

Blue Moon: Buka Invasion by Christopher Dearlove

Blue Moon: Buka Invasion is the ninth expansion deck (eleventh deck) for the two player card game *Blue Moon*, designed by Reiner Knizia and published by Kosmos and Fantasy Flight Games. Some people have expressed an interest in how a Blue Moon deck is created, and this is an account of that as I saw it, having been one of those fortunate enough to play a small part in it.

The first thing to note is that the Buka Invasion is the first Blue Moon deck whose origins are newer than the publication of the basic Blue Moon set. When that was published, all eight basic people decks were fully designed, and while the Emissaries and Inquisitors decks still needed some work, their concepts were in place - and it was even known exactly which gaps to leave in the card numberings. There was an idea for another deck that started as part of what became Emissaries and Inquisitors, but for various reasons it got squeezed out, leaving room for a new deck concept.

In fact several ideas were kicked around, but the most obvious was a deck for either the Buka or the Phar, whose emissaries had been seen in Emissaries and Inquisitors but, unlike the other two emissaries (of the Tutu and the Hyla) had not contributed any other cards. For reasons to do with the roles of these peoples in untold parts of the Blue Moon Legend, the Buka were a more appropriate choice than the Phar for the next deck. That doesn't mean other ideas weren't considered, but they all ended up back with the Buka.

There were two major decisions before design began. The first was would the deck be a playable deck like the eight Blue Moon people decks, or something more like the Emissaries and Inquisitors decks? The decision obviously went with the former, but one idea for the latter, bands of mercenaries, lives on in the Buka "families". The second was how exactly the Buka as a standalone deck fit into the Blue Moon Legend, which also at that point was adding the details which are the basis of the Blue Moon City boardgame. And from that came the idea of the Buka Invasion, which also provided the final catalyst for the Blue Moon peoples realising the futility of the wars and that the right choice of Royal Heirs was ... neither of them. These discussions ("playtest" sessions without any play - giving the lie to those who think all of Reiner's themes are "pasted on") also provided the initial material that was built on by Frank Rehfeld in his novel *Blue Moon* (which being in German, I unfortunately haven't been able to read) which is about the Buka Invasion.

The final piece of background relevant to the Buka Invasion deck was what had already been said about the Buka in the first ten decks. This was three pieces of information: first that the Emissary of the Buka was a Commodore, by the name of Ri Cha, and then two card quotations: "Shhh, betwixt us. Where land meets water, master awaits Buka of winged boats from far floating lands." (from *Caterpillar Watertamer* [Pillar 18]) and "The proud ships of the Buka are nothing but toys in our waters. Peacefully they may sail." (from *Oomola-Aqua-Delta* [Aqua 11]). And both of the latter introduce the same idea: ships.

So the first thing the Buka needed was ships. And the basic ship idea was the first thing designed: played off the board (hence naturally in the influence area introduced in Emissaries and Inquisitors) as a form of "holding box" in which cards from hand could be put, a form of hand extension. Now every deck needs its way of reaching large powers, whether by including high valued characters, by use of multiple characters or boosters, by building up supports, or by something else. And ships seemed like a good way to achieve this; strength could be built up in a ship and then released - in the form of an invasion in fact. This made the ships something which (in the terms now used) had a capacity and which you played, loaded, landed, played the loaded cards from, and discarded (so that you had a limited number of times you could do this). While the ships' special power texts weren't exactly as now, they had those too, and restricting card play from hand when playing from a ship was also part of the original idea.

The final detail for this to work was that the cards that the Buka collects in a ship have to be playable together when the ship lands. This could have been done with PAIR or GANG icons, but using those again would dilute the uniqueness of the Mimix (or Flit if on boosters, but that's not the way the Buka went) or the Khind. And in any case FREE is the easiest option, so cards played from a ship should be FREE. That soon became the final form, that Buka (but not non-Buka) characters (but not boosters and supports) played from a ship should be FREE. This meshed with the Buka becoming character-heavy, as is discussed below. This both makes something special

about the Buka, and also ensured that a ship (which couldn't cost more than 4 moons) wasn't automatically devastating in another deck (no FREE *Flamebreath the Dazzling* [Vulca 01]).

