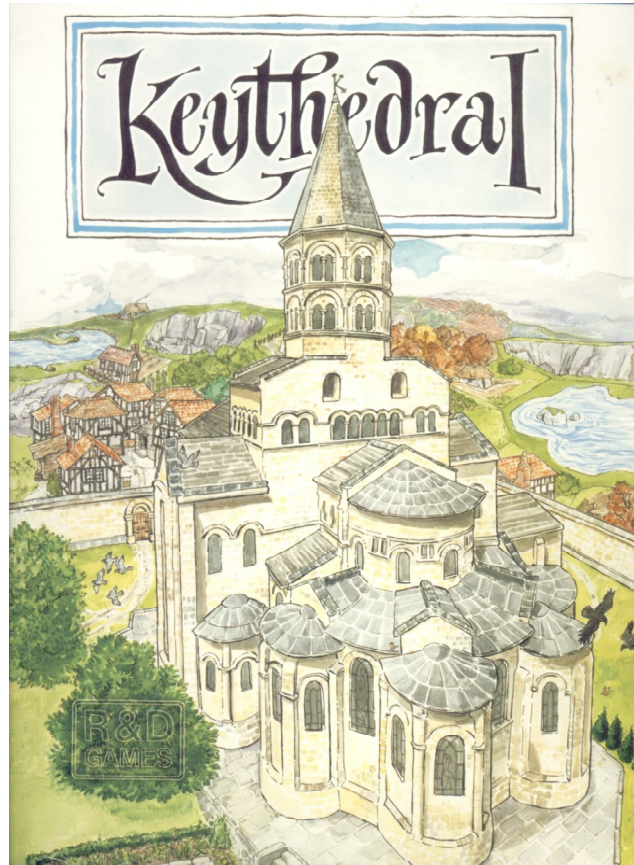


To the glory of Keywood

Keythedral reviewed by Pevans

I've been going on about **Keythedral** for a while now, so it's about time I gave you a proper review of it. To start with, there is an impressive amount of stuff inside the box. Wooden cubes (resources) in eight different colours; solid cardboard pieces (round workers and diamond-shaped buildings) and wooden sticks (fences) for each player; solid cardboard octagonal tiles of five different types of field; square cardboard building tiles for the five levels of the Keythedral; some wooden pawns; very thick cardboard screens and summary cards for each player; two packs of Law cards (one in English and one in German); two display boards; and two sets of rules (in English and German). Phew! What is truly remarkable is the variety of the illustrations: each tile of a specific type – the seven Quarries, for example – is a different picture. The production quality is terrific – with the single exception of the flimsy box. Even here, there is text on the inside of the box, including some very useful hints on playing the game. You cannot fault the attention to detail.



The game is about building a cathedral (the 'Keythedral'). This is shown on one of the boards, which has spaces for the five levels of building tiles. The tiles on each level cost more to buy and are worth more points (though the average cost per point goes down). On one side of each tile is the purchase cost in terms of resource cubes, the value (1-5, according to level) is on the other. The cost of a tile starts at two of the most common resources on level one. By level five, the cost will include (at least) one of the expensive resources (ironwork, stained glass and gold) that can only be gained by trading cheaper cubes. The number of tiles available on each level decreases from four at level one to two at level 5.

The game ends when the last building tile is bought. The player with the highest total value of building tiles is the winner (highest total value of remaining resources breaks any tie). It's that simple. Except that getting there is rather more complicated.

The playing area is made up of the octagonal fields, interspersed with the players' diamond-shaped buildings (filling the gaps between the octagons). Each player has five buildings, numbered one to five. In turn, everybody gets to place workers in the unoccupied fields adjacent to their buildings, one number at a time. The type of field (quarry, wood, farm, lake, vineyard) then gives the resource (stone, timber, food, water, wine) that each worker will produce. So players have to think ahead: what resources do I need? Therefore which fields do I want to get my workers into? Thus which number building do I want next? And what do the others want?

The way it works, you see, is that each player, in turn, chooses a building number. Starting with that player, everybody in turn places a worker adjacent to their building of that number. Providing there's an unoccupied field. Then the next player chooses one of the other numbers. What you get is a sequence of intricately interlocking tactical options. The resources you end up with will depend on what order the buildings are actioned and which fields the other players choose.

All sorts of tactical nuances fall out of this. If all the fields around a building have been taken, no worker is placed, so players can be squeezed in this way. Conversely, a field with only one building adjacent to it guarantees a resource cube for the player whose building it is. Having more than one building adjacent to the same field is counter-productive as you are then competing with yourself. And having a building across a field from an opponent's building of the same number can be bad news – especially if it's the player on your right.

All of which means that the layout of the playing area is important. Setting this up is the first thing that happens in the game. It starts with two quarries and two woods and a Keythedral tile filling the gap in the middle. Players then take it in turns to place a field (taken at random), followed by one of their buildings. The number of field tiles in play depends on the number of players, so the area is bigger for more players, keeping the competition for resources at the same level.

