Our favorite boardgames that model the natural world



Enlarge / *Photosynthesis*, the game.
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The other day, I thought my six-year-old was about to pop one of those questions every parent dreads answering. With a reverentially serious tone, she asked, “Daddy, I have a question I been thinking about a long time…”—cue a pause long enough to stop my heart—“Do snails leave their slime on rocks forever?”

Whew. So she wasn’t awake during last week’s parent-on-parent hour.

Before becoming a father, I was aware that tiny humans don’t come prepackaged with much knowledge, but I never thought I’d have to discourage gleeful littering or pry little hands free from the dog’s ears. We may still be animals, but respect for nature doesn’t always come naturally to kids (or adults).

Curiosity, though, is easy to foster, especially once the kids figure out that board game night means staying up late and filling their bodies with unhealthy snacks. So, with Earth Day happening this last week, here are some of my preferred board games for inspiring curiosity about the planet and our role on it.

The roots: appreciating nature



Enlarge / *Planet*, with some very cool (and magnetic) dodecahedrons

Let’s start with the basics: the Earth is pretty, animals and bugs are cool, and we should probably take care of things here if only so those statements remain true.

For little fingers that love to tinker, there aren’t many better games than *Planet*. The game itself is perfect in its simplicity, letting you add magnets to a dodecahedron as you attempt to create suitable habitats for a number of different species. There are only three priorities to remember: creating

lots of habitats, big habitats, or big habitats that aren’t near other habitats. Even my six-year-old quickly mastered the art of ensuring that every single tundra-dweller flocks to her planet. As a bonus, you get to admire your three-dimensional globe when you’re finished.

More experienced players will likely appreciate *Wingspan* and *Parks*. There’s a good chance you’re already familiar with the former’s clever combo-building and gorgeous illustrations; if not, check out our review from last year. *Parks* is less known but every bit as beautiful. Its artwork is licensed from the Fifty-Nine Parks Print Series, and it lets players tour some of the most dazzling destinations across the United States, rationing resources and campfires while snapping pictures and gazing at wildlife. Despite being competitive, it’s a serene, almost meditative experience.

If you’re more interested in actually putting yourself out in nature, *Hive* is one of the finest modern abstract games—and it’s entirely waterproof, perfect for playing in the grass or tucking into a fanny pack. Gameplay revolves around trapping the opposing queen by using bugs such as the far-ranging grasshopper, beetles that crawl over the top of other insects, or the power-sucking mosquito. I once played this against a mustachioed river guide who immediately announced, “Board games are cool these days, man!”

The trunk: sturdily connected



Enlarge / *Ecos: First Continent*

“We may be apart, but we’re also more connected than ever.” This year’s Earth Day slogan both acknowledges the current pandemic while also reminding us of our shared responsibility to the world we inhabit. The following games emphasize that sense of interconnection—and its fragility.

Like *Planet* but with more room to explore, *Ecos: First Continent* is about forming a landmass and populating it with roving species. Here the appeal revolves around a delicate balance between your own goals and those of your opponents. Everyone is working with the same grasslands, savannahs, and seas, and each player can easily riff on another’s tiles and tokens—or even consume them for points. Nothing is exactly “yours,” belonging instead to the rest of the developing ecosystem, which produces a process of creation that’s both competitive and collaborative.



Enlarge / *Oceans*, the most recent game in the *Evolution* series

On the more carnivorous end of the spectrum lies *Evolution* and its offshoots, including *Evolution: Climate* and the more recent *Oceans*, which we reviewed earlier this year. There are some significant differences between each entry, but all are alike in two major regards: first, they contain some of the sharpest card play you'll ever encounter, and second, you win by chowing down on as much food as possible—including the creatures evolved by your friends. This spurs an evolutionary arms race that sees everybody running (or swimming) as fast as they can to outpace predators, parasites, and even cataclysmic climate changes or asteroid impacts.

Arbor Day also happened this week, and the game *Photosynthesis* throws shade (sorry) at the notion that plants don't make for hot board gaming action. You hope to grow your forest from lowly seeds to mighty trees, but you are competing for space and sunlight, while trying to keep out of the shade cast by rivals. The trick is that each turn rotates the direction sunlight shines in from, rewarding planning and ensuring that no one angle is entirely superior. Like the *Evolution* series, everything here is connected—you even earn points by having your largest trees decay, making room for a new generation of saplings. Hopefully your own, of course.

The branches: reaching beyond



Enlarge / *Bios: Megafauna*

If appreciation for nature doesn't seem sufficient, plenty of titles delve deeper into the workings of the Earth's climate, geological processes, and history. Unsurprisingly, some of these offerings are significantly "heavier" than the games discussed above. But the best of them justify their increased rules and play time with involved gameplay, interesting details, and even some insightful commentary.

Perhaps the most ambitious project is the *Bios* trilogy. Consisting of *Bios: Genesis, Bios: Megafauna*, and *Bios: Origins*, this series traces the evolution of life from primordial ooze to the present day. Each entry tackles a different subject and can be played either individually or strung together. At times, their concepts, rules, and terminology can feel like a crash course in that entry-level biology course you slept through in college. *Genesis*, for example, casts its players as amino acids, lipids, pigments, and nucleic acids as they invest in various environments and chemical processes to achieve unicellular reproduction and eventually multicellular life. *Megafauna* is the most accessible of the trio, as the same creatures (or plants, mollusks, and fungi) that you evolved in *Genesis* crawl onto land and compete for limited space, even as the Earth's

atmosphere is altered by your respiratory processes. By its conclusion, someone will likely have developed the rudiments of emotion, segueing directly into *Origins*, a civilization game unlike any other. Neanderthals struggle against *Homo sapiens*, language groups and religions are formed and fought over, and cultures are defined by the philosophical concepts and technologies they embrace.

What makes the *Bios* trilogy so thrilling is the way it intermixes setting and gameplay. While each entry fits neatly with the others, none of them play the same way. *Genesis* is about choosing what to invest in, reflecting the long odds of nucleotides bonding together to form RNA. *Megafauna* is a fast-paced race to develop new traits and claim territory, always struggling to be on top of the food chain—or on the bottom, if you're a herbivore. *Origins*, meanwhile, is about charting your own course as your variety of humankind develops consciousness and decides which values to pursue—and eventually comes into conflict with other worldviews. The result is breathtaking in its scope and packed with enough ideas to dive down a hundred different search engine rabbit holes.

Sol: Last Days of a Star



Enlarge / *Sol: Last Days of a Star*

Finally, no list about nature, conservation, and our shared responsibility to our planet would be complete without *Sol: Last Days of a Star*, a parable about the eventual destruction of our sun due to unsustainable energy mining. This might seem like a strange inclusion for Earth Day, since it steps beyond our blue marble's atmosphere. (Farther, even, since your entire goal is to build an ark to carry you beyond the Solar System.) But as we fill our night sky with so many satellites that observatories struggle to study the stars, worry about the switch to green energy, and consider the long-term effects of Kessler Syndrome—orbiting space garbage, basically—it's useful to remember that whether we're tackling climate change or rocketing into outer space, we carry our baggage with us.

In *Sol*, the sun's days are numbered and exodus is the only solution; Sol's parable urges action. Perhaps if we act today, we can prevent the dire necessities of tomorrow.

In other words, the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day is the perfect time to spread appreciation, understanding, and education about this world we inhabit. And there are plenty of board games ready to pitch in.

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