

Piecepack Letterbox



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A game for the piecepack by Ron Hale-Evans (rwhe@ludism.org)

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3-6 Players, 60 Minutes

Equipment:

- A "BackPack" (the four suits from a Piecepack 4 Seasons Expansion™ plus the Suns and Moons suits from a standard piecepack). In particular, you will need:
 - The tiles from all six suits
 - One pawn for each player
 - A few coins (suit doesn't matter)
 - One piecepack die
- An ample supply of blank index cards or slips of paper, all of the same size and color
- Enough pens or pencils for all players

Ages 11 and up

Introduction

This game won the first Mesomorph Games Piecepack Design Contest in August 2006. It is based on the real-life outdoor sport of *letterboxing*. Here is a definition from the Mapsurfer's Letterboxing in America FAQ (<http://www.letterboxing.org/faq/faq.html>). If you are explaining the rules, you might want to read this section aloud to the other players.

Letterboxing in America

Letterboxing is an intriguing mix of treasure hunting, art, navigation, and exploring interesting, scenic, and sometimes remote places. It takes the ancient custom of placing a rock... upon reaching the summit of a mountain to an artform. It started when a gentleman simply left his calling card in a bottle by a remote pool... in England.

Here's the basic idea: Someone hides a waterproof box somewhere (in a beautiful, interesting, or remote location) containing at least a logbook and a carved rubber stamp, and perhaps other goodies. The hider then usually writes directions to the box (called "clues" or "the map"), which can be straightforward, cryptic, or any degree in between. Often the clues involve map coordinates or compass bearings from landmarks, but they don't have to. Selecting a location and writing the clues is one aspect of the art.

Once the clues are written, hunters in possession of the clues attempt to find the box. In addition to the clue and any maps or tools needed to solve it, the hunter should carry at least a pencil, his personal rubber stamp, an inkpad, and his personal logbook. When the hunter successfully deciphers the clue and finds the box, he stamps the logbook in the box with his personal stamp, and stamps his personal logbook with the box's stamp. The box's logbook keeps a record of all its visitors, and the hunters keep a record of all the boxes they have found, in their personal logbooks.

Object

Players hide "letterboxes" somewhere on the board and write clues for the other players. Everyone then attempts to find as many letterboxes as possible. A player gains victory points both when she finds other letterboxes and when other players find hers.

The game ends when one player has found all other letterboxes. The player with the most victory points is then the winner.

Summary of play

1. Set up the board
2. Write clues
3. Sketch letterbox cards
4. Read clues aloud
5. Roll die to determine first player
6. Game play (take turns searching for letterboxes)
7. Scoring

Setup

1. **Set up the board:** Take a 4 Seasons Expansion and combine its four suits with the Sun and Moon suits from a matching standard piecepack. This will result in a nature-themed "BackPack" with six suits. *For the purposes of this game, these suits will be referred to as Snowflakes, Flowers, Fish, Leaves, Suns, and Moons.*

Take the 36 Backpack tiles, shuffle them face down, and place them randomly in a 6x6 square. Designate one side as North by placing a spare pawn at that end. The other compass directions follow as if on a map.

2. **Write clues:** Each player secretly selects a tile on the board to be the location of *one* imaginary letterbox. He then writes *one* clue to its location. (Make a private note of your letterbox's location, and sign your clue with your name.)

Clues are placed by the side of the board. They are freely available throughout the game to all players.

Please read the section **How to write a good clue** if you haven't played the game before. (If you are explaining the rules, you might want to read it aloud to the other players.)

3. **Sketch letterbox cards:** Each player should then secretly draw a simple design or doodle on several cards (one for each other player), and sign the cards with his name. The design need not be piecepack-related, but *the design should be the same on each of a player's personal cards.*

Be creative! This design represents your letterbox's rubber stamp, and you will give one to every player who finds your letterbox. **Note:** Initially, these are kept in the letterbox owner's hand of cards; they are *not* placed under the tile where they are supposedly hidden.

