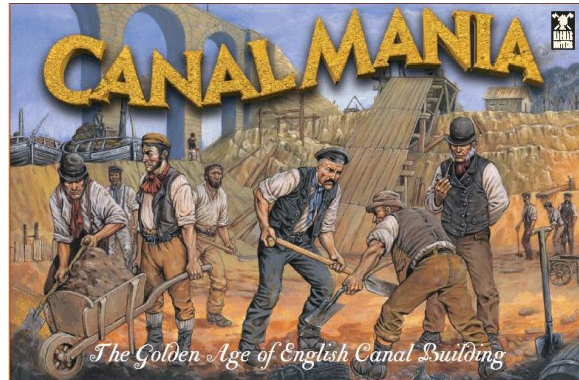


Canal Mania

Reviewed by Pevans

I've thought for many years that there was a game to be made out of the development of the UK's canal network. One of the issues of this, of course, would be the similarities with railway games – after all, the construction of the railways owed a lot to what was learned building the canals. Now the Ragnar Brothers (creators of *History of the World*, *Backpacks & Blisters* and, more recently, *Viking Fury*) have come up with a canal building game. Not surprisingly, the game is not unlike a railway building game – *Age of Steam* in this case. In *Canal Mania*, players construct canals between towns and then transport goods around the resulting network. But the detail of the game is very different.



For the first time, the Ragnars have invested in producing their game in Germany. So, instead of the usual printed tea towel, we have a proper mounted board in a proper box with proper cards and pieces. Sigh: I liked the tea towels! Okay, this is more professional and better quality, but a bit of style has been lost. It has no effect on the quality of the game though. The board shows much of England, from Lancaster and Ripon in the north to Arundel and Taunton in the south. It's overlaid by a hexagonal grid with major towns and cities (in half a dozen colours) taking up a whole hexagon each.

Canals are built between towns, according to the contract for a specific, historical canal. The contract cards give the towns at the ends of the route and some specify an intermediate town that must be included. The contract also indicates the maximum number of hexagonal tiles that can be used in building the canal. This gives players a little scope in the route they follow. As we'll see later, it can be useful to include an extra town in a canal. Players score points when a contract is complete: 1 point for each Lock tile in the canal, 2 points for each Aqueduct and 3 for each Tunnel.

Players each have a set of tiles showing canals in their colour. The tiles have a straight length on one side and a gentle curve on the other and come in four types. Plain lengths ('Stretches') of canal and Locks can be used on open ground. Aqueducts and Tunnels must be used in rough terrain (hills, essentially). Players are limited by the number of tiles in the set – in particular, each has only three Tunnels and four Aqueducts. Players are also constrained in that they cannot put a tile next to one of the same type. This means that, in open ground, for example, you must alternate Stretches and Locks.

To get the tiles onto the board, players have to play cards of the appropriate type as well. So you need a mixture of cards in your hand to get the mixture of tiles played. One Stretch card to play a Stretch tile; one Lock card for a Lock tile; two Aqueduct cards for an Aqueduct tile and three Tunnel cards for a Tunnel tile. There are also Surveyor cards, which are jokers and can be used as any type of construction. Players can get as many tiles down as they have cards to play in their turn. This can mean a big building spree, but you are limited to a maximum of seven cards in hand at the end of your turn.

Building canals is the main thing players do in their turn. The alternative is to draw cards, which means players have a basic choice each turn of drawing or playing cards. The mechanics usually mean that you spend one or two turns building a decent hand and one playing it. It's good news if you only need one turn picking up cards before building. This allows you to build quickly and, hopefully, get ahead of your opponents. This depends on the luck of the cards, of course, so it's not something you can expect to do regularly.

