

Ex-RPGNet Reviews – Brawl

[by Justin Alexander](#)

January 9th, 2015

Tagline: Buy it! Buy it! Buy it! Buy it! Buy it! But it! Buy it NOW!



This game kicks ass... and not just because it's a fight game, either.

Real time card games (a term which I am almost certain was coined by James Ernest) are, in my opinion, one of the coolest developments to hit gaming in recent years. Collectible card games may have been innovative, but the sheer power of the real time concept easily blows them out of the water without blinking.

I have reviewed two other games in this trend – WOTC's [Twitch!](#) and Cheapass Games' [Falling!](#) – elsewhere on RPGNet with words of glowing praise, every one of which they earned and more. Now it is with great pleasure that I review [Brawl](#), which takes all of this to a new level.

The game is currently marketed in the form of six interchangeable decks, each named after a fictional “fighter”: **Hale**, **Chris**, **Bennett**, **Pearl**, **Darwin**, and **Morgan**. It is well worth your time.

(This is not – repeat, not! – a collectible card game. You need two decks – one for each player – to play, but each and every one of the decks is stand-alone. You aren't supposed to combine the decks.)

THE RULES

Okay, first off: What's this “real time” concept?

Basically it means what it says: You play the game in “real time”, instead of artificially breaking the game into a series of “turns” or “rounds” or “hands” or whatever other gimmicky term the creators have come up with.

How does it work in practice?

Each deck in *Brawl* is composed of a variety of cards: Bases, Hits, Blocks, Clears, Hit-2s, Presses, and Freezes. The exact number of each type of card (as well as their presence and/or absence) is determined by which character you select – in other words, different characters have different strengths and weaknesses. In actual play you need to be aware of these, because it can have a profound difference on your success or failure.

To begin play each player shuffles their deck. Then they put one base in the middle of the table and put all of their Freeze cards on the bottom of their deck. You play cards off of these Bases in the following manner:

Hit. All Hits are colored. You can play a Hit card directly on the base, or on top of a Hit or Hit-2 card of the same color.

Block. All Blocks are colored. A Block can be played on a Hit or a Hit-2 of the same color. (Because Hits can't be played on Blocks, a Block thus prevents further Hits from being played.)

Press. A Press is played on a Block, allowing you to resume playing Hits on that Base.

Hit-2. Functions just like a Hit, but you can't play it on a Press or a Base.

Clear. A Clear card removes a Base (and all the cards which have been played on it) from play.

Freeze. A Freeze is played directly onto a Base (regardless of which cards have been played off of it) and prevents any further play on that Base. When all Bases have been frozen, the game ends.

Base. Additional Bases may be played as they come up, but there can only be three bases in play at a time.

Play proceeds off both sides of a base (each side being given to one of the players). When the game ends you count up the number of Hits and Hit-2s which have been played on your side of the base (Hit-2s count for two points) – that's your score. The player with the higher score wins the base. The player who wins 2 out 3 bases wins.

“Wait a minute,” you say, “Where's this ‘real time’ thing come in?”

Well, like I said, there are no turns. Once play begins you begin playing cards off the top of your deck (i.e., you take the top card off your deck, look at it, and then play it, before looking at the next card and playing it) as quickly and as effectively as you can. (You can also discard cards into your discard pile, and can play the top card from this pile instead of turning over the next card in your deck as you wish.)

WHAT YOU SHOULD BUY

As I mentioned before, there are six decks to choose from. Conveniently, on the back of these decks, Cheapass Games has provided a series of three important guides: Skill Level (rated Easy, Moderate, and Hard); Advantages (a couple sentences on potentially successful strategies); and Weaknesses (a couple sentences on the potential soft spots in the deck).

I'd suggest starting with **Hale** and **Chris**, the two Easy decks. **Hale** is a bruiser – he's easy to play because he's all hits (offense is easier to handle than the finesse of defense). **Chris** is a well-balanced girl –



easy to play because she doesn't require any special strategy.

I'd tell you where to go next, but once you've played the game with those two decks you'll be totally addicted, so it doesn't matter. The other four will fall neatly into your pocket without a second thought.

