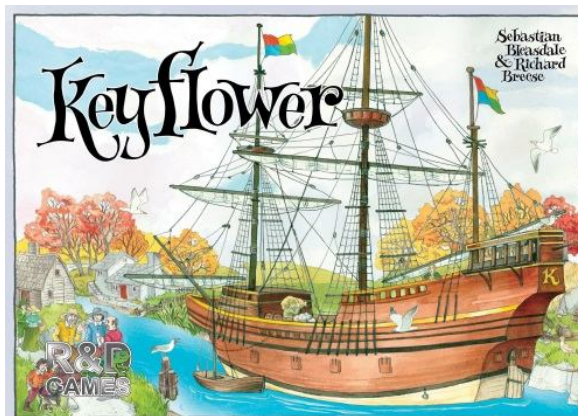


Pilgrim Meeples

Pevans reviews *Keyflower*

This was one of my must-buys at Spiel '12. I've been a fan of Richard Breese's games – and the Key... series in particular – since he launched the magnificent *Keywood* and his imprint, R&D Games, back in 1995. *Keyflower* is a bit different, though, as it is co-designed by Richard with Sebastian Bleasdale. Sebastian's probably best known for *(On the) Underground*, but he's also part of Reiner Knizia's testing team (I recently spotted his intriguing credit in *Medici vs Strozzi*). (I should also disclose that Sebastian is one of my gaming buddies, as he's a regular at the Swiggers games club where several of his own designs have been play-tested.)



So, a new game from two of my favourite games designers – how could I resist? I didn't get to play *Keyflower* at Spiel, but it's been on the table at Swiggers ever since – it's useful to have a designer on hand when you've got questions! The striking artwork on the box and game components is, as usual, by Richard's sister, Juliet Breese, along with Jo Breese this time. Apart from adding to the atmosphere of the game, the illustrations provide a common look across all the Key... games.



Meeples!

Inside the box, you will find that the game's main components are a large stack (once you've punched them out) of chunky, hexagonal cardboard tiles and a big pile of wooden 'meeples' – the figure shaped pawns first seen in *Carcassonne* (there is a specific acknowledgement to Hans im Glück for these). In addition, there are square cardboard tiles ('skills'), wooden barrels ('resources') and a screen for each player to conceal their holdings. In a neat touch, these are illustrated as houses

inside and out. Another neat touch is the chimney pieces to hold each screen together – dealing with the usual problem of screens: they collapse easily.

Players begin with one of the 'Home' tiles to start their village and some workers (meeples), both drawn at random. The home tiles provide a good example for the tiles in general. A rectangle in the centre of the tile contains icons that show what the building does when workers are placed on it. Icons in a smaller rectangle show any enhanced ability (and any victory points it is worth) if it is upgraded (flipped over). Icons in the arrow between the two show the cost of upgrading.

The ability of a Home tile is to move a resource barrel along the roads in your village to an adjacent tile (indicated by a horse and cart with the number 1) and/or to upgrade a



A 'Home' tile

tile (shown by a house). When upgraded, the Home tile lets you move two resources (or one twice) and/or upgrade a tile.

