

Hike the Appalachian Trail in your living room with new game

Marla Hardee Milling 9:31 p.m. EDT August 6, 2014

Marshall's Mark Hanf took his idea to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and it provided him with small grant to design the prototype of the game.



(Photo: Bill Sanders/wsanders@citizen-times.com)

Mark Hanf of Marshall appreciates time he's spent hiking portions of the Appalachian Trail, and one day he hopes to complete the entire 2,181-mile trip from Maine to Georgia with his daughter.

He first asked her last year, when she was 5, if she'd like to hike the trail with him someday. "Sure" was her quick response before he cautioned they'd need to wait until she's older because it requires hiking 15 to 20 miles a day.

They can still enjoy prepping for a hike from the comfort of their living room thanks to a new board game Hanf created along with a team of developers. It's called Thru Hike: The Appalachian Trail Board Game (www.theATgame.com).

"It's kind of like Candy Land meets Trivial Pursuit on the Appalachian Trail," Hanf says.

Fun for inspiration

Hanf was high atop Bluff Mountain while hiking a portion of the Appalachian Trail from Max Patch to Hot Springs when he first got the idea for the game.

He had just cleaned up a shelter that had been trashed by the people who came through before him. At first he was angry, then he realized that not everyone has had the same training that he had in Boy Scouts to leave a site better than what you found it and to always care for the environment.

"I thought there could be a game that would be fun enough that people would want to play, but they'd also learn best practices for hiking and backpacking on the Appalachian Trail. Hopefully it would inspire them to get outdoors," Hanf says.

Hanf took his idea to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and it provided him with small grant to design the prototype of the game. Then he and his team of developers at Outdoor Edutainment invited people to give it a test run.

"The feedback from kids was overwhelmingly positive," Hanf says. "My daughter loved it. She wanted to play it five times in a row. Plus, she's actually learning from it. The last time we were on a hike, she said, 'Look dad, it's trillium.'"

He found interest wasn't limited to younger kids. "I'm a middle school teacher at Rainbow Community School and the kids there loved it," says Hanf. "I also did some beta testing with some high school students. They volunteered to stay 45 minutes into their lunch break because they wanted to keep playing. At that point we thought we should share this in a bigger way."

How it works

The game board is a folding trail map of the entire Appalachian Trail. Each step represents 100 miles. The goal is to become the first player to complete the whole trail.

Each player or team chooses a trail name and a game piece — coin, acorn, button, boot, rock — and decides whether to hike from Springer Mountain, Ga., to Mount Katahdin, Maine, or vice versa. All players have to hike in the same direction.

The game includes two decks with more than 100 cards total. Each player or team begins with seven cards.

Players move ahead or back by answering trivia questions related to the Appalachian Trail, identifying plants and animals and dealing with emergencies such as losing an important item or spraining an ankle. Bonus cards allow participants to increase their hiking speed.

Enter Kickstarter

Once the prototype tested well, the next step was creating a Kickstarter campaign with the hope of raising \$10,000 to put the game into production. The campaign opened July 17 and Hanf hoped to raise the total within a month. A flood of support poured in, exceeding the goal in less than two days.

Backers who put in at least \$20 will receive a copy of the game. Other reward levels offered patches, deluxe game versions, guided hikes and more (see box).

"I'm an artist and have a studio in the Marshall High Studios on the island," Hanf says. "I'm also a teacher and teach math and science. I guess it's a combination of art and teaching and my love of board games that's led me over the past few years to design educational materials.

"We've developed several products," he continues, "but I'm really excited about this game. It's a wonderful thing to bring into the classroom or scout meeting, a really fun way to learn."

He's also thrilled to have an association with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy calling their involvement "amazing." A percentage of the price of each game will go to the conservancy to help maintain the trail.

Players contribute ideas

One of the fun things about this game is that it will continue to evolve and grow with the addition of expansion card packs.

"Not only do we want to crowdsource the funding, but we also want to crowdsource ideas for new cards," Hanf says.

Anyone with ideas for new cards can send the suggestions to newideas@theATgame.com. If they select your idea, they'll print your name on the card and send you a free copy of the game.

"We're really excited to see it expand," says Hanf. "There are so many things we can add to it. Ideally, we'd like to do an app for this as well that can be used in conjunction with the game. We're excited about that too."

How to get a game

- **Thru Hike: The Appalachian Trail Board Game** will be sold through the website at www.theATgame.com and through select retailers, but prospective players can reserve a copy now through the Kickstarter campaign that runs through Aug. 22.

- **Find the Kickstarter campaign** online at <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/77420923/thru-hike-the-appalachian-trail-game> (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/77420923/thru-hike-the-appalachian-trail-game>).

- **The campaign includes reward levels** for contributors, starting at \$20 and rising to \$70 (for a deluxe version of the game including a custom-made card box and game pieces) and increasing to \$2,500, which gets you, among other things, a guided Appalachian Trail hike with Jennifer Pharr Davis, world record holder for fastest thru hike. For \$5,000, contributors get a Hot Springs Hiking Adventure including a hike, overnight stay and spa passes.

- **Some higher levels** of support are designed for groups, classrooms and scout troops, offering multiple copies of the game and other incentives. Check the website for details.

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