

'Defenders of the Realm' board game

Published by Eagle Games 2010; Designer Richard Launius

Review by Paul Le Long

Overview

Four groups of monsters and their leaders are threatening the kingdom and the heroes (you) have to stop them. The monsters proliferate and spread across the board, converging on the capital ó Monarch City. You win by killing all four monster ðbosses.ö It's a ðhold æm at bayö type game and can be very tense, intense and enjoyable indeed. It is also extremely difficult to win; in fact, I find some level of fun in seeing just how much I get my backside kicked ó which is what always happens!

There are a number of ways in which you can lose the game:

- i. You run out of a certain type of minion (because they are all on the board already)
- ii. A boss reaches the capital
- iii. 5 minions of any type are in the capital
- iv. The land is so polluted (ðtaintedö) by the presence of monsters that it can no longer survive
- v. All the heroes get killed

Can it be played solo?

This is a fully co-operative game and can therefore be played either solo or by a group who are all playing against the game ó the bad guys are controlled by the game's AI, and quite elegantly too. I play solo but tend to run 2-3 heroes in each game (there are 8 heroes to choose from).

This begs the question: do more players/heroes mean the game is easier than for a single player/hero? No. The game is cleverly calibrated to even the odds ó the baddies are controlled by card draws which determine where and how much their power spreads. These card draws are made after each hero takes a turn ó so if you run a single hero you draw one ðDarkness Spreadsö card after your turn. If you run eight heroes, then eight Darkness Spreads cards will have been drawn by the time hero number one gets his next go. Nice balance.

What are the components?

The board is beautiful as you can see from the photos below, with all artwork done by Larry Elmore, who is famous for his work on many Dungeons & Dragons and other fantasy projects. There are 176 cards, which are all well produced and illustrated, 100 miniatures of monster minions (4 types) and miniatures of all 8 heroes and 4 bad guy bosses, including a large and beautiful dragon. There are various counters and play boards, all on very thick card. The quality is really top drawer.

What is the level of complexity?

This is a fairly simple game: the rules can be learned very quickly, and soon (during the first play-through) become second nature. I played the game recently with a friend who is only a very casual gamer and he picked it up within 10 minutes. I would categorise Defenders as simple to learn but difficult to master (and so far, impossible to win!).

What do you spend your time doing during play?

You move your hero around the board ó it's point-to-point movement with variations for some character abilities ó and undertake as many actions as your character is allowed ó usually 4-6. Moving is an action, as is fighting minions (or bosses). When there are lots of minions around, the land becomes tainted (think desolation of Smaug) and you can spend an action healing the land. You can heal yourself, build magic portals and so on. Basically, you are trying to keep the minion population as low as possible. At the end of your turn you collect Hero Cards and these can be spent in various ways ó trade in for faster transportation, heal the land, toast some minions or start a showdown with a boss.

Once a hero has completed his turn, then he draws 1-3 Darkness Spreads cards (you draw more of these as the game progresses & by the end when you are drawing 3 each turn, things get very painful very quickly). This is where the minions are proliferating and spreading. Also the bosses start moving towards the capital (which is very bad news).

What are the tactical decisions?

This is I think where Defenders really shines. The game is calibrated so that minions are always proliferating, overrunning locations, tainting the land and bosses are marching inexorably towards the capital. You need to collect hero cards in order to battle the bosses and you have to manage your hand of cards ó only green cards can be used against the green boss for example and you need to be really tooled up before you start a showdown. But those cards are often needed for other things too so you have to be careful. Also when you take down a boss the war moves into a more intense phase and you draw more Darkness cards each turn. But stalling isn't an option because the bosses will reach the capital. Catch-22.

The minions of a dead boss are easy prey for that boss's killer so that's something to consider. But co-operation between heroes is essential because a single hero will find it difficult to take down a boss alone (which is why even when playing solo I run several characters).

The bottom line is that there are so many ways to lose the game that you must work as a team and keep an eye on many things at once ó if you concentrate on killing minions then you will be neglecting bosses and the tainted land; if you concentrate on healing the land then minions will spread and taint it all over again; if you try to do everything then you'll do none of it well. Catch-22.

Points to note

There are several expansions to the game ó none of which I've played but you can find details on Boardgamegeek: <http://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/65532/defenders-realm>

Defenders is more or less the game òPandemicö re-imagined with a fantasy theme. If you already have Pandemic then this might not give you anything more (unless the fantasy theme appeals to you more than the medical one). Conversely, if you get Defenders then you can probably do without Pandemic.

Web Links

There is a good playthrough video on the Dragon Table (YouTube channel):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwMmlsLjkDs&list=UUU245YW2O94AUNVF_CeobMA

There are plenty of other playthrough videos that you can find via the Boardgamegeek page above but I haven't watched them so can't comment.

Check out a review by Marcowargamer (YouTube channel):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzuB9JK78aY>

In fact, this channel is excellent for reviews and it features many solitaire games.

Final assessment

I really like this game. It is designed for co-operative play, which means it plays well solitaire too. A game lasts about an hour or so, maybe more if you are playing solo and running a lot of characters. It is great fun despite being so difficult to beat. In fact, the difficulty is fun in itself and presents a challenge. I also like the tactical nuances of the game and the AI ó for a simple game they are very well calibrated.

Recommended.







