Designing a Collaborative Board Game for Children with ADHD and Neurotypical Peers

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Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a form of neurodiversity characterised by inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity, which may hinder the inclusion of individuals with ADHD in learning activities. This paper presents Spell Myst, a boardgame designed to support inclusive play experiences for children with and without ADHD together. Spell Mystembraces neurodiversity through an ecosystem-aware design that promotes peer collaboration. This work contributes actionable guidance for designing inclusive, game-based systems for ADHD children and their care ecosystems. It also reports insights from an expert evaluation involving game design and ADHD specialists, highlighting considerations relevant to future design efforts.

ADHD; game; play; care ecosystem; collaboration

1. INTRODUCTION

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a form of neurodiversity characterised by inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity, which may hinder the inclusion of individuals with ADHD in learning activities (American Psychiatric Association (2022); Stefanidi et al. (2023)

Within Human Computer Interaction (HCI), research has predominantly focused on designing technologies that support children with ADHD in managing their symptoms, rather than on facilitating their inclusion in activities with peers. At the same time, critical perspectives in HCI, Accessibility, and Assistive Technology have challenged the focus on technical solutions that do not consider social and contextual dimensions. Mack et al. (2021) argue that accessibility research in HCI has often been implicitly framed around disability and accommodation, rather than addressing broader questions of inclusion and participation. Related critiques highlight how such framings can reinforce normative assumptions around neurodiversity. Assistive technologies for autism are frequently portrayed in ways that privilege neurotypical standards Wang et al. (2025), and ADHD-related technology research has tended to prioritise neuronormative outcomes and rarely involves people with ADHD in shaping technologies intended for them Spiel et al. (2022).

The critical analysis by Spiel and Gerling (2021) of game-design research, in particular, highlighted a dominant medical model of disability that limits self-determination of neurodiverse players. Their analysis also reveals a strong focus on single-player experiences, pointing to a gap in research on supporting "neurodiverse socialities in play with others." More broadly, prior work like Stefanidi et al. (2023) underscores the importance of considering the wider care ecosystem when designing technologies for children with ADHD. Inclusive design efforts therefore need to move beyond the ADHD child as the sole user and engage peers and educators as part of the ecosystem.

This paper resonates with the latest aforementioned perspective of designing for the care ecosystem for ADHD children and their neurotypical peers, and adults who provide care for them, rather than only for children with ADHD. In particular, it focuses on **smart things**, such as smart watches or smart toys,

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as technological solutions that children are familiar with and they can make sense of in their lived experiences.

In this paper we discuss the design of a game (Spell Myst) that brings together children with ADHD and their neurotypical peers in the exploration of technologies meaningful for them, promoting an inclusive learning ecosystem. The guiding **research question** is as follows: *what game design features enable children with ADHD and neurotypical peers to explore technology together?*

To design Spell Myst, this work followed a multi-step, multi-stakeholder design approach. Previous research by Cicuto et al. (2023) had examined preliminary requirements and challenges of involving children with ADHD in collaborative learning and technology design activities with peers, highlighting the potential of participatory and game-based approaches. This work lead to CoDePlay4ADHD (Cicuto et al. (2026)), a game-based co-design approach that supported children with ADHD and their peers in collaboratively imagining and designing technologies. It was evaluated with domain experts, including designers and ADHD experts, as well as through a study involving one child with ADHD, three neurotypical peers, and an experienced adult carer acting as facilitator.

Spell Myst builds up from design recommendations extracted from the literature, focusing specifically on inclusive and playful learning for ADHD children. Combining findings from the literature with design and evaluation activities using the CoDePlay4ADHD approach, this paper puts forward seven design recommendations, and presents the latest design of Spell Myst, guided by these recommendations, and its evaluation by domain experts.

2. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

By reviewing and analysing the literature, we were able to extract 7 recommendations (R1-R7) for inclusive playful learning ecosystems for ADHD children. These are referred in text below and summarised in *Table 1*.

