

Pick Up & Deliver 783: 4 Things I Like About Spirit Island

Welcome to *Pick Up & Deliver*, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorder as I step out of the train and deliver an episode to you while I walk home. I'm Brendan Riley.

Well, greetings listeners. It's a lovely day here in suburban Chicago. I'm walking home from the train, uh, heading home to be able to do some work this afternoon at home instead of working at the office. Such is my choice today. Well, as I was looking through the backlog of the podcast, I was trying to figure out what's an episode that was something that I haven't done a lot of talking about yet. And I looked and I realized I recently played my thirteenth game of *Spirit Island*, which certainly puts it in the realm of reviewable. And so I thought I would just do just that. So today I'm going to talk about four things I really like about Spirit Island. Uh, if you are not familiar with Spirit Island, it is a cooperative game designed by R Eric Reuss, published originally by Greater Than Games. I think it has been purchased because Greater Than Games, I'm sad to say, has gone out of business, but I believe that Spirit Island has been purchased, so it will continue. And my understanding is that there are there is new content on the way.

I enjoy Spirit Island, although I do not own a copy myself. My son has a complete copy with all of the add ons and everything. So he's got all the deluxe components and he's got a 3D printed insert that he printed that is very elaborate and works pretty well. And there is a lot to like about Spirit Island, and I have played some of it.

If you're unfamiliar with the game, I'll tell you a little bit about it right now. Spirit Island is a cooperative game. The theme is that colonizers have come to settle the land, and the people who live on the land don't want them to do so. So you play as a spirit of the indigenous people, trying to protect the land from the what the game calls the invaders, who are clearly sort of fashioned as conquistador-era colonizers. During the game, the colonizers come in three sizes. They are explorers, which are tiny little conquistadors. Then there are town towns which are small, like two or three houses together. And then there are cities which are big sort of skyscraper type deals. The way the game works, each round you have a hand, you have some cards, and you have a player board that provides you with a certain amount of resources, energy and card play actions.

Each turn, you're going to take one of the sort of charge up each turn. You're going to take one of the charge up actions which will give you energy, let you get a new card from the deck. They might let you move some of your influence pieces around on the board. And then there's also usually an action that lets you pick your cards back up. So the way it gets a hand management game. So you have a hand of cards and as the game goes along you play them. And then at some point you have to take a reset action to pick your hand of cards back up after you take your setup action. Then there is a fast phase, and every card you have that has a little fast icon on it will activate. Every card that you've played that has a fast icon will activate. Then all of the invaders will do their thing. I'll talk about that in a minute. And then the cards that you played that have a slow icon on them will activate. Then the next round starts. You pick a new reset action and continue like that in between the fast section and the slow section.

The colonizers will do their work or the invaders. It starts with these fear cards, which are one of the main mechanisms that you can use to win the game. So you activate the fear cards, and that's actually usually good for the players. Then you activate the three different invasion cards that the enemies do. Uh, and then there's also these event cards that come with one of the expansions. I think the event cards go before the invaders go. Because those affect some of the things that the invaders do.

So the way the invaders work, you have this deck of cards, and on it, it has the different types of land that are on the board. So there's wetland and desert and mountains and prairie and coastal lands and inland lands. Uh, and you flip one of the cards over first there are explorers and explorers show up and all of the lands on the board that match the type you flipped. So if you flip desert, then you add one explorer token in every desert. Not quite. There's a little more nuance to it than that, but for the purposes of this verbal explanation that works on the next round and so on the very first round of the game, that's all that happens. But then on the next round, you're going to take that desert card and it's now moving into the building phase. And so all the explorers who are in the desert will build towns, which is of course, frustrating, because towns represent settlements and are pushing out the indigenous people, the Dahan. Then you also flip over another card. So if the desert was the first one, let's say the jungle is the second one, then the explorers might show up in the jungle while the deserts are now having towns in them. And then in the third round, there's an additional phase called blight. And a ravage.

The way that works is anywhere that there is two explorer guys or a town or a city, then that's going to do damage, which is called blight. And it's these little grey tokens that go on the ground and it suggests they're destroying the island. And that's one of the main clocks for you to lose. The game is if you run out of blight, if there's too much blight on the board, the the group loses. There's a limited amount of blight, and it's pretty hard to remove from the board. You can remove it, but it's hard.

So one way to lose is to have all of the blight come out. The second way it loses if you run out of time. So that deck that says what the invaders are doing gets worse and worse as the game goes along. If you get to the end of the deck, then that ends the game also. So if you have to flip a card and you can't, you lose the main.

The way that you win is by wiping out the dawn to a certain amount, or by getting enough fear or wiping out the invaders to a certain amount, or getting enough fear that they run away. The way the fear works is that you play these. You take actions, and that causes fear to accumulate. Every time you destroy a town, you get a fear. Every time you destroy a city, you get two fear. There's a bunch of cards that cause fear. And eventually when you get enough fear, then the terror level goes up. And as the terror level gets higher, it's easier and easier to chase away the invaders.

