

Pick Up & Deliver 824: Earth Day (Themestorm)

Transcript

Welcome to Pick Up and Deliver, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorder as I step off the train and deliver an episode to you while I walk home. I'm Brendan Riley.

[Opening Music]

Greetings, listeners. It's a lovely day here in suburban Chicago. The sun is out, the breeze is blowing. It's warm but not outrageously warm. And I'm having a lovely walk home from work. While I was reflecting on the fact that yesterday was April twenty second, which is Earth Day, and it occurred to me I haven't talked about Earth Day on the podcast.

So I'll start with What is Earth Day? Earth day was started in 1970. It is a celebration of the idea of environmentalism and the idea of shared concern for the environment, the the planet we live on Earth. The idea is to have people spend a little time thinking about environmental causes. When it was started, environmentalism and environmental causes were practically undiscussed. So I feel like Earth Day's original purpose is a little less necessary now than it used to be, because we are much more conversational and conscious of the environment. But I wouldn't say we've made a ton of advances in terms of how we're treating it.

Now, on the one hand, that's not true. We have done a lot to curb pollution, to shift how we think about the environment, individually and culturally. But at the same time, we're still producing outrageous amounts of carbon dioxide and other chemicals and toxins in the environment. And we've given most of the control over our environmental regulation to corporate interests and lobbyists that undermine the public health in favor of profits for the few. All right, rant over. So I thought I would talk a little bit about some topics related to Earth Day today. A few games that I think reflect on those topics and see if we can think a little bit about what board games teach us about these issues.

So to start with, I thought I would start with environmental activism and its relationship to human beings. There are three games that I thought of, and I'm going to talk about them in order of least focused on environmental activism to most.

So the first one I want to think about was endeavor Deep Sea Endeavor. Deep sea is a game about exploring the ocean. And in the game you are scientists and or treasure hunters and or salvage operators looking for exactly what I just said treasure, opportunity, gold, etc. in the game you are building up a ship and adding technology to it. To make your dives more successful. You're going into the deep and you're gathering research. You are gathering specimens. Sometimes you're finding salvaged treasure or whatnot. The game is focused on thinking about the ways that people interact with the sea. It has some really interesting mechanisms about how deep you go. And there are several scenarios in the game which I haven't I haven't dived into yet. Uh. Pun intended. And I think there's a lot to be discovered in the game. We played it once and I thought it was fun. We haven't been back to it yet, and I haven't tried any of the scenarios yet. I think it may be worth busting out again and trying again at home, but also maybe bringing to toggle and seeing if it hits with a different audience. Nonetheless, lots of really thoughtful discussion of how people interact with the sea in endeavour. Deep sea.

The second one I want to talk about is endangered. Endangered is very specifically a game focused on environmental activism framed around human beings interacting with habitats and animals whose habitats are endangered by those humans. In the game, you play scientists who are trying to help and help keep an endangered species from being wiped out and reclaim their habitat and save them. The game is played on a large map that includes little tokens that indicate the population of the animals, and it's a pandemic style game where you have a series of potential ways to solve the problem at the heart of the game, but you're also wrestling with the timeline that is slowly dwindling, the number of animals who are alive. So you have to balance between working to solve the overall problem and maintaining the health of the population that's at the core of the game. This is a game I've only played once, so my memory of it is a little fuzzy, But there is also a investment, an investor track, where you are opening up investment opportunities for the group that would result in benefits or better acceleration of the problem solving aspect. So there is an element of the

game of thinking, not just about the science of it or the action taken by the people on the ground, but also by the idea of foundation work and the idea of trying to find ways to get these very expensive things paid for in a world where governments don't just fork over the money. I think it's an interesting balance between the two, and it is a game I think I would enjoy exploring a bit more. I like it as a co-op because it doesn't mean you're not fighting with each other about how to solve these problems. It is a little heartbreaking as you watch the animals dying in the game and figuring out how to do your best to let them survive even as they're struggling. That part is frustrating and a little scary. But overall, *Endangered* is a really interesting game system. They've released a variety of scenarios based on different animals, so there are different boards and different scenarios where they walk you through the various kinds of danger facing these different animals, and you have to figure out how to solve the problem of that particular environment.