Wheeler (2010) highlight that individuals with ADHD can face significant challenges in learning contexts, which are inherently social. Addressing these challenges necessitates special attention from teachers, parents, and educators to prevent the exclusion of ADHD children from peer groups, as well as to mitigate their tendency for self-exclusion. Stefanidi et al. (2023) argue that interventions are recommended to address the **care ecosystem**, including peers, guardians, teachers, and educators in general **(R1)**.

Guidelines by McDougal et al. (2023); McKnight (2010); Wheeler (2010) for educational contexts offer various strategies to include children with ADHD in classroom environments Cordier et al. (2018) found moderate improvements in social functioning when children with ADHD participated in peer inclusion programmes. DuPaul et al. (1998) showed structured, peer-based tutoring has promise in addressing social and behavioural challenges associated with ADHD. For example, Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT) has proven effective in increasing academic engagement and reducing off-task behaviour among ADHD pupils. Peer-tutoring benefits are generally studied in academic settings and in different social contexts additional peer coaching seems necessary by Plumer and Stoner (2005). Furthermore, Flood et al. (2002) found peer-mediated reinforcement combined with prompting to be effective in reducing children's off-task behaviour. Kuester and Zentall (2012) argue that incorporating social interaction rules within collaborative small-group activities can reduce disruptive behaviour and enhance problem-solving skills for all pupils involved. Together, these approaches point to the relevance of shared **structures and rules for peer-based small groups** as key mechanisms to support inclusion and social participation of children with ADHD **(R2)**.

Within peer-based activities, research (e.g Kuester and Zentall (2012); Stefanidi et al. (2023)) suggests to **clearly define roles**, so that adults act as facilitators of the activities while maintaining space for children's initiative and guided autonomy **(R3)**.

Hands-on and active learning can produce improvements in certain cognitive functions of ADHD people. In HCI, tangible objects have been widely explored as a means of supporting learning for children, particularly through embodied and interactive experiences. For instance, de la Guía et al. (2015) introduced collaborative games based on tangible objects, in which movement was used to support cognitive stimulation in children with ADHD. Complementing this work, Cerezo et al. (2019) reported that manipulative and richly interactive tangibles can help maintain attention and regulate arousal in children with ADHD. Relatedly, Yang et al. (2017) provided evidence in support of embodied learning strategies, showing that action-based instructional methods can enhance learning outcomes for both children with ADHD and neurotypical children. Taken together, this body of work points to the value of supporting a range of **tangible and embodied interactions** within a collaborative environment for children with ADHD and neurotypical peers **(R4)**.

Spiel et al. (2022) highlights that technology designed for ADHD, particularly outside child-specific contexts, mostly focuses on mitigating behaviours that deviate from neurotypical norms. It should not reinforce normative pressures and punitive interpretations of ADHD behaviour. Thus, it is recommended that collaborative environments for including ADHD people should be **low-pressure and non-punitive** environments, to avoid reinforcing deficit-based framings of ADHD **(R5)**.

Cicuto (2024) highlight the importance of sustaining ADHD children especially when prototyping novel technological solutions. This can be done by splitting prototyping and complex tasks into **small steps with immediate feedback and level progression**, in line with literature findings highlighting the importance of gamified feedback loops Dai et al. (2025) **(R6)**.

Finally, the **integration of technologies** in inclusive games for children with ADHD remains relatively limited American Psychiatric Association (2022). The recommendation by Stefanidi et al. (2023) is to consider **technologies the children are already familiar with or easy to adopt** in their life **(R7)**. For instance, open educational robotic or physical-computing kits with sensors and actuators have been used to encourage environmental interaction and peer collaboration in diverse educational contexts (e.g. Kalelioglu and Sentance (2020); Katterfeldt et al. (2018)). Researchers like Seyed et al. (2019) have advocated embedding them within game-like systems to increase engagement. A prominent example is the IoTgo toolkit by Gennari et al. (2022, 2024), which enables children to transform their objects into interactive "smart" devices .

Taken together, the recommendations, presented in Table 1, reflect a broader shift in design which values inclusive playful learning ecosystems as integral to academic and social development of neurodiverse individuals like people with ADHD traits. The goal is no longer to merely manage behaviour but to empower children with ADHD as active learners and collaborators in inclusive learning environments.

