

Game Reviews

The Mind. Pandasaurus Games, 2018.

The Mind, created by Wolfgang Warsch, is a cooperative card game in which two to four players must work together to defeat all the levels of the game without exchanging information (i.e., no talking). The deck contains cards numbered 1-100 and, depending on the number of players, teams try to complete 8-12 levels of play. In each level, players receive a hand of cards equal to the number of the level (i.e., one card per player in level 1, two cards per player in level 2, and so on). The team must then collectively play these cards in the center of the table (in a single pile) in ascending order without communicating with each other about what cards they hold. The team starts with lives equal to the number of players and if someone plays a card out of order, the team loses one life. As the team successfully completes levels, they earn rewards along the way. If they complete all levels before losing all their lives, they win.

In 2018, *The Mind* was nominated for three prestigious board game awards, including the *Spiel des Jahres* (Game of the Year, German market award), and won two: the *Guldbrikken* Best Parlor Game and *Guldbrikken* Special Jury Prize (The Golden Pawn, Danish game industry awards). With over 6,000 reviews on Board Game Geek (the largest online board-gaming resource and community), *The Mind* currently ranks 34th best out of 506 party games. Immediately following its release, the game sold out across many board game sellers in Germany and the United States and has since been reprinted. The game's popularity suggests a strong social and cultural resonance with its theme and mechanics.

As players, we observed the most profound feature to be the transformation of *waiting* into a significant medium of communication. As the game's rules indicate, "the secret of the game is developing that collective feeling for 'now is the moment.'" This feeling develops out of reciprocal waiting. Unlike many board games, in *The Mind*, waiting is not a form of wasted down time but rather a central component of participation that emerges from playing with and understanding other players. By turning waiting into an enticing and central part of play, this game offers a unique take on the cooperative experience, which we address in the remainder of this review.

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The board game industry is currently undergoing a cardboard revolution, which has created a golden era of analog games. From cards to boards and rooms to parlors, game players are increasingly attracted to a variety of new gameplay experiences. Traditional board games often rely on contexts of competition or *agôn* (contest), where gameplay typically forces players to strategize their choices for maximum impact, undermine other players when possible, and accumulate resources or points for their own benefit. Within this competitive structure, players often work together to undermine a runaway leader or to form efficient alliances but their extrinsic motivation for teamwork is limited. However, newer board games are transforming this team structure from a tertiary component into a central mechanic of cooperative game play.

Cooperative games are a growing genre of board games that rely not on player antagonism but on group strategy to beat the structure of the game. Players work together to surmount resource limitation, overcome challenges, and defeat specific enemies. In the end, they either win or lose together. Because players still have individual agency, a cooperative structure relies upon explicit, open communication and group strategy to balance player choices with group goals. *The Mind* introduces board gamers to a cooperative style of play that transforms this system of communication and the strategies of interaction that players engage in to achieve group success.

By restricting players from exchanging information—essentially asking them not to communicate—*The Mind* implicitly requires players to facilitate cooperative gameplay through two alternative channels of communication: silence and waiting. Unlike most games where players verbally communicate their insights and ambitions, in *The Mind* players work to understand how their silence can communicate. As one player lays down a card in the center of the table, the other players must gauge the meaning of the silence reverberating among the rest of the group. These moments of silence give players the opportunity to think about their available cards, consider the possible cards in the hands of other players, and evaluate the statistical odds in favor of or against their actions. Moreover, the silent nature of the game play encourages a contemplative approach to interaction that values the potential of other players and ignites both anxiety and hope around the table while everyone waits to see what the others will do.

Essentially, *The Mind* turns silence into waiting and waiting becomes a form of communication. The decision to do nothing, to wait, signals to other players that it is their turn to contemplate action. When a player's card choice is apparent, they

are quick to lay down a card. When there is more ambiguity in the situation, individuals are apt to stay silent and wait. The longer one waits, the more everyone must contemplate. Waiting, then, becomes a strategic decision that has expressive intensity. That intensity, felt simultaneously by all players, is the game's most compelling and unique feature. It is particularly resonant given the current social and cultural moment. In a time of heightened narcissism, increasing allegiance to a competitive marketplace, fast-paced communication technologies, and reactionary politics, *The Mind* encourages players to pay attention to one another, cooperate, embrace waiting, and operate more mindfully.

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Poké Ball Plus, Nintendo, 2018.

Nintendo's *Poké Ball Plus* brings a long-awaited tactile component to both *Pokémon Go* (2016) and *Pokémon Let's Go, Eevee/Pikachu* (2018). Approximately 48mm in diameter, and a mere 65g, this lightweight accessory mimics the appearance of a "Pokéball," a small spherical device used to catch and store fictional monsters called "Pokémon." Easily fitting in your pocket and possessing approximately three hours of battery life, the device can be realistically carried and used on an everyday basis. Its adjustable wrist strap, like those found on other types of Nintendo motion controllers, helps to comfortably secure the device, which retails at \$49.99, only \$10 less than the full-cost of the game *Let's Go*.