I think I've shared enough about how the game works for you to get an idea. I want to talk about four things I really like about the game.

The first thing I like about it is its extreme customizability. So the way the game works at the very base level, you're just playing against generic invaders. But the game and some expansions come with a variety of ways to make the invaders different. You can make them harder. I mean, it's almost invariably harder, but sometimes they're harder in different ways that make them challenging to tackle. They have to change your strategy to deal with the special powers they get, and those are associated with countries. So you can play against Sweden, you can play against England. Like basically it's all the European colonizing countries. There are these additional challenges that emerge that make the game even harder or harder in a different way. So you can choose to face different kinds of challenges as players.

But the challenge is that you're facing pale in comparison to the variety that you have as a player. So when you're a player, you pick one of these spirits and there are a whole bunch of spirits. There's got to be twenty five or thirty of them. If you have all the expansions like my son does. Some of the spirits have what are called aspects, meaning that you have multiple ways that they can play, and the spirits have amazing names like lightning, Swift Strike and Finder of Ways unseen, bringer of nightmares or bringer of dreams and nightmares, maybe stuff like that. And each spirit comes with a little mini deck of like five cards, five to eight cards, something like that. And these cards have the powers that this spirit can do. The cards also have these icons on the side which activate some of the innate powers the spirit can do during the game. When you get more cards, you're tailoring your hand.

It's similar to Mage Knight in that way, where you have a set of tools that you can use, and as you play, you can tailor it to fit the playstyle that you have and the other spirits that you have, because a big part of it is finding synergies between the multiple spirits where you can help each other out because, oh, and then there's also minor powers, which when you want to get a minor power, all you do is you draw four cards and you keep one, discard the other three. Then there are major powers which are really good. The way those work, you draw four major powers. You keep one, discard the others, and you have to discard one of your minor powers. So major powers take a bit more to get. If nothing else, they take two card. Actions because you have to take one action to get a minor power. And you have to give up a minor power. When you take the major. But what you're doing is you're building a machine. A synergy of cards that you can use to kick butt all over the enemies. It's great.

The second thing that I like, I already kind of covered. And this is flexible options for your choices and or half of it I've covered anyway because you have the cards, but the other half of it is the extreme flexibility in how you handle difficult situations, because there are a variety of different cards and a whole bunch of different environments, and you have a certain amount of access to information about what the enemies are going to be doing. You have a lot of flexibility in terms of how you're going to handle different aspects of the enemy attacks. This allows for a lot of creativity and play a lot of collaboration. As you're talking to the other players about what we could do. Here's what I could do. Can you take this guy? I can take care of that one. You have a lot of flexibility. There's a lot of planning in the game and a lot of conversation that makes for just

really satisfying co-op play. The game gives you enough tools that, with a little bit of forethought, you really are able to significantly manage any risk that comes up. It's pretty great. So the second thing I like about Spirit Island is enormous flexibility of choice.

The third thing I like comes right on the heels of that second thing, which is that it is really complicated. Now, it seems weird to say I like a game that's really complicated. But part of what makes Spirit Island really satisfying as a game is that the puzzle it presents to you is intricate enough and complicated enough that it's difficult to complete. It's a challenge to solve, and as a result, it's really fun. So I really enjoy trying to figure out how to solve the puzzle of the challenge that we're facing, having to think about the different cards that are coming in, having to choose from the four different mini powers, or four different minor powers that you could get every time you take a new minor power, having to choose the major power and think about how those are going to interconnect, and think about how you're going to get the symbols you need to activate them.

There's just so much going on, and that's before you add the expansions that include a whole bunch of different little tokens on the board that interfere in different ways. And you have the special powers of the villains, and you have your player board special power and your opponent, your, um, collaborators have their special powers. There's just a whole lot going on. And it makes for a very compelling brain crunch, which is my, like, something I just really, really, really enjoy. So when I want to play a game that really makes me think, really makes me question, how to make the most of my gaming experience. Having the opportunity to wrestle with something as complicated as Spirit Island is a treat.

And finally, **I really like the theme** of Spirit Island. There are so many games these days that use colonialism as the theme, and I don't like colonialism as the theme. Right. The idea of going to a place and taking it over and making use of its lands and ignoring its people. Most, most colonialism games just don't feature the indigenous people at all. They're just not in it. So having that as the theme is really frustrating to me. I feel like it's not a story we need to tell anymore, and it's not fun to play that.

By contrast, defending your land from invaders with cool spirits that have cool powers feels awesome is really fun. Now, this is a little part of me that feels like there's a smidge of cultural appropriation in the names of the spirits, but it's very, very minor. And I think that overall the game is really respectful of the idea of indigenous people. It doesn't. It's using a fictional place. So the Dahan aren't a specific people. And so I think in that regard it works very well.

Well, dear listener, have you do you enjoy Spirit Island? Let me know what you think of it by heading over to [BoardGameGeek 3269](#) and sharing your thoughts in the comments.

Thanks for joining me in my walk today. I hope your next walk is as pleasant as mine was. Bye bye!

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