Introduction

When Chris approached me with the idea of doing a conversation-style review about a particular game we’d both experienced, I was ecstatic. I’ve recently begun listening to podcasts like The Secret Cabal, The Long View and the Shut Up & Sit Down Podcast. Two of these focus entirely on conversation, and for the other one, the banter is the highlight. Less formal and “final say” than a dedicated review, they create a sort of 3D seismic image of the topic by battering it with conflicting opinions and viewpoints, giving the listener a much deeper understanding than a single-perspective review would.

But when I looked at our game collections, I had a hard time picking out overlapping games that I wasn’t already planning on covering independently in the near future. Then it hit me: Lords of Waterdeep, a very un-roleplaying game set in the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying universe. Although I don’t own a physical copy of the game, the digital app had become one of my favorites, especially as I began to explore that same universe from a different angle in our Entropy D&D sessions (that 3D seismic metaphor fits here, too).

Let the following conversation serve as a warning, lest all books be by their covers judged.

Byron Alexander Campbell: To start out with, why don’t we both answer three simple questions (we can expand on specific points about the game later on).
How did you first find out about *Lords of Waterdeep*, what was your initial impression of the game when you heard about it, and what is your opinion on it now?

**Chris Holly:** Sounds good. I’m pretty sure I first found out about *LoW* with the box catching my eye in my Occasionally Friendly Local Game Store. I was browsing the D&D section deciding whether or not to buy *Wrath of Ashardalon* (spoiler: I did and wish I hadn’t, but that’s a discussion for another day), and I was intrigued by two things about the box: first, the cover art, which promised all sorts of D&D hero-related hijinx, and second, the word Waterdeep, which struck deep (heh) thrumming chords of nostalgia in me, having been a huge fan of the old *Eye of the Beholder* series on the PC. How about you?

**Byron:** I don’t remember exactly how I first found out about *LoW* (which is why I graciously allowed you to answer first). I think it’s one of those games that just seeped into my gamer consciousness. Shortly after it came out, I started hearing this buzz about a Dungeons & Dragons-themed board game that’s a Euro and actually good. It doesn’t fit the mold for the types of games I normally seek out (I’m a big fan of co-ops with strong narrative elements, not particularly fond of elves ‘n’ goblins fantasy), so it remained on the periphery of the conversation for me—just a game I knew about but had no interest in playing. My outlook changed when I finally got an iPad (the platform for tabletop-to-digital conversions) and heard the *Lords of Waterdeep* app from Playdek being talked about as one of the top-tier board game adaptations for the platform. I downloaded it during one of Playdek’s big sales and….

It wasn’t love at first sight, but more on that in a bit. What about you? What were your first impressions after you had played the game?

**Chris:** Oooh, let’s definitely talk about the digital version, because, shockingly, **I HAVE SOME OPINIONS**. But anyway, my first impressions take two forms, for reasons that will become clear in a minute. So, the spiel I’d been given by the game store dude promised a back-and-forth game to acquire victory points (and here’s where the truth gets a little… shaded, I think) by sending rogues, clerics, wizards and whatnot to complete quests. Buy buildings, play “screw you” cards on the other players, and generally have a grand old time in a beloved D&D world, yes?
Erm, no.

Now, coming from a dyed-in-the-wool adventure game loving background, this sounded like My Kind Of Thing. And my first impression of the game when I first played it—with my regular gaming group—was, “Huh. That’s really, really different from all of our other games.” The board—gorgeous, functional, but weirdly clean, without all the busy elements we associated with our favorite Ameritrash lineups. The gameplay was…quiet, with turns spent puzzling out who would take which location’s action next, and so forth, and nary a d6 in sight to be rolled. I’d been tricked into playing—gasp!—a Euro game. I found it interesting and different enough to want to play again, but most of that was definitely because I’d not really played anything like it before, genre-wise, and wanted to wrap my head around this new, weird paradigm for me. I confess I felt more than a bit let down about the theming—these weren’t wizards, warriors, and clerics, they were purples, oranges, and whites. Also, I was disappointed that the “quests” were basically “collect X number of Y” ad infinitum—I’d expected something more involved from a D&D game. So no,
definitely not love at first sight for me either, but it did intrigue me. What were your thoughts on first contact?

