

Cursed Empire Heroes of Thargos – Review by Brendan McFadden



‘Cursed Empire Heroes of Thargos’ is a complex game, in fact one of the most complex games I have played. However, once this huddle of complexity is overcome you will find a deep and thought-provoking game which by mastering makes you understand the deep intricate world of the Cursed Empire. It is well worth the effort. Here is my review.

The gameplay

Heroes of Thargos is a deck building game and can be played as a solo game, a two-player game or three player game. I played the 2-player variant and that is what this review is based on. In a nutshell, you play the game thusly: each player controls 4 characters, you battle over mission cards which score you victory points and after you achieve a set amount of victory points before your opponent you win the game; you can also lose the game by running out of drawable cards. It sounds simple... in a nutshell, but a less abridged version of the rules is where you find the devil in the detail (take a breath):

The gameplay outside the nutshell is played thusly: ‘Each player controls 4 characters, you battle over mission cards which score you victory points and after you achieve a set amount of victory points (which is based on your character card composition) you win the game To win a mission the attacking player must outscore the mission cards Might, Mysticism and/or Mind score in addition to the

defending player's corresponding character Might, Mysticism and/or Mind score if the defending character chooses to defend the mission (and in some cases it would not be in the players best wishes to do so). The characters and missions are laid out on tracks- a character can only attack a mission if it sits on the same track. If the players character meets the criteria for the mission, it takes the mission card to the Victory Pile and gains the victory points, if the player does not complete the mission the character card is flipped over to reveal its injured side where it has reduced statistics. If a player wants to try to fulfil a mission or defend a mission but they don't have enough points they can use the cards in their hand to up their Might, Mysticism and/or Mind score, these cards are then designated Played as Modifier cards which are later discarded from their hand after use. Each player must have 6 cards in their hand (unless they have picked characters whose attributes dictate more a player can have more or less cards in their hand), and any cards discarded must be replaced by drawing from their respective battle deck (in a two player each player has a battle deck of 60 cards). A player can also lose the game if they run out of cards. A player does not have to play mission, they can play a lasting card (which sits behind a character card and permanently increases their states, or an action card which can affect the play in various ways'.



[note the not quite a full explanation but can give you some idea, there are some excellent videos on YouTube which go into this in more detail]. Also see the anatomy of the card section

Given the above, it takes a bit of time to understand and appreciate the strategic elements of Heroes of Thargos. The first few games meant a lot of trial and error as my opponent, and I navigated the meaning of each card and the consequence of each decision made. This was a fun voyage of discovery, as most cards have lore and meaning attached and I found myself more invested in the characters as I discovered their effects. As an example lets look at one of the first characters I chose 'Kreiss Nog – Poison Master' - a card with attributes of 2 Might, 2 Mind, and 1 Mysticism- a good

allrounder I thought. When I found when my opponent was attempting a mission with a high Mind rating, Kreiss Nog was that more useful than I first thought, Kreiss Nog you see is particular useful at defending Mind as he gains 2 extra Mind points in defence. This saved me a mission and now I had a favourite character- now he began to take on a personality- Kreiss Nog was clearly a crafty soul. And like a lot to cards there is descriptive text within the character card: 'Kreiss is a master at concocting poisons, using them to deadly effect and he enjoys his art'. Looking at the card art further Kreiss holds his two dangers with menace and malice as two albino rats prowl around his feet'. Here then the tactical complexity of the game lead me to investigate the nuance of this character which in turn lead me to investing into the character and finding this character's place within a wider world. Kreiss Nog was now 'my' Kreiss Nog. I wanted to use this character forever more and wanted to find out more about this world he lived in (cursed of not!).



