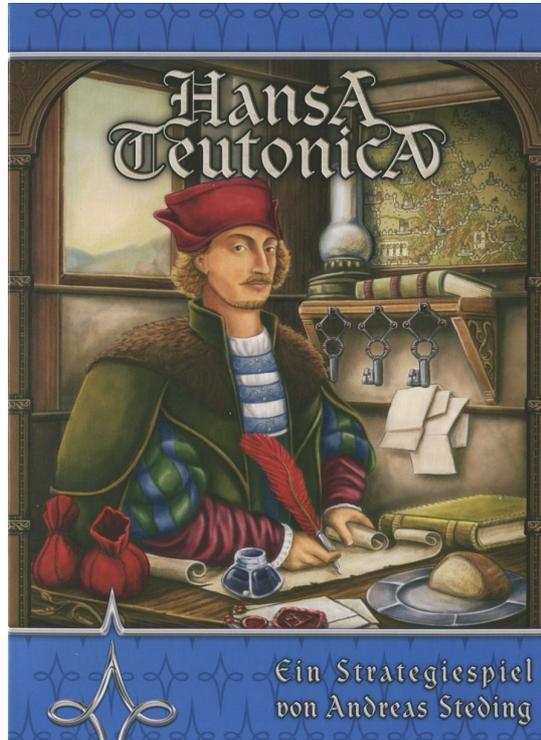


Trading Routes

Hansa Teutonica reviewed by Pevans

Like Andreas Steding's earlier *Kogge*, *Hansa Teutonica* is about the medieval trading alliance of northern European cities, the Hanseatic League. While *Kogge* centres on the Baltic Sea, *Hansa Teutonica* is set on land. The board shows the network of roads and cities in what is now Northern Germany and neighbouring countries. Each city has spaces for 'branch offices', which are filled from the left, with the rightmost having seniority. The spaces are also colour coded and players can only place an office piece if they have the appropriate authority. Each stretch of road between two cities has a number of spaces for pieces to be played on, which is the main mechanic of the game.



Before we get to that, each player also has their own small board, printed with a desk (or *escritoire* as the rules insist) in their colour. The main purpose of this is to show five tracks that limit what the player can do. At the start of the game playing pieces cover all but the leftmost space on each track. As players improve their abilities, they remove pieces (making them available to play) from the left of each track to reveal higher values. The lower section of the player boards (between the legs of the desk!) shows the five actions that players can take.

Players also have wooden playing pieces in their chosen colour. Most of these are cubes, 'Traders', but each player also has a small number of discs, 'Merchants'. These latter pieces are more valuable in some cases. They are also needed to fill circular office spaces in cities—square spaces can only be filled with cubes. At the start of the game, most of the pieces are on players' desks. Some are in their personal 'supply', available to be placed on the board, while the remainder are 'stock'. One of the actions available to players is to move pieces from stock to supply. Initially this is limited to three pieces per action, but can be improved—this is one of the five tracks on players' desks.

The number of actions players have in a turn is another track. Players start with two actions apiece and can go all the way to five actions. As you'd expect in a game where actions are limited, getting additional actions can give you a big advantage. Increasing their actions is thus an immediate goal for players. This is done by establishing a 'trade route' to a specific city. There are six key cities around the

board, five of which can be used to improve players' abilities while the sixth provides a way of scoring victory points.

However, I mentioned that placing pieces on the board is the key action of the game. When taking this action, players place one piece on an empty space on a road. What they're aiming to do is to get pieces on all the spaces between two cities. Doing this gives them a 'trade route', for which they can claim the reward—as a separate action. The usual reward is placing one of the pieces from the road into one of the cities as a 'branch office'—the other pieces go back into the player's stock. The alternative is to improve one of your abilities (by removing a piece from the appropriate track on your desk), if one of the cities on the trade route allows this.



The red 'escritoire'—note the perspective effect (courtesy of Andreas Steding)

The offices are the main way of scoring victory points in the game. The player with the most offices in a city 'controls' it—if there's a tie, the rightmost office takes precedence (remember, offices are placed on the available spaces from the left). This gives the controlling player victory points at the end of the game. What's more, during the game they get a point each time any player claims a trade route that includes that city. I've already mentioned that an initial goal for players is increasing the number of actions available to them. To do this, they have to claim trade routes to a specific city, so gaining control of that city is a good way of scoring some early victory points.

