

A Little Bit of Everything

A chariot quickly approaches, foot soldiers point their extended spears, and while seeking cover behind their shields, waves of wild water threaten. In view of this cover, what else should PHALANXX be, if not a wargame? But it isn't. It is a game of expansion, partly a deck-building game and, in addition, a dice game. That's quite a lot for such a small box. Let's see whether all this actually fits in there.

As usual in the games by author and self-publisher Bernd Eisenstein, he chose ancient times as the source for the theme. The empire of Alexander the Great is crumbling and players try to snatch up a part of it. Initially, each player owns one city plus one oasis on the board, and there is ample space to spread further. In the end, every soldier on the board will be worth one point; an oasis will score up to two victory points, and each city, up to three points. This is where the irritations begin; The victory point symbols of the locations are identical with those on the Strength track around the game board. What finally counts is the possession of regions.

This is very important: Throughout the game, you play cards showing units of troops that give you Strength points. The further you advance on the Strength track, the better you can attack your opponents and

expel them from lucrative places on the board. Suitable purchases, and the quick use of the so-called Era cards, are the central elements in PHALANXX.

Masterly use of the dice

The way to accomplish this is the skillful use of the dice. Initially, you place three six-sided dice in different colors on your Action card. After his turn, your neighbor to the right passes on three more dice to you. A dice roll determines your income. Then the individual numbers on these dice specify what actions you can take. The general rule is that high numbers allow you to play additional Era cards from your hand, and thus, increase your strength. Or you expand into an adjacent region on the board – this is not always peaceful.

But, if you quickly draw the conclusion that low numbers are bad, you underestimate the cleverness of Bernd Eisenstein's dice-rolling mechanism. Of course, it is great to recruit cards and personnel by placing a die with the same or a higher number right next to another die on your Action card. But sometimes, low numbers are convenient, too. If you push such a die from the left into a row (after paying the difference of the two numbers), you now have a die with a low value in the left column – and then in the following rounds, you consequently don't need to roll particularly high numbers in order to expand quickly. You have only one die action per row; and at the end of your

turn, you hand the three dice from your right column to your left neighbor.

The three different colors of the dice are significant as well; that's because the playing of a new Era card often requires dice of specific colors from your Action card. Therefore, you should, in good time, exchange a fitting die of the same value with a die from another player, which he can't prevent. If there is nothing you can do with your die, then you just take three money for it. And if you desperately need a specific number, then you can turn the die accordingly; this costs one soldier, though.

All these options are summarized on the back of the instruction booklet – language-neutral and presented solely through icons. However, none of my fellow players has yet deciphered this



overview without any mistakes. That is a pity, since combining the dice in PHALANXX provides you with a lot of options, even if your situation seems to be hopeless. With some practice, you can manage this reasonably well. Taken by itself, this is original and enriches the game in terms of play.

The game cards, however, are a bit problematic – not only due to the circumstance that the basic colors of the cards (orange and purple) don't correspond to the requirements when you play them (yellow and red). An essential element of the final scoring is whether you have been able to collect "Fame groups" in your display. Each set of symbols for infantry, cavalry, and archer is worth a whopping five points, but only under the condition that you won at least one combat during the one-hour game, and if you have a yellow and a red card in your display. These cards are hard to get, though – and this can make the difference.

Those who aren't happy with PHALANXX often complain that they couldn't get the right cards. At the beginning of your turn, you may buy a card from the general display – for one to five money. If you buy one at one of the two highest prices, then you may additionally exchange one of



your hand cards for one from the display. But if you don't find any fitting card there, then you are left out in the cold, the reason being that playing a card is bound to certain conditions: minimum values or color combinations of the three reference dice on the left side of your Action card. If you are not able to do anything useful, then you can only buy something from an opponent, at best. This is unsatisfactory.

The consequence is a massive imbalance: If you fall behind in terms of strength because you aren't able to play any cards, then you won't get a foot on the ground – you can't expand and will soon fall victim to the other players' expeditions of conquest. An attacker temporarily loses three Strength points, but this is relevant only if two or more players are close for the lead. In games of four, as my experience shows, there is always one player who falls off completely. Fortunately, a game of PHALANXX takes only a good hour, once all players have understood the options of their turns.

Appealing when the outcome is tight

When everybody is familiar with the options, play proceeds smoothly; towards the end, however, it is stifled in a strange manner. At the beginning, the Heroism card is shuffled among the last six cards. When this card comes up in the display, the rules of attack change shortly before the game ends; what matters now is no longer the number of Strength points, but the amount of the colored cards played, minus the cards that have been rotated 90 degrees for the attack. A player who previously fought a lot, now, can no longer keep battling as often, regardless of strength. Though if he lags behind, then the hope a player has to win at least one battle (which is so important for the Fame groups) is not fulfilled in most cases. Therefore, the idea seems contrived and backfires since it has a rather inhibiting effect on the final part of the game.

The really close, gripping games are rare. Often there are one or two skilled conquerors who soon run ahead. But when it gets tight, PHALANXX has quite some

appeal. Sometimes, it only takes the right moment to get a certain card and then be able to attack. It takes one or two games until you realize this and put it into action. The solitaire version rightly suggests that it is suited for becoming familiar with the game since it is not a fully adequate replacement.

Provided you have some experience, you can use the backs



of the Action cards, which gives each player an individual starting advantage.

The use of the dice and the variability of the cards (in terms of their fulfillment as well as their effects) make PHALANXX appealing. The way to get there, however, is pretty rocky, due to the somewhat poorly structured and formulated rules. There is quite a lot in the small box. Maybe a little bit too much. Therefore, it takes players a bit more time to look for a structure – just as in the instructions. One thing is clear: A player who doesn't like confrontation at all is out of place here – as he would be in all Irongames.

Stefan Ducksch/sbw



Title:	Phalanxx
Publisher:	Irongames
Designer:	Bernd Eisenstein
Artist:	Matthias Catrein
Players:	1-4
Age:	about 12+ years
Duration:	about 60 minutes
Price:	about 30 €
Reviewer	Playing appeal
Stefan Ducksch	6
Wieland Herold	6
Alan How	7

