

Casual Game™

INSIDER

The Premier Guide to Casual Board and Card Games
Issue #6 – Winter 2014



★ HEROES ★ OF NORMANDIE

IELLO introduces a fast-paced WW2 strategy wargame inspired by Hollywood war movies
PAGE 4

ALSO FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE...

BEYOND MONOPOLY

How this classic game can help grow casual gaming
PAGE 10

ESSEN RECAP

The best new casual games at the show
PAGE 16

10 TIPS

For teaching younger gamers
PAGE 26

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The Premier Guide to Casual Board and Card Games
Issue #5 - Fall 2013

FLASH POINT

FIRE RESCUE

MORE FIRE, MORE FUN!

Flash Point: Fire Rescue
expansions return just in time
for the holidays
PAGE 4

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE...

THE SPIEL DES JAHRES

A behind-the-scenes look at this
award and a review of *Hanabi*,
this year's winner
PAGE 10

WHOSE AGE IS IT, ANYWAY?

How the recommended age label
is misleading people everywhere
PAGE 20

GAMING OVER THE HOLIDAYS

15 things to consider when
choosing games for your holiday
gatherings
PAGE 32



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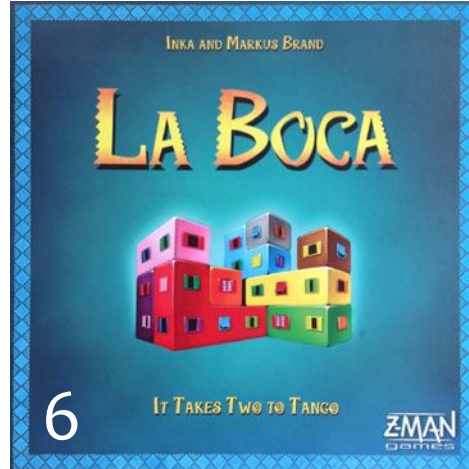


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CONTENTS



- 4 Heroes of Normandie
- 6 Game Reviews
- 10 Why I Love Monopoly (and Why You Should, Too)
- 16 Essen Spiel 2013 Recap
- 26 10 Tips for Teaching Younger Gamers More Complex Games
- 32 Full Time in the Game Industry

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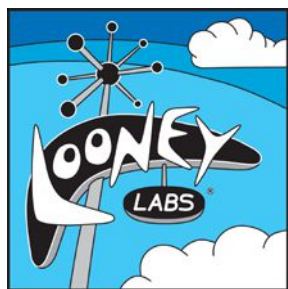
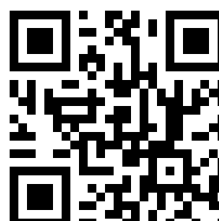
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★ HEROES ★ OF NORMANDIE

The time is summer 1944. The sun shines on Normandy hedgerows. Gentle wind, fields of bright flowers, and in the background, the romantic staccato of machine gun fire in the morning. In these typical French countryside landscapes, thousands of men are about to fight. And die. Bravely like heroes, or cowardly like wussies. But only heroes really matter. Those you see in Hollywood Golden Age war movies. Here lies the inspiration for *Heroes of Normandie*.

A miniatures game without miniatures, *Heroes of Normandie* is a fast-paced WW2 strategy wargame inspired by Hollywood war movies – a tactical scale board game opposing two players and two armies, with the Germans on one side and the Americans on the other. Players use order tokens to determine initiative and to bluff. While a single six-sided die determines combat, action cards are played to spice things up. Secretly plan your attacks and outwit your opponent. Block the opposing strategy and surprise the enemies. Deploy your units and don't turn back!

French designers Yann and Clem took *Frontiers* basic game mechanics and added a tweak or two: "This gameplay was successful in its time, because of its raw efficiency, and many players enjoyed countless games of galactic rampage. But we wanted to simplify some of its basics, and give depth to its playability (easier said than done). We will give you rhythm, we will give you explosive battles, we will give you the pleasure to butcher



IELLO
We Know
Games



your enemies through MG42 walls of lead, and to crush Nazi pigs under tons of shells.”

Heroes of Normandie is a squad/platoon sized game. As in *Frontiers*, the game is about opposing two armies controlled by a pair of players. These armies, German on one side and American on the other, are made of infantry, tanks and, of course, heroes. Each unit has its own set of unique characteristics and skills depicted on its tokens. All can be seen at a glance.

Scenarios become increasingly difficult, and are designed as tutorials to teach you the game mechanics. Each brings a new tactical challenge. Objectives lead players to make tactical choices, some will be successful, and others...well, they won't.

The game is published by Devil Pig Games and is being distributed in the USA by IELLO. The basic game features two U.S. platoons and two German platoons. Several expansions will soon be available (British platoons, Canadian platoons, U.S. Rangers platoons, terrain sets, army boxes, etc.).



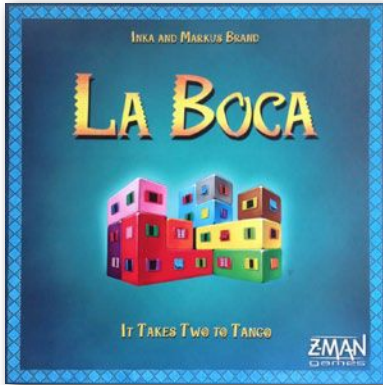


Here are a few remarks about some of the best casual games we have recently received for evaluation.



Chris James

Editor-in-Chief and Award-Winning Game Designer



We all loved playing with building blocks as kids, but *La Boca*, by Z-Man Games, reintroduces the fun of building blocks in a creative and challenging game that is great for casual gamers of any age. In the game, players create colorful structures resembling the brightly painted houses in La Boca, a neighborhood in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

La Boca features semi-cooperative gameplay in which players work together with different partners throughout the game, yet score points individually to determine a winner. In each round, partners sit across from each other, working as quickly as possible to arrange eleven wooden blocks of various shapes and sizes into a specific three-dimensional structure. The structure is depicted two-dimensionally on cards that represent a different view for each player. Players may not look at the opposite side of the card, but instead must communicate with each other to build a structure that matches both players' views. What makes the game especially challenging is that all of the blocks must be used, and many of the structures require one or more pieces to be hidden from view, all while fitting within a four-by-four playing grid. Points are scored for the speed with which a structure is correctly constructed. Each player is partnered with all other players a certain number of times, then the player with the most points wins the game.

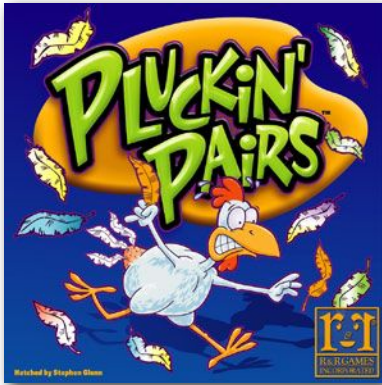
La Boca is a fascinating, fun, and surprisingly challenging game that stretches spacial reasoning and dexterity skills like perhaps no other game. By partnering up all players for an equal number of rounds, it balances out different skill levels, making it a great option for a wide range of players.



Avast, ye landlubbers! All ye worthless bilge rats be walkin' the plank into Davy Jones' Locker, savvy? *Walk the Plank*, by MayDay Games, is an outrageously fun casual game in which a crew of brainless pirates try to force the other pirates off the plank while saving themselves.

Each player controls three pirate pawns, all of which begin the game inside the ship. Each player also has an identical deck of ten action cards. During each round, players choose three cards from their hands to play face down on the table. Cards include actions such as shoving or dragging another player toward or away from the sea, moving one's own player toward or away from the sea, and retracting or extending the plank. One at a time, each player reveals his first card and must carry out the action, even if it means sacrificing his own pirate. Then the second and third cards are played, respectively. Each pirate that falls into the sea is eliminated. The winners are the last two players with pirates remaining.

