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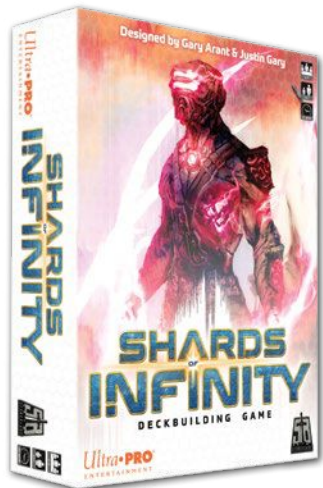
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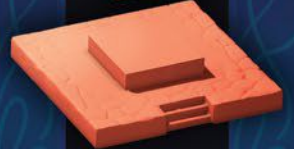
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Gamelyn Games, founded by Michael Coe and best known for their *Tiny Epic* games, delivers thought provoking, high quality, and affordable products with top-notch customer service.

GamelynGames.com



Cheapass Games is a small, delightfully snarky game company based out of Seattle. Led by game design legend James Ernest, they specialize in casual, quirky titles and pub games. Learn more about Cheapass Games and download a free game or two at cheapass.com.

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Founded in January 2011 by Christopher Badell, Adam Rebottaro, and Paul Bender, Greater Than Games focuses on creating unique tabletop games that the founders have always wanted to play.

GreaterThanGames.com



Looney Labs was founded in 1996 by Kristin and Andrew Looney. Our mission is to create fun! We publish *Fluxx*, *Just Desserts*, *Loonacy*, and games for *Looney Pyramids*.

LooneyLabs.com



Gate Keeper Games exists to actualize epic game ideas, bring others joy, and treat every guest like they are our dear friend. GKG's John Wrot! is the creative mind behind *Half-sies Dice*, *A.D.A.P.T.* and *The King's Armory*.

GateKeeperGaming.com



Your experience playing a game is multi-dimensional and so are our games; they engage mechanically and aesthetically. The sibling company of KTBG (*Foodfighters*, *Problem Picnic*, and *Haunt the House*).

BurntIslandGames.com



GGG publishes *Unreal Estate* and *Stroop*, and the upcoming *Pocket Ops*. We began with smaller titles, but are excited to add *Endeavor 2nd Edition* to the roster of bigger games.

GrandGamersGuild.com



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dVGiochi.com



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BlueOrangeGames.com



Wandering Monster Studios is an independent publisher that focuses on games, mainly in the whimsical and fantasy vein. Of course, they've been known to wander.

WanderingMonsterStudios.com



Founded in 2009, Stratus Games publishes quality casual and party games like *Eruption*, *Gold Mine*, and *Off Your Rocker*. They are also the creative minds behind *Casual Game Revolution* and *Casual Game Insider*.