Keep a few blank cards in your hand as well after sketching your letterbox cards. Seen from the back, they should be identical to the letterbox cards, but where the rubber stamp design would be, a decoy slip should say something such as "Try again!", "Sorry, Sherlock!", "Not this time!" to indicate that the opponent has failed to find the letterbox. *Make sure your opponents can tell your letterbox cards from your blanks without having to ask.*

Keep your own letterbox cards and blanks hidden (as well as any you receive later in the game).

4. **Read clues aloud:** Players should now take a few minutes to read their clues aloud to their opponents.
5. **Roll die to determine first player:** Each player selects any available pawn, and the players then roll a piecepack die to see who goes first. (In this game, a Null is always 1, and an Ace is always 6.)

Game play

1. A player may start her pawn anywhere on the board on her first turn. (See **Variants** if there

are more than four players.)

2. Each player receives 6 action points (APs) per turn. These points can only be used on the player's current turn; they cannot be "saved" or "banked" for later turns.
3. Each AP is considered to be one hour of the player's time and allows him to do one of the following:
 - travel one hour in any direction (move his pawn one tile in any direction, orthogonally or diagonally), or
 - spend an hour searching his current location
4. A player may only search a location if he spends as many hours (APs) doing so as the value of the tile. A Null tile is considered to be worth one point, while an Ace is considered to be worth six points. All other tiles are worth their face values. Thus, it takes one hour (1 AP) to search a Null tile, six hours (6 APs) to search an Ace tile, and the number of hours printed on the tile for everything in between (2-5 APs).

More than one player's pawn may be on the same tile; however, each player there searches the tile independently.

When a player searches a tile, he discovers *all* letterboxes at that location. All players who hid a letterbox there hand him one of their *personal* letterbox cards, and all other players hand him a blank.

5. A player may take multiple actions per turn, and in any order, if she has enough action points available. For example, 6 points will allow a player to travel one tile to the north (1 point), search the 2 of Fish there (2 points), then travel two tiles to the east (2 points), and finally search the Null of Leaves there (1 point).
6. At any point in his turn, a player may ask another player *one* of the following four Big Questions. The player announces to the table that he is asking a particular player a Big Question. He then writes it down and passes it to her. She responds in the same way. (The other players should not see what is written.)

Here are the four Big Questions:

- "What is the suit of your letterbox tile?" (or just "Suit?")
- "What is the value of your letterbox tile?" (or just "Value?")
- "What is the row of your letterbox tile?" (or just "Row?")
- "What is the column of your letterbox tile?" (or just "Column?")

Every time a player asks a Big Question, he takes a piecepack coin as penalty. This will be figured into his score at the end of the game.

Otherwise, apart from explicitly asking or announcing the location of a letterbox (which is forbidden), *all table talk is free and encouraged!* Some of the Little Questions that cost nothing and may be asked at any time include the following:

- "Am I in the right part of the board?"
 - "Does the phrase 'run east' in your clue mean anything special, or does it just mean 'move east'?"
 - "I'm totally stumped. Could you clarify your clue a little, without giving it away?"
7. When a player has spent all of her action points, and optionally asked some questions, her turn is over and play passes to the left.
 8. When one player has found all of the other players' letterboxes, he announces that fact, and scoring occurs.

Scoring

Scoring is simple.

For each time you
found a new letterbox: +2 VPs

For each time someone
new found your letterbox: +1 VP

For each Big Question
coin you accumulated: -1 VP

VPs are "victory points", and should not be confused with APs, or action points.

The player with the most victory points is the winner. In case of a tie, the tied player who found the most letterboxes is the winner. If there is still a tie, the tied player whose letterbox was found most often is the winner. Finally, if both numbers are the same among all tied players, then the tied player voted to have the better letterbox (clue and/or drawing) wins.

How to write a good clue

Please read this section if you haven't played the game before. If you are explaining the rules, you might want to read it aloud to the other players.