Walk the Plank was a hit among our testers and was requested over and over again. It is a chaotic game that fills the uncontrollable urge to shout pirate insults at your friends. While there are plenty of choices to make, there is no need to over-strategize, since the actions you choose are highly dependent on other players' choices. For eliminated players, the game goes quickly and is still fun to watch.



Pluckin' Pairs, by R&R Games, is a party game that, despite the cover art, has nothing to do with chickens. Instead, it is an interesting exercise in human interpretation. Players lay out on the table an array of cards containing pictures of random objects, then start the timer. Each player is tasked with grouping the cards into five different pairs on their score sheets, using each card only once. Pairs can be grouped for any reason; for instance, one player might group a pie with a cookie because they are both food, while another player might instead group the pie with a knife because the knife is used to slice the pie. After each round, players announce their pairs and score points for each pair according to the number of players who also formed the same pair.

However, if everyone formed the same pair, no one scores points. Thus, players are rewarded for predicting the most popular pairings, except for those that are obvious enough to be chosen by everyone.

Pluckin' Pairs is a delightful game that is good for getting to know people and how they think. Discussing the reasoning behind each pairing is a fun exercise that often reveals a quirky personality trait, unknown interest, or simply a random train of thought. It can also lead to a lot of laughter. On the downside, the picture cards are rather small and difficult to see unless there is plenty of lighting and players are seated close together. Regardless, this is a fun party game that is worth a look.

"a very entertaining and engrossing casual game"

- Father Geek



Play one of your tiles so that the shapes on the corners match up with other tiles already in play. If your tile completes a four-corner shape, you earn a point token of that color. But remember – as the number of tokens collected increases, their value decreases.



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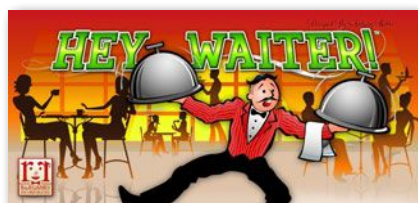
In *Gunrunners*, by Dr. Finn's Games, players take on the role of international police in pursuit of a nefarious arms dealer. The object of the game is to confiscate the most weapons by deploying agents to bust locations. On each turn, weapon crates are randomly delivered to a location or stored in a warehouse for later delivery. The player can choose to assign either a probationary agent or an undercover agent to a specific location. A probationary agent remains in training (face down) until it is replaced by another player's card and deployed to the location. Undercover agents are deployed directly to the location, but remain face down until a bust occurs. Some probationary agents include a special ability that can be used only when another player reveals it. When four or more face up agents are at a location, a bust occurs and weapons are distributed to each player based on the total point value of all of his agents at that location.

Gunrunners is a fun casual game with an interesting theme. The rules feel a bit too detailed for such a small and relatively simple game, but even so, it's easy enough to pick up fairly quickly. Winning requires careful planning to deploy the best agents to the best locations, and the fact that special abilities can only be used on another player's turn keeps players more engaged between turns.



Scripts and Scribes: The Dice Game, also by Dr. Finn's Games, tasks players with acquiring gold and collecting resources to increase the prestige of a medieval abbey. On a turn, all of the dice are rolled, one or more matching dice are selected, and the remainder are passed to the next player, who also selects dice. The dice continue to be distributed among players until no dice remain. The dice can perform various actions, including advancing the player's tokens along a resource or influence track, retrieving gold, or adjusting the value of a resource. The game also allows for two types of auctions to take place: one to purchase resources rolled, and another to sell accumulated resources. At the end of the game, the players who have accumulated the most of each resource earn gold according to the current value of the resource. The player with the most gold wins.

There is a lot to like about this game. The components and artwork aren't groundbreaking, but the gameplay is fun and well-balanced. The passing of the dice on each turn ensures that all players are engaged all of the time. The auctions add an interesting twist, and the ability to modify resource values offers a great catch-up mechanism.



Hey Waiter! is a casual game by R&R Games in which players try to be the first to serve their whole stack of dishes to customers. Stacks can be divided to allow a player to serve dishes more efficiently, but doing so reduces the number of cards in the player's hand. Adding a tray cover to a stack of dishes prevents the next dish from being served, which hinders the progress of other players. On each turn, the active player plays two cards side by side, which together form a new card with a specific action to take. The left card specifies the type of action (serving or moving dishes, moving a tray cover, or calling a busboy). The right card specifies what color of plate or person it applies to.

This is a solid casual game with nice components and an enjoyable card-combining mechanism that offers many options on a turn. The game also offers many trade-offs, yet is relatively simple to learn. 🎲



LATEST NEWS *From the casual game industry*

- Asmodee has released *Pix*, a party game in which players “draw” a clue using magnetic screens and pixels. Players work quickly and try to use as few pixels as possible to represent the clue. If another player guesses the clue, both the “artist” and the guesser win a point.
- dV GIOCHI, publisher of *Bang!*, has released *The Great Persuader*. In this party game, two “Persuaders” try to convince the “Customer” that either their “bad” offer (“Working as a scarecrow”) is good for him, or that their “good” offer (“Winning the lottery”) is not what he is looking for. The Customer listens to both Persuaders, then must choose one of them. In the meantime, all the other players bet on which Persuader will prevail.
- Looney Labs has released *Choose One!*, a party game in which players try to predict which of two concepts their friends would prefer (e.g., outer space or the bottom of the sea, window seats or aisle seats, the party versus the after-party).
- Many casual games were released at the 2013 Essen Spiel fair, held October 24-27 in Essen, Germany. Highlights include *Glastonbury* by Franjos, *Cheaty Mages* by AEG, *Concept* by Repos Production, *Trains and Stations* by WizKids, and *Going, Going, GONE!* by Stronghold Games. See the Essen recap article in this issue for a brief preview of each game.
- The Toy Industry Association’s (TIA) 111th American International Toy Fair will take place February 16-19 in New York City. In 2013, the show attracted an estimated 30,000 industry attendees, including more than 1,500 manufacturers, distributors, importers and sales agents.
- *Pandemic*, the popular cooperative strategy game by Z-Man Games, is now available for iPad.

RECOMMENDED GAMES *For your casual game collection*

Casual Games

Aztlán	DiceAFARI	Incan Gold	Square Shooters
Atlantis	Duck! Duck! Go!	La Boca*	Survive: Escape from Atlantis!
Bazaar	Eruption	Launch Pad	The Stars Are Right
Botswana	Farmageddon	Little Devils	The World’s Smallest Sports Games*
Blockers!	Fill the Barn	Lost Temple	Ticket to Ride
Blockers! The Card Game	For Sale	My Happy Farm	Tsuro
Blokus	Forbidden Island	Octopus’ Garden	Two by Two
Can’t Stop	Gold Mine	Pentago	Völuspá
Carcassonne	Gunrunners*	Pizza Theory	Walk the Plank*
Castle Dash	Hanabi	Quartex	WOW: World of Words*
Castle Panic	Hey Froggy!	Rise!	Zombie Dice
Clubs	Hey Waiter!*	Scripts and Scribes: The Dice Game*	
Crazy Creatures of Dr. Gloom	Hive	Slapshot	
	Hooyah		

Party Games

20 Express	Off Your Rocker	Taboo	
Apples to Apples	Pluckin’ Pairs*	Wits and Wagers	
AttrAction*	ROFL!	Word on the Street	
Click Clack Lumberjack*	Say Anything		
Last Word	Smarty Party		
Love It! Hate It!	Spot It! Party		
Mad QUAO	Snake Oil		

