Tears of the Dragon is a quick-playing fantasy boardgame. The Dragon Princess Erynmil weeps in her tower prison, pining for a hero who can free her by bringing the lost magical wisdom of the ages. To such a hero she will give all her power, and he will rule the world for 100 years. But in the meantime, her tears pour from the tower, creating an ever-expanding sea that threatens to inundate the kingdoms to the north. Two great warlords in those quickly-shrinking lands, Lord Gorganun and Lord Forseti, want the honor of rescuing her (and ruling the world). So, they battle each other while sending scouts to search distant ruins for the lost wisdom. Once one side finds all the lost wisdom it must sail for the Dragon Island, hoping to prove its Lord most wise and dry the tears of the dragon.

The game board has spaces depicting castles, cities, towns, ports, ruins and the Tower Island. The Tower is in a sea area. Other spaces are linked by roads. Playing pieces move from space to space along roads, and can move into sea areas from ports. Different types of pieces on land move at different rates.

Units, Leaders and Wizards

Pieces depict infantry, cavalry, fairies called Cadmin, leaders, wizards and Terromax the Dragon. Infantry, cavalry and Cadmin are known as "units." The only number on a unit is its combat strength.

Each leader has a rank to the left of his or her picture ("1" is the highest) and three numbers (called "ratings") at the bottom: Attack, Command and Defense. Higher-ranking leaders can command lower-ranking ones. Leaders' attack and defense ratings add to the combat strengths of units with them. When a leader starts his or her turn in the same space with friendly units or lower-ranking leaders, he or she can take them along when he or she moves. The leader can take all lower-ranking leaders, plus a number of units equal to or less than his or her Command rating. Lower-ranking leaders can take other units with them, too. These units can also be placed in the leader boxes on the player card. That way, those units move with the leaders, but the other player can't see them until he or she fights a battle with the leaders.

Wizards have three numbers: Combat strength in the upper left corner); and Spell Success followed by the number of spells he or she can know, at the bottom. To have a wizard cast a spell, roll a ten-sided die. If the result is less than or equal to (5 + the wizard's Spell Success number), the spell works. If not, it fails. On a 10, it misfires—roll on the Catastrophic Failure table to see what happens. A wizard starts the game with spells specified in the rules; see the Spell Index to see what each spell does. A wizard can get more spells by exploring ruins, until he or she hits the maximum.

Terromax the Dragon starts off-board. The Gorganun player (only) can try to recruit him by sending a wizard to Asten and rolling on the Terromax Recruitment Table. Terromax may join the game, go back to sleep, take the wizard captive or eat the wizard. If he joins, he fights for the Gorganun player if the wizard who recruited him stays with him and makes an extra spell roll to control him each turn. If the wizard dies or fails the roll, Terromax goes berserk and attacks randomly.

Players start by setting up some of their pieces in castles as specified in the rules. Other pieces can be recruited later. To start a turn, players roll for initiative. The winner then chooses to either move and fight with one unit or leader (plus units under that leader's command), or roll on the Command Table to try to activate more units. Rolling on the command table has risks—sometimes you activate lots of units, sometimes you can't activate anybody, and sometimes your opponent gets to activate instead. In the latter case, once your opponent's done activating, you have to keep rolling until you can either activate one, some or no units of your own. If your opponent gets to keep on activating, you're in deep trouble....

Battles

When units move into an enemy-occupied space, they must stop and fight unless the enemy player owns a castle there and declares that the units are in the castle (they can be either inside or outside, not both). If the enemy units are in the castle, the moving units may stay and attack the castle, or keep moving. Also, if a stack of five or more units (not counting leaders) enters a space with just one enemy unit, they can attack it for one round (see below), and if they eliminate it they can keep moving. This is called an "overrun."

To fight a battle, both players put the units that are in the same space (or in player card boxes of leaders in that space) on the table. The moving player is the attacker, the other is the defender. Leaders can add their attack and defense ratings to the strengths of units they lead. A leader can split his or her ratings between units in any fashion—so a leader with a rating of 3 can add 1 to each of three units, or do something different. Hoever, no unit's combat strength may go above 7. Once attack/defense ratings are assigned, the defender rolls one die for each of his or her units. On a roll equal to or less than the unit's strength (plus any additions from leaders), it scores a hit on the enemy. Once the defender finishes rolling for all his or her units, the attacker chooses which of his or her own units take the hits the defender inflicted.