So that is *Endangered*, I believe *Endangered* both *Endangered* and *Endeavour Deep Sea* are from Grand Grand Gamers Guild, which is an interesting opportunity. Maybe they're carving out a niche of games that are concerned with the environment.

Finally, in the environmental activism category, there's *Daybreak*. *Daybreak* is a cooperative game from Matt Leacock, the designer of *Pandemic* and a couple other people. In this game you are trying like sort of *Pandemic* style, trying to stop the cascading effects of global warming through a variety of different means. The game has this really interesting cooperative element where you are accumulating different kinds of cards, and the cards have tags on them, sort of *Ark Nova* style tags. And as you accumulate more tags, then you're able to accomplish more things. There's a cruel blending of choice or a cruel choice at the heart of every play, which is that you have to spend cards to play cards. And all the cards sound really good, so you don't want to spend any of them. You want to play them all, but you can't. The fighting for resources is a crucial part of the game, and the cards represent not only opportunity, but opportunity cost. So as a storytelling mechanism, the game is really interesting. Different factions have different benefits and different starting positions. And so as a player you need to get your faction under control and then give some level of help to the other players. I like the balance back and forth between those two concerns, and there's a really interesting and compelling mix of choices and projects that you might engage with as you are playing. Finally, the really neat thing from an environmental standpoint is that all of the things you're doing to fight global, global climate change are real, either real solutions or real proposed solutions. Sort of near-future science ideas that we haven't quite worked out how to do on scale yet, but have the potential. And each card has a QR code on it that you can follow to an article about how that idea works in the real in the real world. So there's an educational component to it that's not overwhelming, but really interesting. So that's *Daybreak* and the end of my section on environmental activism in honor of Earth Day.

next. I thought it would be interesting to talk just about nature itself. Now there are tons and tons and tons of games that are about nature generally, uh, natural things and so on. So in some ways it feels a little disingenuous to do a nature section. Oh, just occurred to me, another game that you could put under environmental activism would be *Ark Nova*, which has a whole section, like a whole piece of *Ark Nova* is how you're developing the conservation side of your zoo's experience. That's all I'm going to say about that for now. So under nature, these are games that celebrate the natural world and set what you're doing in the idea of the natural world. Now, there are a couple games that are sort of on the border of that. *Wingspan* is one. In *Wingspan*, you have like a nature preserve, and you're trying to get all these different birds to come live in your nature preserve. It still does sort of frame it as you are a person running a nature preserve. I don't really get how you how you get those creatures or where they how you get the birds or where they come from. But it is part of how the game sets up what you're doing.

The other one is *Wild Serengeti* and this one you are a photographer in the Serengeti trying to capture photos of animals. And so the different arrangements of animals that you're trying to accomplish are the goal of the game and their pictures. So in both of these, you are still a person trying to do a person thing. And the environmentalism is part of the narrative that's happening, but not necessarily the focus of the game.

By contrast, both *Earth* and *Cascadia* and to a lighter, a lighter degree, um, *Mycelia* or I can't remember what it's called the the game about mushrooms, the *Elizabeth Hargrave* oh, *Undergrowth*. Um, those three games, *Earth Undergrowth* and *Cascadia* are all games about how nature works. And as players we are interacting with nature. But we're not humans interacting with nature. We are just nature incarnate. Sort of. Uh, in *Cascadia*, you're trying to build a map that has shared environmental spaces, and you get points for each of

your largest of the five of each of the five environmental spaces. But then there's also animal to animal tiles that go on the environmental hexes, and the animal tiles all score in different ways as well. So it's a game of two overlapping and competing scoring sets of scoring conditions for which you can score everything that's possible to score. It's an interesting, really fun game. It's really easy to lose the lose track of things as you try to hit the the sweet spot of fully connecting the different regions and getting animal tiles in a place where they're going to score a lot of points. Managing to do both of those is the tricky part of the game. But the game is beautiful. It feels germane to the region that it's in, and overall I like it very much. That's Cascadia now.