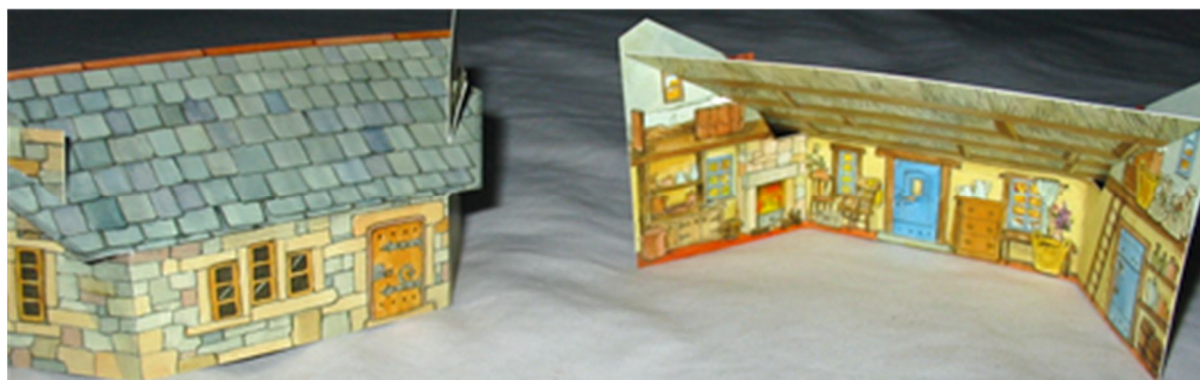
Five sides of the home tile show roads leading off, while the sixth has a riverbank. When adding tiles to your village, adjoining sides must match: riverbank to riverbank, road to road and field to field. Other tiles have fewer roads (decreasing each round/season) and more fields, while some (boats) show stretches of river and riverbanks. The roads become important when you need to move resources – either to upgrade a building or use in one.

Initially, workers go behind players' screens as they are used to bid for buildings as well as placing to use a building's

ability. The game is played over four seasons and there is a set of building tiles for each season. Some (depending on the number of players) of the appropriate set are laid out at the start of each season. Through the season, players bid for these buildings and for the tiles that decide who will be first player next season. There are also boat tiles (one per player) that contain a random selection of workers and/or skills tiles (the number of which decreases across the seasons). Players will choose one boat (in the order they bid for) at the end of the season to gain extra workers and skills.

Each season lasts until players run out of things to do with their workers (or run out of workers, of course!). That is, they no longer want to place or raise a bid for a tile or use a building. Players bid for a tile by placing one or more workers alongside it. As the tiles are hexagonal, you can tell which bid belongs to whom by which side of the tile it is next to. Clever – and very necessary, too, because only one colour of worker can be placed with a tile. First to get a worker down sets the colour for everybody.

Other players can counter-bid for a tile. Their bid must be in the same colour of worker, of course, and more than the current highest bid. It goes by their own side of the tile. If you've been overbid, you can move the workers in your redundant bid somewhere else (as long as you move all of them together and they go somewhere you're allowed to place workers) or increase your bid by adding more workers.



Highly illustrated player screens

Using a building means placing more workers on it than anyone has already done – though each building can hold no more than six workers. Thus, you need only place one worker if you're the first to do so. Note that putting three workers on a building stops anyone else using it (since they'd have to place four more and six is the maximum), while placing two means only one other player can use it. The chances are you'll only want to place the minimum, but it is a tactical option to bear in mind.

When placing workers to use a building, you are not limited to the tiles in your own village. The building can be in another player's village, or even one that's still being bid on. The crucial thing is that all the workers, whether using or bidding for a building, must be the same colour. One point to be aware of, though, is that the workers on a building go to the owner of the building at the end of the season. Using another player's building can be useful, but you are giving them workers for the next season.

Deciding what to do with your workers is the key to the game. How much do you bid? For which tiles? Do you hold some back to counter over-bids by other players? (This may be where I'm going wrong!) Which buildings do you use? Should you grab them quickly while they're cheap? Or is the priority to get some bids down? The conclusion I'm coming to is that *Keyflower* is a very tactical game.



Summer bidding under way: note the competition for the tile centre left; someone's used the tile centre right; and the start player meeple is lurking in the top left.



My village after adding Spring purchases – a mine (with a stray resource barrel) and a tile that swaps yellow meeples for green

At the end of the season, when all players have run out of things to do, the bids are resolved and players get the buildings they won – including any workers on them. Workers from winning bids go into the bag, while those from losing bids go back to the bidder. Each player gets the workers from the buildings in their village. Then players add new workers from the boats, choosing a boat in the order decided by their bids, and the new start player gets the purple pawn that indicates this.