All of this means that there's a lot of decision-making going on: first in the set-up and then each turn in play. The danger is that the game bogs down in analysis paralysis: players taking forever to weigh up all the options and consequences of each decision. However, having played the game several times, I've come to the conclusion that each individual decision is not that important. Hence it's not worth taking too long agonising over it. For example, choosing the order of the buildings may seem vital, but all the resources are useful (the need to trade things ensures this) and you will usually get a reasonable number of them.

Spending resources

Okay, we've got as far as gaining resources each turn, but what do you do with them? Spend them, of course! Each player in turn gets to buy something and this goes round until everybody's had enough – or run out of resources. A minor point

is that players can pass on one round and then come back in (unless everybody else has passed), which can be a useful tactic.

I've already mentioned that building tiles are bought with resources, so this is one of the things you can do when it's your turn. Initially you can buy any tile in the bottom row (the 1s). Only when these have all been bought is the next row turned over to reveal what resources you need to buy them. This means that trading for high value resources before the upper rows are revealed is a gamble. The odds are that one of the 4s or 5s will require what you've bought, but you can't be sure. It also means that there is often a pause before the last tile of a value is taken. Players are building up their resources to make sure they can get one of the next value.



The next thing you can do is trade resources. The trading options are shown on the second display board. The Trader will exchange any two resource cubes for one of any of the five basic resources. The Blacksmith sells one ironwork for any two resource cubes. The Glass Maker sells one stained glass for any three resources. And the Goldsmith sells one gold cube for any four resources.

Players can also upgrade their buildings. All buildings start as cottages. Pay one wood and one stone and you convert one of your cottages to a house. The advantage is that you get to place workers in two unoccupied fields adjacent to a house. As the hints in the game note, houses are more valuable the earlier they are played, so that they take effect in as many turns as possible. Hence the early turns usually see a frenzy of house-building. Having said that, the last game I

played was won by the player who didn't build a single house. He concentrated on buying building tiles with the 4-5 resource cubes he gained each turn.

For one wood you can build a fence. This blocks a building from a specific field. This is useful for reducing competition for a particular field or hampering a specific player. You only have three fences and you don't get them back, so use them carefully. One little tactic: a building that's entirely cut off by fences can be re-located! You can remove a fence, but it costs you two wine cubes. The hints suggest it's more cost effective to fight back with a fence of your own than to remove fences.

Finally, players can spend one cube of any kind and buy a Law card. Two Law cards are available each turn. These are face down, so you don't know what you're getting. The other twist is that buying a Law card ends your turn. You have to weigh up whether it's worth losing the rest of the turn to make sure you get one (which is more difficult the more players there are in the game). The Law cards allow you to do something special: a free cottage to house conversion, for example. Or trading one resource for any two. I haven't looked at this rigorously, but the Law cards seem to be worth 1-2 resource cubes for the cost of 1. However, played at the right moment, they can be very effective.

Once everybody's done all the actions they want to (or are allowed to), the turn ends. The first player marker moves to the left and a little auction takes place. The player to the left of the marker decides whether to bid a number of resource cubes or pass. The next player has to raise the bid or pass. This goes round the table to the player with the marker. S/he just has to match the last bid. The highest bid pays the player who would otherwise have the marker and then *chooses who is first player!* Being first player is an advantage, but it's not a huge one. Hence, I have seen players win the bid and give the marker to the player on their right. This way they start with the marker for next turn! In the first turns players generally don't bid, but later in the game it can be important to be first. It can also be important to get extra resource cubes, so it's a decision worth thinking about.

And that's the game. The rules provide a few variations if you want to try something a bit different. People generally find the game shorter than they expect the first time they play. The second time they anticipate this, understand that they've got a lot of decisions to make and take a bit more time over the game. The result is that the game takes a bit longer than the advertised 1-1½ hours to play (though this also depends on the number of players).

This is a game all about decision making and logistics. Planning ahead for each turn certainly helps, but you've also got to be flexible to make use of what you've got (in terms of resource cubes and Law cards). As I've already said, it doesn't repay really deep analysis (it isn't Chess!), so the game moves fairly quickly despite all the thinking. The way each turn works means there's very little downtime, too.

All in all, this is a tremendous game. It requires some thought, but not too much; moves briskly; provides lots of tactical opportunities; and the best man wins. There are clearly multiple strategies for the game, but the best seems to be aiming to buy building tiles regularly – I aim to get one of each value. I have not yet tried hoarding resource cubes in the first turns and only buying higher value building tiles. Logic suggests this could be a viable strategy, but it does depend on somebody buying the cheaper tiles.

Keythedral was designed by Richard Breese and published (in a limited edition) by R&D Games. It is a strategy board game for 3-5 players, aged 8+ and takes about 90 minutes to play. Copies are only likely to be available second hand, though a new edition (from German publisher Pro Ludo) is planned for Autumn 2004.

Pevans rates it 10/10 on his very subjective scale.

A version of this review was published in **Flagship** 102 (April/May 2003).

© Copyright Paul Evans 2004. All trademarks acknowledged.
Illustration of **Keythedral** in play courtesy of Boardgame Geek.