The other one I mentioned here was earth and undergrove. We'll do undergrove first and then earth. Undergrove is a game about the way that trees and mushrooms trees communicate with mushrooms through their root systems, and mushrooms provide stuff for the trees. So there's a symbiosis of the two. And it's that symbiosis that we're playing on. We play as a stand of trees, and the mushrooms that interact with them are our goals and also generate points. So undergrove is a really interesting game. I will say my biggest complaint about it is it feels pretty Sammy, but it really does teach us some interesting things about how the animal world, or how the plant and mushroom world works, and give us some insight into these networks, which I really like that I think the I think undergrowth is a solid, really interesting game. Like I said, it feels pretty similar every time you play it. So it probably is not a game I would want to play every week or every month, but a couple times a year for sure.

And then there's earth. Earth is an interesting game in which you are accumulating, building a sort of engine that allows you to gather and dispense of a variety of different resources. There's like three or four different resource types, and they all score different points in different ways at the end of the game. So you're constantly deciding like, do I spend a third of a point now to do a thing that'll get me a half a point later? There is an element of that that's kind of annoying, but mostly it's pretty interesting. I think the graphic design on earth is a little clunky. It's not the prettiest game. I don't I'm not particularly fond of the way it looks, but it is an interesting little engine, and the fact that you get to activate your engine whenever other people activate theirs, or parts of it anyway, mean that you're always kind of doing something. All in all, earth is pretty good and I enjoy playing it, and it seems apt for Earth Day. All right.

The final section of stuff I wanted to talk about is going to be a little shorter, but generally I want to talk about games where the concern of the game is the balance between human intervention on earth and aspects of the earth itself. So sort of thinking about environmentalism as a balancing act more than a series of strictures against what people can do. So to start with, let's talk about harmonies.

Harmonies is a pretty simple abstract game that barely has a theme, but the theme that it barely has is about environmental balance. In the game, you have a small grid of spaces where you can put circular tiles and the circular tiles have to match the landscape that you're putting them on or be eligible for that landscape, I think. Uh, and there's a variety of animals, the animals, and you get points for building habitats for the animals. The game is called harmonies because some of the habitats you build are also human adjacent. And so what you're trying to do is figure out how can you accommodate the most animals in this limited space while also accommodating people? I guess the game doesn't require you to ever build any stone buildings, but there are enough cards that require them that you'd probably you're probably shooting yourself in the foot if you refuse to build any. So that's harmonies.

And then I haven't played CO2, which is, I believe, a Vitale Lacerda game about carbon dioxide. And he made a follow up called CO2 Last Chance, which is again, it's about carbon dioxide. And I believe the game is sort of about carbon offsets. It's about being a business who is trying to use carbon in your manufacturing but not use too much carbon. And if as a group you use too much, then it ruins everything. So there's an element of the game requiring you to achieve a balance.

The same thing happens in the Vladimir Suchy game 20th century, which I think came out in 2010. This is a game that represents the emergence of modern industrial society. And as you build things, you inevitably create pollution of different kinds. And then you also have to create the systems that manage that pollution. You have to take care of garbage and take care of waste. It works really well. I think it's an interesting game. I've only played it once or twice, but I would like to get it out again. Again, because it was relatively easy to play and it had interesting mechanisms, and I really liked the idea of trying to find balance Between what your civilization is producing and the trash that you have to get rid of.

So those are my thoughts on Earth Day as they involve board games. What did I leave out? I'm sure I missed many. What games would you add to the categories of environmental activism, nature, or balance? You can share those ideas over on boardgamegeek guild 3269. I'd love to hear from you there. You could also email me Brendan at rattlebox dot com. I want to say thank you for joining me on my walk today. I hope your next walk is as pleasant as mine was. Bye bye.

[closing music]

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