

Blue Moon

This is an article which was published in the June 2004 edition of Counter magazine. It is not exactly as then published, I have restored a few cuts that were made by the editor for reasons of space (I have kept some changes which improved the article). Of course the world of Blue Moon has moved on since this article was published (in particular the expected decks have now been published, and more) but I have not attempted to update the article, but have left it as then written. Christopher Dearlove.

Anyone visiting Kosmos's web site at <http://www.kosmos.de> will see that Kosmos's big splash at Nuremberg this year was a two player card game **Blue Moon** by Reiner Knizia. Erroneous advance rumours to the contrary, this is not a collectable card game, although it has some features most commonly seen in that genre. There's a lot of material about the game at another Kosmos web site <http://www.blue-moon-games.com>, which includes English language material. Here you can see, among other things, both the rules of the game and the published cards, plus a summary of future plans.

Anyone viewing the German web site material, particularly the cards, will quickly see that there's rather too much text for the average non-German. Fortunately however there is also an English language (American) edition using the same artwork - an important part of the game - from Fantasy Flight. Unfortunately this leaves the game rather expensive in the UK, given the usual translation of about a dollar or a Euro to a pound.

Before going any further in discussing the game, I need to get one thing clear up front. This isn't an unbiased, review of the game. I was fortunate enough to have been involved in the later stages of the playtesting of the game, although even those date back to from 2001, and obviously had I not thought at least reasonably highly of it I wouldn't have put in the time I have to it. I should also point out that, although I had a small group who played separately from Reiner, the main playtester, and credited as such in the rules, was David Farquhar. In addition others (especially Kevin Jacklin) also had more significant roles.

So what is Blue Moon? It's a two player card game in which each player uses his own deck of cards. The basic Blue Moon set, packaged in the standard Kosmos two player game range, pits one player using one deck against the other player using the other, different, deck. You can pick up the game, take a deck each and play straight out of the box. A lot of the playtesting work went into ensuring these first two decks were balanced - although one or the other may suit your playing style better. Now if that were all there were to Blue Moon it could still hold your attention for some time, but it would lose it after a while and I wouldn't have written this article. But of course there's more.

First I should mention that Blue Moon is a world with a Legend into and out of which the peoples and game of Blue Moon has derived. This isn't just a thin veneer put on top of the game. Several suggestions made during playtesting went nowhere as they didn't fit the Legend. The Legend hasn't been published as a single work. Instead it has been distributed across the cards in the usual form of "flavour" text, plus three short paragraphs introducing the rules. Read all the cards (once they are available) and you can pick up quite a lot. Will it help you play the game? No, but the Legend, and the artwork, make up part of the game's physical attractiveness.

The world of Blue Moon has eight main peoples. The basic set contains the **Vulca** and the **Hoax**. Also immediately available (each separately) are the **Mimix** and the **Flit**. But these aren't just more of the same. Each of the peoples has its own characteristics. These are represented in the game by special abilities which are either unique, or especially common, to that people. In addition the whole design of the people deck works with these abilities. I think both I, and the other two people I did my playtesting

with, had the same reaction to this. The Vulca and the Hoax were a solid, quite interesting, game - but the Mimix and the Hoax took it to a new level. You may find the same.

You will have noticed however that I said eight peoples. The **Khind** and the **Terrah** should be out for Essen 2004 and the **Pillar** and the **Aqua** should be out in 2005. And yes, they're all real: all eight peoples were designed and playtested before the game was released. Their special abilities are already described in the rules. In addition there are some samples of the later peoples in the first four decks. Each deck has one leader card, which at this point just acts as a cover card, and 30 other cards (plus a reminder card for icons used on the cards.). However only 26 of the 30 cards in a deck are from the deck's own people. There's also one mutant card each, the mutants belonging to none of the eight main peoples, and three cards which actually belong to other peoples. This feature, that the deck and the people aren't the same, turns out to be a major part of the advanced game later. Each of the eight peoples (not decks) has been illustrated by a different artist, and I don't think it's giving away any confidences to report that getting the artwork right was one of Reiner's major concerns, although the Mimix "classic fantasy babes" (to quote a female gamer of my acquaintance) may not quite be the original conception. Obviously most of the art you can see now is from only four of the artists, but you get two samples from each of the other four.

Blue Moon is played between two players, each with his own deck. Each plays only on his own side of the board, which is basically just to allow players to display their cards in the separate areas the game uses, although it also depicts elements of the Legend and has a game turn summary. The game progresses through a sequence of fights. The winner of a fight attracts one or, if the fight has got intense enough, two dragons. There are three dragons, red, green and blue, which move between players and the centre of the board as they are won or lost. The game continues until either a player wins what would be a fourth dragon, or a player runs out of cards. You can still win with no cards, but timing running out of cards without conceding one or more dragons can be tricky. Scoring is one plus the number of dragons held by the winner (there's always a winner, even with all dragons in the centre of the table, in which case the player who ran out of cards first loses). In Legend terms, scoring is in crystals (unfortunately not supplied as actual components) and the first to five (which can't be done in one game) wins.

Fights each use one of the two elements in Blue Moon: fire and earth. A player remains in a fight as long as he matches his opponent's power in that element. Thus if the opponent's last announcement was, for example, 5 fire, then all you need is 5 fire to stay in the fight. Of course raising to, say, 7 fire makes your opponent's task more difficult. It may also be possible to reduce your opponent's power instead, and the various special abilities of cards also allow for options such as staying in the fight but reducing power (shields) or, provided certain conditions are met, changing to the other element (mutants). Where does this power come from? The most important component is from a character card. All character cards have both fire and earth ratings (although these can be zero). A player must play a character card to stay in a fight, and this covers (replaces) his previous character card.