Finally, players decide where to put the new buildings in their village.

As already mentioned, tiles must be placed so that touching edges match. There are also a couple of potential bonuses to take into account when organising your village. For example, there is a bonus for a loop of roads around your village (a point for each tile), which one player will have at the end of the game. More immediately, you need to consider the connections for moving resource barrels from the buildings that produce them to where you want to use them.

The new season starts with the new set of tiles being set out and more workers and skills placed on this season's boats. The last season, winter, is a bit different from the others. To start with, the winter set of tiles all score victory points – either in themselves (the Keythedral is worth a significant 12 points, for example) or by providing a bonus based on the owner's holdings (sets of skills tiles, for example). These are dealt out to the players at the start of the game.

At the start of the winter season, players choose how many of their winter tiles (at least one) they will make available for bidding on. So, you have three quarters of the game to consider the winter tiles you have and build up your holdings to fit the bonuses. Of course, you still need to win the buildings you want in the winter season's bidding – which is where the plan can all go wrong!

There are no boat-loads of new workers at the end of winter, but players still get to choose boats in the order they bid for. Boat and turn order tiles are added to players' villages, as they also provide bonuses (that loop of roads bonus on the "Sea Bastion" – groan! – boat for one). Once the final tiles are in their villages, players score up: points from buildings, gold resources (worth a point each) and their bonuses. Note that workers, other resources and skills are worth nothing unless you have a bonus that scores for them.

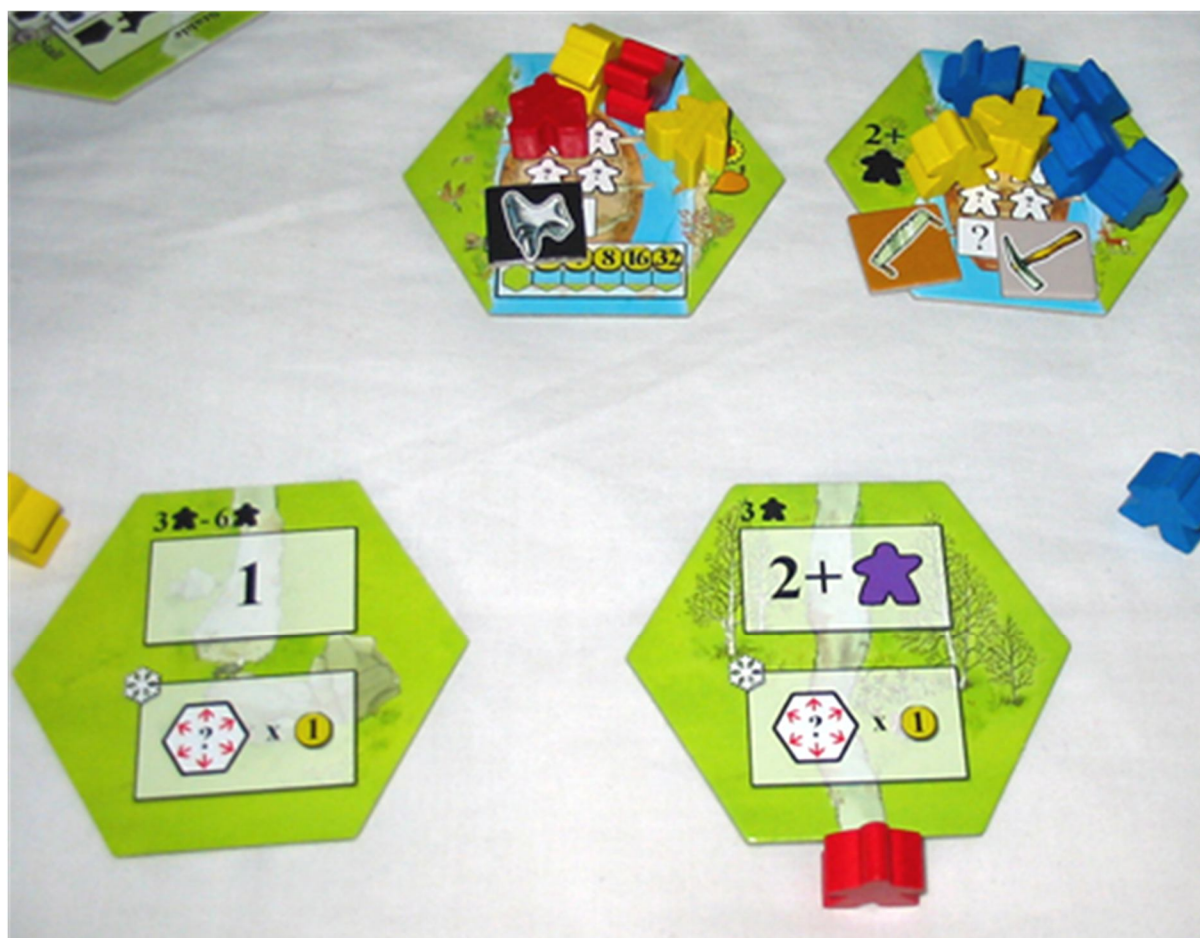
This makes the game seem fairly simple: put out tiles, bid for/use tiles until everybody's used up their workers and then get new workers. Repeat three times (with some