StratusGames.com



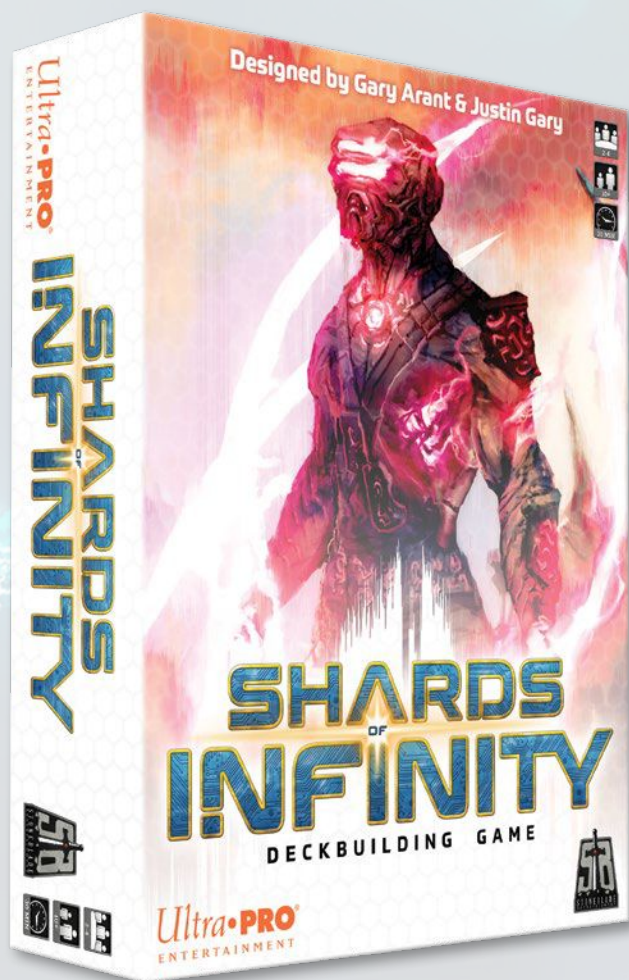


SHARDS OF INFINITY

by Justin Gary
Game Designer

and Beyond

In *Shards of Infinity*, you are tasked with harnessing the power of an Infinity Shard – a fragment of a weapon of unlimited power. Master it, and you can shape reality to your will. Fail and another shard-wielder will turn that power against you.



Shards of Infinity is the newest deck-building game published by Stone Blade Entertainment, and is a bold successor to my original *Ascension* series. The innovation of *Ascension*'s ever-changing center row has laid the foundation for a multitude of different games since its initial release. Now on its 13th big-box expansion, *Delirium*, the *Ascension* series has sold hundreds of thousands of copies both in physical form and digital copies.

Even after eight years of designing and playing *Ascension*, there is still plenty of room to grow with the genre. *Shards of Infinity* is all about using that core deck-builder concept and taking it in an exciting new direction. Teaming up with co-lead designer Gary Arant, we set out to design a game that is faster, more strategic, and more streamlined than any deck-building game on the market.



Let's Talk About the Basics

Like *Ascension*, *Shards of Infinity* plays with two to four players. Each player starts with a basic deck of cards and acquires new cards from an ever-changing six card center row. But unlike *Ascension*, there are no extra piles of cards to deal with (bye-bye cultist!). And instead of players defeating monsters to earn points and claim victory, the only way to win in *Shards of Infinity* is to defeat the other players directly.



The biggest mechanical innovation in *Shards of Infinity* is the use of Mastery points. Every character starts with fifty health and zero Mastery, represented on a cool character spin dial. On each turn, you can spend one Gem (money resource) to gain a Mastery Point. The more Mastery you have, the more powerful your cards become. This lets even the weak cards in your starting deck become more powerful as the game progresses.

You can win the game by attacking opponents or by getting up to thirty Mastery and using the Ultimate Power from your Infinity Shard. These two paths to victory create plenty of strategic choices during play, and allow players to accomplish some pretty amazing come-from-behind victories.

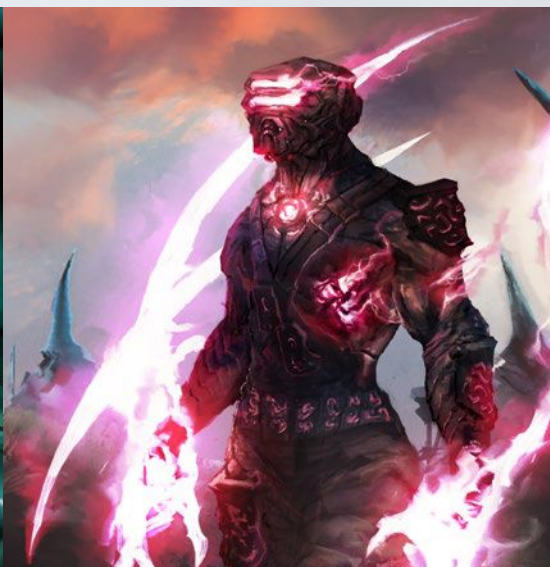
Another big strategic innovation in *Shards of Infinity* are the Mercenary cards. Mercenary cards can be added to

your deck just like in other deck-building games OR they can be fast-played immediately from the center row.

Fast-played Mercenaries don't go to your deck, so you will have to make a strategic decision of whether you want their abilities now or later. This adds even more drama to the turn as a key mercenary flip can alter the very outcome of the game!