A player can, as well as a character card, also play a single booster card or a single support card. An exception is that in the turn when starting a fight, usually by the loser of the previous fight, a player cannot normally play a booster or support. Boosters add to characters and are covered when it is. Supports last throughout the fight. Boosters and supports may add to power in either or both elements. In addition all of these cards may have special power text (over a third of them do) which may do more complicated things with power - or may produce other effects entirely. For example from the Vulca, the character *Ember* has the special power text "You may not play character cards that do not have special power text", whilst the support card *Fearsome Spirits* has the special power text "If you retreat I attract one additional dragon. There is also one other sort of card, the leadership card. These are one per turn maximum use once cards; they don't go into the usual discard pile. Leadership cards can have quite

major effects, for example the Vulca's *Cast Cataclysm* ("Now I may discard all of your active support cards"). A player starts with a hand of six cards, and refreshes his hand to six cards every turn and between fights. (If you have more than six cards, you keep the excess.)

A player is free to drop out of a fight at any time, and may be forced out due to not being able to match power - or even due to not being able to play a character at all. A critical factor is the fight escalation mentioned above. If the winner of the fight has six or more cards in his combat and support areas (including inactive - covered - characters and boosters) he gains two dragons rather than one. A large part of winning at Blue Moon is deciding when to drop out of a fight even though it's possible to continue. This is often because dropping out now and losing one dragon avoids a two dragon loss later. Conversely starting weak in order to prolong a fight to reach a two dragon gain can play well - but if it allows your opponent to play multiple supports this can backfire. Here you can see different peoples behaving differently: the Vulca have some very strong single cards (get all eight decks and you won't find a single character to beat *Flamebreath the Dazzling* - provided fire is the element) but the Hoax deck has five support cards with power values - two of them reusable - to the Vulca's two. The Hoax deck needs a little more subtlety to play, which has led some less subtle players to suggest, prematurely, that the Vulca are clearly stronger.

The Mimix and the Flit take this different behaviour considerably further. The Mimix have character cards which form pairs (they have the PAIR icon and matching names) and can be played together as if one character. For example their *Dancer of Dawn* is a 4/2, and their *Dancer of Dusk* is a 2/4 (using an obvious fire/earth notation). Together they form the equivalent of a single 6/6 character. The Mimix also have various cards, especially the four *Shamans*, which allow gathering cards to help put these pairs together. The Mimix have more characters than most decks. The Flit on the other hand have fewer characters, and many boosters (most playable two at a time) but most of their characters have the RETRIEVE icon ability where a character can be recovered to hand for reuse immediately or later - even just before withdrawal from a fight. So to deprive the Flit of their *Wing Commander Razorfeather*, a useful retrievable 4/4, takes either a special ability (another RETRIEVE character will do - they block each other to avoid infinite looping) or losing a dragon.

Four decks allows six different pairings (and actually you can play a deck against itself - but it's less interesting and isn't really in the spirit of the Blue Moon Legend) and eight decks will allow twenty eight. That'll keep you occupied for a while, but not forever. I guess the next step, the Advanced Rules, will surprise no one in its basic concept - deck building. But here we have a twist which keeps the game bounded, and - we all hope - free of the "one deck to rule them all" syndrome which afflicts most collectable card games which allow uncontrolled deck construction. To construct a deck you first pick a people leader card, for example *Blue Radiance, the Great Spirit Mistress of the Mimix*. This (and all the initial leader cards - but look for a hint in the rulebook) tells you to build a 30 card deck with non-Mimix cards totalling no more than 10 moons.

What are moons? Well every card has from zero to four moons on it. A weak card, such as the Vulca's *Spark*, a basic 4/2 character, has no moons - but so, for both design and Legend reasons, also do all the mutants, despite many not being at all weak. The Flit's *Wing Commander Razorfeather* has two moons. The Hoax's leadership card *Muster Reinforcements* ("Now I may draw five cards") has four moons. So if a Mimix deck selects *Muster Reinforcements* that's four of its ten moons spent. Note that it's peoples who matter, not decks. So a Mimix deck can recover its *Heroine of the Great Plains* (to pair with its *Heroine of the High Flames*) which is "on loan" to the standard Vulca deck, for free.

Ten moons worth of imports turns out to be enough to allow some non-trivial improvements on the standard decks, but not enough to badly distort their nature. Obvious imports are those which play to the people's strengths (such as the Mimix suggestion above) or patch its weaknesses (I don't think I'm giving away too much if I suggest that the Terrah provide good imports into a Vulca deck - and vice

versa). Of course this relies on sensible card values. I have a copy of a spreadsheet, for a slightly earlier version of the decks, in which are entered Reiner's, Dave's and my (with some input from my group) suggested numbers of moons for all 240 cards - and Reiner's final decision. (One man, one vote - and Reiner's the one man, although actually there are examples of almost every pattern of voting agreement and decision, with unanimity the most common.)

So, who should Blue Moon appeal to? Well, Kosmos obviously think a lot of people, and I think they could be right. The game's strengths are several: it plays straight out of the box, it has enough options, even with four decks, and especially with eight, for a very long period of play before repeating yourself - and that's before you get to the advanced game, where the options are almost unlimited. There's no reason why you can't enjoy the game having never even seen a collectable card game, and the game can be considered a step up in complexity in the Kosmos two player game series. However I think a particular market will be the large number of people, often couples, who saw something they liked in Magic, for example, but got swamped by the number of cards, the rules complexity and changes - not to mention the cost. For such people Blue Moon might well be exactly what they want. In short I think there's quite a wide range of players who should find what they want here - and the whole presentation is I think a definite part of the attraction.