Each turn is divided into three phases. In the first phase, the player must pick up a contract – from the face-up selection – if they don't have one. If they have a contract, they may pick up a second. Otherwise, they can sweep away the five building cards available. This gives them a fresh set to be able to draw from in the second phase. The third option in phase one is to swap Engineers. Players start with a canal Engineer chosen at random and each of them gives some advantage during the turn. These can be fewer cards needed to build Tunnels or Aqueducts, being able to use Surveyors as two cards, building either Locks or Stretches from the more numerous Stretch cards or getting more cards when you pick some up. The usual reason to swap Engineers is to get the use of a specific power in phase two.



Phase two is either playing cards or collecting cards. Which you do will depend on what cards you already have in hand, keeping in mind what you need to expand your current contract/s and the hand limit. If collecting cards, you get to pick up three from the selection available (four if you have the appropriate Engineer). If any of these cards shows goods, cubes must be placed on the board. For each card in a colour, cubes must be placed in two empty towns of that colour. There is a strict rule of precedence: the cubes must go into towns connected to canals before unconnected ones and, within this, the one city in this colour before any of the towns. Where

there is a choice, it's up to the player. However, the precedence rules mean that cubes will go into the cities (one in each colour) more often. Hence, a route that connects cities is more likely to have a ready supply of cubes.

In phase three, you may move a goods cube. The rules for this are simple: you move them from town to town; the last section of canal moved over must be yours; you can't move them to a town of the same colour as they've already visited; and players score one point for each town the good moves to or from along their canals. Then they come off the board. Obviously you want most of those points to come to you, but you do have the option of giving points to other players to get some yourself. As you can imagine, this provides plenty of tactical options.

The options for moving goods also influence which contracts you want and how you build your canals. I saw a good example in my first game: one player ended up with canals from Gloucester to London, a string of five differently coloured towns. And Gloucester and London are both cities. The result was a constant stream of goods appearing at Gloucester or London and being moved to the other one to score five points a time. There are other potential routes like this on the board. The effect they will have on the game depends on when the contracts for these canals appear and whether one player can get a monopoly on such a route.

There is one other option for what players do in each phase of their turn. They can just draw one card off the top of the deck of building cards. This is often used in phase three when there is no cube to move. It's occasionally used in phase one, when there's nothing else the player wants to do. Having carried out the three phases, the player's turn is over and they must discard down to seven building cards if they hold more than seven.



The game continues until the last set of contracts is turned up or, more usually, one player reaches the target score – which is higher the fewer players there are. This triggers the final turns. First, play continues until everybody's had the same number of turns. Then, every players gets two more turns (just enough to collect some cards and build some last bits of canal). Only then do we get into the end game. Any incomplete canals are scored for the tiles used in building them – so no building is wasted. The remaining goods are scored. And there are bonus points according to who has completed the most contracts.

The bonus is useful, but the major difference the end game can make is in scoring the goods on the board. Any good that can be moved will be moved. A player who's built a little canal that isn't connected to anything else is guaranteed some points if there are goods sitting on that canal. This means there are some tactics involved in the placing of goods and thus in choosing which cards to draw and placing goods. It gives significance to just about everything a player does in the course of the game.

The more I play this game, the more I appreciate it. In some ways it feels similar to the year's big hit (so far), *Caylus*. *Canal Mania* doesn't have the complexity or the plethora of points-scoring opportunities of *Caylus*, but every action feels significant in the same way. It is a very tactical game where players have to consider the implications of everything they do. The chance element of the cards is a factor and one option is to ride your luck. However, the clever thing is how you take advantage of your luck and I think clever play will beat pure luck over the course of the game.

Once again the Ragnars have done an excellent job of combining history with game play. The result is a very clever, tactical game that requires thought and planning. A little luck doesn't hurt, either. *Canal Mania* has proved something of a hit at Swiggers games club, getting regular outings at our weekly sessions, and is certainly one of my favourites of the moment: 9/10 on my highly personal scale.

Canal Mania was designed and is published by the Ragnar Brothers. It is a tactical board game for 3-5 players that takes 2-3 hours to play. It is available in some games shops or direct from the Ragnar Brothers (www.ragnarbrothers.com) at £35 plus postage.

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