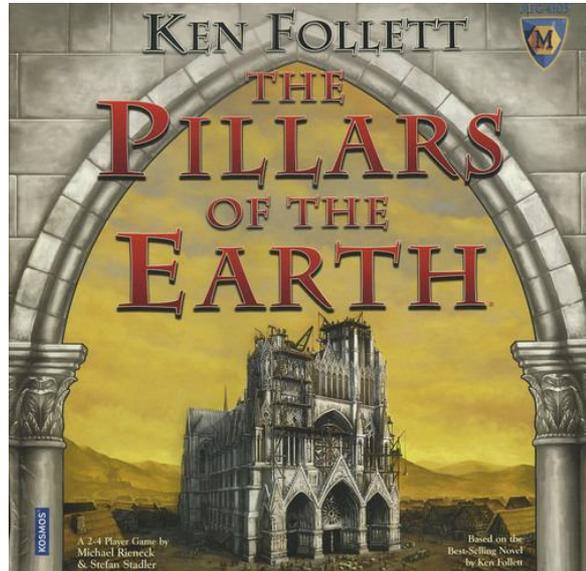


The Pillars of the Earth

Reviewed by Pevans

Like other people, I was really taken with the way this game looks when I first saw it. This is due to the six wooden pieces that make up the cathedral in the centre of the board. Around this, the board shows the countryside and workplaces of the people building the cathedral. This is the plot of the Ken Follett book that inspired the game (and from which it takes its title) and is also the 'story' of the game itself. Unlike building a real cathedral, the game is strictly time-limited. After six turns, the cathedral is complete and the player with the most points wins.



The players gain victory points from their 'craftsmen' (cards) as they turn raw materials (wooden cubes) into parts of the building. First, though, they have to use their 'workers' (wooden figures) to get the raw materials. Players can also get better craftsmen and use their 'Master Builders' (big wooden pawns) for various useful actions – such as buying and selling materials at the market or gaining extra workers. Two tracks on the board show how many victory points and how much 'Gold' (money) players have. Each player starts with a couple of points and the start player has 20 gold. The other players each get one more gold than the previous player in a little bit of handicapping.

In terms of pieces, players start with their own set of workers – seven standard figures and a larger one that counts as five – and three master builder pawns. Each also has three basic craftsmen – you can hold up to five, but not having each of the basic types restricts some of your actions during the game. These use the basic raw materials of the game (stone, wood and sand) to produce victory points (material for the cathedral). There's also a reminder card for each player that shows the course of play and, importantly, the limitations imposed by not having one of the basic craftsman types.

Each turn starts by laying out all but two of the supply cards – quarries, forests and sandpits – each of which needs a certain number of workers to produce a set number of cubes in the appropriate colour. Alongside these go two of the new craftsmen for this turn. Players then take turns to claim a card: either by playing the right number of workers to take a supply card or by paying the right amount of gold to hire a craftsman. Once all the cards have gone or players choose not to take another

card, they place any remaining workers on one of the positions on the board – where they will earn gold later in the turn.

This is the first decision point for players. Take a craftsman card and you may not have the chance to get the materials you want by the time the turn comes back to you. Grab some materials and the craftsman you want may have gone before it's your turn again. The more players in the game, the more important this becomes – with four, you'll probably only get two choices. It also means that your position in the turn order is important: the first player gets first choice and will still have plenty of choice next time round. The last player will end up choosing whatever nobody else wants –if they can afford it!

The next stage of the game is deploying the master builders. All of them go into a cloth bag and one is drawn out at random. The player whose piece it is has the choice of paying gold to place it on the board or passing. Then a second pawn is pulled out: this costs one gold less to place than the previous one and, in most cases, can only go where there isn't already a master builder. Eventually, placing the next pawn will cost nothing and, once all the pawns have been drawn from the bag, any pawns that were not placed earlier can finally be added to the board at no cost.