*Newly added

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Why I love



(and why you should, too)

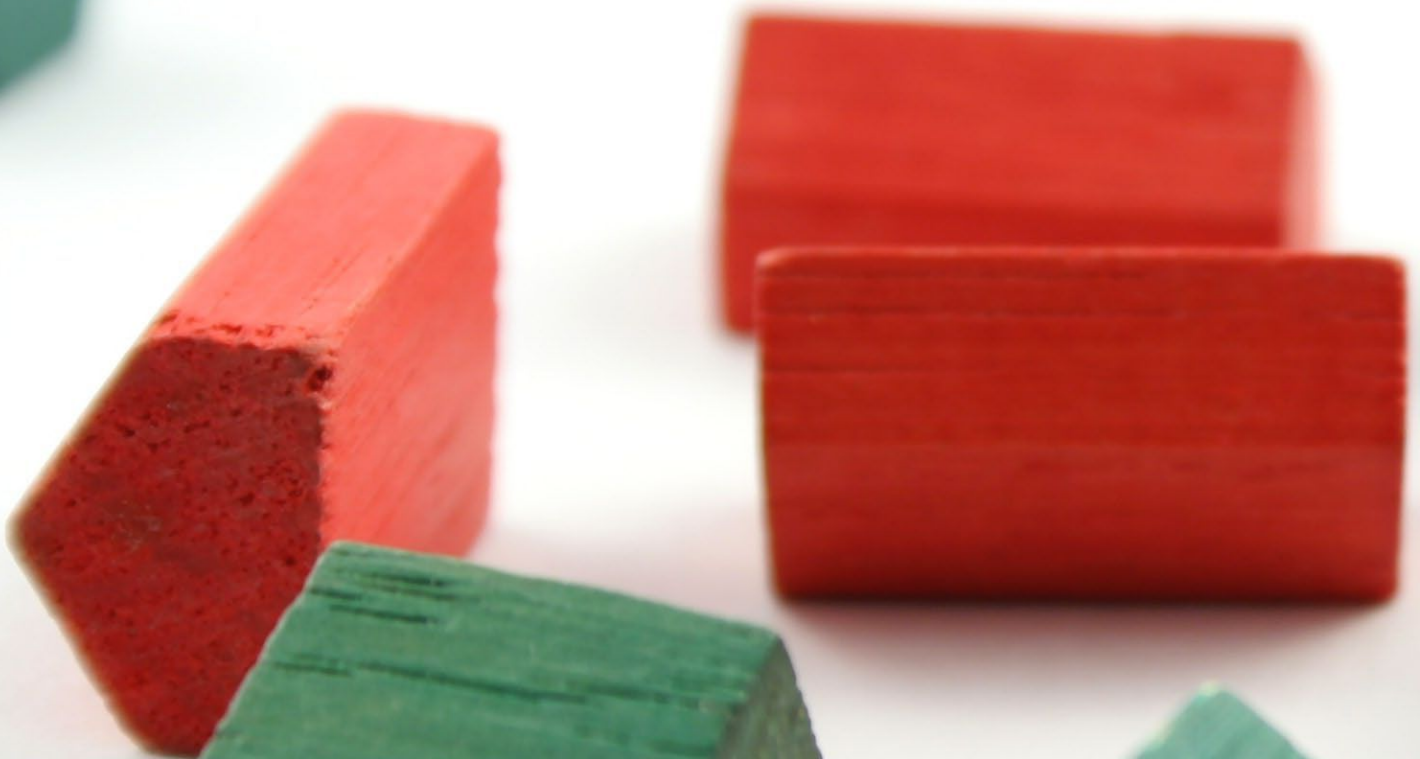
Many gamers frown at this timeless classic, but it should be revered as an opportunity to grow casual gaming.



Charlie Hoopes

*Founder of HoopCAT Games
and Creator of Fill The Barn*

Some months after the release of our family's first self-published game, *Fill The Barn*, our younger son's school held their annual holiday fair. We reserved a table as a local vendor, aiming to increase awareness of our new family business within our community, and also get a few more of our games under local Christmas trees. We were showing our game to a mother who was interested, yet not convinced. A second mother, whose family already owned the game, walked up behind and enthusiastically chimed in, "It's just like *Monopoly*, only with crops, and shorter, too." And based on that *Monopoly* comparison from another owner, the hesitant mother dropped her reservations and was immediately swayed to buy our game for her family.





As the game's designer, I was flabbergasted that my creation had just been compared to *Monopoly*. Yes, both are games, and the object of both games is to earn the most money. Yet, as a game maker, I would argue that the similarities end there. *Monopoly* is a roll-and-move game, while *Fill The Barn* doesn't even use dice. *Monopoly* eliminates players from the game, while in *Fill The Barn* there is a mechanism to keep everybody playing until the game's end. *Fill The Barn* only takes 30 minutes to play while...oh wait, relax, deep breath, the eager mother's comparison did mention the difference in playing time.

Despite my game designer indignation, as a small family business owner I had to pause and take a different view. A parent who was uncertain about trying our new unknown game was persuaded by another parent's favorable comparison to a known game that her family already played and enjoyed. That *Monopoly* comparison had just put our game onto another family's table.

Many game designers and frequent casual game players frown at *Monopoly*. Follow casual gaming through podcasts, blogs, and social media, and the topic of *Monopoly* sometimes comes up. When it does, the verdict is almost always thumbs down. While *Monopoly* is not the only classic, traditional mainstream game that many frequent casual game players avoid, it seems to be the target of the greatest disdain.

Monopoly critics offer similar lists of weaknesses. The strictly roll-and-move mechanic has fallen out of favor because it limits player choices – after all, every player wants to buy Boardwalk, yet which player gets there first is based purely on the luck of the dice. Player elimination leaves the early losers with no way to continue to participate in the game. The feedback loops work in such a way that the leaders just keep getting richer while those who lag behind eventually find themselves with zero hope that even the wisest of decisions and luckiest of dice rolls will ever put them back in the game again.





And while these are objective reasons for casual gamers to choose other games over *Monopoly*, the emotion that comes through in some of the criticism indicates there is something deeper behind the *Monopoly* grudge. I suspect that the *Monopoly* franchise has come to symbolize gamers' collective disappointment at big corporations with large marketing budgets that no longer innovate, and instead seek to squeeze more dollars from consumer wallets by simply altering and repackaging classic games with strong sales histories. Today's casual game innovations come mainly from small companies with small budgets unafraid to take the risk on something different. *Monopoly* bashing is a way for all the Davids of the gaming world to stick out their tongues at Goliath.

