Carpe Diem

Designer: Stefan Feld
Publisher: Alea, Ravensburger
2-4 players 45-75 minutes ages 10+
MSRP $40

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THE CONCEPT

ROME, 1 B.C. You are a leader of a noble Roman family, a Patrician. As such, you are charged with improving your city district—and, as always, advancing the interests of your family.

Lately, a new thought has seized Roman life. “Carpe Diem”, or Seize the Day, the sentiment advanced by Horace, the poet. Make the most of today, with little thought for tomorrow.

The race is on. Can you, in a few actions, maximize your holdings and gain the greatest glory?

THE COMPONENTS

There are 84 tiles with light green backs, as well as 39 tiles with dark green backs. These tiles represent the buildings and fields which you will draft to add to your district. A number of these will be available each round on the main board.
Each player receives a building board, which is laid out in a 6 by 6 grid. This board is then encompassed by four frame pieces, randomly assembled, which define the boundaries of your family’s district. The frame pieces also present certain scoring opportunities for building smartly in your district.

Victory points are represented in 66 cards, in denominations of 1, 3, 5, 10, and 25 points. There are tokens to represent coins and bread, as well as wooden pieces for the wares (grapes, herbs, fish, and chicken) which your holdings may produce. Players have a figure to represent themselves, as well as discs to mark their scoring options.
Finally, there is a central playing board. On one part, the player figures will move from point to point, collecting building tiles. The board also holds the scoring cards, which are laid out in a grid, as well as some extra tiles, which may be earned during play.

THE MECHANICS

Carpe Diem is a tile drafting game. Each turn, players will move their pawn around the 7-sided star, taking one tile from where they land, and adding the tile to their player board.

The game lasts four rounds. Each round players will move, and take a tile to add to their province. At the end of seven turns, a scoring round will take place.

Building rules are fairly simple. The first tile you build must go on your starting space (marked with a shovel icon). Each subsequent tile must touch a side of a previously place tile. Also, tiles must be placed so that all adjacent sides match. Pond touching pond, villa touching villa.
Scattered about your player board are little bandarole markers, which look like mini scrolls. When you build on one of these spaces, you remove the marker, and advance one space up the bandarole track at the top of the main board. The player who has progressed furthest here will have first choice of scoring cards at round’s end.

So, what are these building tiles?

Well, four of them are landscapes. Depending on the color, they will produce herbs, chicken, grapes, or fish. Landscapes may be from 2-4 tiles long. When complete, they will produce one fewer good than the number of tiles in the group (a 3-length pond will have two rounded off ends and a solid blue piece in the middle. When finished, it produces 2 fish).
There are four types of Dwellings. These all consist of exactly two alike tiles. Each Dwelling performs a different function in the game.

1) The Merchant. Here, a player turns in all his goods, and receives a coin for each, plus one bonus coin. During scoring, coins are used as wild cards to replace any ware.

2) The Baker. The player takes 2 bread tokens. Bread can be used in two ways. Paying one bread will allow a player’s figure to move to any space on the main board to pick up a tile. Paying 3 bread will fulfill any one scoring requirement.

3) The Administrator. The player advances their disc two spaces up the bandarole track.

4) The Craftsman. The player selects any one of the dark green building tiles at the bottom of the main board, and adds it to their player board.

There are also three buildings which are one tile. The Market gives a player one coin. The Bakery, one bread. And The Fountain allows the player to select two cards from the fountain deck, keeping one for endgame scoring.
Finally, there are villas, which can be of any size. Completed villas will score points at the end of the game. Partial villas may earn points during scoring rounds.

Once players have each selected 7 tiles, scoring occurs. The first player on the bandarole track places their disc on one of the pairs of scoring cards. The cards may be scored in any order. Only this player may score this same pairing of cards. Once scored, this exact pairing may never be scored again.

Scoring cards come in two types: Red cards, which require you to pay certain combinations of goods to score points and Green cards, which reward points based on your building accomplishments. Either way, if you cannot meet the requirements of a scoring card you’ve chosen, you lose four points.

After four rounds the game ends. Players receive points for the number of chimneys on their completed villas. Also, each remaining item (wares, coins, bread, etc.) is worth ½ point. Players also score points for their position on the bandarole track, as well as any fountain cards they own.

Finally, players score their frame achievements. The four frame pieces surrounding the player boards each have scoring incentives. Each one defines a line on the board which must have at least one completed building or landscape of its type crossing it. Incomplete structures don’t score.

The player with the highest score is the winner.

**WHAT SETS THIS GAME APART**

**The unique scoring card grid**

With 60 cards available, but only 12 max used in any game, the combinations of scoring pairs are almost endless. Add to this the fact that no scoring space can be taken by more than one player. This ramps up the tension between players, and forces you to focus not just on your game, but also on your neighbors’. Will the space you desperately want be available when it’s your time to choose? Additionally, the risk of losing four points at scoring adds a palpable tension to the game. How can you crack the nut and make the most of your opportunities?

**The frame of the player boards defining building goals**

From the start, players have clear goals to shoot for. In a game like this it’s possible to get lost amongst all the choices. Having clearly defined targets helps simplify player choices. And this leads to quicker decisions, keeping players involved in the game.

**The satisfaction of building your own province**

All of us enjoy making a thing and admiring our creation. You picked the tiles and placed them with thought, keeping an eye out for scoring opportunities. Even if someone planned better, your province is unique and a thing which is your own.
Let’s start with a note on the elephant in the room. Much criticism has been hurled at the graphic design choices made by the publishers. While it is true that clearer choices might have been made, the fact is that most of the problem rests with the beholder. What Alea has done is perfectly in line with their other titles, going back many years. These decisions raised no controversy in the past. What has changed are the expectations of the crowd. Newer games have much flash and dazzle. That’s not Alea’s style.

I’m not blind to presentation. If anything, I think the lack of pizzaz shows just how strong a game Carpe Diem is. It overcomes any lack in presence with great gameplay.

Carpe Diem is an accessible Feld game which will appeal to fans of classics such as Carcassonne and 7 Wonders. The puzzle-like aspect of building your map, combined with turn-by-turn drafting of tiles make a fine pairing.

The learning curve for newer gamers is fairly low for a strategy game. But the depth of decisions, both strategic and tactical, will have old hands as well as new wanting to revisit the game.

Carpe Diem offers an appropriate ratio of length-of-game to fun. Like any good houseguest, Carpe Diem is witty and engaging, but also knows when to make a gracious exit. Invite Carpe Diem to your table. You won’t regret the time spent.

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