Byron: Yes, yes, yes, you hit the nail squarely on the head, I think. The one thing I’d heard endlessly repeated about the game was that it was a Euro game with theme, a game with the mechanics of Agricola or Stone Age but one that actually felt like you were a shadowy puppetmaster of the D&D world. (For those who haven’t played the game, the titular “Lords of Waterdeep” are the masked rulers of this hub city in the Forgotten Realms setting. Players receive a specific character, which gives them bonus points for completing specific types of quests, but their character is only “unmasked” after the game ends.) I was told that completing quests feels like rallying adventurers, rogues and clerics, not pushing around orange, black and white cubes.

Which is complete bullshit, isn’t it? It may be true that you’d have an easier time tricking a D&D’er into playing this than something like Stone Age, but this isn’t a thematic game in any way, shape or form. (As a matter of fact, Stone Age feels a good deal more thematically authentic.) The cubes have never felt like more than colored cubes to me, and the quests (which require a specific, pretty much arbitrary mix of colors) are just a means of converting cubes into points.

That was my first great disappointment with the game. The other was, as you said, how basic and repetitive the quests felt. There are a few special quests in each category that give you a lasting benefit or another interesting reward, while the majority simply give you varying numbers of points and maybe a few of your cubes back. It’s balls.

There are a few things I did and do like about the game. The main one is the Waterdeep Harbor action space.

[For those following along at home, Waterdeep is a worker placement game—you have a certain number of workers, or “agents,” to assign each round. Players take turns placing their workers on a space and taking that space’s action, which is usually something like picking up one or two cubes of a certain color or taking a new quest. Most action spaces only have room for one worker, so it’s first come, first served—if you know someone else wants rogues, you’d better get to the Grinning Lion Tavern before they do. If you and somebody else both want fighters, it’s a race to visit the Field of Triumph.]

But the Waterdeep Harbor space is different. When you place your agent there, you get to play an Intrigue card from your hand. These cards (which you gain in various ways, mainly by taking and completing quests) have all manner of
small, mostly interactive effects, such as taking adventurers (cubes) from other players or forcing them to complete an annoying Mandatory Quest. But the cool thing about this space is that, at the end of the round, you get to pick that agent up and place them on another available space, taking that action as well. This creates a lot of tension in terms of timing—do I put my agent on The Plinth now, or do I play an Intrigue card and hope that the space is still available at the end of the round? That’s really clever. And there are three Harbor spaces—you could do it up to three times, if you like, and it’s “first in, first out” if multiple players visit there.

This plays well with the Castle Waterdeep space, which lets you take the first player marker (meaning you place your agents first starting next round) and an Intrigue card. Many worker placement games are pretty much just about taking the obviously important spaces as soon as possible, but these special spaces in LoW make it much more interesting than that and a bit of a mind game.

Even with these innovations, it was still an interesting but ultimately “meh” game for me. My thoughts on the game didn’t really evolve until I got the expansion content (which **YOU MUST OWN** if you plan on playing this game more than a few times). How about you? Did you ever grow to like LoW?

**Chris:** Yeah, the theming is completely and utterly reel-’em-in marketing at its finest, and look; I’m not denigrating WotC for using a well-known license to get people to try something they normally wouldn’t. I mean, it obviously worked, and it’s clearly a tried-and-true marketing tactic. It’s just that, having played it, I now roll my eyes at the “quests,” and even looking at the box art makes me just a tad bit disappointed. I actually had this conversation with one of our group before introducing it to him:

**Him:** Hey, look! You can play as the Harpers!

**Me:** Yeah, that just means you’re Green.

**Him:** So do wizards have spells or special abilities?
Me: Well, only if you consider “being purple” a special ability. Which it kind of is in this game.

Him: …

Me: Yeah.

You’re right on about the Waterdeep Harbor space; in fact, you’re so right on that it’s commonly referred to as “the only interesting space on the board” in our group, and that’s the problem right there—it really is, to a large degree, the only space on the board that holds any surprise or deviation from the standard “pay X resource here to acquire Y resource, and maybe let everybody else do the same thing on a smaller scale.” And I guess that’s just how worker placement games are supposed to go, which is fine—but I can’t say that I particularly “enjoyed” it as much as I “got to grips” with it. My initial feelings of intrigue and wonderment at this strange new genre of game quickly gave way to feelings of…boredom and a weird kind of isolation from the other players.