Released November 16, 2018, the *Poké Ball Plus* enables two divergent playstyles, respective to the two games with which it can be paired: Niantic's augmented reality mobile title *Pokémon Go* (2016), and Nintendo's Switch title *Pokémon Let's Go* (2018). Despite their shared franchise and generally similar player-goals, the vast gulf between differing platforms divides the two games, and, consequently, the ludic possibilities each entails. As an augmented reality (AR) mobile game, *Pokémon Go* uses geolocations to spawn items and wild Pokémon in real time, across a real-world map. Before the release of the *Poké Ball Plus*, it

represented one of the most immersive experiences in the franchise, and the only one to close the gap between its diegetic world and our own. *Let's Go*, on the other hand, retains the well-entrenched console game design upon which the Pokémon franchise has been built since its inception. While its graphics and some of its play mechanics are new, the game's basic design is comfortably familiar. Both the limitations and the desired effects of the two platforms predetermine the play possibilities of the *Poke Ball Plus* when used in combination with your smartphone or Switch.

Niantic's smash-hit AR mobile game, *Pokémon Go* premiered in July 2016 on iOS and Android devices. Utilizing the digital map infrastructure they previously built for their first AR game, *Ingress* (2012), Niantic combined their pioneering location-based game design with the cultural currency of the globally successful Pokémon franchise. *Pokémon Go* struck gold by capitalizing on the collectability inherent to the franchise, which frequently releases new sets of monsters. The franchise slogan, "Gotta catch 'em all!" aptly captures the manic desire for consumption upon which successful mobile game franchises are built.

Used in conjunction with *Pokémon Go*, the *Poké Ball Plus* serves as more of a tool of convenience than of gameplay enrichment. It allows the player to complete routine and repetitive tasks, such as collecting items and catching low-level Pokémon, with a single click of the *Poké Ball Plus*'s large top button. The ability to play *Pokémon Go* without being glued to your smartphone screen brings added convenience to the game, while further immersing the player. The central conceit of *Pokémon Go*—that these adorable creatures exist, and can be interacted with, in our own "real" world—is enhanced when the intermediary screen becomes unnecessary for play to occur. In short, the *Poké Ball Plus* more effectively augments reality than *Go* does on its own, by further blurring the lines between the world we live in and the one we play in. This little round accessory enhances the game's ludic elements by adding physicality to it; the game feels more "real" when you're *really* pressing a *real* button.

At their core, nearly all *Pokémon* stories center on a young trainer who travels the world trying to catch every unique type of Pokémon. *Go* found its success in combining this narrative premise with real-world geo-syncing and accelerometers. To go out and catch Pokémon within *Go*, you had to literally *go* out, explore, search for wild creature spawns, interact with waypoints of various kinds, and then walk a significant amount to "hatch" the Pokémon eggs acquired along the way. Nintendo's *Poké Ball Plus* immerses players even further within the fantasy of

becoming a Pokémon master – while going about their normal lives – by removing the need to awkwardly stare at a screen when walking and by adding a haptic prop that makes the player’s simulated action “feel” real at a sensory level.

Through Niantic’s AR mobile game, players seek the fantasy of adding Pokémon to their own physical space within reality. There is a clear distinction between this “real” space and the in-universe, diegetic game space contained within the Nintendo Switch’s *Pokémon Let’s Go*, the fantasy of which centers instead upon physically interacting with Pokémon. When playing *Let’s Go* on the Nintendo Switch, the *Poké Ball Plus* functions as a motion controller. In the same way that the steering-wheel motion controller, pioneered on the Wii, strengthens the immersive experience of playing *Mario Kart*, the *Poké Ball Plus* advances the fantasy of catching Pokémon. The sense of player agency—of real interaction with the creatures—is enhanced by the linkage of physical player motion with their corresponding onscreen successes and failures. The sensation of “throwing” a Pokéball, and the ensuing elation or dejection that follows its result, adds a sense of embodiment to player experience.

In addition to its effect on play, the *Poké Ball Plus* is also physically-appealing. Though similarly-functioning yet less expensive *Pokémon Go* accessories exist, they tend to look like gawdy watches or weird keychains. The *Poké Ball Plus* remains the only such device that looks accurate to the item it simulates, and this accuracy represents a huge draw in terms of both immersion and “nerd cred.”

The *Poké Ball Plus* only possesses one critical drawback: its limited effectiveness as a game controller. While it effectively simplifies the *Pokémon Go* processes of collecting digital goods from “Poké stops” and of catching wild Pokémon while navigating the real world, this accessory currently lacks motion control capabilities within the mobile game. Thus, the game’s reality-fantasy is diminished, as you can only use the *Plus*’s button to catch Pokémon. A similar controller limitation detracts from the otherwise positive motion controller experience within *Let’s Go*. Using the *Poké Ball Plus* to “throw” Pokéballs in the Switch game comes at the expense of using a controller with a better joystick to navigate the game world. In the current iteration, the *Plus* replaces, rather than augments, an existing Switch controller, meaning its tiny and unintuitive joystick nearly cancels out the added enjoyment the motion controls bring to *Let’s Go*. In terms of minor drawbacks, the *Plus* becomes dirty quicker than you might expect for a product allegedly intended for everyday use; its durability is also somewhat dubious. At nearly the full cost of a new console game, these drawbacks make the

Poké Ball Plus hard to recommend to any but the most diehard of Pokémon fans—myself included—for whom none of these setbacks can outweigh the thrill of “throwing” a visually-accurate Pokéball.

