

Blasts from the past (1)

Scheherezade and me—*Tales of the Arabian Nights*

I recently acquired a (secondhand) copy of the vintage game, *Tales of the Arabian Nights*. Designed by Eric Goldberg, it was originally published in 1985 by West End Games. It has long been a favourite of mine, but it's taken me twenty years to get my hands on a copy. Z-Man Games now have a new edition of the game, with new artwork, but I am very glad to have a copy of the original. However, I thought I'd use this excuse to introduce the game to those who haven't come across it.

What makes *Tales of the Arabian Nights* stand out is that it's all about the story. Or stories, as it's drawn from the tales of the 1001 Nights—Aladdin, Sinbad, Ali Baba and all. The game uses the standard tropes of the tales—powerful Djinns (Genies), evil viziers, beautiful princesses, wondrous beasts, fabulous treasures—from which the players weave the tapestry of their own story. At the heart of the game is the Book of Tales—numbered paragraphs that are snippets of the stories.

I'm sure most of you know how a paragraph system works, but here's an introduction for those who don't. It's effectively a story where the reader is the lead character and makes decisions that shape the narrative. It's probably best known from the Fighting Fantasy series of books and other 'solo dungeons'. Hence, "a big, bearded brute twirls his scimitar in front of you. Do you: engage him in a sword fight (go to paragraph 254), run away (go to paragraph 1056) or draw your gun and shoot him (go to paragraph 2)?" The narrative then continues, based on the option



you chose. The paragraphs are usually mixed up to make it harder to guess what the result of your actions will be and the system allows you to play the game multiple times trying different approaches. *Tales of the Arabian Nights* uses this system with knobs on.

The players are adventurers exploring the world as they seek fame and fortune—in game terms, players gain (or lose!) wealth, treasures and destiny and story points. This being the 1001 Nights, the players start in the centre of the civilised world: the fabled city of Baghdad. The civilised world extends over much of the Middle East—outside this area there are uncouth barbarians and, of course, dragons. The board is a rather distorted map of the world with routes for players to follow by land and sea, cities for them to visit and places of magical power.

Wherever they end up, players will encounter something—decided by the draw of a card and the roll of a die. Depending on what they find—an imprisoned princess, a poor beggar, a house fire—players will have a choice of reaction (and there are several different tables of these). Would you aid them? Pray for them? Rob them? Each reaction directs you to a paragraph, modified by a die roll so that you won't necessarily get the same result should you come across the same encounter again. The next player has the Book of Tales and they read the narrative from the paragraph, giving you the results of your action and any choices now open to you. This can take you through several steps before things are resolved.

The result of an encounter can also grant the player particular skills (which can help them deal with future encounters) or give them a 'status'. There is a wide range of statuses, including such things as 'Imprisoned', 'Wounded', 'On Pilgrimage'. These tend to constrain what a player can do or point them in a particular direction. On Pilgrimage, for example, means a player has to go to a specific place and then visit the holy city of Macca.

The game is won by achieving a personal goal of destiny and story points. Alternatively, you can play to achieve quests, which I prefer as it gives more purpose to your journeying around the board. Then there is a merchant game, which involves buying and selling goods and is a whole game in its own right. And then there is the Story-telling game, where players put the printed paragraphs into their own words, really telling their own tale.

However, I shouldn't be talking about the mechanics as, above all, playing *Tales of the Arabian Nights* is an experience. You really are creating your own story in the style of the original tales. Take my last game. Kiwi Paul was Ali Baba and set off from Baghdad his first quest. He had only journeyed as far as Damascus before he spied a mysterious old man. Ali Baba followed the man out of town into the desert where he revealed himself as a mighty Efreet. Ali paid due respect to the magical being and was rewarded by being transported to the mystical Jewelled Fortress (one of the half dozen Places of Power around the board). Cautiously entering the fortress, Ali was astounded by the many treasures it contained. However, the

presence of a mortal caused the building to crumble away and Ali barely escaped with his life—and a couple of magical treasures.

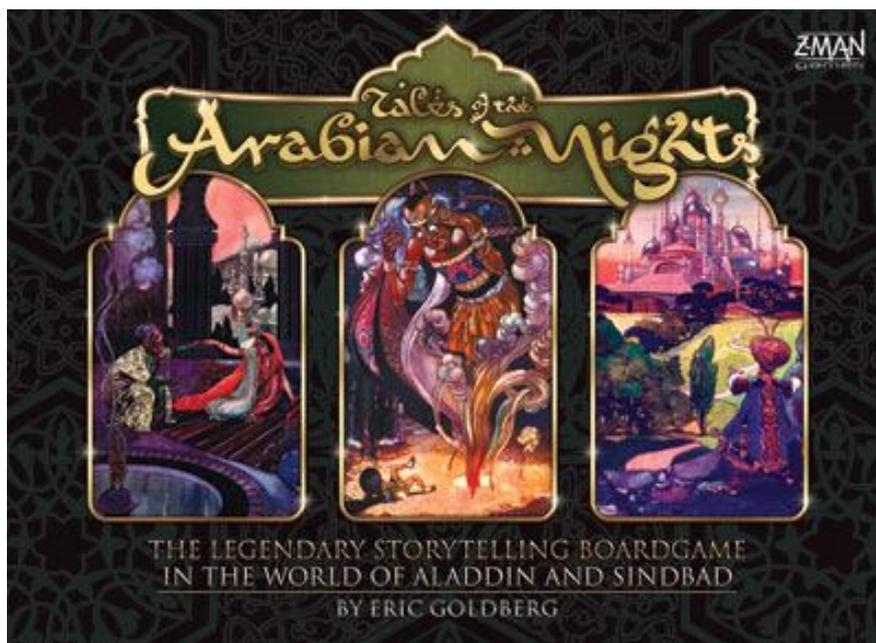
Ali Baba found himself in the North African desert. From here he travelled north in pursuit of his quest. Meanwhile, Sindbad (me) had made his way to Alexandria on his own quest. Here he was able to assist a

damsel in distress, only to discover that she was a Princess—the object of his quest. With joy in his heart, Sindbad set off to return to Baghdad, only to run into Ali Baba. Fearing his rival's success, Ali used one of his treasures to cast a spell on Sindbad, changing his sex! (A status that prevents the player from winning!) So as Ali went in search of his own quest, Sindbad started looking for a magician to lift the spell.

Both men succeeded at much the same time and the race was on back to Baghdad. Not only did the two return at the same time, but Aladdin arrived, too, having finished his own quest. Yes, the game was a three-way tie (and the fourth player only missed out because he'd been crippled in his travels around China and couldn't get back to Baghdad quickly enough!). The important thing, though, was that all of us had had a brilliant time.

Tales of the Arabian Nights is a terrific game that is a great experience each time you play. However, it's not a game I would play every week as I think it would become too much of a game. That is, I think the mechanics of the game would take over from the atmosphere. Now I have my own copy, though, it will be coming out every couple of months. The new Z-Man edition means the game is available once more and I can't recommend it enough. Z-Man say they've added 2,000 extra paragraphs to the game, which will both add variety to the experience and make it different from the original. Which means I'll have to get that one as well!

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