There are countless fun combos and unique abilities in the game that you'll have to discover by playing. At only \$19.99, *Shards of Infinity* offers hours of play for an incredibly low price. We are still addicted to this game around the office, and I hope you will have as much fun playing it as we did making it. 🎲

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TOUCHDOWN!

BOARD GAMES FOR SPORTS FANS



Dann Albright

Freelance Journalist and
Lifelong Board Gamer

At first glance, it seems like sports fans and board gamers don't have much in common. Athletic battles are won by feats of strength and agility, while board games often come down to strategic choices. Sports fans dedicate themselves to their teams and players, while board gamers are usually fighting for themselves. The difference in mindset seems stark.



BLOOD BOWL

1-4 players, 45 minutes

This is fantasy football...with a heavy emphasis on “fantasy.” Games Workshop brings humans, orcs, dwarves, ogres, vampires, elves, and a variety of other creatures to face off in a quest to win by any means possible. Each player on the board gets to move, block, blitz, pass, hand off, or foul each turn.

What results is a crazy, ridiculous, violent game of football full of tactical competition, intentional fouls, turnovers, and a whole lot of dice rolling. You’ll need to build your team and plan your moves carefully, because if you fail a roll, you’ll suffer a turnover and immediately be on the defense.



There’s actually quite a bit of strategy that you’ll start to uncover once you’ve played a time or two. And be sure that you do: this is an addicting game with a lot of fans around the world. You can even get involved in tournament play!

If you decide you really like the game, you can add more teams, giving each player more options when they come to the field. The craziness just multiplies.



FORMULA D

2-10 players, 60 minutes



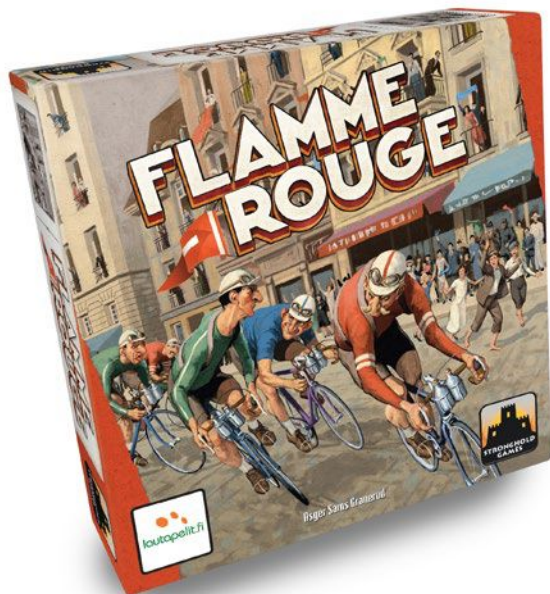
If you know (or are) a fan of car racing, *Formula D* is a going to be a hit. Now in its third edition through Asmodee, the game simulates Formula One racing, both on the track and on the streets. You’ll move your car by rolling dice, but there are plenty of strategic decisions to be made as you race to the finish line.

For example, how far you move on a roll depends on which gear you’re in. Each turn, you can shift up, shift down, or stay in the same gear. You’ll need to optimize your speed by shifting constantly. Corners effectively have speed limits, too, so you’ll need to scrub some speed before heading into one.

If you bump another car, downshift too suddenly, or get blocked, you’ll take wear on your car—too much wear and you’ll have to drop out of the race. So that requires management, too.

And there are plenty of optional rules for custom cars, drafting, road debris, pit stops, and illegal street races. This game will keep you and your friends who love racing busy for a long time!





FLAMME ROUGE

2-4 players, 30-45 minutes

Another racing game, *Flamme Rouge* by Stronghold Games comes with very different tactical challenges—you'll manage two cyclists in order to get your sprinter to the line first. (Cyclists will know what that means.) You'll play cards throughout the race to move spaces, but be careful about using your big cards too early!

Drafting, breakaways, and hills all add excitement to the race, and players need to take each into account to correctly manage their deck of cards. Once you start thinking about your opponents and trying to guess their strategies, the true character of the game shines

through, and is a great example of board game strategy translating to a fun sports theme.

Flamme Rouge is a rather simple game that opens up once you've played it a few times. The core mechanics are quick to learn, but when you start playing against your opponents, instead of just the game, you'll see the beauty behind it.

