

Game Review: Once Upon a Time

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This is a non-collectable card game designed to be played with younger children ages 6 and up. Its goal is to stoke the imagination and introduce a level of friendly competition and cooperation that is very useful for playing RPGs.

From the Atlas Games website:

Named to GAMES Magazine's Best Family Card Game section in 1997, Once Upon a Time is a game the entire family will enjoy. The players create a story together, using cards that show typical elements from fairy tales. One player is the Storyteller, and creates a story using the ingredients on her cards. She tries to guide the plot towards her own ending. The other players try to use cards to interrupt her and become the new Storyteller. The winner is the first player to play out all her cards and end with her Happy Ever After card!

I know, I know, you're thinking, What's he doing reviewing a kids' game on an RPG site? Well, a lot of us are parents or parents-to-be and we've got junior gamers just waiting to fill our ranks and take up the mantle. So I plan to do a number of reviews that could be used to introduce young gamers into the fold.

This is the type of game I would have used if it had been available when my kids were growing up. It's a simple family game that has no overtures of fighting or macho posturing so even your non-gamer spouse will enjoy it.

The rules are relatively simple and easy to catch on. You are dealt a hand of cards that each have a picture on it. Your goal is tell a story using the cards you have. Each sentence you use to tell your story lets you discard that specific card from your hand. For example, you could start your tale with "Once upon a time there was a witch that lived on the edge of a forest." which would let you play the witch or forest card. If you had both witch and forest cards, you could only play one per sentence you make.

The idea behind the game is to discard the cards in your hand first. You can interrupt the storyteller at any time if you have a card that is part of the current storyteller's story. So in the previous example, if you have the forest card, you can play it and take control of the story. You continue the story but it should carry on from the original premise. There are other rules but these are the basic ones and most important.

The cards have very nice images with the word printed at the bottom. Although the game is only available in English, Spanish or Italian, it could easily be played in French any other language. The graphics are the most important part. However, there are a group Happy-Ever-After cards with phrases like "And when they brought it back to her, she was very happy and gave them each a reward." Everyone receives one of these cards and your story should end with this phrase you have. These cards might be hard to translate into Netherlandese.

I had a chance to play this game over the Christmas holidays with my older kids and the 7-year-old twin boys of a close friend of mine. Now my friend is too straight-laced to be a gamer so I took a perverse pleasure in trying to introduce his kids to gaming.

The game didn't go as well as I expected. I found that as the rules moderator I was constantly saying "no, you can't do that". The experience came across as more negative than I really wanted. The biggest problem was that everyone would try to use as many cards as possible in one sentence. Even I was doing it and I was enforcing the rules. The competition to discard your cards just makes you do it. The rules suggest that everyone in the game decide if the cards being played are acceptable and within the rules. But as a player, you are more concentrated on following the story and setting up

your interrupts than you are validating the rules.

So in the end I ended up acting as a Game Master, even though I was playing myself. And as such I was constantly correcting people. In our last games (which are relatively short), I ended up letting the rules slip and just letting the game flow. This was more relaxed but we didn't follow the rules very well.

What we needed was a GM to officiate the rules and who had no interest in playing his hand. If I were to play again I would do it this way. Even so it still seems that at this young age, the kids should be able to follow the rules easily and just get caught up in the fun. Instead we were constantly going against the rules.

One of the things I should have done would be to play the game with adults first and get some feedback. Although I was pretty well prepared and had read the rules many times, I wasn't ready for the way we all broke the rules. And we weren't playing with all the rules. I'm betting that if we had asked the twins what they thought, they would not have endorsed it highly.

I'm not ready to give up on the game though. I still think it's worth a look at. You can start a very simple game with your own kids and then build it up at subsequent sessions.

Note: This product is now no longer being printed and my FLGS was not able to order it. I was able to quite easily find a cheap price for it on eBay from an Online Games store.

dDemonicAngels is the online identity of Bil White, a freelance writer from Montreal. Bil had no problem getting his son into D&D but this game might have won over the heart of his daughter if he had it then. He loves the idea of giving kids a constructive outlet for their imagination.