So by the time of the first real playtest session, ships were pretty much as now, with two exceptions not yet noted. The restriction of ships to load only character, booster and support cards wasn't yet in place, but came about when codifying the rules and had no real consequence before then. More importantly, at this point in the design ships were played, loaded and landed all as leadership phase actions. The very first playtest deck had five ships, which was expected to be too many, as indeed it was, but was immediately replaced by three ships, with the deck's single leadership card (now *Entreat Favor* [Buka 27]) changed from an original idea that wasn't really used to become a way of reducing the chances of all three ships being stuck at the bottom of the deck (but with a way to use the card if all three ships are already drawn).

So that's one of the two big ideas in the Buka Invasion deck, what about the other? Well, that was put in place in the first real playtest session. Bluffing was where the idea started, and bluffing means face down cards. And the rest is design, the critical detail of which was the decision to make the deck character heavy, and use character cards face down in the support area as the bluff, thus introducing a new feature of a card usable, in effect, as either a character or a support. A real/bluff icon was the obvious mechanism, but dividing real cards between fire and earth was introduced straight away too. The main difference from the final rules was that bluffing started as value 3, and only later became value 2.

Even at this point the rules included one feature that may surprise some players, that even if your bluff is real and your bluff is called, although you gain a dragon (always the only real "currency" that makes a bluff work) you lose your bluff cards. There are two ways you can look at this. One is that it's the "cleanest" of possible alternatives (the most obvious others being leaving characters face up in the support area, and turning cards back face down even although no longer an unknown bluff). The other is that even a value 2 support is quite strong, and the deck could simply be played as if it had six of them (ignoring the other aspects of bluffing) and such a strength needed some counter-play against it. Incidentally it's also this that makes bluff cards not count towards the six cards needed to attract two dragons; if they did then sometimes you would have nothing to lose by calling a bluff, and that's not on.

The same playtest session also incorporated one idea that had already been floated, to finish off the fire/earth balance in the card mix, which made the Buka automatically earth heavy, but with the one missing special power text, thus introducing the *Duplicator of Fire* [Buka 26]. This soon led to another feature of the Buka, competition between features. The Buka are earth heavy, which can be useful, but all the real bluff icons were put on the unbalanced earth cards, so it's one or the other. This competition idea comes up again later.

So, with ships and bluffing, balancing fire and earth, *Duplicator of Fire* and *Entreat Favor*, the core of the Buka deck was in place. But in fact even at the first playtest session more of the features of the final Buka deck were added: one more support (but not the current version), a single booster preventing you calling my bluff (which needed to be FREE to work properly), characters with special power texts to provide some sort of anti-booster/support capability, to play bluff cards (later all support cards) faster, and to improve your bluff cards, and the idea of 3/3 conditional FREE cards (another competition: FREE from hand, or FREE from a ship).

And so, after just one actual playtest session, the deck was basically in shape, and playing plausibly against at least some of the other decks. The main structural change made later was the splitting of the ship functions into different phases, which again provided competition between features (loading a ship versus playing a bluff card).

Now this all sounds like everything was one step forward, no steps back. Well, it almost was. But there was one thing that there turned out to be no solution to. The Buka deck is fast. Very, very fast. It's a very rare game which ends with the non-Buka deck running out of cards first. Now in an ideal world that wouldn't be the case. Of course some decks will be faster than others, but the Buka are at the extreme end of the curve. A few minor details have helped (the RETRIEVE icon on *Captain Ariosa Paal* [Buka 04] for example) but attempts at alternative solutions just didn't gel (they weren't liked, and didn't work either) and the Buka speed became a feature to plan for.

