

Courting the Sun King

Louis XIV reviewed

The first publication from alea this year is sub-titled “Intrigue in the Court of the Sun-King” – or at least, that’s how it’s given on the English language edition of *Louis XIV* from Rio Grande Games. This is presented as one of alea’s smaller box range, but it’s as complex a game as many of its larger companions. *Louis XIV* was designed by Rüdiger Dorn, designer of *Traders of Genoa* and *Goa*, amongst others.

Inside the box area a dozen square boards, representing major characters at court, a set of wooden pieces for each player, several sets of cards and lots of cardboard counters. The character boards form the core of the game’s intricate structure. They all correspond to historical individuals: the King’s mother, brother, wives, son, mistresses and courtiers including, of course, the Cardinal (Mazarin in this case). Players play their pieces to gain influence over characters, thus allowing them to get specific counters. These are used to complete ‘Mission’ cards, which are the major source of Victory Points and give players special abilities or actions.

The set-up starts with laying out the boards in order. They form two concentric circles, touching only at corners, with the inner circle made up of the people closest to the King. Players have some of their pieces in front of them – a stock from which they can place pieces on characters – while others are in a ‘reserve’ in the playing area. In general, pieces in reserve have to be moved to the stock before they can be played – you can begin to see some of the detail of the game play here. Players also start with some missions and choose these from the easy, difficult or medium sets.



Each turn, players get a hand of influence cards, each of which corresponds to one of the 12 characters. These constrain where players can place their pieces that turn, playing one card at a time. It's not as restrictive as it sounds, since a player puts up to three pieces (from stock) on a character's board. From there, they can trail pieces to a row of boards. Wild cards provide some options and cards can also be used to bring pieces from reserve to stock. Another clever feature is that players will have one card that isn't played, which gives more options. What's clear is that you need to do some planning at the start of the turn. How best can you use the cards you have to gain the abilities of the characters and use them to fulfil your missions? Ooh, this is my kind of game!

As the turn goes on, players must react to what their opponents are doing. This makes it very useful to be able to keep options open until later in the turn. So players will often move pieces from reserve to stock early in the turn. Conversely, a pre-emptive move – getting lots of pieces onto a character quickly – is another tactical option. One of the characters gives players an additional card for the next turn. This means they have an extra card to play and can thus ensure they go last – a useful tactical advantage. All of the characters provide useful benefits like this, so there is always some advantage to be gained by getting influence on a character.

There are several different ways influence is used with a character. For many of them, any player with influence on the character can spend money to gain the ability or item that character provides. However, the player with most influence gets it free. But their pieces go into reserve, while the other players get theirs back into stock. This kind of balancing mechanism is one of the features of the game and another factor to be weighed up when planning your turn. Other characters may provide their service to anyone with enough pieces on them and so on. It doesn't stop there, though. Depending on the circumstances, a character is often flipped over each turn. The other side gives a slightly different way of getting the character's ability. The alternative to paying for it, for example, is that only the player with the most pieces gets the use of the character's ability.

At the heart of the game is the inner circle of characters. Each of these provides a different item (scroll, helmet, ring or orb – though this consistently described as a "scepter" in the Rio Grande edition). A cut-out figure representing the King will be with one of these four each turn. For this character there is an extra reward for the player with the most influence: a crown, which is a wild item. Crowns can also be gained from a couple of the outer characters. The items are used to play Mission cards. The easy Missions require one specific item and any other; to play the difficult ones, players will need a pair of the same item. Getting a couple of Crowns is thus a great opportunity to get a difficult Mission into play. And it follows that it's something you shouldn't let other players get.

Game turns are played in a strict sequence of phases. It starts with identifying how much gold players get and just where the King is going to be this turn. Players also get a fresh hand of cards. Then it's the meat of the turn when players play their cards to get influence (pieces) onto the character boards. Once all of this has been

done, the influence on each character is evaluated – in numerical order – to see which players gain what. The sequence is important, as, for example, one of them allows players to place more influence on a character. This can be for later in the turn or an early move for the next turn – more tactical options. Finally, players have the opportunity to play their Missions. Once in play, the Missions provide their owners with advantages, which are usually tied in to a specific phase of the turn.

Louis XIV is played over four turns – which is not much time. (The limited and structured play reminds me rather of *Princes of Florence*.) At the end of this, players' Victory Points are assessed. Played Mission cards count for five points each. But players will also have accumulated 'Shield' counters during the game. These can be acquired in many different ways: from characters, from Missions, from card play. They are also given for things left over at the end of the game: unused cards and items, for example. There are several different shields, but they're dished out at random. At the end of the game, there's a small bonus for whoever has the most of each type of shield. This seems a little odd to me, as it's just a bonus point or two paid out at random. Okay, it gives an incentive to collect more shields to be more likely to get bonuses, but players may just get lucky.

In fact, there's quite a lot of randomness in this game. The amount of money given to players each turn, which cards players get, which Missions players get and so on are all random elements. The game is thus almost entirely tactical. The only strategy element I can see is within a turn, when you can plan how to get the items you need to complete the Missions you hold. Even then, players draw a replacement Mission for a played Mission before they play any second Mission and can thus trust to luck (it also allows a player with two Crowns to pick up a difficult Mission that they know they can play).

I think Rüdiger Dorn has come up with a winner here. *Louis XIV* is a superb tactical game. I like the challenge of maximising what I can get from each turn – and I like not having to plan several turns ahead (this is why I don't play much Chess!). I like the challenge of out-thinking my opponents each turn, too. I think the complexity and intricate nature of the game will repay skilled play and that this will more than outweigh the randomness of the cards. Though I haven't played the game enough to be certain of this. At the moment, *Louis XIV* is at the top of my list of games from 2005.

Louis XIV is a strategy game designed by Rüdiger Dorn and published by alea (in German) and Rio Grande Games (in English). It is for 2-4 players, aged 12+, and takes about 90 minutes to play. It is readily available in specialist games shops in the UK.

Pevans rates this game 9/10 on his highly subjective scale.

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