differences for the final round) and whoever has the most points wins. Of course, it's a lot more complicated than this, mainly because the meat of the game is in the buildings. What you do – and are able to do – depends on the buildings available.

As you'd expect, the early seasons' buildings give players ways of generating resources, skills and workers. And they can be worth points, too, when upgraded. Resources and skills are needed to upgrade buildings and use buildings as well as being collected for final bonuses. The tricky question is which buildings to use and which are worth buying. I'm still wrestling with this one. As only a sub-set of the buildings is used in each game, my games so far (almost all three-player) have been quite different.

What is clear is that managing your workers is a crucial element of the game. The game starts with red, blue and yellow workers in the bag to be picked out. Green workers are also available, but can only be taken by using a building (if available). They can provide a useful tactical edge if you have more (or the only!) green workers, but my experience suggests they are not crucial. Once used, they go into the bag, so after this they may appear as part of a random selection.

A more significant tactic seems to be trying to monopolise workers in one of the main colours. Having more workers in a colour than your opponents both ensures you can bid more than the other players and lets you monopolise the use of some buildings – this round. Having said that, I've not played *Keyflower* with more than four players and I'm



Turn order bidding tiles plus a couple of boats loaded with meeples and skills. Note that the lefthand boat has been flipped and its winter bonus (points for adjacent boats) is visible at the bottom of the tile.

not sure how this would work out in a 5- or 6-player game. (There'd certainly be rather more competition for each colour.)

What is clear is that you need to study the buildings available each season and how they might fit with the buildings you already have. From this, you can decide how much it's worth bidding for them – though this is complicated by the colours of the workers available to you and which colours your opponents have. However, you also need to keep track of the buildings other players have and how you may be able to use them. On top of this, you need to consider what the other players may be up to and what bonuses you will have at the end of the game.

Keyflower is a complex game that is very different each time you play. There is a lot to think about and plenty of decisions to take, making it a tricky, but rewarding challenge. It's also a lot of fun. I'm really enjoying playing the game, learning how to get the best out of it and look forward to playing it a lot more. I give *Keyflower* 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

I should also mention that, unlike earlier R&D games, which were generally limited editions, *Keyflower* has been co-produced with German publisher Huch! & friends and Gigamic in France. This means that the game should be readily available for a while yet.

Keyflower was designed by Sebastian Bleasdale and Richard Breese and published by R&D Games and others. It is a strategy game for 2-6 players, aged 12, and takes about 90 minutes to play.

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