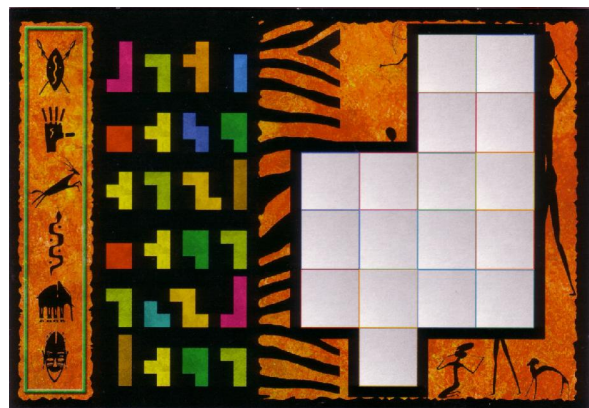


Puzzling

Ubongo reviewed by Pevans

Ubongo is an odd little game. Though “little” probably isn’t the appropriate word as it comes in the chunky square box that Kosmos uses for their board games. The box – and game components – are brightly coloured and decorated with African symbols and artwork. This doesn’t seem to have any connection with the game itself, but does provide some atmosphere.

The ‘board’ is quite little. It’s essentially just tracks for the gems (bright, faceted plastic crystals in half a dozen colours) that players are trying to collect. *Ubongo*’s main component is a set of boards printed with shape puzzles. The puzzles are the heart of the game. Each board has an outlined space with a square grid. Players have to use selected pieces from their set of Tetris-style shapes to fill the space. And do so against a timer. Each player has their own board and therefore a different puzzle. Completing their puzzle allows a player to take two gems from the board. Provided they do all that within the time limit.



A puzzle board from *Ubongo*

The game runs until all the puzzle boards have been played. Players count up how many gems they have. Whoever has the most gems in a single colour is the winner. If players tie – which is quite likely – their second-biggest set counts. And so on. From this we can begin to see some tactics to the game. First is picking up gems in the right colour. This is not as easy as it sounds. Gems must come from the end of a row. What’s more, each player can only take their gems from the row where their pawn stands. The more quickly they solve their puzzle, the further they can move their pawn before taking their gems.

The second tactical element is planning ahead. That is, looking further along the board to see when more gems of the desired colour will be available. The third is that players can see what everybody is collecting as gems are held openly. So there’s the opportunity to spoil other players’ sets. Players can also check who else is collecting the same colour as them. And, of course, can keep an eye on everybody’s score so that they know who to beat. However, taking advantage of these tactical elements depends on solving the puzzles in the first place.

There’s one variable to the game that I haven’t mentioned yet. Each board shows six different sets of shapes that can be used to fill the space. The set that’s used is selected randomly at the start of each turn. This is also the signal to start the timer. So players have to select the right shapes from their set, solve the puzzle, move

their pawn and collect their gems within 45 seconds. In practice this is plenty of time. The trick is to use the time outside this to check the gems on the board and in other players' collections.

As well as the six different sets of shapes, each board is double-sided. One side shows smaller spaces and sets of three shapes. The other side has larger spaces and sets of four shapes and is noticeably tougher to solve. I suggest using the easier side initially and moving on when players are confident with the game. With a dozen different puzzles on 36 boards, there is plenty of re-play here. It's unlikely that anybody will get the same puzzle twice even after playing several games.

Ubongo plays in 20-30 minutes, as it says on the box. This is surprisingly quick for a 'big box' game. This reinforces for me that this is actually quite a slight game. Yes, there are some neat tactical ploys in the game. But they are not particularly challenging and certainly not demanding. Though those to whom this kind of geometric, spatial awareness puzzle is impenetrable will be completely baffled by this game. *Ubongo* will only be appreciated by those who like this sort of thing. And I doubt they will be that impressed as this is such a lightweight game – despite the big box. I suspect the game's intended audience is families who like competitive puzzle-solving. For gamers, *Ubongo* is a decent filler – for those who appreciate it.

Ubongo was designed by Grzegorz Rejchtman and is published by Kosmos (and University Games). It is an abstract board game for 2-4 players that takes 20-30 minutes to play. It is available in specialist games shops.

Pevans rates it 4/10 on his highly subjective scale.

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