Developing culture

Neuland reviewed

Neuland provoked a lot of interest at Spiel last October, so I have been keen to try it. It comes in a large, but shallow, square box. The bits inside take a little sorting out. The most obvious are the fine, chunky, wooden blocks and pawns for the players. Then there are the card tiles that make up the board, showing the different terrain of *Neuland* (fields, woods and mountains). And then there are the diamond-shaped cards that represent the various buildings that go on the board – colour coded for the terrain they go on. It all looks – and feels – pretty good.

The idea of the game is that the players are developing their joint civilisation. They set up farms, factories and other buildings (those diamond-shaped pieces). Some of these represent cultural advances, such as the Library, Theatre or Town Hall. Players score points when they provide the materials the cultural advances need, usually at the end of a chain of production. The first player to score all their points (the number depends on how many are playing) wins the game.

The production chain is key to *Neuland* – it's the first thing players need to understand or they'll struggle to see what they're doing. Everybody starts with a Hunting Lodge and a Lumberjack, which demonstrate the start of the chain. The Hunting Lodge produces food from nothing. The Lumberjack takes the food and produces wood. Wood is the basic requirement to set up some new buildings and can be the raw material for other production (the Paper Mill takes wood and produces paper, for example). Other buildings can take food and produce something. The Quarry provides stone, which is needed to build the more advanced buildings. Mines use food to produce coal, iron ore or silver ore (you decide when you put a Mine on the board), themselves the raw materials for other things.

At the end of the chain are the various cultural advances. Stone is required to place them on the board, but players need more complex input to claim the victory points. Gaining the points for the Cathedral, for example, requires paper plus coins (produced by the Mint from silver produced by the Smelter from silver ore and coal produced from two Mines). From this you can see the path the game takes. Players start with the simple buildings and produce wood and stone to add more buildings to make more advanced stuff. Then they use the chain they have set up to produce what's needed to score a cultural advance. Phew! Get your head round that and you have the game cracked.

Interestingly, the markers for products are the large wooden blocks in each player's colour. The actual product is indicated by the building the block is standing on – a block on a Lumberjack is wood, for example. (There are extra markers to show whether the product of a Mine is coal, iron ore or silver ore.)

The activity of the production chain is shown by taking markers on and off the board. So if the wood is used to create paper through the Paper Mill, the marker is removed from the Lumberjack and placed on the Paper Mill. Or, more likely, the player moves the marker from one to the other.

The only restriction on this is that players can't produce from a building that already has a marker on it. This is an interesting point. There is no ownership of buildings, but players do own the products. So I can spend several turns setting up a chain of buildings only for someone else to use them! A clever tactic on their part, not so clever on mine. So players try to leave product markers on key buildings. This stops anyone else using them and makes sure that the product is available on their next turn. However, players have to use products they have at the start of the turn or they'll lose them.

Which reminds me that I haven't described what happens in a turn yet. This uses a rather clever mechanism that provides some tactical opportunities itself. The turn is controlled by a short, circular track plus pawns for each player and one for the passage of time. A player takes their turn and moves their pawn one space forward for each action they take. However, they cannot land on or pass the time pawn, giving them a maximum of 10 actions. Once they've finished, the time pawn is moved on to the next player's pawn and it's their turn. So, by taking just a few actions, a player moves his pawn just a few spaces and can get another turn immediately. In effect, this means players can get anything from 12 to 17 actions at once – though it will then be a little while before they get another turn after that.

Actions are used in producing things: at least one action every time a player uses a building. The further the raw materials have to come, the more actions it costs. So it makes sense to use buildings that are close to each other. But, if a player can afford the actions, there's nothing to stop them moving stuff right across the board. So if someone wants to use the silver mine you've built in front of you, the

only thing stopping them is running out of actions. Unless you've parked your own silver on it, of course.

Putting buildings on the board can cost actions. If the wood or stone used to construct the building comes from an adjacent area, there's no cost. It costs one action for each additional area the product has to cross. Players also have to consider where they can put the building: it has to go on the appropriate terrain and no more than three buildings can go on an area. In a clever bit of design, the diamond shape of the buildings means three of them make a smaller hexagon within a hexagonal area. An element of planning ahead can help here: putting buildings in a production chain close together to keep down the costs (in terms of actions) of building and producing.

Consequently, the first thing that happens in a player's turn is that they spend some time working out what their options are. They have so many actions, certain products on the board and certain buildings available. What can they make of it? There is plenty to think about and the danger is that analysis paralysis sets in. My tip is not to take too long or the game will bog down. As a rule, spending more and more time does not produce an increased payback. The key thing is to look for opportunities to score the cultural advances. Failing that, build towards them – but try not to leave anything useful for the other players.

Don't forget that empty buildings can be used by anyone, so look all over the board for opportunities. Players need to keep an eye on what everybody else is up to, as well. There's not much point in planning a three-turn effort to grab the Cathedral, say, if someone else takes it next turn! Apart from this and the ability to use buildings other players have built, there is no real player interaction in the game. Players are essentially following their own development paths, but do compete for the same things and can block what their opponents are up to.

Neuland is a game that has many tactical possibilities. But, to take advantage of these, players must understand the central workings of the game – the production chain and the way actions are taken. Then they can plan what they want to do and put together a sequence of actions that will often span more than one turn. The result is a challenging but rewarding game – if rather slow at times.

Neuland is a logistics board game designed by Tobias Stapelfeldt and Peter Eggert and published by Eggertspiele (English rules are available on www.eggertspiele.de or www.boardgamegeek.com). It is for 2-4 players, aged 14+, and takes 1-2 hours to play. It is available from the publisher for 44 Euros (+ delivery).

Pevans rates this game 8/10 on his highly subjective scale.

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