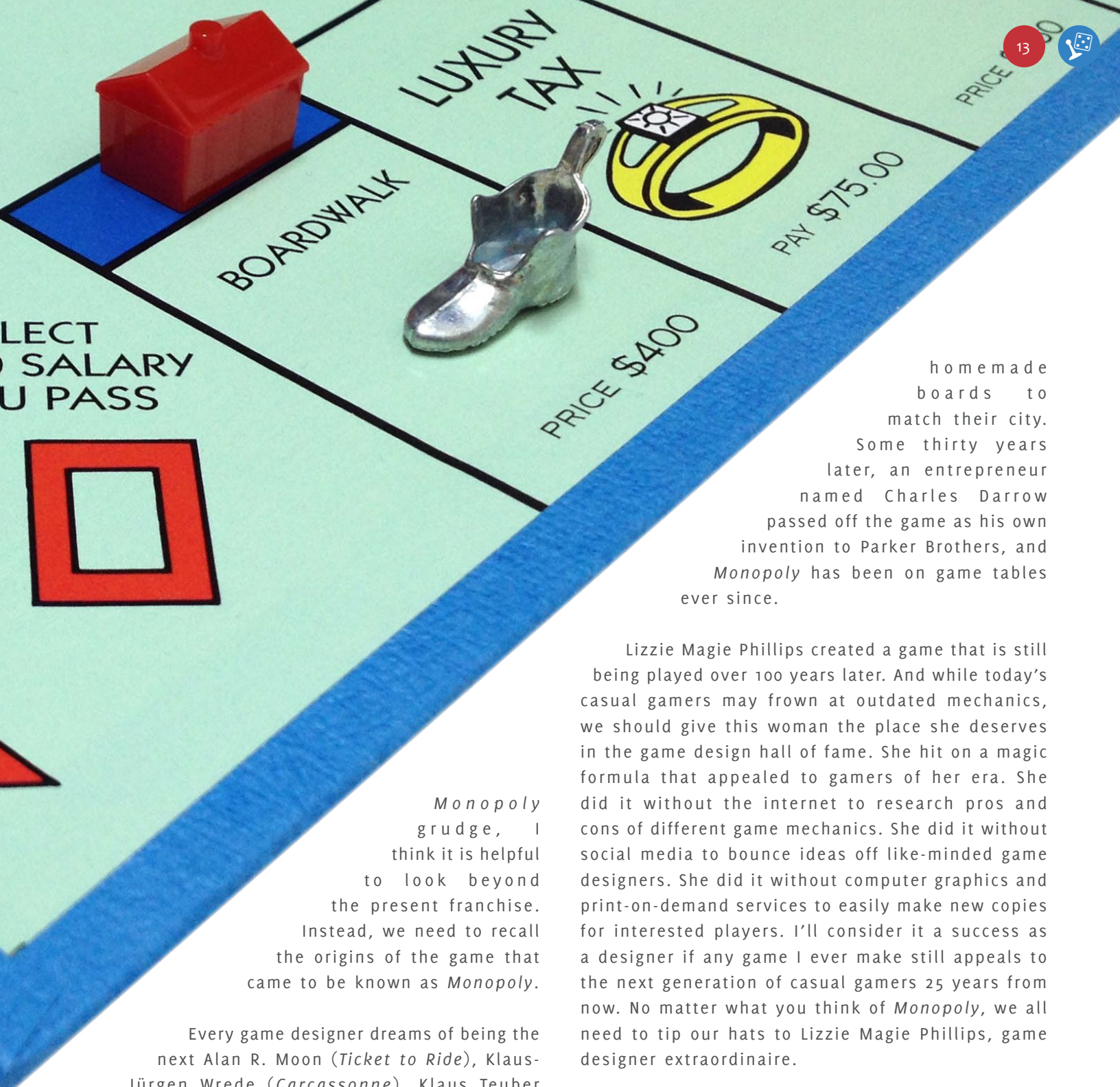
Casual gamers are justified in their frustration at big corporations who choose variations of proven designs over innovation. Yet let's be careful where we sling our stones. Expansion packs for newer casual games and even Kickstarter rewards also need to be evaluated for their value. Which expansions add to the gaming experience of the base game? Which are motivated more by profit than gaming? Even so, I am sure that many casual gamers would argue that the *Monopoly* franchise has successfully repackaged variation after variation at a level far beyond what other games have tried.

Nonetheless, I believe that to turn our noses up at *Monopoly* does casual gaming more harm than good. *Monopoly* remains wildly popular. Whenever we snub or criticize the game that remains one of the most popular games of all time, we risk giving a cold

shoulder to the very players who might find it refreshing to also put some games from *Casual Game Insider's* list of recommended games onto their tables.

Turning back to my opening experience – what if I had corrected that helpful parent to explain the weaknesses of *Monopoly* as a game, had insisted that my game is nothing like *Monopoly*, and destroyed the comparison that had just been made between *Monopoly* and my newer, unknown game? Would I have still made the sale to the reluctant mother? Or would I have alienated her by insulting a game her family enjoyed? Might she have walked away doubting whether a family who enjoyed *Monopoly* would also enjoy a newer casual game such as ours?

To help the casual gaming community overcome the



homemade boards to match their city. Some thirty years later, an entrepreneur named Charles Darrow passed off the game as his own invention to Parker Brothers, and *Monopoly* has been on game tables ever since.

Monopoly grudge, I think it is helpful to look beyond the present franchise. Instead, we need to recall the origins of the game that came to be known as *Monopoly*.

Every game designer dreams of being the next Alan R. Moon (*Ticket to Ride*), Klaus-Jürgen Wrede (*Carcassonne*), Klaus Teuber (*Settlers of Catan*), or Matt Leacock (*Forbidden Island*). (As a designer, I felt like a rock star for a day when Matt Leacock once replied to one of my tweets with a word of design advice on cooperative games). But how many designers dream of being the next Lizzie Magie Phillips?

Lizzie Magie Phillips first patented *The Landlord's Game* in 1904. The game developed a cult following in the northeastern United States, with players adding to the rules and renaming properties on their own

Lizzie Magie Phillips created a game that is still being played over 100 years later. And while today's casual gamers may frown at outdated mechanics, we should give this woman the place she deserves in the game design hall of fame. She hit on a magic formula that appealed to gamers of her era. She did it without the internet to research pros and cons of different game mechanics. She did it without social media to bounce ideas off like-minded game designers. She did it without computer graphics and print-on-demand services to easily make new copies for interested players. I'll consider it a success as a designer if any game I ever make still appeals to the next generation of casual gamers 25 years from now. No matter what you think of *Monopoly*, we all need to tip our hats to Lizzie Magie Phillips, game designer extraordinaire.

An automobile enthusiast can only dream of taking a Model T for a test drive, and an NFL fanatic can only wish for a time machine to sit in the stands and watch Vince Lombardi's famed Packers play on the frozen tundra. Casual gamers don't need that time machine — all we need to experience casual gaming as it was 80 years ago can still be found on the shelf of a nearby store. And the fact that *Monopoly* continues to be played after eight decades should bring a smile to the face of everyone who calls themselves a casual gamer. Why?



Because every *Monopoly* game purchased, every one that has a place on a game shelf, every one on the table being played, demonstrates three things that are important to our hobby:

1. People still enjoy the experience of casual tabletop games.
2. Games are for adults, too.
3. Even the most casual and infrequent of game players will tolerate some complexity in a game.

People Still Enjoy the Tabletop Experience — In this electronic age, a physical game is no longer needed to play *Monopoly*. Yet a tabletop game offers a face-to-face social experience that virtual AI opponents or online play cannot match. In our world of computers, consoles, and smartphones, the enduring popularity of *Monopoly* as a board game demonstrates that people are still seeking the around-the-table social experience.

Adults Enjoy Games, Too — *Monopoly* breaks the stereotype that games are only for children. While many established mainstream games could be perceived as primarily for children, it is difficult to force *Monopoly* into the category of children's game.

Tolerance for Complexity — To mortgage a property, one must first sell back houses and hotels at half price. To unmortgage a property, one must pay the mortgage price plus 10%. If even the most casual and infrequent game players can learn and tolerate rules such as these, then there should be no barriers in the rules to games like *Ticket to Ride*, *Blokus*, *Forbidden Island*, *Carcassonne*, or any of the games on *Casual Game Insider's* list of recommended casual games. Some of the rule complexities in *Monopoly* dispel the myth that the learning curve for today's casual games is too steep for occasional game players.

