

BOARD GAME REVIEW

by David Chircop



Amber Route

Designed by Krzysztof Matusik
Published by Bomba Games

The 'draw a card and see what you encounter' mechanic in board games is strangely appealing. Despite being undeniably simple, it has sparked the imagination of many people over the years—especially in the fantasy adventure genre. Most famously, Steve Jackson's best-selling hit *Munchkin*, controversially used it as the only tangible mechanic.

Talisman is another genre market dominator, which has spawned a multitude of variations and expansions. So it has always intrigued me when other companies decide to challenge the well-established franchises. The genre is old. The simple 'draw a card and see who you meet' mechanic is even older. Yet it keeps reappearing.

I discovered it again at the Internationale Spieltag SPIEL board game fair last year, at a booth that really caught my eye. I hadn't heard of the Polish company called *Bomba Games* but their artwork was astounding. They only had two games on display, *Black & White*, a tactical block war-game, and *Amber Route*, a

family friendly adventure game with a sticker on it that said 'with real amber inside!' I wanted to know more.

In *Amber Route* you draw a card to see what you will encounter next. The difference here is that, while in *Talisman* you'd fight a generic orc or some other fantasy trope, in *Amber Route*, you draw and try to beat creatures from slavic folklore. Charming. The gameplay itself is simple and intuitive—perfectly fitting for the adventure game's target audience—and features a few twists. *Amber Route's* board presents a race to the finish through tiles which fit into each other in a puzzle-style contraption. The result is a sure start, and a finish with a vast range of possibilities of what you fit in between. Routes can be short or long, hard or easy, random or defined. All dependant on the order of strips of land that lock together. The result is a fascinating, light, visually gorgeous adventure that does not overstay its welcome—unlike *Talisman*. Most importantly, is that it's different. It explores a new realm, it allows you to feel real minerals (yes, the

bits are actual amber), and it has stellar graphic design. *Amber Route* stands out for breaking the mould. Call it indie, call it experimental, whatever it is: I like it.

The designers of the game seem to have gone out of their way to make the game as language independent as possible. All text within the game is, in fact, replaced with iconography which is a pleasure to interact with. You will need to get used to the symbols till they sink in, and that's fine. The rules, however, are slightly problematic with a confusing layout and poor translation. I had to make too much effort to find the relevant paragraphs every time I turned a page. A couple of other problems are that the game is a little too easy and the gameplay itself is nothing special, but neither of them is a deal breaker.

Overall, *Amber Route* struck me as a surprisingly fresh take on an overused formula. It was an enjoyable product to explore not only as a game but as a physical object within itself. Whatever you do *Bomba*, do not fire your art director. 