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The Thing: Infection at Outpost 31, Mondo Games and Project Raygun, 2017.

In *Game Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games* (2015), Paul Booth writes that “Paratextual board games create meaning from the tension between an authorial presence and audience play; this meaning is created between player, designer, and original text” (46). The cooperative hidden identity board game *The Thing: Infection at Outpost 31* (2017) exemplifies this idea. The game, an adaptation of director John Carpenter’s 1982 horror film *The Thing* (itself an adaptation of John W. Campbell’s short story “Who Goes There?” which was previously adapted by Howard Hawks and Christian Nyby in 1951 as *The Thing from Another World*), successfully transplants the paranoia that plays such an important role in the movie and transforms it into a necessary ludic element that informs each play session. Designed by Joe Van Wetering and featuring whimsical artwork by Justin Erickson of Phantom City Creative, *Infection at Outpost 31* faithfully “recreates the world of *The Thing*, making players feel the cold isolation of Outpost 31” (*The Thing Board Game*), and asks players to work together to complete various missions even as it generates an overwhelming sense of distrust among them. Ultimately, *Infection at Outpost 31* translates the narrative of Carpenter’s film from a cinematic context into a ludic setting in a way that manages to, as Booth writes, “strengthen and cohere” the cult world, thereby making it more real for fans (177).

In *Infection at Outpost 31*, published by Mondo Games and Project Raygun, four to eight players spend anywhere from 60 to 120 minutes re-enacting the scenario from Carpenter’s cult classic, in which a shapeshifting alien infiltrates a remote Antarctic research station staffed by an increasingly suspicious crew.

Players can choose to play as one of the 12 characters featured in the film, including Blair (Wilford Brimley), Palmer (David Clennon), Childs (Keith David), and MacReady (Kurt Russell). They must then work together to kill the titular monster and escape from the rapidly failing station. Yet one or more players have become infected by the Thing and now aim to surreptitiously sabotage the efforts of the other players as they embark on missions to track down crucial supplies (such as dynamite, rope, and a flamethrower) and to find the alien that has intruded upon their fragile sanctuary. Thus, *Infection at Outpost 31* incorporates a traitor mechanic like the one described by Jonas Linderoth in “Exploring Anonymity in Cooperative Board Games.” According to Linderoth, such a mechanic dictates that “one or more of the players are supposed to secretly work with the game board and ruin the other players’ chances of victory” (7). The traitor mechanic thereby generates mistrust among the players to the degree that “the motives of anyone suggesting a specific strategy can be questioned” (7). *Infection at Outpost 31* utilizes such a traitor mechanic to recreate the paranoid atmosphere that characterizes Carpenter’s film, as players become increasingly wary of their teammates each time a sabotage card appears during a critical mission.

The game uses its complex but easy-to-learn mechanics to further establish this tension-filled mood, as it forces one player to assume the role of leader and decide who will accompany them when exploring the different rooms throughout the station. The leader (referred to in the instructions as “the captain”) is determined through rolling the dice; whoever rolls the highest number becomes the captain, their authority signified by their possession of the “gun” token. Throughout the game, the captain determines which players venture out to search for the tools needed to escape the station and thereby allow the human players to win the game. It also becomes the captain’s responsibility to ultimately decide which players to leave behind or to kill prior to escaping should some or all the other members of the party accuse them of being infected. This setup becomes complicated by the fact that the leader is not immune to infection and might use their power to mislead the human players. This play-mechanic intensifies the ludic anxiety, effectively approximating—and embodying within players—the atmospheric terror Carpenter creates within his horror masterpiece. As such, *Infection at Outpost 31* demonstrates Booth’s assertion that paratextual board games must exhibit a “keen awareness of the particular mechanics as they apply to the media franchise” if they are to be considered a successful adaptation (7). In that regard, *Infection at Outpost*

31 succeeds because it facilitates ludic interaction between itself and the original media text, thereby serving as a superb adaptation of the source material.

Despite the positive ludic interaction described above, the game does suffer from a few drawbacks, not the least of which involves the number of players needed to launch a campaign. *Infection at Outpost 31* requires a minimum of four players, meaning that organizing a play session can sometimes prove difficult. In addition, playing with only four players can sometimes make identifying which player or players have become infected too easy, decreasing the paranoia that drives the game's ludic interaction and rendering the game less enjoyable. Despite this admitted shortcoming, a group of five or more players ensures that the Thing's identity remains a mystery throughout, thereby ramping up the suspicion that connects players to the storyworld of Carpenter's film. For example, at the 2018 MPCA conference in Indianapolis, Indiana, I played the game with seven other participants, one of whom became infected in the first round but nevertheless managed to conceal this fact right up until the very end, much to the shock of the other players. Overall, *The Thing: Infection at Outpost 31* does a fine job of translating Carpenter's film from the screen to the tabletop and should therefore appeal to both hardcore fans of the property and board game enthusiasts alike.

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