#GENCANT: Cthulhu Realms

written by Quincy Rhoads | August 1, 2015

Cthulhu Realms
by Darwin Castle
[Tasty Minstrel Games](#), 2015
Available at GenCon 2015

I am obsessed with *Star Realms*. It caught me off guard, too. For as long as I've been into tabletop gaming I've been against anything with ties to *Magic: The Gathering* (I know it's silly, but bad elementary school experiences are not easily forgotten), so a game co-designed by a *Magic* Pro Tour Hall of Famer seemed like a hard pass for me… until I played it, of course.

Star Realms has that bottled lightning, addictive feel that few games have wherein the more you play the more you feel the need to play. I've spent hours playing the app version on my phone: failing missions and trying new card combinations and retrying strategies. It's an incredibly easy-to-learn game, with a low entry-level cost, and it's surprisingly challenging and feels fresh every time I play it.

I've fallen so in love with *Star Realms* that I was incredibly excited to get to try the new reimplementation of the rules from Tasty Minstrel Games, *Cthulhu Realms*. Available for purchase at GenCon this year, *Cthulhu Realms* is developed by Michael Mindes and Andy Van Zandt to create a more complicated *Star Realms* gaming experience.
In the original deckbuilding card game, cards give players points to damage their opponents, or points to buy new cards, or both. Many cards also give players bonuses when they play multiple cards per turn that have one of the four matching faction icons on them, allowing for more of the aforementioned points or other actions such as the removal of certain cards from the game. What keeps *Cthulhu Realms* from simply being a reskin of the original is how Mindes and Van Zandt make game designer Darwin Kastle's original faction rules take more prominence in the game play.

In *Cthulhu Realms* the quantity of cards with faction-reliant actions has been exponentially increased. In fact, nearly every card in the deck has an action requiring one of the game's four color-coded factions, and even more require both the corresponding color and one of the three card types that have been introduced to the game as prerequisites for completing a card's actions—entities, artifacts, and locations.

These entities, artifacts, and locations ramp up the Lovecraftian theme, too. The deck is filled with inside jokes for Cthulhu fans and card artist Rob Lundy (of *Harbour* and *Dark Dealings* fame) really keys into the mythos while still keeping a strong sense of humor. TMG is best known for lighthearted themes, so when I first heard that they were publishing a Cthulhu game I was

wondering how they would pull it off, but they avoided the grimdark pitfalls that plague most games of this theme. In fact, the card art even keeps this game appropriate for families despite the gory theme.

The emphasis on matching colored factions and types does add another intriguing layer onto an already fun game, but unfortunately *Cthulhu Realms* ditches the text based cards of *Star Realms* in favor of iconography, and even though the rulebook and player aids provided do a good job of explaining what each symbol means, game play starts to feel a bit overwhelming without the easy-to-read instructions printed on the original cards. I can sort of understand why this choice was made since Lundy's illustrations really make the game, but at the end of the day I'd rather take functionality over aesthetically pleasing card design. That being said, both fans of Star Realms who are looking for a new layer of challenge and fans of the Lovecraft mythos will have a lot of fun with this game. New initiates to the game or those who don't know their Dunwich Horrors from their Dagons are better off seeking out the original game from beyond the stars.

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