SUMMARY

What makes the game so effective is a combination of factors: First, the real time mechanics are a perfect fit for the fighting motif ([Video Fighter](#), which I [review elsewhere on RPGNet](#), looks stodgy by comparison). Second, the variety of decks for different fighters (a concept which was imperfectly originated by *Video Fighter*, coincidentally) shows the ability with which a simple set of rules and cards can be combined in various manners to create very specific dynamics and tactics. Third, the entire package is beautifully put together – great artwork, great design, great appeal.

Finally, and most importantly, the game is just damn fun to play. James Ernest, once again, proves he has an ineffable sense for near-perfection in game design – balancing a disparate set of elements in just such a manner to make them, ultimately, totally enthralling.

Whatever you do, don't start playing this game unless you've got plenty of time on your hands.

Otherwise, you'll regret it.

Style: 5

Substance: 5

Author: James Ernest

Company/Publisher: Cheapass Games

Cost: \$6.95

Page Count: n/a

ISBN: n/a

Originally Posted: 2000/03/12

For an explanation of where these reviews came from and why you can no longer find them at RPGNet, click [here](#).

Ex-RPGNet Reviews – Devil Bunny Needs a Ham

by [Justin Alexander](#)

January 16th, 2015

Tagline: Huh?

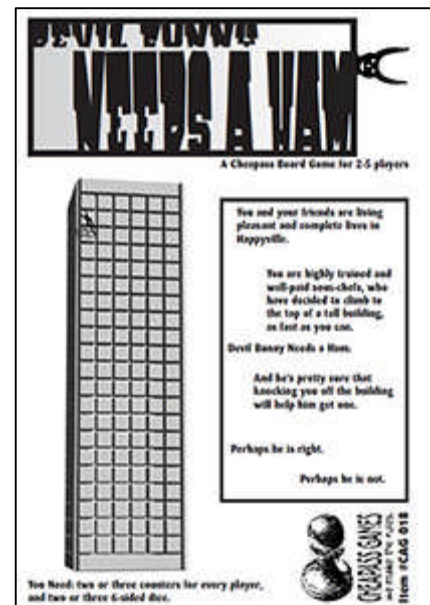
“You are a highly trained and well-paid sous-chefs, who have decided to climb to the top of a tall building, as fast as you can. Devil Bunny Needs a Ham. And he’s pretty sure that knocking you off the building will help him get one. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps he is not.”

What the hell?

I have been given to understand that Devil Bunny is an arcane reference to the alt.devilbunnies newsgroup. I have to admit, I’m impressed. Very few cult references can slip past me with nary a blink of recognition – but this one did entirely until it was pointed out to me.

It still doesn’t make any sense, but at least the name “Devil Bunny” has been imbued with a certain degree of significance ... despite the fact that the devilbunnies of alt.devilbunnies don’t seem to have much of a relationship with the Devil Bunny of this game.

Errr... Anyyyywwaaaayyyy....



THE RULES

You are provided with a board which represents a sky-scraper. You start at the bottom with three counters and make your way towards the top along six columns of boxes. You move by rolling two dice, moving your counters by the combined number of pips on your dice (you can break the number up anyway you like between your three counters, and you can move them left, right, or diagonally – but not up and down). You can’t move through other players, Devil Bunny, or the black squares on the board (which basically serve as obstacles).

The exception to this is if you roll a six. If you do, then Devil Bunny moves immediately – “jumping” on the climber who is farthest up the building, and knocking them down. A climber who is knocked down falls straight down until he hits another climber (and is automatically “caught”, by being placed below that climber’s counter) or until he hits the Ground. Midway through the board is the Line of Death – if you hit the Ground while below this line, you live and simply start of. If you’re above it and hit the Ground, you die and the counter is removed from the board.

Counters which reach the SAFETY! at the top of the building score points depending on the order in which they reach it (this is a series of fairly arbitrary numbers based on providing interesting and competitive combinations of exit orders). The person with the most points at the end of the game wins.

Variations: For an easier game, you can move on the black squares. For a more bloody game, have the Devil Bunny jump onto a random column. "You can also experiment with cheese, although it is primarily intended as a healthy snack."

SUMMARY

Cheapass Games has a habit of designing really fantastic games.

Then there's this one.

I have the vague feeling that if you first cracked this thing open while being incredibly high with a group of incredibly close buddies this game would have an intensely hilarious component to it that I, playing it sober with my brother, simply missed entirely.