Table 1: *Design recommendations for inclusive playful learning ecosystems for ADHD children*

R1	Integrate the broader care ecosystem by involving peers, families, educators, and support professionals.
R2	Support peer-based small groups via shared structures/rules while preserving playfulness.
R3	Offer clear roles that enable guided autonomy, with adults acting as facilitators of participation and collaboration.
R4	Emphasise tangible and embodied interactions with physical actions and objects.
R5	Minimise performance pressure and avoid punitive or comparative feedback.
R6	Enable gradual progression through small, achievable steps paired with immediate, meaningful feedback.
R7	Leverage familiar & easy-to-adopt tools, aligned with children's everyday experience.

3. THE DESIGN OF SPELL MYST

The design of Spell Myst follows the game-design-document framework by Adams (2013). Key design decisions, based on recommendations presented in Section 2, and listed in Table 1 are explicitly referenced using their labels (e.g., R1).

Target players: The game is designed for the following care ecosystem **(R1)**: groups of up to four 8-11 year old children, with and without ADHD traits, and an adult with knowledge of ADHD.

Game type: In line with prior work on peer-mediated learning, Spell Myst is intentionally designed as a collaborative game that reflects principles of peer-based small-group work with related structures and rules **(R2)**. The game, supported by a narrative, invites four players to embark together on a discovery journey. Through this framing, the game invites players to support each other and collaboratively explore components of smart things, interpret them and learn how these work in the context of the narrative, and finally adapt them to become powerful wizards.

Player roles: Roles are clearly defined in Spell Myst **(R3)**. The adult plays as game master and acts as facilitator: they guide the narrative, manages transitions between games and supports players as per need, with guided autonomy. Each of the players assumes the role of young wizards becoming more powerful and acquiring further specific roles in the gameplay, such as reader, performer, etc. Adult facilitator and neurotypical peers are essential part of the gameplay in order to include ADHD children's care ecosystem.

Technology integration: Building on evidence supporting the role of exploring tangible and embodied interactions in learning ecosystems, Spell Myst incorporates tangible smart things that respond to embodied actions through audio-visual reactions **(R4)**. In other words, an interaction with a smart thing consists of an action (e.g., turning over a medallion) and a reaction (e.g., the medallion laughs). During the game, wizards collaboratively unveil, combine, and enact spells through smart things, and so discover their inner workings. Smart things in Spell Myst use micro:bit boards, which include built-in

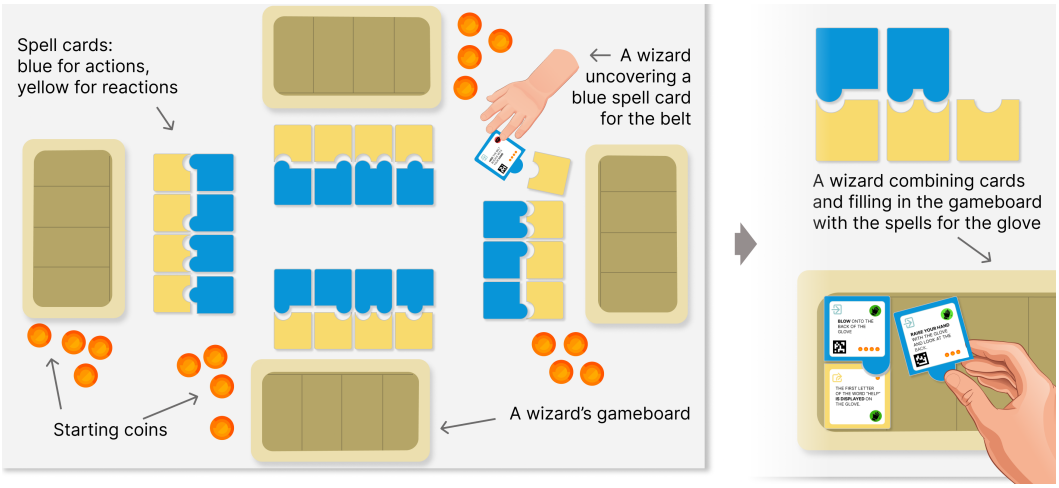

Figure 1: *Level 1 (spell completion). A wizard reveals a blue spell card and coins to exchange with other wizards for finding the matching yellow spell card (left). A wizard filling in the gameboard with all possible spells for their smart thing (right)*

input and output devices (e.g., an accelerometer detecting acceleration along three axes, and an integrated speaker, producing sounds). This enables a range of tangible and embodied interactions. For example, a turn-over action can be sensed via the accelerometer and trigger a corresponding audio response, such as laugh-like sounds, through the speaker. The medallion smart thing in Figure 3 embeds a micro:bit that supports this interaction with the wizard wearing it.