And keep in mind that you don't need to be a cycling fan to enjoy this game. It's a great race game, and will kindle the competitive spirit in anyone.





TAVARUA

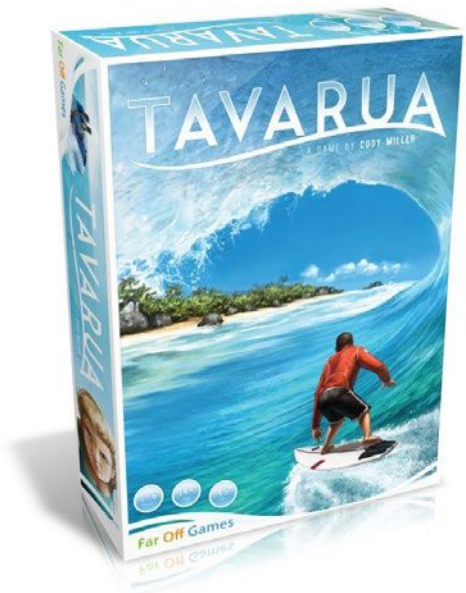
1-6 players, 30-60 minutes

Not all sports games focus on popular sports like baseball, football, and racing. *Tavarua* by Far Off Games is a surfing game in which players need to find the right wave and keep their balance to ride it out.

There's a lot of dice-rolling and card-drawing in this game, so it might not feel like you have a lot of control...but that's the nature of surfing. Choose a wave, paddle to it, catch it, and ride it out to score points. Whoever has the two biggest waves for each board type (short and long) at the end of the game, wins.

Cards with higher values give you more points, but they also shift your balance more, putting you closer and closer to falling off your board. If you manage to stay upright, you'll score big. But watch out for waves that'll throw you off-balance!

A fun little game that plays in 30-60 minutes, *Tavarua* is unique. Whether you live on the coast or far inland, it's sure to be a hit.



TWO WORLDS COLLIDE

Sports and board games might not seem like they mesh very well. But when you combine the two, there's a chance you'll come up with something that's a whole lot of fun. From football to surfing, there are board games out there for every type of sports fan, and these titles are a great middle ground to entice sports fans to come to the table. Why not turn the Super Bowl into a game party?

The best part is that you don't have to be a fan of a particular sport to enjoy a game about it. Anyone who likes the tension of high-speed racing will like *Flamme Rouge*. Fans of card games and deck-builders will have a blast with *Baseball Highlights: 2045*. Not a fan of football? That doesn't mean you won't enjoy the strategy or physicality of *Blood Bowl*.

When board gamers and sports fans come together over these games, they can forge a connection that might be hard to achieve otherwise—and that's when you *really* score a touchdown. 🎲



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PART 1

2017

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AND
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Paco Garcia Jaen
Board and Roleplaying Games
Enthusiast and Publisher

There is something invigorating about heading towards one of the largest board gaming trade shows on the planet. The anticipation of the new games, trying to guess which company will get the most attention, and which publisher will surprise you — Spiel is a rather amazing experience and an incredible event.



Just arriving at the Düsseldorf airport in Germany gives me the chills. Get through security, and you will immediately start your own challenge of “Spot the Gamer.” Either the face of excitement at the thought of getting to the show, or the face of confusion trying to figure out the right train ticket to purchase – it is very easy to feel you are not alone when you are making your way to Spiel.

This year, the Internationale Spieltage SPIEL (or Spiel as it is commonly referred to) started early for us. On Wednesday, we attended the official press conference and gained early access to the exhibition spaces just to witness the chaos and mayhem of setting up the booths – pallet upon pallet of games, furniture and fittings being delivered while precariously balanced on skillfully-driven forklifts, as men and women unpack their hopes for a successful show, put the boxes on display, and ready the tables to demo their games.

HERE'S THE SPIEL

As always, a very well looked-after press crowd was dazzled by the organizers with sandwiches and drinks while Dominique Metzler (Spiel's managing director) and Spiel colleagues introduced some of the titles being released at the show, gave an overview of the awards this year, and updated everyone about the previous year. All of this was in German, so my understanding was a bit limited, but the handouts in English more than helped cover everything that was discussed. Being an international board game show means accommodating for a bit of a language barrier.