Most of the fun of Piecepack Letterbox is in the giving and deciphering of clues (as well as drawing "rubber stamps"). It's therefore important to write good clues. Here are some guidelines.

First, *err on the side of simplicity!* A clue that seem obvious to you may be completely baffling to the other players, either because it requires special knowledge or because it's overly clever. (Of course, you may decide to write a hard clue and make the other players pay victory points to ask you Big Questions.)

Second, be creative in basing your clues on the features of your letterbox tile. Consider its suit, value, color, symbolism, position on the board, and position relative to other tiles. **Examples:** you can refer to a Leaf tile as a "tree" or "bush" or a Fish tile as a "pond". The 3 of Moons might be "3 A.M.", while the 3 of Suns might be "3 P.M.". An Ace tile is often called "big", both because it has a large suit icon, and because it is the highest value (6 points). For example, an Ace of Leaves may be "a big tree". A cluster of tiles of the same suit may also be called large. For example, three Leaf tiles grouped together may be "the Great Forest", three Fish tiles in a row might be "the Long River", and three Snowflake tiles in an 'L' shape might be called "the Elbow Mountains".

Here's a good clue: "Feeling parched after a day in the desert? Walk a little further to the oasis near the hills and be refreshed while examining this letterbox." (This clue is from a *past* game, so it won't apply to the board you're playing on now.) This clue refers to a Fish tile (the oasis) sandwiched on the board between two Sun tiles (the "day in the desert") and a Snowflake tile (the hills). It evokes the feel of real-life outdoor letterboxing and makes good use of the 4 Seasons tiles. (There were some other tiles that nearly matched this description, so this was a good bluff too.)

Here's another good clue from a previous board: "The lucky clover beneath the shallow snow." This referred to the 4 of Flowers (four-leafed clovers are considered lucky) directly south of the Null of Snowflakes (blank and worth only one point, hence "shallow").

Here's a *bad* clue: "Fear and Panic." This referred to the 2 of Moons tile. This player thought that the others would recognize the clue as Phobos and Deimos, the two moons of the planet Mars. (Their names mean "Fear" and "Panic" in Greek, and come from the horses that pull the chariot of Mars, the god of war.) Needless to say, no one at the table understood the clue, both because it required special knowledge *and* because it was overly clever.

Don't feel you have to restrict your clues to talking about mountains, forests, and deserts, though. Use your imagination and have fun!

Variants

1. On a player's first turn, before placing her pawn on the board, she must first roll a piecepack die. She may then place her pawn only on one of the six tiles with the value shown on the die. For example, if she rolls a '4', she may start her pawn on any of the '4' tiles. (This variant is recommended for games with 5-6 players. It tends to reduce the disadvantages of coming late in the turn order.)
2. For a more challenging game, consider multi-part clues: when a player successfully searches one location, he is given a clue to a letterbox (or another clue!) at another location. (Multi-part clues occur in real-life letterboxing as well.)

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History

Version 1.0.1 (2006-08-22): Added names of two loyal playtesters I forgot. (Shame!) Some proofreading.

Version 1.0 (2006-08-17): Decoy rules (snide comments) returned to blanks, since players find making them irresistible anyway. Players urged to make sure opponents can tell letterboxes from blanks. Rules clarifications. Added notice about winning contest. Acknowledgments added. History section added.

Version 0.9 (2005-02-18): Rules clarifications. Streamlined prose. Added Variants section. Submitted anonymous version to Mesomorph Games contest.

2005-02-17: Streamlined prose.

2005-02-16: Strategy section omitted. North now designated with pawn rather than the way tiles are facing. Tips on good clues moved to own section. Decoy cards replaced by blanks. Distinction between Big Questions and Little Questions made explicit. Scoring simplified to 2005-01-22 version.

2005-02-12: Penalty coins added for hints. Complicated scoring system added based on number of players, with table for simplifying calculations.

2005-01-22: First electronic version. Many changes made from handwritten notes, such as replacing the dice-based movement system with Action Points.

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