

Drown, Captain Crackers! – Game by Crofter, Critique by David Spieth

First off is the theme of the game. Just reading the title made me want to play it. Imagining a lunatic captain trying to drown his crew is an intense idea. The fact that it uses such simple components made it so much the better for a ‘beer-and-pretzels’ game.

Core Mechanics: One person (the captain) floods the ship, filling it with water tokens and modifying the flow with sandbags. Three crew try to escape death or kill the captain by modifying the water flow with sandbags. The crew move around the ship (8x8 grid) placing sandbags against a steadily-rising level of water. A water depth of 2 is enough to drown a person.

I played both sides of the game, playing two games for this critique.

Setup time: Setup for the game was less than a minute. 3 pawns at one corner, 1 pawn at opposite corner of chessboard, 2 piles of different-colored tokens.

Rules Layout: The rules have many illustrated examples. These illustrations are well-defined, aiding the reader. The visuals/aesthetics of the examples are top-notch.

Game Sessions:

First Game: Game lasted 19 rounds. I didn’t play the full 60 rounds. From where I was at, it looked like the captain could not add more water without drowning, so play was concluded. (There were a few turns to go before the water level would get to the captain. The crew were safely barricaded behind 3 sandbags surrounding their zone. The captain had no way to barricade himself, as there was a full water path touching next to the control center.) The game lasted 40 minutes, part of the time was tracking rounds and taking notes.

Second Game: I played this game at a more rapid pace, having better grasped the rules. I did not keep track of the rounds played. In the second game, Captain Crackers won by cutting off a crew member from the escape pod. This game lasted 20 minutes.

Design Goals:

I believe the designer was trying to convey frantic desperation with the theme of this game while maintaining a humorous element. (‘Captain Crackers’ is great. I picture a wooden-legged pirate with a parrot with the name). The game captured this with the crew running to and fro, creating sandbag barriers, sometimes removing sandbags to allow the water to level out, etc.

Gameplay assumptions and Questions:

The example on page 7 states, “Flowing level is also illegal if the unit ends up at the same level from which it began.” It would be nice to include a picture of where the additional token ends up. I played it as if the token sat at the pump inlet.

There is water surrounding a sandbag. The sandbag is one high. The water level increases to 2 all around. I add one more water token to the water pool. Does the water

token stay at the level 3 mark at the pump inlet, or does the water sit on the sandbag? (I played that the water did not sit on the sandbag)

I also played that sandbags placed diagonally contained water okay.

Does the captain HAVE to use his full move? (Is the captain always forced to add at least one water token?) Other than having a visible avatar, is there a reason to have a Captain pawn? I interpreted the rules as the captain never leaving the control room, even when adding or removing sandbags.

Game suggestions (What I would consider changing if I were the designer):

The game says it's for 2-4 players. I think it would play much better as a 2-player game, with 1 player controlling the crew. In a 4-player game, there does not seem to be enough for any one crew member to do. (Essentially, Captain Crackers gets to place 3 things, the crew members each get to place 1 thing in a turn). Many games are 2-player even with much more decision with what to do with particular avatars. (pretty much any table-top war game it's usually 1-on-1, each player controlling many miniatures).

For a 4-player game it may be more interesting if the escape pod can only hold 1 crew, so the 3 crew are trying to get each other as well as Captain Crackers. In this case, the captain's winning condition would need to be changed to killing all the crew.

Once tokens were placed on all 64 squares, the choices became less interesting. Sandbags could be removed, converting squares to water squares, but not vice-versa. It would be interesting if a sandbag could be added to a water square, either displacing or absorbing a water token. (Not sure if this would unbalance the game though). Without this mechanic, it seems like the key to winning this game would be to remove sandbags on a square adjacent to the control room or escape pod. Once one water token touches those squares, the game seems to be over except for playing the rest of the game out.

Water mechanics:

I also played that water can 'snake' across the board. (Within the first two turns, Captain Crackers can have a line of 6 water tokens zigzagging on the board.) This seemed to allow the board be quickly sectioned to allow water all over the place. It seemed to make it too easy to get around and then surround sand bag placements. Also it quickly ended the game once all open squares were filled with 1 level of water. Using the snaking technique with level 2 of water quickly cut off the crew from the pod.

It may make help the above situation if the water was forced to pool instead of snake. This could be done by adding a water flow rule that a water token must be placed the minimum number of squares to the pump at the lowest level. By this method after two turns, the water would be no more than 2 squares from the pump (instead of the six by snaking). The pump and 2 adjacent squares to the corner would fill on turn 1. The 3rd adjacent square to the pump and then 2 more squares each 2 from the pump would fill on turn 2. This would also make sandbags more useful by Captain Crackers, to help direct water flow.

Other comments: I used opaque bingo plastic chips for the water and bags. The bags were red, the water was blue. Having blue chips for the water really helped the imagery of this game. On the blog, Ian links a site to manufacture games-on-demand called 'The Game Crafter'. I notice they sell these exact markers.