

Review: Jaws is a much better board game than we had any right to expect

Jaws and its components.

reader comments

6 with 6 posters participating

Share this story

Welcome to Ars Cardboard, our weekend look at tabletop games! Check out our complete board gaming coverage at cardboard.arstechnica.com.

If I had predicted a brand new *Jaws* tabletop game in 2019—one that would actually be excellent—you might have called me crazy. And yet here we are: *Jaws* the board game is a marvel.

Leave it to the design studio Prospero Hall to resurrect this 44-year old film in a new cardboard format. This group of designers has been responsible for recent hits such as *Horrificed*, *Jurassic Park: Danger!*, and even the *Funkoverse Strategy Game*. They design mass-market titles that bridge the gap between gaming hobbyist and random Target shopper.

But *Jaws* may be Prospero Hall's best. It's a game of cat and mouse (or "shark and swimmer"), where one participant plays the film's antagonist and the rest work together as Hooper, Brody, and Quint. By the end, you could be ripped in half like Quint—or you could haul the carcass of the Great White up the beach in triumph. Either way, the surf will shine crimson and screams will pierce the clear Amity Island air.

“Is that \$3,000 bounty on the shark in cash or check?”

At a bare minimum, this kind of licensed game must provide context for you to shout out your favorite movie quotes at opportune times. *Jaws* does that and much more. This is an evocative experience that captures the suspense of the film while punctuating events with clever nods towards individual scenes and characters.

Mechanically, *Jaws* is a “hidden movement” design. That means the shark player tracks their own position on a special pad, moving from space to space with the goal of devouring swimmers who pop up over time.

The rest of the group takes on individual characters from the film, and each character has asymmetric abilities and specific functions. Brody can shut down beaches by pleading with the mayor. Hooper can use his fish-finder to locate the predatory shark. Quint can drive his Orca around the island.

It all feels absolutely gripping. From the majority’s perspective, you’re hunting in the dark. Swimmers keep taking to the various beaches of Amity, and your team must pool its efforts to locate and nab the beast. (You will need to combine efforts to set a workable trap for the shark.)

The shark, meanwhile, is hunting. The shark player can trigger one of several special powers at opportune times. It's a bit of a mind game as you seek to elude your pursuers and attack where their defenses are weak. Or, perhaps you strike right into their position with a surprising charge.

This portion of the game can play out in many ways. The shark's goal is to devour nine swimmers, while the other players try to land two barrels onto the predator. As each swimmer perishes, the team feels the weight of failure; you can almost hear each swimmer's family members cursing your ineptitude.

Anyone who has played games like *Fury of Dracula* or *Scotland Yard* knows the drill. But the advantage *Jaws* has over its peers lies in its pacing and atmosphere. The game never lets up, and the action is focused and cinematic. It also has the advantage of a structured arc which results in an explosive climax.

- Amity Island. It all looks so peaceful...
- The shark, surfacing.
- Gathering barrels for the final showdown.
- Aboard the Orca.

“You’re gonna need a bigger boat.”

The most novel aspect of this release is its two-act structure. Once a side has accomplished their goal, we move to the climactic showdown at the Orca. The board is flipped over, revealing the iconic vessel, and violent conflict ensues.

It suddenly feels as if you're playing an entirely different game. This portion of the game switches from a large-scale hunt to a more focused battle. That sense of climbing into your opponent's skull and deciphering their tactical approach still exists, albeit in altered form.

Here the shark must choose one of three locations to attack. These areas of the Orca are dictated by a row of cards. The shark objective is now to destroy the vessel or kill the three crew members, while Brody and company want to fell the beast and get home by supper.

The violence increases, too. Now characters can be attacked directly if they end up in the water, each chunk of flesh torn from their body resulting in a loss of health and possible death. The upside is that the crew now wields weapons. Crew members may have a rifle, pistol, a bucket of chum, or the explosive canister featured in the final moments of the movie.

Enlarge / Ah, the old “cardboard fin hoax” card...

Your performance in act one dictates the amount of gear the crew receives and the amount of special attack cards the shark holds. If you can tag the monster with two barrels when he’s only devoured four or five Amity citizens, for instance, you get to hold a few more weapons.

It’s a pretty wobbly scale that doesn’t always feel as tightly woven to the first part of the game as you’d like. And this is perhaps the game’s greatest stumble, in that the first act can sometimes feel inconsequential. The effectiveness of the bonus cards earned from the first round varies—several can give zero benefit based on failing a die roll—and you might feel that your performance in the first portion of play was irrelevant.

But at other times, a well-played card can pay out immensely as you nail the shark with an explosive or take a huge chunk out of the boat with your massive jaws.

The balance between the two sides feels quite “directed” by the designers. The first act favors the predator, as players will often see the maximum number of nine swimmers being devoured. The second half, on the other hand, swings back in favor of the crew, with games more often than not resulting in tender shark flesh floating among the Orca wreckage. You can buck these averages, of course, and unexpected outcomes like to poke their fins out of the water, but you will have your work cut out for you.

There’s also the small issue of player scaling. With less than four, participants will need to control more than one character—possibly even all three crew if playing a two-player game. This is not overly difficult, but it results in a more cerebral, quiet experience with less discussion. Strategic play may rise, but the overall joy of play diminishes as those fevered discussions to deduce the shark’s position disappear.

Yet those blemishes are small. *Jaws* reliably delivers a level of enjoyment that competes with a trip to the beach. This is a top-shelf hidden movement design and is a great experience for those who are fans of the film. You can even juice up the experience by playing Quint’s death on a nearby screen between acts, and your play group will eat it up like an enormous Great White munching on swimmers.

The game’s impact will not be as strong for those unfamiliar with the source material, but the mechanisms at work still provide a hell of a ride. Bottom line: this is not only a great IP-derived game, it’s absolutely one of the year’s best titles.

<https://arstechnica.com/?p=1580229>