So what happened then? Well, we playtested. And while the Buka deck was in the right ballpark, it was (once the bluff value became 2) a little too weak. And so the various other minor features of the deck slotted into place, along with rules details which became needed - what exactly happens when you ignore a bluff icon, and how do you handle getting trapped in a bad bluff when the element changes, being two of the most important.

While a mutant wasn't thematic, the ability to change element is useful in a deck which has definite element preferences. And in fact putting this ability on a non-mutant Buka character had a positive advantage. Its condition of play (another first choice) is another competition in this deck (you can't change element with ships in play) but drafted into another deck the card would have effectively had no condition on its play (unless using Hyla) - but as a Buka character it can have moons, so the Buka (which it restricts) can have it for free, but any other deck (which it doesn't) has to pay for it. Incidentally this card (*Old Goo Laa's Ghost* [Buka 23]) spent most of its life as a 0/0, becoming a 2/2 was a very late change, 2 having become the Buka's favourite number (especially when bluffing). The ability to discard your own bluff cards at the start of your turn is so that *Old Goo Laa's Ghost* works, but it can be useful at other times too.

The 3/3 conditional FREE (*B.P.*) characters worked so well they were added to, going up from three to four to five. (The character/booster/support versions are the originals.) Note that the idea is that they span a range of conditions, so that in just about any game some are useful, while some are not (at least not unless you put them in a ship or bluff with them). This usefulness may be either in countering your opponent's strength, or making him play more cautiously. Their single moon cost is to encourage their use; the right ones are worth at least two moons, but the wrong ones zero moons (except for when loaded onto a ship). It's assumed you don't know exactly which deck you're designing your deck to play against (not for the first time in pricing Blue Moon cards).

Other changes up to this point included the final versions of the second support card (*Armory* [Buka 25]) and of what became *Quartermaster Kura Ko* [Buka 20] and *Powdermaster Tina Ko* [Buka 21], the RETRIEVE icon already mentioned, and a little strengthening of values at the top end of the deck. Also *Letter of Marque* [Buka 24] ended up, uniquely for a booster (or support), with values (the Buka's favourite again), an icon and special power text. And so the Buka closed the gap on their competitors, at least in our playtesting, except for one. The Buka just could not beat the Khind.

Actually this position was quite fortunate. It's easier to improve a deck selectively than it would have been to degrade it selectively, and doing so against more than one deck would have been very tough. But before covering what was done to improve against the Khind, let's go back to something I've skipped over the details of: special power text on ships.

Once the number of ships stabilised at three, their capacities and texts were soon pretty much as they finished up. But they didn't actually stay that way. There are things you can do about ships with the right cards: in particular you can prevent them being either played or loaded. But you can't stop me landing a ship. (You can't sink a ship either, that would be too strong, though ships with cannons were an idea played with, until eventually cannon ended up just as part of the names of the real bluff cards.) Now it was agreed that delaying ships from landing would be a good feature, but it would have to be accomplished using existing non-Buka cards. To achieve this, for a while landing a ship was special power text, so if it was ignored, you couldn't land a ship. The problem was that the single strongest effect that could do that was *Laughing Gas* [Khind 27] and as I've just said, the Khind were the problem. So that idea came and went, and you can't stop your opponent landing a ship any more.

But that wasn't all that was needed to check the Khind. Looking for where to hit at them (but not other peoples) concentrated on the Khind's main strength: multiple characters that carry over from turn to turn. Both *Boatswain Mena Marn* [Buka 18] and *Coxswain Mora Marn* [Buka 19] got texts specially aimed right at the Khind. (These characters used to be 3/2 and 2/3 characters with only an EMPTY BLUFF icon for interest.) The former directly prevents building up a gang, the latter breaks up an already formed (or, often better, partially formed) gang. Note that the restriction on using the text on the latter character card (only when played out of a ship) makes it difficult for anyone other than the Buka to draft the card usefully, which kept its cost in moons down. It's true that some other peoples can get slightly affected by these texts (*Mimix* pairs for example), but

without the Khind gangs' building up of strength, not by that much. Finally *Lookout Dolora Paal* [Buka 22] got an added PROTECTED icon. It already had its discard ability (the final version of a text that was aimed at this task in the first playtest) but the PROTECTED icon is there for one reason only: it allows *Lookout Dolora Paal* to discard *Laughing Gas*, as the final anti-Khind measure (one not aimed at gangs).

