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‘Gormenghast’: The Board Game

A review orchestrated by GPW

LAST AUTUMN, a board game of Gormenghast created by Phil Cooke was published by Sophisticated Games (of Cambridge, England). I had helped Phil with information while he was developing it and I was promised a copy, but nothing has come.

So I have done what one does under such circumstances: turned to my friends and the internet. The ‘boardgamegeek.com’ site tells me that

In this board game each player takes on the role of a ‘kitchen rat’. Like Steerpike you have the same murderous desire for power. Your goal is to accumulate as much influence as you can (in the form of Victory Tokens), rise to the top and become Master of Ritual. To acquire Victory Tokens players move characters around the board to complete various intrigues (detailed on Plot Cards). Completing a plot wins the player Victory Tokens. The first player to acquire nine (or more) Victory Tokens wins the game.

There was a write-up on the same site by a fan of the books, Brian Boyle, who bought the game because of its title. He judged the

Components: excellent. Thick tiles for rooms of Gormenghast castle laid out to form the game board. The cards are of good quality and the thick-card character-tiles stay firmly in their stands.

He found the artwork by John Howe on the cover of the box ‘just sensational’, whereas the tiles by Phil Cooke are simply ‘serviceable’. He found the theme faithful to the book, sensing that ‘this game has clearly been crafted by a lover of the novels.’

Playing Gormenghast, Brian Boyle noticed a potential for confusion: inconsistency between the names of things on the cards and the book of rituals and the names of the same things on the board.
(Strangely, this was something I picked up and commented on to Phil when he sent me a proof.) Boyle went on:

It feels a little like a cross between Ankh-Morpork and Roborally but without the chaos on your turn. [It is] significantly luck driven largely due to the goal cards you receive, and whether the people/things on your goal cards are present on the Board at the start. Nevertheless, there is some depth in planning out your moves each turn. There are limited opportunities to frustrate opponents’ plans – since [your] opponents’ goals are unknown – but opportunities for interaction via ritual effects occur regularly throughout the game.

He concluded that the game (which usually lasts around forty-five minutes) is ‘possibly too simple for hard-core gamers, [there being] limited opportunity for interaction [and] almost no opportunity for strategic play.’ Consequently it is likely to be of interest principally to ‘fans of the novels’.

So let’s ask a fan. Just at the time the game came out, Catherine Grose completed her dissertation on how place supersedes character and narrative in the Titus books. She found the game confusing but engaging. You play as Steerpike and have to work your way up to Master of Ritual by gaining influence over the characters and getting them to do what you want. The ‘plots’ that each character has to complete (dictated by the plot cards that each player holds) are reminiscent of Cluedo: you have to get a certain character into a certain room with a certain object. One of the difficulties, however, is that this is supposed to be Gormenghast: no one has a full working knowledge of its layout. So the actual game board is made up of individual rooms that are partly laid out by players at the beginning of the game and partly discovered as you go along. This is actually my favourite aspect of the game because you get to build a different castle every time, by matching up the entrances and exits of each room.

So if you are trying to complete a plot with Mr Flay, for example, and you need to get him to a room which isn’t on the board already,
you have to take him off the edge of the map to bring other castle tiles and objects into play. Sometimes it is impossible for you to move your character without getting rid of some of the ‘ritual cards’ in your hand. At this point you roll the thirty-sided dice, read a passage from the book of ritual, and do whatever it tells you to do (which is very much in keeping with the original books, in that ritual gets in the way of the action). Eventually, someone completes enough plots to become Master of Ritual and the game is over.

The game pieces are very well made, with great illustrations of each character, so if you ever get bored of playing the game, you have a lovely set of Gormenghast-themed coasters for your coffee mugs.