This is also a big decision point for players. If your master builder is drawn out first, you have the full choice of where to place it. But is this worth the cost? And, if you pass, it will be some time before you finally place it and your choices will be much more limited. You also don't know when your next pawn will come out. Just how much is it worth to get the position on the board? It depends on just what your position is, what you want to do this turn and, of course, how much money you have left. This is already shaping up to be a cracking game.

Once all the master builders have been deployed, the turn's random event card is turned over and takes effect. These are a mixture of good news and bad news, so it's worth knowing what the possible events are and how you might deal with, or take advantage of, each one. There are ten cards in the box, only six of which are used during each game. While you can try to guard against all the events, this will tie up your resources and may be pointless if that event doesn't take place. I take a risk management approach to this: what are the odds and how bad could it be?

Now we know the event, it's time to resolve the various areas of the board. The first of these is actually the event card. The second gives the player whose master builder is there protection from the event, if they want it. If it's good, or you aren't bothered by the event, you get to take a free cube from the market. This is a neat little tactical option – paying the cost of a bad event to get a free cube. The third place on the board, the woollen mill, generates gold for players who have placed workers there. The fourth has two spaces for players to get 'Advantage' cards. Each of these gives players some special advantage: such as immediate cash or materials, exemption from tax for a turn or a free cube each turn.

The next space also has two spaces, which score the player one or two victory points. The next three positions, which don't have master builders on them, trigger the production of each of the three basic materials from the supply cards players claimed earlier in the turn. Position 9 is The King's Court and the players are taxed: a die roll gives the amount to be paid, but players with master builders at the court are exempt. In addition, the first player there gets a free cube of 'metal,' the fourth material. Next are the two remaining craftsman cards available in the turn. These go to the players who put their master builders on them at no cost in gold.

At the castle, the player whose master builder is there gets two extra workers for the next turn. Then we come to the market. This starts each turn with four of each basic material and players can buy these or sell what they have – including metal, which can be a nice little earner. Each player gets the chance to buy or sell one type of material, then it's the next player's turn and this goes round until players have done all the deals they want to do or the cubes have run out.

Next, players expend their cubes, using their craftsmen to turn them into victory points. Each craftsman takes a certain material, needs a certain number of cubes to produce a point and can only do this a certain number of times each turn. This is why the later, more efficient craftsmen are more useful. They need fewer materials to produce a victory point or they can produce more points in a turn. Players can keep up to five cubes between turns, which gives players a definite incentive to spend their cubes each turn.



The final position on the board makes the player whose master builder is there the first player for the next turn. If nobody does this, the first player moves round to the next player. There is a definite advantage in being the first player when it comes to placing workers. However, as the master builders are drawn at random, this advantage does not run right the way through the turn. The very last thing at the end of each turn is to add another piece to the cathedral. When it's complete, the game is over

The Pillars of the Earth is definitely a tactical game. It's all about making the most of each turn. What you can – and should – do is improve your craftsmen through the turns in order to generate more victory points. However, you also need to make sure you get enough materials to get those victory points. As the game is a set number of turns and you have a limited number of pieces in each turn, you have to make the most of your opportunities. However, these are limited by the other players' actions, the order the master builders are deployed and the amount of gold you have.

This whole game is put together very well. Not just the excellent physical package, but the way the different components of game play interlock to give players the constant need to weigh up the pros and cons and make decisions. None of these is significant enough to win or lose the game, but the pressure is there to make the better choice. The random element is enough to make sure that the detail of the decisions is different each time you play. I was right: this is a cracking game. And other people seem to think so as *The Pillars of the Earth* has been chosen as a tournament game for both UK's SpielChamps and the EuropeMasters this year.

The Pillars of the Earth was designed by Michael Rieneck and Stefan Stadler and is published by Kosmos (as *Die Säulen der Erde*) and Mayfair Games. It is for 2-4 players, aged 12+ and takes 2 hours to play (though it's faster with players who know the game). It gets 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

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