3.1. The Gameplay

In line with research advocating for low-pressure and non-punitive environments for ADHD children, Spell Myst avoids competitive dynamics, time constraints, and failure states **(R5)**. Therefore, the game does not include win–loss conditions or competitive outcomes; instead, the game progresses through shared goals. Gameplay unfolds across three levels, each embedded within a continuos narrative. Progression is guided by players' actions with immediate feedback contextualised within the narrative **(R6)**. Games levels are details as follows.

3.1.1. Level 1: spell completion

The game starts with a narrative introduction by the game master (played by an adult facilitator), guiding the players through a journey to become powerful wizards.

Each wizard receives starting coins, a gameboard and a set of spell cards. See Figure 1, left. One side of each spell card displays its value in coins and an icon, representing a smart thing, either a hat, a glove, a belt, or a medallion. Cards are divided into two decks: blue cards correspond to actions with smart things, while yellow cards represent their reactions. All spell cards are initially placed face-down. Wizards take turns uncovering cards. Each blue card can physically combine with exactly one yellow card sharing the same icon, forming a complete spell for the smart thing the icon represents. See Figure 1, right. If players do not have enough coins to complete a spell, they may ask others for coins or exchange cards, thereby fostering prosocial behaviours.

The level concludes once each wizard has completed all four spells for a smart thing on their gameboard. The game master then distributes the corresponding smart things to each wizard for the second level and asks the wizards to wear them.

3.1.2. Level 2: smart-thing discovery

At the start of this level, each player has a smart thing and a complete gameboard containing four spells, each composed of a blue card and a matching yellow card. See Figure 2, left. Coins are no longer used and have been removed by the game master. In a complete gameboard, the set of spells represents all possible interactions with the smart thing. Figure 3 illustrates these interactions for the medallion. However, only one interaction is active at any given time. For instance, in the case of the medallion, only the first interaction works when the medallion is flipped to hide the star symbol, a laughter is briefly heard. It is the wizards' collective task to identify the working spell, that is, the spell for the active interaction. To promote collaboration and joint discovery, initially, the game master instructs the wizards to exchange their gameboards: each has to loan their gameboard to the adjacent wizard in a clockwise direction, but each keeps their smart thing.

A wizard picks up a spell on the newly acquired gameboard and reads it, taking over the role of Reading Wizard. The wizard who loaned the gameboard assumes the role of Performing Wizard

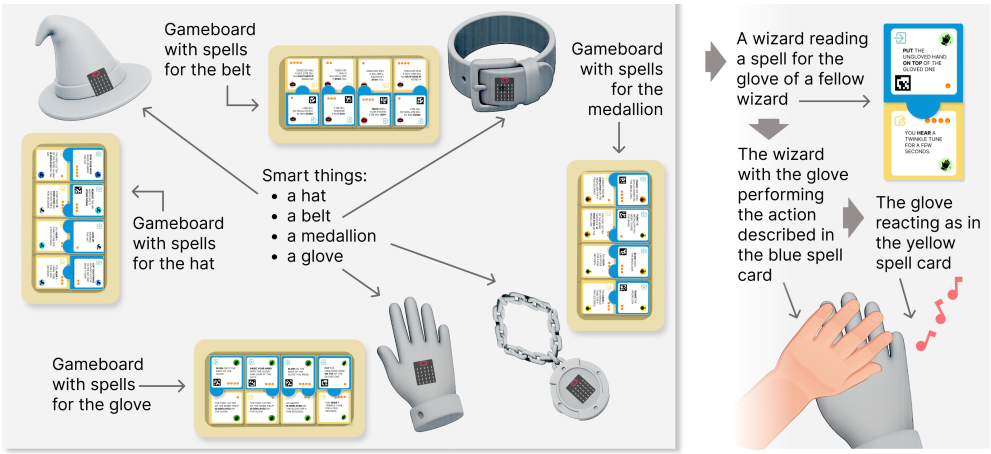

Figure 2: *Level 2 (smart-thing discovery). The left side shows the start of this level: each wizard has a gameboard with four spells, and the corresponding smart thing. The right side depicts: the reading of a spell for the glove; the enactment of the spell's action (placing a hand on the glove) and the audio reaction of the glove*

