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You would think that a board game based loosely on Dan O’Bannon’s 1985 cult classic THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD could not possibly be anything short of infectious fun. You would think this, however, until you actually sat down and played Twilight Creations’ newest expansion of its nine-year-old ZOMBIES!!! board game. Taking the inherently cool concept of a RETURN game and turning it into something tedious would seem to be no mean feat; and yet, Twilight has pulled it off.

First, let me make it clear that the concept itself is a very cool one. The ZOMBIES!!! series has been around since 2001, but up until now, it has mainly approached the undead mythos from a decidedly Romero-centric point of view. This time out, Twilight took their inspiration from that other giant of living-dead cinema, and in fact the film that basically overshadowed Romero’s own DAY OF THE DEAD some 25 years ago.

And so, we have a board game that takes place in a cemetery, in which the buried dead rise up from their graves to pursue those hapless individuals who dare to draw breath six feet above them. Although RETURN is never directly mentioned—for obvious reasons of potential copyright infringement—the influence is clear felt via game cards with titles like “What Did You Do to Freddy?”, “Aqua Regia,” “Send…More…Paramedics,” “We Have a Little Problem,” “You Made Me Hurt Myself Again” and even “Do You Wanna Party?”—complete with scantily clad dancing redhead.

It’s a game I really wanted to love, but that in the end, I just couldn’t enjoy very much. I had purchased the original ZOMBIES!!! nine years ago, and unfortunately, many of its problems are still present. The gameplay is very slow, and it takes quite a while for the action to pick up, even as the plastic zombie figurines begin to fill the expanding stretch of board tiles. There’s simply not much that actually *happens* in the game.

The cards are included to help make things interesting, and clever though they may be, they really don’t achieve their intended goal. In fact, this ninth expansion includes a new feature called “automatic cards”—which must be played the instant they are dealt to a player, rather

than at that player’s discretion. This experimental concept only serves to confuse and muddle the play further, and it seems unlikely to be carried over into future editions.

While the instructions indicate that the ASHES TO ASHES expansion can be played on its own in the cemetery setting in addition to being a part of the larger original game, you really can’t get the full experience playing ASHES alone. For example, players are instructed to mix the expansion cards together with those from the original edition, and yet many of the original deck cards are only applicable in the first game’s setting, not in the graveyard. Also, when playing the expansion alone, the object—to be the player who kills the very last zombie on the board—seems pointless, and far less satisfying than the original’s method of winning, in which players keep track of all the zombies they kill.

Just like the initial edition, this expansion of ZOMBIES!!! seems like a fantastic idea, yet the experience of playing simply never quite lives up to expectations. It’s as if the creators were so pleased with the central concept of a zombie-movie-inspired board game that they never put enough thought into actually making it fun. Still, I can’t completely dislike any expansion that comes with a bag full of little plastic zombie children…

{jcomments on}