After adding all that (which didn't all happen at once) the Khind vs. Buka match seemed to have reached the same balance as the other deck matchups against the Buka. Of course as much as we've played it, the total of everyone's experience with it will soon catch up with ours, and people will devise new ways to play with and against the Buka - who offer quite a few options in this way. Considering those options, this article isn't a discussion of Buka tactics, but of course some of them were designed into the Buka, and others have arisen from it. Here are just a few glimpses.

Most of your bluffs shouldn't be, having your bluff called successfully hurts, and it's meant to. But if you never bluff, your opponent will stop calling your bluff, and then you will be able to get away with bluffing easily. Things should stabilise with most bluffs real, some not. And the added value of even one bluff card can be very useful, it's a support of value 2 after all. Some of your *B.P.* characters will play nicely from hand, but, for example, if one is FREE only with two opposing active supports played, and you are playing against the Flit? Put it in a ship instead. Ships provide a very nice big punch, but it's not an automatic killer. Shields work very nicely against a ship, as do cards like *Provoke Earthquake* [Terrah 29], and if your power is matched then you may have difficulty matching power back again. Loading a ship can be a slow process, but one loads itself, and *Quartermaster Kura Ko* can load another one in a single turn. Finally the "big bluff" of either *Quartermaster Kura Ko* or *Powdermaster Yina Ko* plus *Letter of Marque* can be just as good as a ship, and who cares if you use cards with EMPTY BLUFF? Finally, playing both with and against the Buka definitely do one thing: count the bluff cards played. You get to see all of them being discarded, and trying to bluff when your opponent has seen and counted all your bluff cards in the current element isn't going to help you.

Now that's all concentrated on the preconstructed deck, which is the most important and was the focus of the most effort. But there are also Buka families and constructed deck play. The former actually constrained the design a little in the anti-Khind phase, as the split was decided before the cards were absolutely finalised, but couldn't then be changed as the artist had been briefed. The family split deliberately makes six groups with quite different styles: three have a ship, three can bluff (one in earth, one in fire, one a bit in each). A family of all five *B.P.* cards was considered, but felt not to really work and left the other five families unbalanced (in a bad way) as well; but the *B.P.* characters are on just two of the ships. Also note that one of the bluffing families can play the "big bluff", and the others have their own unique features too. Most of the deck and family combinations remained to have their first outing in their final form (there are 48 of them after all).

On constructed play, while testing has been done, there's more to be discovered. Constructed play has two sides to it: how to make a better Buka deck (and how to counter it) and how to use the Buka cards in other decks - and in design this also means how many moons are the Buka cards worth? Some were easy (*Duplicator of Fire*, just like *Duplicator of Strength* [Hoax 25]) and some were not (though when the playtesters disagreed it was only over one moon variations). Used in the right way, in the right deck, there are probably some good buys to be had. When considering taking ships, note that the ship probably isn't the whole cost, you probably want a few Buka characters to play from it. (You might avoid this with the most expensive, *Sea Falcon* [Buka 28], which is good for a Mimix pair or part of a Khind gang.)

Well, that's it for this account. Is there more that could be said? Well, probably (the rationales for some of the rules details for example) but I think the highlights are covered. But the main things that struck me about this process were first that the first design got surprisingly close to the final one, despite including some novel ideas to the Blue Moon game. But second, despite that, and despite some good fortune (only having to refine the design to specifically target one deck, the Khind, once it was basically balanced), a lot of work (testing and refining) went into what is actually just one small expansion to Blue Moon, more work than many full-blown games.