What was new for Spiel 2017 was that it expanded to two additional halls at the Messe, the gigantic exhibition complex on the outskirts of Essen, Germany, where the trade show takes place. This was a very welcome move, as organizers forecasted about 175,000 visitors over the next four days of the show, which would require a bit more space to accommodate everyone. Not to mention the more than 1,200 exhibitors from all over the world with their assortment of stock, supplies, and displays. Those

exhibitors also had the opportunity to show the press their new releases at a private event held in a very large hall not accessible to the general public. This was a great opportunity to discover some of the more obscure games and publishers and to talk shop with some of the industry's leading designers.

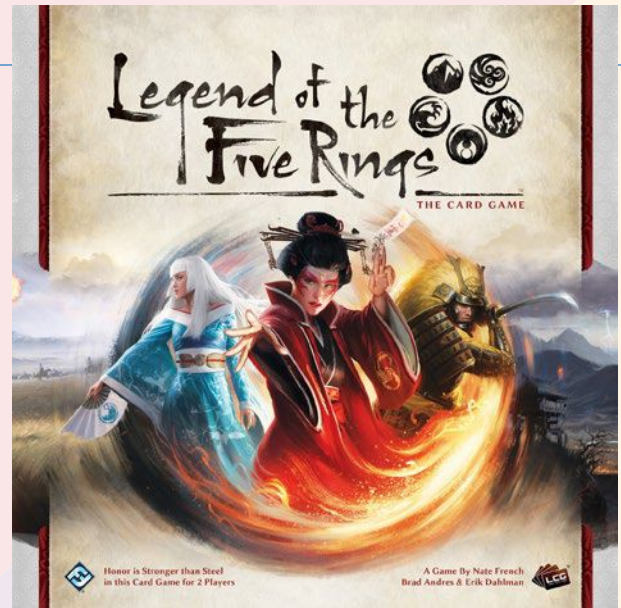
Adding those two additional halls at the Messe this year made it feel more spacious than previous shows. While I can't say I ran into each of the 175,000 slotted to attend this year (press reports suggest it got as high as 182,000), it sure felt like that many attended on Saturday when every hall was packed with gamers carrying bags of goodies, speaking a multitude of languages, and trying to get their hands on the newest titles this season. Finding a table to demo some of these games was a quest in and of itself. The newly opened halls received less attention, as people were still getting used to them, and they featured less of the expensive booths from big name companies, but they offered an opportunity to discover up-and-coming publishers.



A LEGENDARY EXPERIENCE

Speaking of some of the big names there, Asmodee went all out for this year's Spiel. The publisher at the head of companies like Fantasy Flight Games and Days of Wonder decided to reflect its status in the industry with the size and design of their booth. It was impossible not to be amazed by the 215 square-foot screen on which staff and volunteers streamed live tournaments and demos via the Asmodee Twitch channel, a real-time editing suite with a multi-camera setting, and an insane number of tables to try out the new titles. There was even a bit of theatrics to introduce *When I Dream* to the public, complete with two sleepy people going around with their pillows enacting the game. A large portion of the company's layout was decorated as a Japanese garden for the release of *Legends of the Five Rings: The Card Game*, which made Asmodee's support for the product abundantly clear.

Of course Asmodee wasn't the only big name there, as almost every major publisher in the board game industry had some sort of representation at Spiel. Though Hasbro didn't have quite the presence for an



ever-expanding colossus, *Monopoly Gamer* gathered plenty of attention, as well as a new game that, sadly, I didn't get the chance to play: *Pipi Party* (renamed *Toilet Trouble* in the United States). The hilarious-looking game comes in the shape of a toilet, and I witnessed how people literally rolled on the floor in laughter.





THE UP-AND-COMERS OF SPIEL

As impressive as the collection of major hobby titles was, I was very taken with a lot of the lesser known and more casual games that I happened upon at Spiel. I decided to concentrate on games that look and feel wonderful but are yet to be discovered. Jolly Thinkers made my jaw drop with some immensely cute artwork by artist Madga Markowska in *Bye-Bye Black Sheep*, a push-your-luck card game for ages 6 and up where you must get cards out of your hand and onto the table to form your own zoo. Definitely a delight to see.