One of my favorite Twitter handles belongs to a York, UK gaming group, @BMYork. The name of

their game playing group is *Beyond Monopoly*. That name welcomes new players by acknowledging a game known to all, yet indicates there is so much more available for anyone with an interest in casual games. That name uses the *Monopoly* legacy as a launch point for something more.

Monopoly's popularity and familiarity are an opportunity to grow casual gaming. How do we capitalize on this opportunity? Sharing a negative opinion on *Monopoly* is likely to build a barrier others may not want to cross. Instead, next time you find a *Monopoly* player or owner, try to extend the invitation with one of these approaches, inserting your favorite casual game wherever you see the blank:

"I see you play *Monopoly*. Do you also play _____?"

"If I accept your invitation to play *Monopoly*, in return would you be willing to try a game of _____ with me? I could show you how to play."

"If you like *Monopoly*, you might also like _____."

"*Monopoly* wasn't the only game invented by somebody in their home. Have you ever heard of _____?"

Or you can always try this approach: "How would you like to play _____? It's just as enjoyable as *Monopoly*, and shorter too."

Next time you're tempted to bash *Monopoly*, remember what casual gamers and *Monopoly* fans have in common: we both enjoy playing board games. Don't destroy that foundation! Rather, look to build on that shared interest. A friendly invitation may be all that is needed to broaden their horizons to the new generation of casual games beyond *Monopoly*. 🎲

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ESSEN 2013 SPIEL RECAP

During October 24-27, 2013, we attended the SPIEL fair in Essen, Germany, to scope out the best new casual games. Over 800 of the most prominent U.S. and international game publishers exhibit at the fair each year.



Blake Evans-Pritchard

Journalist and Casual Games Enthusiast (Editorial)



Violetta Polese

Italian Travel and Photo Journalist (Photography)





As a casual gamer, the thought of attending what is arguably the largest board game convention in the world can be a little daunting.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people descend on the western German town of Essen to attend a four day fair that showcases the newest board games from around the world. Essen represents the most important date in the calendar of many publishers and they often time the release of one of their major games to coincide with the fair.

“Essen is always a lot of fun,” said Elisa Obando from Peru, who has been coming to the fair every year for the past 13 years. “You find an international environment with many games to discover at all levels. Above all, the fair gives you the chance to try many games before you buy them, to decide if they are right for you and the group of players that you come with.”

This was the first time I had been to Essen for the board game convention, and I couldn't help wondering whether a committed player of casual games would actually fit in amongst so many hardcore gamers whose one priority for the whole year seemed to be going to Essen.

My slight sense of trepidation was heightened when we turned up at Essen's Convention Center a quarter of an hour before the fair was due to open and saw a heaving throng of people who all seemed to know exactly what they were doing and why they were here.

Once the doors opened, we tumbled into the main entrance hall, where an explosion of colors rose up from the thousands of games that were already laid out and ready to play.

We casually ambled along the rows, marveling at the huge variety of games that were on display. Before the fair, I had scribbled down a dozen or so games that I quite wanted to try, although preparation isn't necessary and you can just wander around until you find a game that looks fun to play.

The first game on my list that we came across was an involved strategic game called *Relic Runners*. There was a spare table, so we sat down and gave it a try. We quickly realized that this wasn't the kind of game we were looking for, but at Essen this doesn't really matter.

The rules were complex and the game play took some getting used to, but there was someone on hand who could give a quick and precise overview of the game. For those that



Above (top to bottom): a crowd of people enters the show; customers browse for Christmas gifts.

Previous page (clockwise from top-left): game players take their seats at tables in the main hall; an exhibitor teaches a new game to a group of players; a giant game of Connect 4 at the Hasbro booth; players engaged in a game at the IELLO booth; R2D2 wanders around the gaming halls.

"A FRIEND AND I PLAYTESTED SPACE JUNK AT GEN CON 2013. OVER FOUR DAYS WE PLAYED WELL OVER A DOZEN NEW GAMES. OUT OF ALL OF THEM, SPACE JUNK IS THE ONE WE CAN'T STOP TALKING ABOUT."

SPACE JUNK

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ARMCHAIR
I am submerged in armchair leisure

MOVE	ATTACK	SEARCH	FAME
0	1	0	1



ELEPHANT
Elephants are of the family Elephantidae & order Proboscidea.

MOVE	ATTACK	SEARCH	FAME
2	5	8	2



SGT. NED COLE
VETERAN SOLDIER

Ignores all range penalties

MOVE	ATTACK	SEARCH
1	10	2



MR. SMITH
THE OBSERVER

Once per game Mr. Smith may forfeit his movement, if he does he may not be targeted by attacks for the rest of the turn.

MOVE	ATTACK	SEARCH
3	4	2

"WE SPENT TWO HOURS LAUGHING AND HAVING A GREAT TIME. THAT IS THE HIGHEST PRAISE YOU CAN GIVE ANY GAME. IT WAS JUST SUPER FUN"



don't like wading through tedious rulebooks, this is a blessing: you can get up to speed with a game in no time at all and quickly decide whether it is one for you or not.

There is never any pressure to buy the games that you play. This laid-back approach to gaming means that the event often feels more like a board game evening at a friend's house rather than a convention. And, because there are games for everyone, it's nice to see entire families and kids having so much fun. The fair is strategically held a couple of months before Christmas, so there is plenty of opportunity to stock up on presents.

You can also meet many game designers at the fair. Wandering around, we soon bumped into Eric M. Lang, the Canadian-born designer of *Trains and Stations* (see the reviews section starting on the next page).

"My passion is for American-style games, but I'm slowly starting to move back into euro-games," he said. "I'm quite used to appearing at fairs in the U.S., and so it's nice to come over to Essen and see

how people appreciate board games over here."

Justin Ziran, president of WizKids, which publishes *Trains and Stations*, added, "What is unique about the Essen show, at least from a U.S. perspective, is that there is a wide spectrum of casual and hardcore gamers. One of the first things that you notice is how many families are wandering around on the Saturday and Sunday. The other day, I demoed one of our games to a couple in their 60s, whose children had all grown up. In the U.S., playing board games is often built around a geek culture, whilst in Germany gaming is very much a part of everyday life."

And it is this idea of there being something for everyone that gives Essen such widespread appeal.

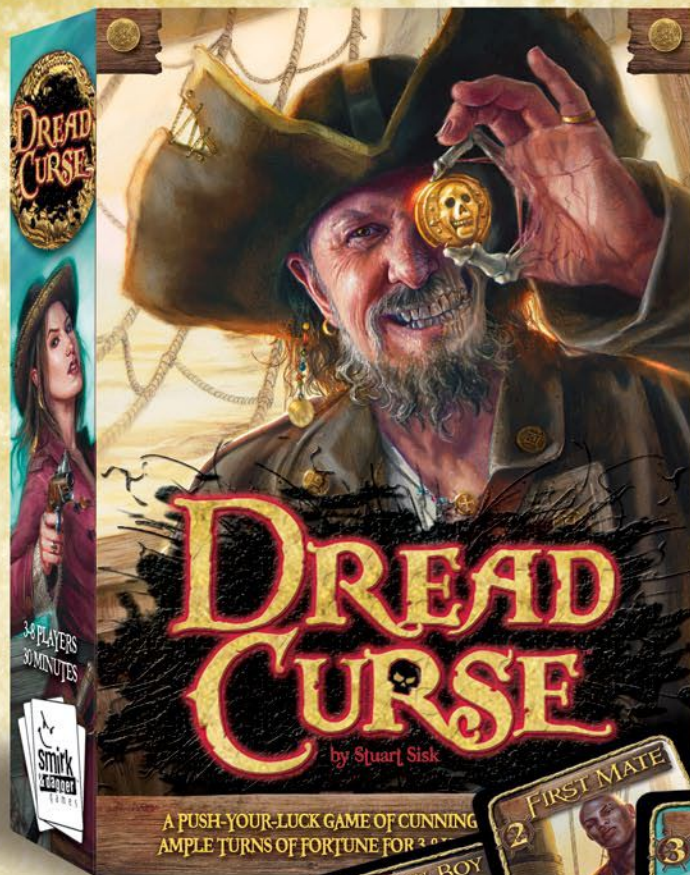
"I wasn't sure what to expect at Essen, but in the end I really enjoyed my time at the fair and met some great people," said Carmine Rossi from Italy. "I found everything very relaxed and informal, and the fact that you were able to get instruction on every game that you played really helped. I'll definitely be going next year."



