

Cogno creator develops second board game

In the days of high-tech video and computer games, it would seem board games are a thing of the past. Now add in a board game that promises to teach scientific concepts, and "yuck!" is what kids would say.

At least, that is what one would think, but that doesn't seem to be the case with Cogno Deep Worlds, the second board game in a series of games and books created by Ladue resident Stuart Montaldo.

Lessons taught in the Cogno series go beyond gravity, time calculations in outer space or how air pressure works under water. Teachers are finding out about the games and bringing them into the classroom.

"I went down to the Science Center and thought, 'This is just great.' It allows them, in a fun way, to be exposed to science," said Ladue Middle School science teacher Mike McBride. "This is something that's already boxed, and it's an instant lesson."

McBride and other teachers have incorporated the game into the classroom, fitting in game time when the subject matter coincides with the lesson plan.

Cogno Deep Worlds falls in line with the units being taught in Ladue Middle School's sixth-grade science classes.

Louis Allen, 11, of St. Louis jumped out of his seat a few times during the game. The rest of the time he was teetering on the edge of the cushion as if the suspense was going to fly him to the moon.

"I think it's a cool game," he said after being prodded to take a break from playing it. "I knew some of the answers and other ones I guessed at and got lucky."

Louis said it's not just the questions that make it fun.

"It's a game of strategy, so you have to think," he said.

The game is recommended for children ages 7 and older. Adults can play, too. The questions are a mix of true and false and multiple choice. There also are freebie "Now Wrong Answer" questions that are designed to inspire players to think.

The game pieces for the players are characters from outer space. They are drawn, as Montaldo described, weirdly but not creepily.

Cogno, the name of the main character, is described as "The one who knows all, Cogno combines telepathy with sheer brainpower to be the most intelligent being in the known universe." It makes him the equivalent of the racecar in Monopoly; hence, the game piece children will fight over.

Robert Garlock, 12, of Ladue plays the game at home with his brother.

"My brother and I always fight over Cogno," he said.

Part of the game is acquiring survival gear to travel through the space ocean. After playing a few times, Louis already is getting to know the strategy for the survival gear.

"You should save stuff and use it when you really need it, like the time-machine token," Louis said. "Use it when you have to go into the trench or right before somebody's going to win."

Montaldo said a life-long interest in space and science prompted him to create the Cogno series. He said he was "the guy on the beach reading about physics and trying not to look too nerdy."

The series thus far includes two board games and a book based on the game-piece characters. Montaldo calls the book "science fiction," because real science is blended into a fictional story.

Ladue Middle School is not the only school using the game in the classroom. The game is carried by retail outlets in 43 states and is available online.

Montaldo considers it a compliment that teachers are using Cogno to teach.

"It's great," he said. "It's really validating and really thrilling that educators see the value. To be perceived as more than a game was really important from the start."

Montaldo will make an appearance from noon to 3 p.m. Dec. 18 at Bradburn's Parent Teacher Store, 734 N. New Ballas Road in Creve Coeur. For more information on the Cogno series and a list of stores that carry the book and games, visit www.cogno.com.

It's taught in Ladue Middle School classes



Questions from Cogno: Deep Worlds

1. True or false: Imagine that all gravity in the universe was magically turned off (except the gravity of Earth), and everything stopped moving. Earth's gravity will now begin to pull everything in the universe slowly toward it.
2. How long would it take an alien friend who lives 10 light-years away to tell you a "knock-knock" joke by radio? a) 15 seconds; b) 15 minutes; c) 50 years; or d) he couldn't tell the joke because there is no laughing allowed beyond Earth.
3. True or False: If you could play laser tag on the moon, the laser beams would be able to hit targets at greater distances than on Earth.

Answers to Cogno sample questions

1. True. While the force of a planet's gravity decreases the farther away you go from the planet, in theory, it never goes away. If there was only one source of gravity in the universe, and no object was moving compared to the other objects, the source of gravity would draw everything else slowly toward it.
2. C, 50 years. Radio waves travel at the speed of light, and your friend is 10 light years away. It will take 10 light years for every message to travel between you and your friend.
3. True. Air molecules help to break up laser beams over distances. The moon's lack of an atmosphere would allow the beams to continue farther before breaking up.