Dream Catchers, the new game from Play Nation Studios out of Singapore, was also on my must-have list. In this cooperative game, players try to help children sleep by keeping at bay the monsters that live under the bed. Meanwhile, dreams hang from the ceiling of each child's room and come down safely to grant a pleasant night's rest until dawn. As if the theme wasn't lovely enough, the artwork was very evocative and fits very well with the simple-yet-compelling rules, which will make you think and work together time and time again.

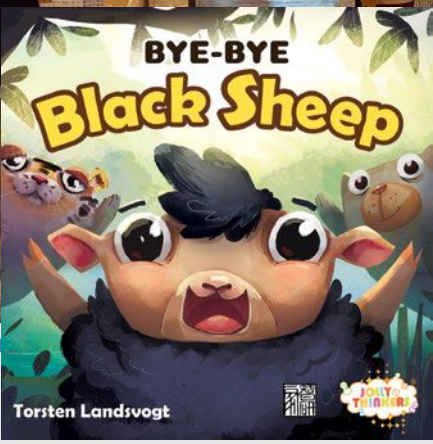
I also have to give a mention to Strawberry Studio. This fast-growing company was born just over a year ago and already has four very strong titles in their catalog, with more due out soon. Specializing in small, quick-and-simple games for ages 6 and up, the team led by Agnieszka Kopera of NSKN Games has already produced *Three Wishes*, *What's Up*, *Strawberry*



Ninja, and *Pyramid of the Sun*. With these and more titles to release soon, this company could become the go-to publisher for fast and casual games, and definitely worth keeping an eye on.

An ever-increasing presence of Kickstarter-funded games was also a point of conversation with more than one person at the event, as many companies turn to crowdfunding platforms for feedback on future projects, games, or possible expansions. It was common to see displays or even booths promoting a product going up on Kickstarter. For instance, Backspindle Games brought out a few of its prototypes for its newest title *Mournequest*, a co-op adventure that feels like it's right out of a dark Irish fairy tale. For Backspindle Games, Spiel is a great way to garner some interest before launching their Kickstarter campaign early next year.





Clockwise, from top left: setting up for the show; packed halls; playing Flick 'em Up! Dead of Winter; Bye-Bye Black Sheep

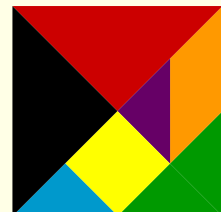
THE MOMENTUM OF GAMING

I have attended Spiel six times in the last seven years and this, by far, was the most interesting of them all. The larger convention area, the longer list of exhibitors, more visitors, and a much, much greater selection of games is proof of the undeniable growth of the industry worldwide, and the reach Essen Spiel has in the gaming industry.

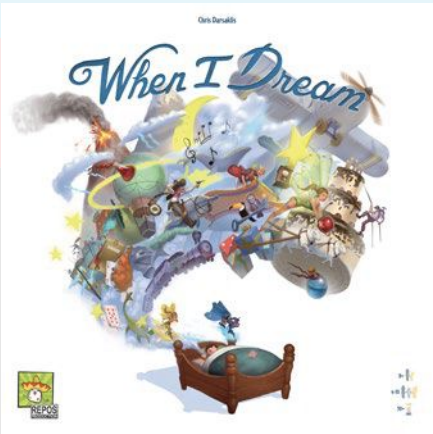
the experience of Spiel 2017 and, more importantly, the growing hobby it represents.

This, my friends, is an extremely exciting time to be a gamer. Watch this space, because it's only going to get better. 🎲

And no matter if you've gone one or several times, it's hard not to get caught up in the experience of the exhibit halls, the collection of people there, the games that were played, or even just the general atmosphere of being surrounded by board game fans from around the world. Words simply can't convey



