

Ye Gods!

Olympos reviewed by Pevans

French publisher Ystari has a fine track record and *Olympos* is the latest addition to the line (Rio Grande is publishing the English language version). The game's designer is well known, too: Philippe Keyaerts is the man behind *Vinci* (and thus *Small World*) and *Evo*. As soon as I saw the pedigree, I knew this was a game that I needed to try. I have not been disappointed.

The main board shows classical Greece, including the southern Balkans, western Asia Minor and the islands. Plus 'Atlantis' – three large islands at the south of the board. Players represent tribes coming into Greece from the north, moving their pieces around the map to occupy territories. Control of a territory provides the player with the resource the territory produces: a resource they can spend every turn. (Resource cubes, on the other hand, can only be used once.)

There are only two actions available each turn: expand or develop. Expansion consists of either adding a piece to the board and moving it or moving one that's already there. The piece can move as far as you want – as long as you can pay for it. While players take over empty territories just by moving in, occupied ones must be fought for. This is very simple: the attacker wins! However, the cost



depends on the difference in military power between the combatants. Initially, the more important territories contain neutral pieces which must be fought, making them more expensive.

I've mentioned the cost of an action a couple of times there. The cost is the amount of 'time' the action takes. Around the outside of the board is the 'time track'. Each time a player takes an action, they move their pawn a number of spaces along the track. The next player is then whoever is at the back of the track. If you're still at the back after taking an action, you take another – and continue until you're ahead of someone else. As you'd expect, the more important actions take longer. Thus, one of the considerations before taking a major action is how many actions other players will get before you get another go – and what they'll do with them.

One point to note here is the 'hourglass' tokens. These can be gained in several ways (such as being attacked) and are used instead of moving a space on the time track. They are thus rather valuable. However, the rules prevent players from hoarding them: hourglasses must be used first each turn. This does make for some interesting calculations, though, as to just how much you can do in your turn.

While the geographical board and the Expansion action are important, at the heart of the game are the Development action and board. The 'Development' board holds 'Discovery' tiles and 'Wonders' in six rows. When a player takes the Development action, they buy a Discovery (or Wonder) tile from the board. Discoveries cost resources and each provides some bonus, discount or strength for the rest of the game: cheaper movement, perhaps, or more military strength. What's more, players get an immediate bonus (for example, a resource cube or an hourglass token) when they take a discovery, covering their chosen bonus with a counter.

The Wonders, at the end of each column on the Development board, don't cost resources, but can only be taken if you have enough 'star' symbols. Stars come on some



The Development board with a full set of tiles – there's a lot of information on both of these



Discoveries and you may pick up a star token or two by beating neutral pieces. However, players are not likely to collect many stars. This is where Discoveries have yet another use: each counter in the same column as a Wonder counts as a star towards buying it. As Wonders are worth a lot of points, getting discounts towards them is a very useful move.

Each row of Discoveries and Wonders is laid out at random at the beginning of the game (and there are more Discoveries the more players there are). It is thus worth spending some time to see what's where before the game starts. The first consideration is which columns the most valuable Wonders are in and what Discoveries are in these columns. Ideally, you want two or three Discoveries in a column that will work together, providing a strategy as well as a discount towards the Wonder in that column. Even better if you can do this in two columns and pick up both Wonders. Of course, the other players will make the same analysis...

There are a couple of other wrinkles to the game, both tied in to the time track. Certain points on the track are marked with a 'Zeus' symbol and trigger two things. First off, players get a 'Destiny' card when they reach or pass one of these spaces. These provide a bonus of some kind and can be held until needed – there's no restriction on how many you can play in a turn.

Secondly, one of the Gods will turn up! Depending on the specific space, this is triggered by the first and/or last player to arrive. A card is drawn and the God picks on someone. If it's beneficial, the recipient will be the player with the most 'Zeus' symbols. If it's detrimental, the player with the fewest Zeus symbols suffers. This gives players something else to collect – some Discoveries have a Zeus symbol, as do some Destiny cards, and there's a token for whoever occupies Mount Olympus.

All but one of the Gods will appear during the game, so it's worth knowing what they do before you start. My experience suggests that being on the receiving end of the Gods is painful, but not catastrophic. It's worth making sure you don't have the fewest Zeus tokens. Having the most is a useful bonus, but I wouldn't put too much effort into chasing it.



A couple of Gods – good and bad!

At the end of the game there is a final tactical ploy. The spaces after the last Zeus space on the time track are marked with decreasing numbers. When a player's marker arrives on one of these, they have a choice when it's next their turn. They can take one more action – as long as their marker doesn't go past the very end of the track. Or they can pass and score the number of points for the space their marker is on. This is a neat touch and does give people something to think about at the end.

Once everybody's finished, it's time to tot up the points. As already noted, Wonders are worth points. So are Discoveries and territories – Atlantis counts double as these areas are furthest from the starting space on the northern edge of the board. Some Discoveries give points for holding other things or symbols or just for themselves. Unused Destiny cards are also worth points and the God Keres inflicts a penalty on whoever has the fewest Zeus symbols. Whoever has the most points is the winner, of course.

There's a lot going on in this game and the game's mechanisms are cleverly intertwined. At the start of the game, players will grab territory to get the resources to buy their first Discoveries. Where they go after this will depend on just which Discoveries they have and which ones they're looking to get. Pick up some Discoveries with sword symbols, for example, and you can use your military power to take territories off others. Add the Discoveries that give bonuses for swords and for pieces on the board and you're on the way to a good score.

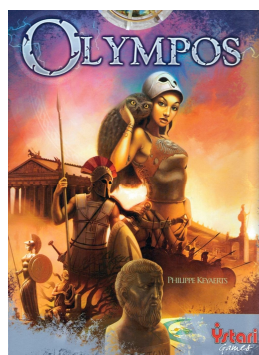
My strategy so far has been picking up Architecture, which provides a star and makes buying Wonders cheaper (in terms of time), and Engineering, for another star and a bonus on stars held at the end. Other Discoveries provide more immediate advantages (faster movement at sea, for example) and I recommend getting one of the 'discount' tiles that make buying other Discoveries cheaper. As

each discount is tied in to a particular resource, this tends to influence your strategy for the rest of the game.

As I've already said, collecting Discoveries is key to the game, but you also need to think about collecting stars, collecting Zeus symbols, collecting swords, collecting Destiny cards, collecting hourglasses... and dodging the Gods. Oh, and don't forget the territories you will need to get the resources you will need to buy these Discoveries. Phew!



Example Destiny cards – they give you hourglass tokens, a star and an orange cube, respectively



Olympos scores for me by providing a lot of decision making, some clear strategies and the occasional opportunity to mess up your opponents! It is my top game at the moment, the one I'm most likely to put on the table to play, and I give it a definite 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Olympos was designed by Philippe Keyaerts and is published by Ystari (and in English by Rio Grande). It's a strategic board game for 3-5 players, aged 10+, and takes about 90 minutes to play.

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