The expansion, *Scoundrels of Skullport*, though. Now that? That is interesting. Or, at least, the one new mechanic is. Because the expansion introduces Corruption, which is basically a mechanism for removing VPs from everyone’s total at the end of the game, rather than adding VPs at the end (which is what literally every single other mechanic in the game does).

[For the uninitiated, the way it works is that the new buildings and locations on the Skullport board will require you to, in addition to placing your agent there, take a Corruption token off the Corruption track. Each space on the track assigns an escalating point value to the Corruption tokens, so the more people take advantage of Corruption in the game? The more points they’re getting deducted for each token they have at the end of the game.]

And not only does this present an entirely new axis of play, there’s even a Lord (a beholder, natch) who actually gets VPs at the end for accumulating Corruption! Because he’s evil! And a crime lord!
Which makes Corruption the only thing in the game that actually carries any theme (and carries it spectacularly). The more you get corrupted by giving in for short-term gain, the deeper a hole you dig yourself (and everyone else with Corruption tokens) when it’s time to tally up. It’s awesome!

Unfortunately, the Undermountain stuff in the expansion is just as bland as the base game for me—an another board and a pile of buildings with inflated numbers, yawn—so Corruption is the real draw. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that it feels like it always should have been a part of the game, it’s that essential to making it interesting.

But to (finally) get around to answering your question, I don’t know that I ever got around to “liking” LoW as much as I’ve finally learned to “tolerate” it. Even with the Corruption mechanic, the whole thing to me is Just. So. Dry. Even the board, which is a map of the city with spaces with names like The Grinning Lion Tavern, and The Field Of Triumph, and Wizard’s Tower, is varying shades of beige and brown. That weird isolation I mentioned earlier stems, I believe, from the fact that since the theme is nonexistent and you can’t even assign an identity to your opponents (since it’s kept secret until the end of the game), it feels more like “multiplayer solitaire” than any other game I’ve ever played. There’s no table talk, and except when you play Intrigue cards, virtually no real interaction. Virtually every game feels the same, and by turn four, I’m pretty much ready for it all to be over.

But again, this may just be me admitting that I’m not wired for worker placement Euro games and have a deep addiction to chrome. For all I know, it succeeds spectacularly at being an interesting and innovative game in its intended genre. What’s your thought on that? Am I missing something fundamental here? Some hidden layer of strategy or narrative? And is there any way to make the games play any differently?

Byron: Well, there’s definitely nothing innovative about it, apart from the Harbor space I called out earlier and the Corruption mechanic you described. But I do think that it succeeds at being a worthwhile entry in its intended genre—it’s as good as any other worker placement game, with a thematic hook (even if it’s only millimeters deep) that appeals to a branch of gamers
most Euros wouldn’t address.

I want to disagree with your assertion that the game’s essentially multiplayer solitaire, but first, I want to provide my own take on the *Scoundrels of Skullport* expansion. For me, it’s a must-have (sounds like we’re in agreement there), turning a rather bland take-it-or-leave-it worker placement game into something that finally has its own identity (and turning the app into the best-of-the-best board game adaptation that I was originally promised—empty promises seems to be a running theme in this discussion).

I’m an expansion addict, and I find that there are broadly two types of expansions: those that simply add to the base game, giving you more of what you already loved, and those that fundamentally fix the base game. These are the games that would be great except for that one little thing, and then the expansion comes out and completely overhauls that one sour mechanic, turning it into something fresh and interesting. I think that each of the *Arkham Horror* big box expansions does this to some degree, adding mechanics like Injuries, Madesses, Epic Battles, and Personal Stories that patch up holes in the original game. Or sometimes, it’s just that the base game is a little too simple, a little too streamlined—gotta address the broader market—and you really need that extra dollop of complexity to make it worth playing in my eyes.

That’s what *Scoundrels of Skullport* does for me. You’re right that the action spaces in the base game are pretty damn bland, with the Harbor, Cliffwatch Inn (where you draw new quests, with three slightly different takes on that action), and the Builder’s Hall being the only really exciting spaces.

![Mirt Sez:](image) [At the Builder’s Hall, you get to pay some resources to put new action spaces out on the board, earning a few points and a small bonus every time another player uses your building.]

