

Fabrizio Marcotulli's critique: Drown, Captain Crackers!, by Crofter.

I played this game as part of the final assignment on the Game Design Concepts course. Drown Captain Crackers! (DCC from now on). DCC is a game about a crew that is working to escape Captain Crackers's attempts to kill drown them or, if possible, drown the captian himself.. I onnly played one game with some friends, but it still

The mechanics in DCC are pretty starighforward for everyone: crew members get to move around the board, placing or removing one sandbag at the end of each move, while the captain only gets to remove sandbags, or place water and sand bags in various combinations. However, the dynamics that arise from such simple desicions are what make it interesting.

Basically, the way placement works allows for channeling water for various purposes, even setting up floods to harm players. The nature of the game also builds pressure throughout the course of the game, as players are always dealing with a tighter space.

For instance, a box made of sand bags stacked 2 pieces high can contain water within the enclosed area until all spaces have to water tokens stacked 2 pieces high. But if the captain (or a crew member) choses to remove it, suddenly all that contained water “bursts out” and makes the captain choose where to spread this water flow.

The aesthetics are harder to appreciate though, considering that the only distinctive things about the prototype I made to play the game are the Captain Crackers name and what is shown on the instructions, which are not necessarily indicative of what the finished board game would look like. That said, I have complete confidence that the game's aesthetics wouldn't stray too much from what is shown in the manual, with ligh brown tokens for the sand bags an blue ones for the water tokens.

I have one small comment on the gray background for the board (as it appeared on the rules). The thing about is is that it does hint that players are trapped inside a compund made of metal/concrete, but the captain's name brought a vibe that was more like the videogame Age of Booty, with wooden boats and no metal or underground facilities. It just felt a little odd once we realized that.

It seems the designers of the game tried to create a cooperative game that had a complex system that was not just a pile of cards waiting to be drawn, so they compromised and made it a game where players take two sides, but one of them has to work together to beat the other, lone Captain Crackers. To this end I think they have succeded for the most part, but our group still though the game needed many adjustments before it could really be a fun game. The descriptions of what we found will be explained using chess board notation, where the crew starts on a1 and the captain is on h8.

After playing our first game we found some scenarios just setup the gamme for a crew members win b turn 12, as water was succesfully contained on the captain's side of the board and we felt that could have been averted if the captain were allowed to remove more sand bags. I'll talk more on that when we get to the possible changes.

The second issue we found shows itself in this scenario:

on their first turns, the crew tries to secure a sand bag height of 3 on squares a3, b3, c1 and c2 with

priority given to squares b3 and c2, , this encloses the players. The captain has two basic options for the first two turns:

1. concentrate on one side
2. try to come from both sides

However, the first option allows the crew to keep two people finish the job while the other one creates an emergency path on the other, just to give them more movement options over time. The second option just gives the players more space to expand.

The point of all this is to make sure the captain never has a way to place water near the escape pod, and if the crew is successful in this (which is not hard at all) then the crew can concentrate on getting the inside of the enclosed area filled with sand bags. Once this happens the crew only has to concentrate on replacing whatever sandbags the captain removes, maybe not even that, as the rules don't ever force you to place/remove sand bags.

This scenario is not a comprehensive explanation, but it shows a combination of many factors that add up to this strategy being pretty successful, which in my opinion are:

1. the captain can only remove one sandbag at a time, making it way too easy for the three other players to override that decision on the next turn
2. players have too much freedom to move, as a figure on page three shows they can change direction mid move, which is extremely useful in making the above scenario happen.
3. Water can't be on top of a sand bag (or so we assumed, though in our experience it doesn't really matter after the seventh turn using the strategy in this scenario)

My attempt to solve these issues is to force players to either place or remove a sand bag instead of just giving them the option to do it, this means that at some point, camping is no longer an option, my guess is that using this the strategy would fail by turn 20

Another possible change could be letting the captain take away 2 sand bags and place one water, but I don't know exactly how that could work out

My last proposition is to make the board a 7 x 7 board so as to make the game shorter, and let the captain meet the camping players earlier.

I think this game really shows a lot of effort on Crofter's side, but our group found the captain was playing a losing game and quickly chose to stop. The concept is good but it seems like it could use some work.