That being said, for \$2 it's a rather fascinating game that'll chew up at least half an hour with mild entertainment and will, thus, earn it's keep.

Style: 3

Substance: 2

Author: James Ernest (also E. Jordan Bojar and Toivo Rovainen)

Company/Publisher: Cheapass Games

Cost: \$2.00

Page Count: n/a

ISBN: n/a

Originally Posted: 2000/03/12

For an explanation of where these reviews came from and why you can no longer find them at RPGNet, click [here](#).

Ex-RPGNet Reviews - Dice Wars

by [Justin Alexander](#)

January 23rd, 2015

Tagline: "Have you ever wondered what your dice when you're not using them?" You're about to find out - whether you want to or not.

A couple of days ago an interesting e-mail cropped up in my mailbox: Seth Ben-Ezra, lead designer and publisher of Dark Omen Games, was inviting me to review their new game - *Dice Wars* - which was freely available from their [website](#). Well, hell, who am I to say no to those who seek me out? Besides which he was groveling (no, really, he told me he was groveling), and I just hate to see that in a grown man. So I popped over and took a look.

CONCEPT

"Have you ever wondered what your dice when you're not using them?" You're about to find out - whether you want to or not.

Basically once you've got a taste for the game's concept the rest will quickly become obvious: Your dice are alive. They form societal units based on their die sizes and types ("a black die probably won't get along with a sparkly pink die, for what should be obvious reasons"). There's a fairly well-developed and semi-extensive (given the short nature of the rules) section on die-type personalities: "The four-siders are the craziest of all dice..." "The d10s are the shock troops of dice wars. Many defenses have crumbled before formations of d10s..." "d8s, as a rule, suffer from an inferiority complex..." And so forth. My favorite is the section on "Monstrosities": "Legend speaks of other dice. Dice that have been mutated beyond recognition. Old dice whisper stories of dice with 16 sides, 30 sides, and even 100 sides."

Every so often, though, the dice are seized by "the Rage" - capable of sending an entire dice bag into a complete frenzy of violence.

That's when you have.... **Dice Wars!**

THE RULES

The game consists of a set of rules (available in HTML, MS Word, and Acrobat) and a "Battlemap" (available as a set of GIF files and a PDF).

The game itself is scenario-based - you set the dice up for combat based on pre-designed scenarios. Many of the scenarios contain victory conditions. Unfortunately, this leads us to my first set of major critiques of the game.

First, there are only two scenarios include: "All Out War" and "Saving Private Ryan". The former being a basic combat scenario, the other being a "rescue the captive die" scenario in which some special rules are presented for that. Just some basic, and fairly obvious, variants ("capture the flag", "battle of the monstrosities", etc.) leap to mind with ease. This wouldn't be such a problem except for the fact that no coherent rules are given for the creation of new scenarios.

Second, the rules state: "Additionally, regardless of the scenario, one victory condition always applies. If you lose all of the dice that you assigned to the battlefield, you lose." Personally, as many of you know, I like to keep as much flexibility as possible. When someone lays down a "thou shalt not" like this my first response is: "Oh yeah, what about situation X?" In which situation X would be a plausible scenario in which such a victory condition would not apply. For example, the capture of an enemy die as your victory condition - kill all the enemy and you lose. Keep your options open.

Third, I downloaded the PDF versions of the rules. Each scenario is *supposed* to be accompanied with a diagram of how to lay your dice out on the BattleMap - unfortunately this diagram is missing.

Moving on: Each scenario gives an army size for each side, which is then created from the forces in your dice bag. For example, in a 100-sided game you'd take a selection of dice which totaled 100-sides between (five d20s; one d20 and eight d10s; etc.). You then your "general staff" (a concept which is never explained) to determine initiative in placement - whoever wins places one of their dice, then the other, and so on until all dice are placed. Depending on the scenario you may then select a "Fearless Leader", a die which has certain positive combat effects (but also causes you to lose initiative on the next turn if it ever dies).

To begin the actual game you again roll your "general staff" (still don't know what it is) to determine "activation initiative". The player who wins "activates" (an arcane wargame term which means "move") one die - the fewer sides a die has, the farther it can move on a given term. Once a piece has been activated, you should place an activation counter under it so that you don't accidentally move it again on this turn. Activation then alternates, just like placement.