*Scoundrels of Skullport* adds the Skullport and Undermountain boards, adding a total of six new always-available action spaces. The big change, as you noted, is the Corruption mechanic, which is awesome. It greatly enhances the player interactivity, since every time you take Corruption, you’re digging the hole deeper for everybody with Corruption tokens. It also adds a risk/reward consideration to those new action spaces, which tend to be very powerful. And you can work Corruption into your strategy—some new advanced buildings available from Builder’s Hall essentially let you spend Corruption as a type of resource, while others let you place Corruption on other action spaces, discouraging players from going there. I believe there are even ways to make Corruption more punishing without taking any yourself, if you’re a Lawful Good type. It adds a ton of strategic depth to the game with very little rules overhead, which is pretty much the ideal for any expansion.
The Undermountain board is good, too, though. It focuses on new ways to gain and play Intrigue cards, which I think we agreed were one of the more interesting and interactive parts of the base game. Yeah, it’s more subtle than Corruption, but it does increase the amount of interaction a bit. Of more interest are the Undermountain advanced buildings, which let you place adventurers (cubes) on other action spaces, to be hoovered up by the next player who visits that space. Unlike Corruption, this acts as an incentive to visit those spots—suddenly, Blackstaff Tower got a lot more inviting, and your opponents might find themselves rethinking their course of action. It also lets you hedge your bets—if you really need fighters this round, you can put fighters on someplace other than the Arena so that even if that spot gets taken, you can grab them from your backup space.

And the expansion also adds slightly more interesting Intrigue cards, Quests and Lords. I can’t remember off the top of my head which new mechanics were introduced, but I know that some of the new quests allow you to “overpay” the adventurers you commit to it to get a scaling reward, so you could complete it with a single cleric for a few points or dump 10 clerics into it for a landslide of VP. Again, it increases the non-obvious decisions in the game, turning a base game that was slightly too simple for me into one that feels just right.

Without the expansion, I’d rate LoW a 6/10. With the expansion, it’s a solid 8—I’d gladly play it any time it’s offered, and will occasionally get a hankering to play. It is one of the better board game apps, for certain—a lot more fun than Agricola.

Now to address the multiplayer solitaire complaint. I’d say that the fundamental nature of worker placement games precludes them from being multiplayer solitaire, although they may feel that way at first. Because there’s only one of each space on the board, and only one person can visit a space at a time, there’s a huge element to the game that’s about reading your opponents, guessing where their wants and yours align, and making sure you get that spot before they do. Taking a cleric may be the obvious next move, but if you do that now, will you be denying yourself the chance to get rogues this round? The more you play the game with the same group, the more palpably
you’ll feel the importance of the different action spaces as they shift over the course of the game, and the more intense this race-like aspect of the game will feel. The expansion alleviates this a bit by adding alternate ways to get the same basic resources, but it adds in other mechanics to increase player interaction.

Wow, that pretty much exhausts the topic. Did you have something you wanted to say about the app?

**Chris:** I get what you’re saying about multiplayer solitaire, and you’re right. My problem is that it feels like MP solitaire, mainly because I’m not concerned with blocking others’ moves—I’m usually too far behind in points to be doing anything other than madly scrambling to get whatever locations might help me, forget about playing offense. You also make a great point about playing it with the same group over time; I think that would help, too. Right now, as it is, I just don’t get the sense that I’m playing against others so much as we’re all “racing in our own lanes,” so to speak, with the occasional slight nudge to the other guy’s bumper. But! You’ve given me enough to think about to let me approach the game differently the next time we play, so there’s a win. I’d say it’s still squarely in the 6/10 range for me, and yes—for the love of Mike, if you’re going to play, this then you must get the expansion.

The app…it does indeed seem to be a pretty much perfect recreation of the tabletop game, with very slick production values and an incredibly smooth UI. The only real complaint I have is that when playing solo against the app it’s sometimes hard to tell who’s doing what, as the AI moves so fast I can’t keep up and take note of what others are doing (not that it would help me much anyway). It’s pricey, but it’s also pretty much gold standard for iOS conversions of tabletop games, so it gets a hearty recommendation from me. It’s also something I wish I had existed before I bought the game proper, since it would have prepared me a bit better for the real-life experience with this game and Euros in general.
Chris Holly is the author of over 1000 first chapters of novels in genres ranging from noir to science fiction and back to noir again. His second chapter, titled “Chapter Two”, is due out in 2018. Find his daily writing exercises at http://fortuneandglories.wordpress.com/.

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