Left to right: Eric M. Lang, designer of *Trains and Stations*; loading luggage on the *Riff Raff* boat.



*Roll three dice and add two of them to the stack.
Continue as long as you dare.
The wise will distinguish ambition from reaching beyond one's means.*



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Glastonbury, designed by Günter Burkhardt and published by Franjos, is a delightful game in which each player shops for ingredients to put into their magic potions. Tiles are laid out on the table in a six-by-six grid and each player moves around the outside of the grid. Players select ingredients from the column or row on which they land. Not only does the selected ingredient get added to your cauldron, but it also determines the number of spaces that you can move next time. This is where the light strategy comes in – do you select an ingredient that you really need or do you choose the ingredient based on the number that you need to move next time? There are also a few spells that you can pick up on your travels around the board, adding another layer to the game play. It is a lovely little game that plays in around 30 minutes, but has enough variety to keep things interesting. Glastonbury is actually a reimplemention of the 2001 game *Copper Kettle Company*, but with enough new elements to make it a whole different game.



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Betting games are always fun, even more so when the object of the bets is a battle being waged between mythical creatures. *Cheaty Mages*, designed by Seiji Kanai and published by AEG, is a card game in which each player takes on the role of a wizard gambling on the outcome of a fight between monsters. What makes this game so much fun is that each wizard can seek to influence the outcome of the battle by casting spells, either to help one fighter or hinder another. But judges are watching and not all are so tolerant of such blatant cheating; your spells may be disallowed or even turned against you! Much of the play is in secret. You do not know whom your opponents have bet on, and the outcome of many spells is only known at the end of the bout. You have to guess whether spells that the other mages have cast against a particular fighter will weaken or strengthen him. It is a fast, fun game played in three rounds.



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Many people will be familiar with *Twenty Questions*, in which players have to guess a particular object by asking a series of Yes or No questions. Repos Production, a French company, have come up with the idea of taking this popular backseat car game and packaging it up in board game format. *Concept*, designed by Gaëtan Beaujannot and Alain Rivollet, is played out on a board that consists of dozens of pictorial clues. The drawing of notes and coins, for example, could indicate “money”, “rich” or “expensive”. Players select a word or phrase from a game card, and then use colored counters to suggest to the other players what the word or phrase could be. The game is very rich in variety, and counters of different colors can be used to add sub-concepts that clarify the main concept being sought. This game is extremely easy to learn and most people pick it up almost without thinking. It is one of those games that plays particularly well with a large group of people, with players trying to shout out the correct answer at the same time as colored tokens are frantically being shuffled around the clue board.

Train games seemed all the rage at Essen, but one in particular stood out, both for the speed in which it can be learned and the depth of play once the basic rules have been mastered. *Trains and Stations*, designed by Eric M. Lang and published by WizKids, is a commodity development game in which each player takes on the role of a rail baron. The game is set in North America during the age of the steam engine. Players must erect buildings to extract resources and establish delivery routes to turn resources into profit. There are elements of *Ticket to Ride* in the game, but the winning component is the way in which dice are used to establish delivery routes. Every train symbol rolled can be added to a delivery route. As soon as all spaces on a particular route are filled, that delivery has been completed and resources are awarded. There is also a cooperative element. Some routes are so long that players may find it easier to work together to complete them. Each player has a limited number of dice, so the more that are used for delivery the fewer that can be rolled on the next go. Easy to pick up and quick to play, this game is definitely going to prove popular among casual gamers.

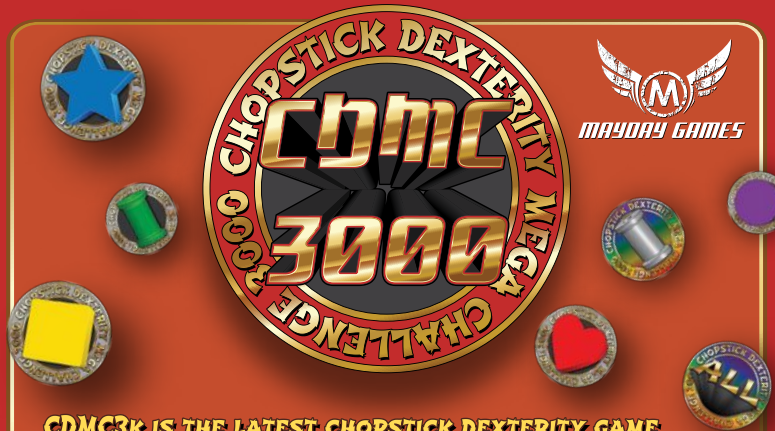


I have always been a big fan of those casual games where all players have their go at the same time, providing that the rules are simple enough not to interfere with the flow of game play. *Going, Going, GONE!*, designed by Scott Nicholson and published by Stronghold Games, ticks all the right boxes. Learned in only a couple of minutes and fast to play, this is a game that will prove a durable addition to any casual games cabinet. Players are at an auction and have to bid on the cards that they want by throwing colored cubes in one of five pots. However, the speed of play means that it's not always easy to see exactly how much your opponents are bidding. As soon as the auction is over, the auctioneer shouts "GONE!" and places the auction paddle over the five cups. No further bids can take place in that round. Cards are then assigned according to who placed the highest bid on them. The idea is to get the biggest collection of cards by the end of the game. Frantic, fast and fun. 🎲



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Are you a board game fan with one or more kids? Do you find your child frequently eyeballing all those wonderful boxes on the shelves? Have you ever caught your child opening up a board game and pretending to play? Do you wish you had a nickel for every time you've heard "I wanna play this one?" Kids love to play games — this isn't any big surprise. It's still our job as parents to help filter what games are suitable for our kids based on their age, maturity, and reading abilities, but if you're looking for some suggestions for introducing board games that have passed your test to a younger audience, here are ten for your consideration.



James Floyd Kelly

Full-time Technology Writer,
Part-time Swashbuckler



Play Through the Rulebook

Rulebooks can often be intimidating, so put yourself in the shoes of a younger player as you examine the rules. One great way to introduce a new game is to turn the rulebook into a game itself. Start out by mixing all the components (if possible) and let the young player separate out the parts; this is a great way for a young

player to become familiar with the types of cards and tokens and how players can be distinguished from one another.

Next, move on to the layout of the game board and/or component locations and let the young player set up the game. If you find samples of gameplay in the instructions, set those up and play them out — reading the rules is one thing, but actually playing the sample scenarios has an increased chance of sticking in long-term memory.



One way to keep from taking one step forward followed by two steps back is to limit the number of Do-Overs. I give my son three tokens when he's learning a new game and allow him to cash one in when he wishes to try a different strategy, play a different card, or even roll the dice again. If you're going to allow Do-Overs in your game, come up with a solution that won't add too much time to the overall length of the game but will offer up chances to learn from a mistake.



Stack the Deck

This can be a bit difficult with complex games, but for card games one of the best ways to help young players get a grasp of the game mechanics is to let them choose their deck versus a random distribution. You can even go one step further and help them pick out the right mix of cards that will give them a good game experience.