Once all your dice have moved, combat takes place between any enemy groups which have found themselves in the same space. Basically it works like this: The "attacker" (a concept which is not clearly defined, but I assume means the person moving into a square which was occupied first by the other player) pair off dice into sub-grouping called melees - in other words, he pairs up some of his dice with the dice of the other player. For example, the attacker might pair his d10 up against the defender's d6; his d20 and d6 up against the defender's d10.

At this point you then roll each melee (adding multiple scores together) - whoever has the higher score wins, and the other dice are removed from play. (Note: At the end of a round there may still be dice from both sides left alive in the square. You stop after a single round of combat resolution.)

It shouldn't take more than a couple seconds for you to start seeing the problems: While there are some rules limiting exactly how the attacker can distribute the dice (the player who has fewer dice has melee groups of only one die each, and the other player cannot have three dice in a melee group until all of his groups have two dice in them), this is still hugely unfair to the defender - who, actually, should logically be able to determine what formations his or her defenders are in.

The simplest fix for this unbalance is to simply give group assignation chores to whoever has more dice. Given the rules concerning even dice distribution this makes sense - since whoever has fewer dice will never have any choices about melee groups, anyway.

Or, for a slightly more complicated fix: If the space was occupied by a single player's dice for a whole turn before being attacked by the other side (in other words, at least some of your dice have been standing in the space by themselves without any enemy dice present), then they get to set up whatever defensive groups they want (whether that's one big group or lots of little groups is up to them. Then the attacker defines his attack groups (if you want to make defense a lot easier, you can let the standing defender have the ability to define lop-sided combat groups, while forcing the attacker to evenly

distribute his forces – in order to represent that ability for the defender to prepare defenses, while the attacker is acting while on the move). If, on the other hand, both sides moved into the space for the first time on this turn (or are continuing a combat from a previous round in which this was true) then the rules of my simple fix (side with more dice defines evenly-distributed melee groups) apply.

To wrap things up, you can also have artillery units – which are placed in special spaces around the edges of the BattleMap. To fire artillery you roll all of the dice in the artillery pool, and then count the spaces directly in front of the artillery based on the number you roll. For example, if you rolled 1, 3, and 4 (on three artillery dice) you would count out 1, 3, and 4 spaces from your artillery – a single die is removed from every one of those spaces (whether friendly or not). There's some additional rules on how to determine which side loses a die if the space contains troops of both sides.

SUMMARY

I'm not going to lie to you: There are quite a few problems here.

First off, the overall package suffers from an unprofessional lay-out and presentation. Details are missing, there are several broken links off of the web-pages, and the language used in the rulebook often descends into a far too casual voice (replete with unamusing attempts at humor).

Second, the rules are too *cluttered* (for lack of a better word). At its heart *Dice Wars* is a very simple, Cheapass-esque, game. But the rules often use terms which are better left to the realm of [Advanced Squad Leader](#) ("activation" being a key example). The failure to honor the KISS principle, in combo with some generally unclear language (much of which has been cleaned up in my short presentation of the rules above – particularly in the area of combat resolution), makes it so that you have to decipher the game in order to enjoy it.

Third, the rules simply aren't flexible enough. Or, to be more precise, they aren't as flexible as they *easily could be*.

Fourth, the BattleMap is too damn small – it's useful for some squad-level stuff, but you just don't have enough maneuverability. I'd suggest using a chessboard which is oversized enough to fit multiple dice into each square. It'll be more fun and you won't have to cut-and-paste.

Finally, and perhaps most damning, the rules don't deliver on some of the neat concepts discussed in the promo material at the beginning of the game. I'd have especially liked to have seen more detailed rules on the Monstrosities, and for the "powers" of different types of dice (gems, solids, etc.).

But, at the end of the day: Should you check this one out? Well, if you were paying any significant amount of money (even at, say, a Cheapass level) for the package I'd say no. But it *is* a freebie. With some minor modifications and decipherment (most of which I've implied or done here in this review) the game becomes the simple, quick, fun playing experience I think it's ultimately meant to be. In particular I'd highly recommend it for quick play while you're waiting around for that perpetually late member of your gaming group to show up – you've already got the dice just sitting there, the rules are easy to remember, and the board is easy to improvise.