Like a lot of deckbuilding games, there is a good balance of strategy and luck within Heroes of Thargos card game. This would usually be a source of frustration for me as I like to rely on my wits alone to win and I don't like my plans being foiled by a bad luck of the draw. However, Heroes of Thargos solves this very neatly, as a bad hand can be used to capture missions when they are played as modifiers. So, if I have a playing hand which I find very little use for considering their original purpose I can use them as modifiers instead. In poker I would usually just throw this hand in, in Heroes of Thargos this bad hand presents an opportunity. Also like in a game of Poker, the Heroes of Thargos has a form of gambling within its gameplay. If I see my opponent is close to running out of cards in his battle deck, I can bluff my way to winning missions with knowledge that he dare not defend (or should he? If I win and take the mission card, he must replace this mission card- and if he does not have the mission card in his hand, he must keep drawing until he finds one). This can of

course be a double bluff as the opponent may well not choose to defend the mission and I have thrown away some cards needlessly for some victory points I was going to win anyway.

The structure of Heroes of Thargos means finding the appropriate tactic for win conditions also takes time to master (this is most definitely not a criticism- finding the appropriate tactic to win *should* take time to master). At first, I had a cavalier style of play and wanted to win the missions in front of me fast- I played hard and fast using cards in my hand to modify and increase my character score- and had some short term success at the start of the game, gaining a lead over my opponent that I thought could not be surpassed. But my battle deck was dwindling, and too late did I remember that an inability to draw cards meant I lost the game. With a judicious use of some action cards I found myself out of time, out of cards and out of luck. By my opponent using the 'Troll Raid on Camp', an action card which forces me to immediately discard 2 cards from my hand I had lost the game! I wouldn't make the same mistake next time. And this fact that I was beaten by what I would consider such a lowly action card as Troll Raid, how my carefully considered and mighty character card composition of Elios Buccaneer, Imperial Mentor, Assassin and (aforementioned) Poison Master- leads me to a point aspect of Heroes of Thargos which I adore- its egalitarianism a sense that anyone can make a change..

This egalitarianism is baked into Cursed Empire Heroes of Thargos- you can see this by the way your chosen character cards contribute to your win conditions. Character cards each have valour points and the by combining all of your four characters valour points you find how many victory points you need to win the game. If you want to a party of largely high-status characters, then fine, these have more valour points and therefore you need more victory points to win- ie you need to complete more missions or high value missions to win. Sir Conrad the Imperial General, as you may guess from his name alone, is a very powerful character card and a person of importance within the Cursed Empire; he also has strong Might, Mind and Mysticism attributes- but such a character requires more to satisfy his valour (Sir Conrad has a valour point of 11 point). Hypothetically 4 high status cards- 4 Sir Conrads- would require you to complete a maximum amount of conquests to satisfy their valour. Whereas if you choose a less 'high status' character- ie the Assassin Sorsha Magda, then she carries significantly less valour points and your win condition is less. This is just another example of how tactical nuances bring to the fore gameworld sensibilities, it creates a multidimensional, philosophical, and almost democratic fantasy world experience. It is not surprise that the author or the game Chris Loizou is an ancient history buff. One could argue in history, the protagonists of the narrative are usually the greatest leaders- Everyone know about Julius Caesar the roman leader who conquered Gaul, but less so about his mentor Marcus Antonius Gniphio who helped forge this character, and even less so than the common legionnaire who helped turn the tide in the Siege of Alesia. Each would have valour according to their context, they would compare themselves to their historical peers- Julius Caesar lamented upon turning 30 years old that you had not achieved the heights of Alexander the Great, yet his singular legionnaire would not of even known of Alexander, for his it would be enough to retire to a plot of land to satisfy his expectations. So art imitates reality, The Cursed Empire Heroes of Thargos has this depth and its own philosophy which mirror ancient history but segues into its own worldview and your own worldview.

The multitudes of scenario of Cursed Empire Heroes of Thargos mean that no 2 games will ever be the same. I am no mathematician, but I played chess a lot and I know there are more atoms in the universe than there are chess scenarios, and I know there are millions more Heroes of Thargos scenarios than there are chess scenarios. Playing through a game of Cursed Empire Heroes of Thargos creates unique stories which I love. After you get past the initial steep learning curve there lies a deep and satisfying card game where you step into the mind and passion of its creator.