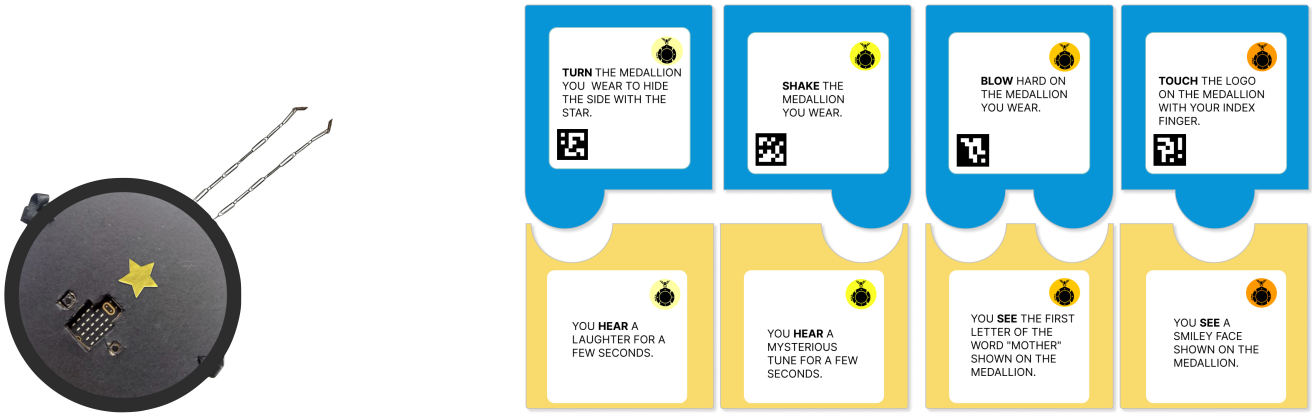

Figure 3: *Left: A smart thing: a medallion with a micro:bit. Right: all possible spells for the medallion*

and attempts to execute with his/her smart thing the action on the blue card of the spell (e.g., turning the medallion). The remaining wizards in the game take the roles of Observing Wizards: they assess whether the smart thing reacts as specified on the yellow card of the spell (e.g., the medallion emits a laughter sound). See Figure 2, right. If the smart thing does not react, the Reading Wizard and an Observing Wizard exchange roles, and so on. In this manner, all players take turns in experiencing different roles, through which they exchange and explore different smart things and interactions with them. At the end of the level, each player receives an icon for a smart thing, different than the one they owned during this level.

3.1.3. Level 3: smart-thing adaptation and final transformation

The game master introduces a scanner and a storybox. This has four drawers with icons, one per smart thing. See Figure 4, left side. Each drawer includes a card with a narrative situation to enact with the smart thing represented on the icon. In turn, according to the icon collected in Level 2, each wizard picks up a narrative card and reads it aloud. The wizard has now to select a spell for the smart thing that is consistent with the narrative situation. Wizards discuss and agree together on this spell, with the game master moderating the decision-making process.

In turn, each wizard places the selected spell under the scanner. This embeds an AI-enabled Huskylens and a micro:bit connected via radio to the micro:bit inside the smart thing. When the scanner reads the spell, the corresponding interaction with the smart thing is enabled and can be enacted. See Figure 4, right. This structure enables players to experience how to adapt the interaction of smart things according to the context, emphasising joint sense-making rather than individual performance. The game concludes when the narrative is collectively enacted through the spells of the four fully transformed wizards with their smart things.