Each unit has two sides: full-strength and half-strength. Taking one hit will flip a full-strength unit or eliminate a half-strength unit. Taking two hits will eliminate a full-strength unit. Remove eliminated units from the board—they can be recruited again later. Once the attacker has assigned all hits, he or she attacks the defender using the same procedure.

Once the defender takes all hits from the attacker, first the defender and then the attacker may decide whether to keep fighting or retreat. Retreats must be into a space linked by road to the battle space, or into a friendly castle in the same space. Spaces retreated into can't contain enemy units. If neither side retreats, players start another battle round, rolling again for each surviving unit and inflicting hits. Damage in the second and subsequent rounds is simultaneous—the defender doesn't hit first.

Wizards in battle may either cast one spell each battle round or attack like a unit using their combat strengths. Battle continues until one or both sides retreat from the battle space or are eliminated. If all of a player's units in the space are eliminated, he or she rolls for each of his or her leaders and wizards present on the Casualty Tables.

Captured leaders and wizards may be forced to give up spells or wisdom. The capturing player rolls each turn for each captured leader or wizard. If the roll equals or exceeds the leader's command rating or the number of spells the wizard can know, then the capturing player may take the wisdom from one ruin the enemy side has visited from a wizard or leader, or one spell the wizard knows from a wizard.

You can attack units in a castle, but they fire twice each battle round. Each castle has a number on it. Unoccupied castles fight with a combat strength equal to that number, and can be taken with just one hit. Occupied castles with the number 3 add +1 to the combat strengths of all units in them, and castles with the number 4 add +2 (no unit's strength can go above 7). Units in castles can't retreat if there are enemy units in the same space.

Half-strength units that activate but don't move may flip to their full-strength sides if in a castle, city, port or town. Leaders in those spaces who activate but don't move may recruit new units (place an unused unit under the leader or in his or her player card box). Eliminated Eite units can't be recruited again. Designate one Gorganun wizard as Ambassador to the Cadmin at the game's start. She can recruit one Cadmin per turn.

Spells and Wisdom

A leader or wizard who enters a ruin may search for wisdom or spells there. Roll a die. If you roll 4 or less, one of your units there takes a hit. If the only piece there is a leader or wizard, roll on the Casualty Table. If you roll "captured," he or she is trapped and can't leave until another friendly unit enters the ruin (roll for hits on that unit too). If enemy units enter a ruin with a lone trapped leader or wizard, they capture him or her.

Leaders and wizards that survive and don't get trapped or captured unearth the wisdom of that ruin—make a note on a piece of paper that you got the wisdom there. A wizard may also attempt to find a new spell there if his or her spell list isn't full. Roll again to see if he or she takes a hit, and if not, roll on Spell Table 1 to see what kind of spell is found. Add that to his or her spell list.

Once a player has unearthed the wisdom from all eight ruins, he or she must go to the Dragon Isle and convince the Princess to accept him or her.

Up to three units in a port may enter the adjacent sea area together in a stack (they are on the same ship). Units may move one sea area per turn, or into or out of port. Opposing units in the same sea area fight normally, except that cavalry are half-strength. If a stack takes four hits, its ship sinks. Eliminate all troop units and roll on the Casualty Tables for each leader or wizard there. Add +5 to the roll. Wounded = Killed while at sea, so the leader or wizard either dies or is captured (if the enemy ship didn't sink too).

Victory!

Units, leaders or wizards that reach the Island may move to the Tower the turn after they make landfall. There must be at least one leader or wizard there to make a victory roll. If so, the owning player rolls a die, and wins the game on a "3" or less. Raise the target number by +2 for every friendly wizard there (the target number can't go above 7).

If the roll is above the target number, the Dragon deems the player's wisdom unworthy, and teleports his or her units to a port of the enemy player's choice. Units keep voyaging to the tower until one player makes a successful victory roll.