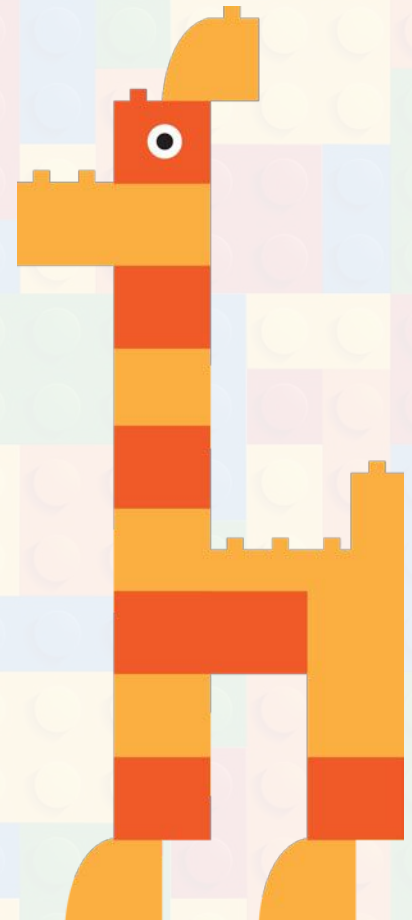
For board games that rely on property collecting, there's nothing wrong with providing young players with a leg up by giving them an initial batch of game pieces, money, or cards before the game starts. Also, consider breaking limits if you find they might be frustrating to a young player. For instance, for the first few games of *Castle Panic*, I allowed my son to have a maximum of eight cards (versus six). It disrupted the complexity of our first few games, but it allowed him to get the hang of mentally stepping through the upcoming turns to see what cards might be useful to trade to other players.



Beat the Game Together

Today's cooperative games are immensely popular, especially with young gamers. The "We All Win or We All Lose" format of games like *Forbidden Island* is easier to accept for younger kids who might not have the maturity to handle a loss. But not all games are cooperative. If you've got a young gamer who is dead set on playing a more advanced game where there can be only one winner, playing by the basic rules is likely to end with a young gamer viewing a great game as a real stinker and never wanting to play it again.

One of the best ways to handle a complex "one winner" game is to turn it into a cooperative game. For a victory condition game, allow the young player to combine forces with another player to reach that condition. Create "resurrection" rules that allow a player to bring back an eliminated player to the game. My son is also allowed to use his Do-Over tokens to ask for advice, so he'll frequently use them to get a look at my cards and his and get my best suggestion for how to beat me!



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Skip the Timer

I like games that have built-in deadlines, be it *Elder Sign* or *Dungeon Roll*. But my son absolutely hates them. HATES them. In my experience, I find that younger game players are often overwhelmed at certain points in a game where multiple decisions must be made. Add a countdown timer to the mix that they need to pay attention to, and you may wind up with young players who just freeze up and can't make a decision (or decisions) when they are most critical to surviving or winning a game.

Take one of our favorite games to play together: *Escape! The Curse of the Temple*. This game can use a sand timer, but we use an MP3 audio file I play from my phone. At various points in the game, the drums beat faster and a gong is heard, meaning the players are supposed to race back to the starting point for safety. My son simply wants to grab all the gems and get out of the temple without the pressure of a time limit. For the first five or six games, that's exactly how we played, too. After he had a solid grasp of the dice mechanics for the game and didn't have to focus solely on his rolls, he began to see that the game was a bit more fun with the time limit tossed in and the occasional rescue of Dad who had lost all his dice to bad rolls.



Switch Sides for the Win

I absolutely hate this one, but my son sure does love it. If he hasn't used any of his three Do-Over tokens, I will allow him to cash them all in and trade positions with me. By offering him this opportunity, I've observed that not only does he focus on his own hand or position in a game but he's also doing the math on my position and trying to figure out if it's worth saving his tokens instead of asking for a Do-Over.

The ability to change sides can be frustrating to you (or another experienced player) when you've carefully navigated a game to put yourself into a winning position only to have it yanked away. Again, I come back to the goal of this article and that is to help your young gamer acclimate to a new game and to become a better gamer. Switching sides allows the young gamer a short-term victory, but the long-term effect is a young player gaining a more solid understanding of victory conditions or the value of certain cards, properties, or other key game factors.



Toss Complex Rules or Cards

This one's a no-brainer to most parents – if a child isn't ready for the big-boy rules, you play the game any way you can to maximize fun, including and up to making up new rules and tossing out the entire rulebook, if necessary. You must be careful to explain to young gamers that the rules change as they get older, or else you face the unpleasant job of having to try and change a rule that's been cemented by too many years and too many wins.





In games like *Fluxx*, I've gone so far as to remove the "bad" cards (called Creepers) completely. And in games like *Dungeon Roll*, I know which Hero cards maximize XP at the end of the game and I let my son pick from those. (Well, I did...I don't let him do this anymore as he's become quite the expert player at *Dungeon Roll* and beats me quite often with no rule modifications.)



Change the Win Conditions

Changing victory conditions can be done before the game starts (just make certain all players know about the rules change) or on the fly. If you find a game is getting a bit long, there's nothing wrong with coming up with an impromptu victory condition towards which to race. (It's up to you to decide whether to lean the victory condition closer to the young gamer's current position.) Likewise, creating a simple elimination condition can help wrap up a game quickly.

For very young players, you're going to find that most of them simply do not have the patience for a game that lasts an hour or more. It's best to prepare early for an "out" to the game. And don't forget: for kids, a tie is better than a loss. There's nothing wrong with changing a win condition to be mutually beneficial to all players. I'm continually surprised at how bad my son feels when he wins and I lose — kids want everyone to win!



Don't Forget the Post-Game Discussion

When my son finishes a game, he tends to want to run off to his next activity, and I'm often fine with that. But when I'm teaching him a new game, I try to hold his attention a bit longer by asking him some questions about the game he just played. What was your favorite part of the game? What didn't you like? What did you find confusing?

While it's great to focus on the fun parts of the game, don't ignore the bumps in the road. If your young player encountered difficulties, this is a great time to try and identify those areas of confusion or frustration (or both) so you can better help him or her the next time you play. Even better, you can try to identify similar games that might provide your young player with more practice or at least reduce the risk of them disliking a game that you are playing too often. 🎲





FULL TIME IN THE GAME INDUSTRY



The path from game enthusiast to full-time game publisher is a notoriously difficult one — but not impossible.



Michael Mindes
Founder, Tasty Minstrel Games (TMG)

TMG was started in March of 2009. Since then, we have published a large number of games and seen amazing success. Recently, we released *Dungeon Roll* to a wide audience after funding the game for over \$250,000 on Kickstarter with 10,078 backers. Now with *Dungeon Roll* on retailers' shelves, we are continuing to see an amazing response.



Left: Seth Jaffee prepares the TMG booth at Gen Con. Right: Michael Mindes and Seth Jaffee flip a deck of *Eminent Domain* cards into the air.

But this isn't about the success of *Dungeon Roll*, it is about how I got here. This article sets out to answer the question, "Why is TMG where it is now?"

It must have started when I was about 6 years old, when my father taught me how to play *Chess*. Maybe it was the time with my father, maybe it was an inherent love of games – either way, I was hooked.

Sure, I played other games, but *Chess* was fantastic for me – the possibilities, the battle of wits, and the combinatorial capability of the pieces.

I joined the *Chess* team at my elementary school, started attending tournaments, and continued to love the game. My love of *Chess* hit its peak in middle school and culminated with my attending the National Junior High Chess Championships. I performed well, but I was never super-amazing. For those of you wondering, with extensive practice and effort, I could probably play at an expert level now.