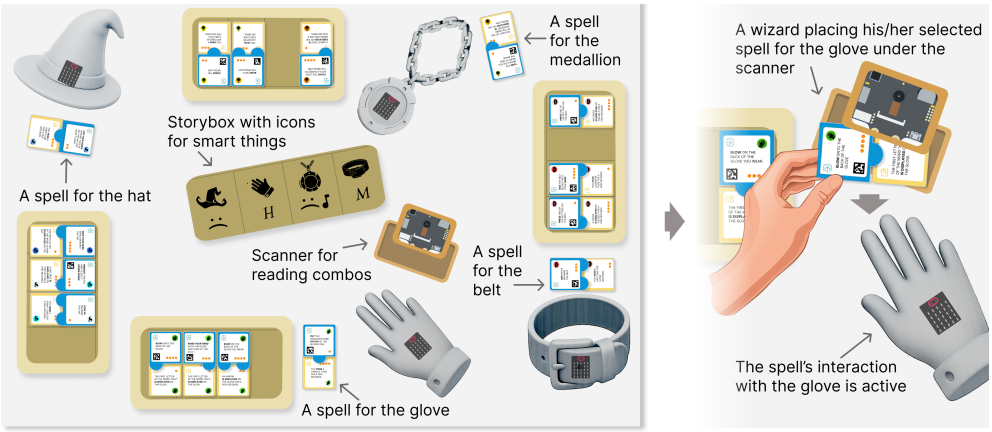

Figure 4: *Level 3 (smart-thing adaptation and final transformation). The left side shows a storybox with narrative situations; wizards have to select each a spell for their smart thing, and enact it consistently with the narrative. Right side shows a wizard selecting a spell for the glove and placing it under the scanner; this activates the corresponding interaction with the glove.*

4. EXPERT-BASED EVALUATION

The game functional prototype, presented in the paper, was evaluated through expert play-through session, in which an expert systematically steps through player actions and decisions in the game, and follow-up interviews. This evaluation involved separately three experts of game design, and two experts of ADHD to gather further recommendations for the evolution of Spell Myst and the design of similar games. Three experts of game design (3 M, 0 F) had extensive research experience in game design and development. One of them had an additional focus on collaborative games, while one is also an independent commercial game developer. For the two experts of ADHD (0 M, 2 F), one is a licensed clinical psychologist and psychotherapist specializing in behavioural interventions for ADHD, while the second expert is a senior developmental neuro-psychomotor therapist. Age related data was not recorded for the experts.

Each evaluation session lasted c. 1 hour, managed by two researchers, one interviewing and guiding through the game, the other taking notes. The first session with the game design experts was held in October 2024 in UK, and the second session with the ADHD experts in November in Italy.

Several issues were uncovered concerning the **social** aspects of the gameplay. According to game design experts, coins, and **personal rewards** in general, tend to foster competition if they are not associated with trading mechanics; Spell Myst was thus praised for using coins to promote collaboration. The **exchange of roles** was appreciated as a mechanism for fostering collaboration by both game-design and ADHD experts.

Both the **integration of technology**, and the **exploration** mechanics were appreciated by game-design experts. However, game designers stressed the **need of further autonomy** for players in the second level. On the other end, ADHD experts **were cautious with respect to the integration of interactive technology and giving too much autonomy**, e.g., "if left alone, the ADHD player might ignore other elements and rush to use the smart things". A careful balance between autonomy and the need to follow rules needs thus to be considered. ADHD experts farther stressed the importance of **clarifying and maintaining clear roles** for adults playing as game masters and children playing as wizards, with practical suggestions, e.g., "leave it to the adult to manage or regulate misunderstandings of the rules".

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This paper presented Spell Myst, a collaborative board game designed for small groups of children with ADHD and their neurotypical peers. Through facilitated play with an adult game master, the game supports children in exploring and discovering the working of technologies that are meaningful to their everyday use. It also reported insights from an expert evaluation involving game design and ADHD specialists, highlighting considerations relevant to future design efforts. This work contributes preliminary design knowledge for engaging ADHD and neurotypical children in technology exploration through collaborative, structured play. Future work will benefit from multiple rounds of child-facing iterative co-design and evaluations. We will also employ participatory and interdisciplinary approaches that move beyond accommodation and toward recognising neurodiversity as a design resource.

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