

NANUK (SJG 1422)

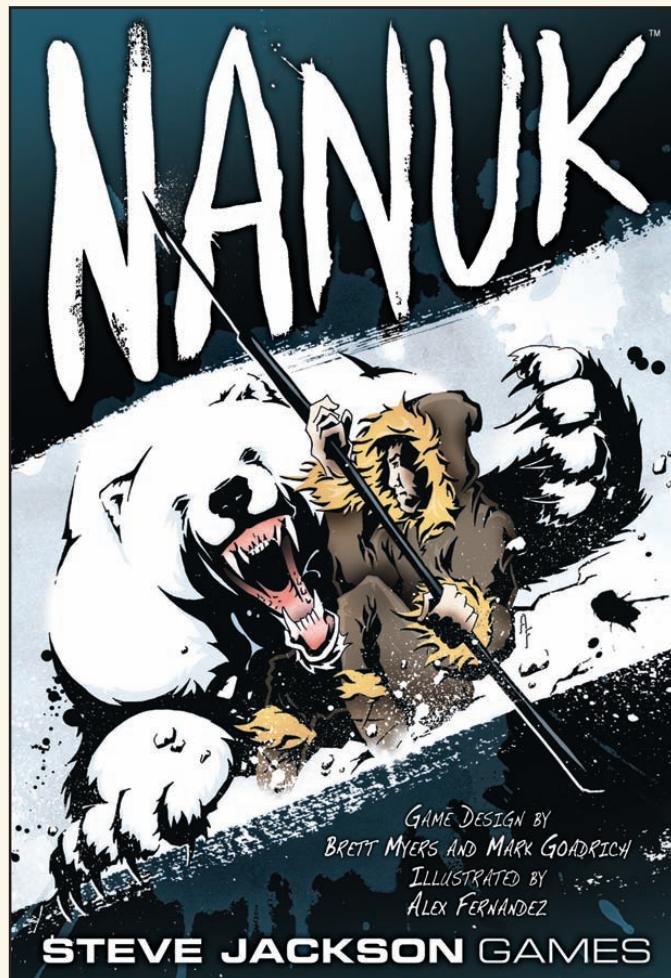
From Steve Jackson Games, reviewed by Eric Steiger & Rob Herman

You don't need to know anything about hunting in the Arctic to enjoy *Nanuk*—it's probably just as well that you don't. Although it's fun to cross your fingers in the anticipation of a successful hunt or cry against the folly of a doomed venture, the heart of *Nanuk* is the joy of outbluffing and outguessing your opponents.

Nanuk is an inexpensive game with well-made, but not lavish, components: a deck of cards with pictograms representing various types of animals and hunt/doom decision markers for each player. One thing to notice is that *Nanuk*'s player count is 5-8; by nature it's a louder, more frenzied experience than most other board games.

Nanuk's central mechanism is inspired by *Liar's Dice* (made famous by the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*). Each player gets a small hand of cards. One player makes a boast about the animals that will be caught in the upcoming hunt; the hunt will be affected by all players, so there is the risk of seeing only one's own hand. Going around the table, each player must make an ever-increasing boast about the hunt. The increase can be either in the number of animals, or the number of days. (A longer hunt can make up for a shortage of animals, but brings extra risks even when enough animals are available.) Instead of making a boast, a player can instead claim the that hunt is DOOMED! (Players are specifically encouraged to dramatize the DOOMsaying.)

Here is where the game breaks off from *Liar's Dice*: the players now secretly choose whether they will side with the Hunters or the Doomsayers. (The boaster is committed to hunting, and of course, the DOOMsayer is committed to doomsaying.) Whichever faction is correct about the fate of the hunt will share in the spoils; so there is a benefit to being correct, and a great benefit to being in a small group that is correct (a bigger share per person.) Hunters contribute cards from their hand to the hunt and its spoils; doomsayers contribute an "ante" toward the spoils. All of the hunters' cards are revealed; then, the hunters must flip over an extra card per day of the hunt. Animals revealed count towards the hunters' tally; but some of the deck cards contain the icon of Nanuk, who dooms the hunt immediately unless a protective Inuksuk card was contributed by a hunter. Even if the hunters reach their goal early, the risks of every day must be faced.



Whether the hunt succeeds or fails, the players who correctly guessed its fate draft all the cards contributed. Most cards have a similar value in endgame scoring; most points are gained from having sets, one of each animal. The cursed Nanuk symbol is a boon during scoring; whoever has the most gets bonus points.

The hallmarks of a good casual, large-group game are the opportunities for tension and raucous interaction. *Nanuk* delivers on both fronts. While players are deciding whether to Hunt or Doomsay, there is a period for "diplomacy"; since little information is available, diplomacy consists mostly of boasting, posturing, and giving speeches about the many dangers of hunting and the futility thereof. The joint role reveal is a great moment; in particular, watching a betrayal unfold (say, if Player X promised to contribute important cards, but decided to stay home and withhold them) is a time for groans, shouts, and good-natured gloating. The hunt itself is the other great source of tension; if the animal count is close or the hunt is at risk of Nanuk-doom, every card brings crossed fingers, curses, and cheers.

• • •

Eric Steiger & Rob Herman are from <http://www.rule0.com>, where you can also find periodic musings about current boardgames and design theory.