But things changed for me in 1993 when I was introduced to *Magic: The Gathering* by a fellow *Chess* player at my middle school. It was amazing.

I continued playing *Magic* through my teenage years (heavily through age 21), competing, and was quite good. I played in 3 Pro Tours and even won some money, but I never really broke through into the professional scene.

Of course, this doesn't mention the video games and arcade games. I loved all kinds of games, and as a result I knew that I wanted to make games (video games at the time) and looked to study toward that goal. At first, you needed a college education (but I was 15!). Then the bar moved up and you needed a college education and experience, and then the experience requirement kept moving up.

It was clear that I wouldn't catch up to the ever increasing requirements to enter into making video games; and besides, I was heavily addicted to video games like *Diablo 2*, *Ultima Online*, and

so forth. My studies of what would be needed to make such games suffered (if it even started), but I was learning through play more about what made a game popular.

Soon, the year 2000 came around, along with my discovery of Eurogames (and subsequent love of them). It started with *Settlers of Catan* and continued with games like *Carcassonne* and *Puerto Rico*. I bought *Carcassonne* before it won the SdJ (Spiel des Jahres or German Game of the Year), but I did not know at that time what the SdJ was.

I fell in love with the simplicity of the rules, the depth of game play, the strategic game play options, and the variety of games I could consume. I looked at games as an artificially created system in which I would try to find optimal exchanges. My addiction to video games eased up, and was instead replaced with board games.

The puzzle of figuring out how best to play a game was what thrilled me. I became good at figuring this out. I "broke" several published games, and in



the future, when testing games to be published, I would also break many of those games.

I was a gamer. 100% to the core a gamer, and there was nothing that I wanted to be doing more in my life than making or selling games. So, how did I transition from being a gamer to being a game publisher? I get this question a lot, and I always answer the same way:

I just started.

At the time, I had at least two decades of experience playing games, testing games, trying “improvements” to existing games, and so forth. I knew what made a game something that I personally liked. I knew that there wasn’t really a formal education in the publishing of games, and I thought that I could successfully do it.

So, I just got to work figuring it out. I thought about what I buy and what needs to be done to move from concept to final product delivery. Once I outlined that, I just started calling people and emailing people to try and fill in the blanks of how to perform each step. I needed to learn about manufacturing, art creation, industry standard deals, distribution, delivery, and much more.

Most people would find this to be a barrier, and it certainly is. I did a lot of research. I spoke with local plastic manufacturers, box makers, artists, game designers, game publishers, distributors, and industry veterans. I studied

methods of online marketing and traffic generation, including search engine optimization (SEO), email lists, opt-in pages, pay per click (PPC) ads, analytics, and so forth.

I loved every minute of the learning process. Even before having the publishing experience that I have now, I felt that I was uniquely skilled to publish games. Today, I have a much better understanding of many aspects of the process and have forgotten more than I knew when I started.

Still, when I started, I had the following going for me:

- I love value creation processes, especially when applied in businesses. I am fascinated by them even more so than by games.
- I have tons of experience playing games of numerous types, such as classics, collectible card games (CCGs), video games, arcade games, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), role-playing games (RPGs), tabletop miniature games, Eurogames, card games, dice games, dexterity games (including sports), and more. I know what I like and I know what others like, as well.

- I understand how to sell a product by showing somebody why they want it.

- I have experience maintaining trust with customers from being a financial advisor.

So, really, I just started.

I didn’t get a job with an existing publisher to learn more. At the time, I had two children to feed and needed a steady income from being a successful financial advisor (which I had). Now I have four children. So, I started in what little free time I had, between my career that demanded forty to sixty hours per week and spending time with my young family.

Really, it would have been impossible to accomplish without the full support of my wife. I think that partially she just wanted me to stop dreaming of being in the game business and to just give it a shot as long as I could still provide for our family.

Since I planned to publish many games over many years, I decided that I needed a way to reach our existing customers on a regular basis. I looked at using “bulk email marketing” and decided it was great because I could reach



Belfort: The Expansion, an add-on to the popular strategy game *Belfort*, published in 2011 by TMG.

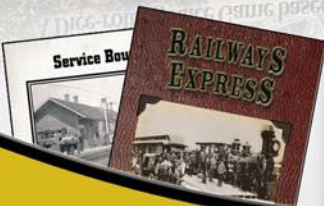
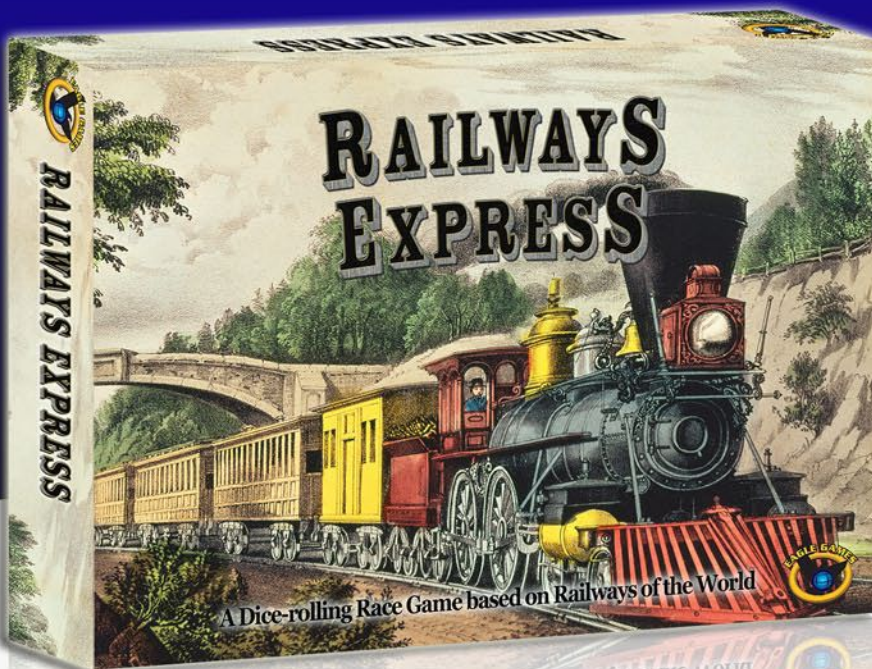


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people when I needed to, most people regularly check their email (especially true for gamers!), and I could build a relationship with many people at the same time without investing an increasing amount of time for an increasing amount of people.

This last point was a key factor for me. I needed methodologies which would scale well. That is to say, a successful proven method for marketing and communication that would not require more time from me as the number of people served increased. To this day, reaching TMG fans via email is a top reason for our success. Without that, we would not be in as good of a position as we are now.

Of course, it wouldn't matter if you can reach previous customers and fans if you make bad games. That is why we spend a lot of time in the discovery of games, designing, developing, and pre-press process of games (hooray for Seth Jaffee who handles most of this!). We value intriguing and fun game play that is built on top of simple (or relatively simple) rules. We tweak, change, and test many iterations of the same game until we believe that a game is the best that it can be.

We then work closely with talented artists that will make the game look great while also making the game easier to use, play, and understand. Then we work closely with the manufacturer to make

sure that none of the benefits from the art process are lost.

Eventually, when the games are finished, we will get them shipped to the USA, and sold to retail stores that then sell them to the consumer. It can be a long process, but it is very rewarding.

I hope that you have enjoyed this portion of my story about what TMG does and how we have gotten to where we are now. We love games, and we love making games. We get excited when people have fun and gain enjoyment from playing what we have brought to life. We look forward to publishing many more games that you will love for years to come. 🎲

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