You'll have noticed that players have to have pieces on all the spaces between two cities to claim a trade route. Hence, players can block a route simply by having one piece on it. However, another action available to players is to replace another player's piece (on a road) with one of their own. There is a cost to this—they have to discard an additional piece from supply to stock (two if replacing a disc rather than a cube). What's more, the displaced piece only goes as far as an adjacent road. And the owning player gets to add another piece (or two if a disc was displaced) from their stock.

This means that placing a piece on a road is not a complete block. However, it makes it more expensive for other players to get that route and delays them. What's more, gaining an extra piece on the board is very useful. Not least because another

action available to players is to move pieces across the board. This takes pieces from spaces on roads to other, unoccupied spaces on roads. This allows a certain level of misdirection. You can put pieces initially on several roads and then use a move action to shift them to a single route. Again, the number of pieces you can move is limited by a track on your player board.

As I've outlined above, the actions available are: to add a piece to the board, to displace someone else's piece, to move pieces across the board, to claim a trade route and to transfer pieces from stock to supply. Players are limited in: how many actions they have each turn; the number of pieces they move; how many pieces they transfer and in the colours of office space they can play on.

As players establish branch offices, they begin to score victory points. The game ends when somebody reaches 20 points—there are other ways the game can end, but my experience is that this is the most usual way. Players then score the bulk of their points. They get points for each city they control and for tracks on their board that have been improved to their maximum. They also get points for their largest network of offices—the points for these are given by the 5th track on players' desks.

This makes the levels of the game clear: you play pieces on the board to claim trade routes to get branch offices to control cities and thus to score points. The big question facing players is whether to go all out for victory points or to improve their abilities first. At the start of the game, the obvious answer is to improve your abilities so that you can, hopefully, score more points later on. This makes for fierce competition for the trade routes that allow players to improve an ability, particularly the one that allows players an extra action each turn. The first player thus has an obvious first move: to place one piece on each of the two roads that connect that particular city. At the very least, this will give them extra pieces on the board when they're displaced and slows down the other players.

When all the other players are squabbling over a small number of cities, there is a definite temptation to ignore them and build a network of offices across the board. However, I have yet to see this work. There are two problems. First is the handicap of having fewer actions. You get an early lead, but the other players quickly catch up. Of course, you can take the opportunity to improve your abilities once the fight has died down. However, players will by then have established offices in the key cities, so improving your abilities also scores points for your opponents, meaning they catch you more quickly! And you're pushing the game towards an early end.

The second issue is that, if you're not improving your abilities, you are not releasing playing pieces from your board. It's surprising how quickly you begin to run out of available pieces. This is clearly a constraint that's been built into the game. You cannot focus solely on building up your presence on the board from the start because you simply don't have enough pieces.