Style: 3

Substance: 2

Author: Seth and Crystal Ben-Ezra
Company/Publisher: Dark Omen Games
Cost: Free!
Page Count: n/a
ISBN: n/a

Originally Posted: 2000/03/12

For an explanation of where these reviews came from and why you can no longer find them at RPGNet, click [here](#).

Ex-RPGNet Reviews – Government-Funded Robot Assassins From Hell (Mission One: Kill All Evil Game Designers)

by [Justin Alexander](#)

January 30th, 2015

Tagline: Two words: Bizarre. No wait, that's only one word. Uhhh... Okay: Really bizarre. How's that? Good? Good. Great. Okay.

CONCEPT

Government-Funded Robot Assassins from Hell – Mission One: Kill All Evil Game Designers (henceforth, for obvious reasons, referred to merely as *Government-Funded Robot Assassins*) is a card game dating back to 1995.

Basically it combines a tongue-in-cheek presentation of “government-funded robot assassins from hell” with a satiric look at the gaming industry. Hence you get cards like:

Steve Jackson. *He has his own game company!* Creator of gaming chaos, this man is wanted by not only the Pentagon, but also the Secret Service! KILL HIM NOW!



And:

Favorable Review. *Everyone loves it!* It could be because the game is good or maybe the designer slipped the reviewer some cold, hard cash.

(Note: Any game designers wishing to slip me cold hard cash should contact me via e-mail to obtain my snail mail address. I have no scruples. None at all. Honest.)

THE RULES

You win the game by earning a hundred points. Points are earned by carrying out a successful assassination – your targets being various game designers (each of whom are worth varying amounts).

Basically each player starts with a Plain Bot (a really basic model of robot assassin) and a hand of seven cards. You roll 4d6 to determine who plays first (why 4d6? I don't know). Each player then draws a card and places a target on the table. Then he plays a card (which modifies the score of either his robot or a target, depending on the type of card). Everyone does the same thing.

When play returns to the first player he may now place a second card and then he needs to attack his target (the card he played back on his first turn). To carry out the assassination attempt he adds up his Assassinate score (his 'bot plus its modifiers) and adds 4d6. If the total is higher than the defense of his target, then the target is dead and the player collects the points. Play out a new target.

Repeat until someone wins.

SUMMARY

I ended up picking up *Government-Funded Robot Assassins* because I was ordering a number of products from Propaganda Publishing and my eye caught the title (which is very catchy, you have to admit). Since it was only six bucks I added it to my figurative cart. I'm very disappointed by it.

Basically I would sum the game up by its major problems:

First, the production values are very low. Hand-scribbled lettering in the graphics, which are generally low quality anyway. The game as a whole shows up as a set of cardstock pages (the cards, which you have to cut up yourself) folded into a large sheet of xeroxed instructions. This isn't too bad, overall, since the whole product is basically one large in-joke – so you're hardly going to expect laminated perfection – but it's still a knock.

Second, the game – by its very nature – ends up being very topical. And the topic is now half a decade old. To put that in perspective, realize that *Magic: The Gathering* was new, TSR was still independent, and *SHADIS* still existed. It's not a knock against the game as it was originally conceived, but it is a knock against purchasing it today.

Third, the rules are presented in a rather sloppy manner in a couple of places. A far larger problem with the rules, however, is that they just aren't that effective or fun. Your average assassination almost always succeeds, particularly once you start building your robot up (you can move your assassinate score up, but not down – while you *are* able to modify defensive scores in both directions).

Finally, the jokes were never that funny to begin with. I picked a couple of the more humorous ones, above, but most of them are just yawners. For example:

Wizards of the Coast. *The publishers of a hot new card game.* Though they have money, they aren't exactly in the same league as TSR. If they survive *Magic*, look out!

(Okay, that's a little funny *now* – in an ironic sort of way.)

At the end of the day, this just isn't worth your time or your money. It has a note of pleasant nostalgia to it for "old timers", like myself, who happened to be kicking around when the events discussed on these cards were unfolding. But that's not reason enough to pick it up.

Style: 4

Substance: 4

Author: Philip J. Reed, Jr.

Company/Publisher: Propaganda Publishing

Cost: \$6.00

Page Count: n/a

ISBN: n/a

Originally Posted: 2000/03/12

For an explanation of where these reviews came from and why you can no longer find them at RPGNet, click [here](#).