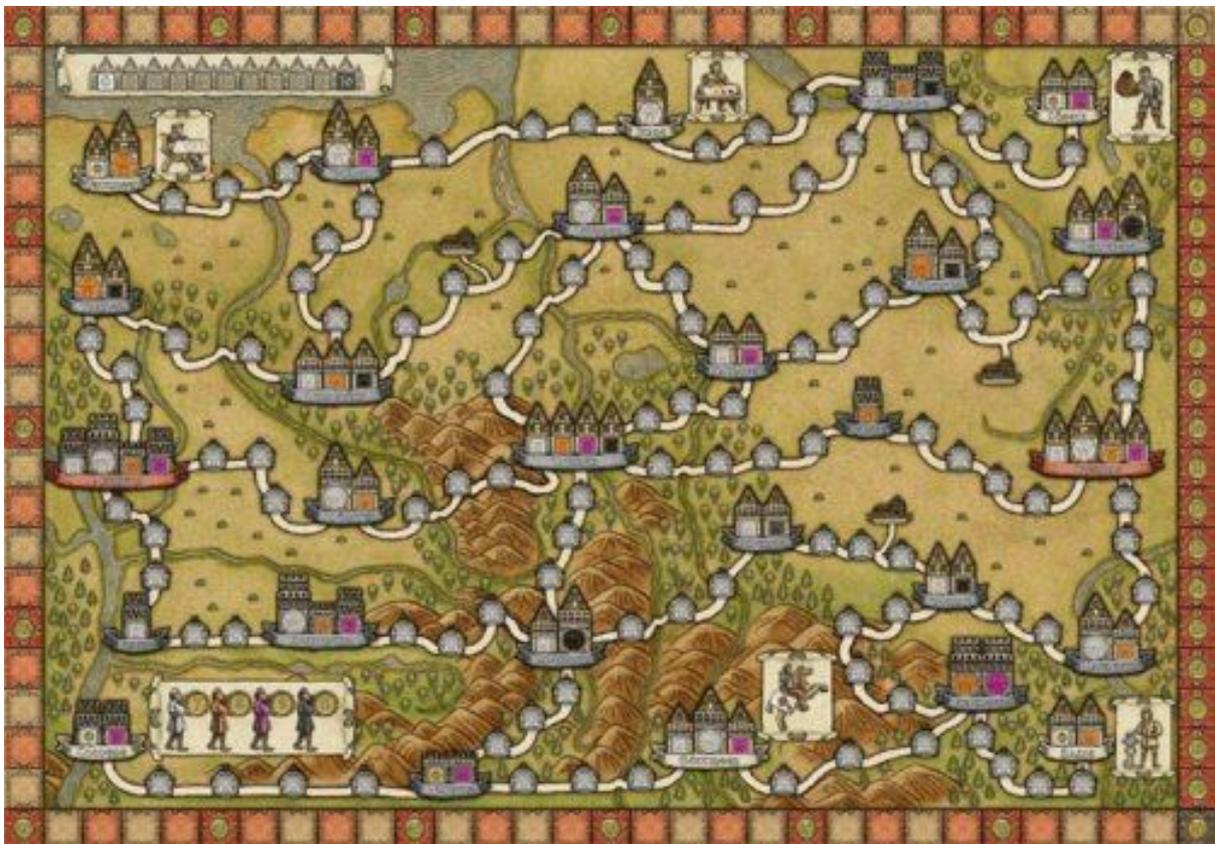
The other key element in the game is the end-game trigger of 20 points. Establishing control of the cities where players must go to improve their abilities

will get you victory points. Do this early enough and you can concentrate on building a network on the board while the other players score points for you. And each time they do so brings the end of the game ever closer. It is by no means certain that the first player to 20 points will win, but it is a significant advantage.

What this boils down to is that *Hansa Teutonica* is a fiercely competitive and closely fought game. It provides players with plenty of options, giving them some tough decisions to make. It's quite clear what your strategy should be, but the tactics for achieving this are much harder to work out. And, as in most multi-player games, your opponents will get in the way!

There's one wrinkle to the game that I haven't mentioned. At the start of the game, bonus tokens are placed on certain roads. When a player claims that route, they also get the token (and then place another somewhere on the board). Each token gives a particular advantage that can be used immediately or kept for later in the game. These can be invaluable for giving you a tactical advantage. What's more, players also get victory points at the end of the game according to how many bonus tokens they have.

I should also mention the two-player game. This uses an extra pawn, which players can move a limited distance across the board at the start of their turn. They can then only play on roads adjacent to the pawn. This is a neat mechanism for ensuring that the two players will compete with each other rather than setting up



The full board (courtesy of Andreas Steding)

their own 'empires' in different parts of the board. The two-player game works very well—though some of the hurly-burly of the multi-player game is lost, of course.

Hansa Teutonica is a clever game that forces players to compete from the start. It is an intricate game that provides a lot of tactical options and I can see why it is so popular. However, personally, I find it very dry. I also dislike the way the game rewards negative play—blocking a route not because it does you any good but to deny it to other players. For me, the game simply isn't much fun, though I do appreciate its subtlety.

Hansa Teutonica was designed by Andreas Steding and is published (in Germany) by Argentum (an English language edition is now available from Z-Man Games). It is a strategy board game for 2-5 players, aged 12+, and takes about 60 minutes to play. It gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

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