CGI ESSEN 2017



PAX UNPLUGGED

CGI CONVENTION SPECIAL, PART 2



Glenn Flaherty

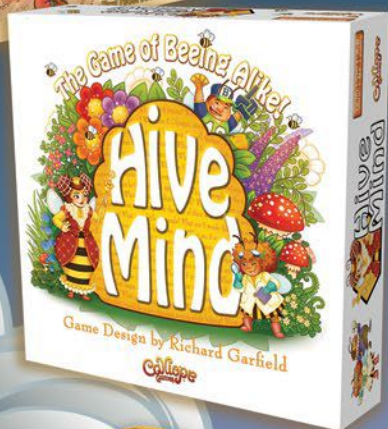
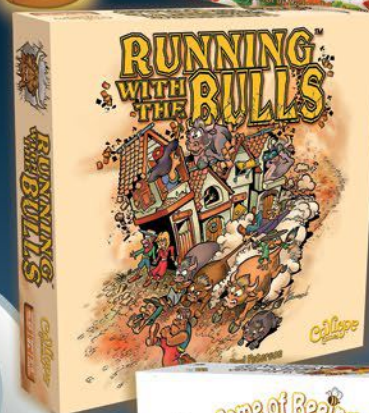
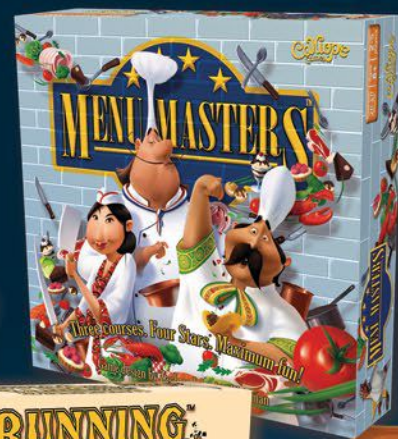
Author, Reviewer, and Host of
Boardgames & Bourbon

Oh my, that was quite an event. The very first PAX Unplugged occurred November 17–19, 2017, and without hesitation you can be assured it was a resounding success. Everyone who is anyone was there and the crowds were eating it up. Big time media and even a few famous faces showed up, and at \$25 a ticket it was an event easily accessible to the masses.

I was told that 23,000 people bought tickets, with future plans of hitting 40,000. For comparison, Origins has around 17,000 attendees. Being able to generate these numbers in your first year is no small feat. I'm not talking out of turn when I say everyone there was impressed by this inaugural gathering. It was held in the Philadelphia Convention Center which is right in the heart of the city – when the doors closed at 6 p.m., there was still tons of stuff to do within easy walking distance.

The industry turned out in force. Game publishers and game peripheral companies were probably 40 deep in the endless rows of vendors. Of the publishers, attendees included big ones like IDW, Daily Magic and Bezier Games, ones on the rise like Grand Gamers Guild and Escape Velocity, and

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a surprising amount of Kickstarter startups, too. I saw a lot of my friends in the crowd as gamers, media, and booth workers.

Front and center was Renegade Game Studios, which sponsored the lanyards for the entire convention. Renegade had an arsenal of brand new games, some that even debuted at this show in particular (like *Pie Town* and *Planet Defenders*), with demo areas set up for anyone to try out the latest titles. Scott Gaeta and Sara Erickson head up the Renegade team. They were giving speeches, running demos, and doing who knows what else, but also set aside time to hang with the “Glennster.” They told me how important this show was, given the cross-over appeal from PAX’s video game market. They expected the Saturday and Sunday crowds to be filled with new people who would be discovering board games as a legitimate form of adult entertainment for the first time.

Bruce Voge from North Star Games felt the same way. “What an amazing opportunity for all of us!” he exclaimed. He couldn’t have been more ecstatic about how the entire event came together. North Star’s newest game, *Vegas Wits and Wagers*, was attracting flocks of interest from nearly everyone who passed by.

There were the usual culprits – the cosplayers, the *Dungeons & Dragons* gang, etc. – but more so was a swath of upcoming designers and the socially minded. PAX made provisions to host an Unpub area specifically for game designers seeking advice and playtesting. They also had a diversity lounge where needs and discussions about inclusion occurred.

The convention space itself was held in a massive bay area with all the attendees and booth occupying roughly half of area, while the second half was split three ways: an enormous open play area with a game library, a vast tournament section, and then a theater-style setting for the on-going talks that were scheduled steadily throughout the day. Any way you slice it, this show had something for everyone.

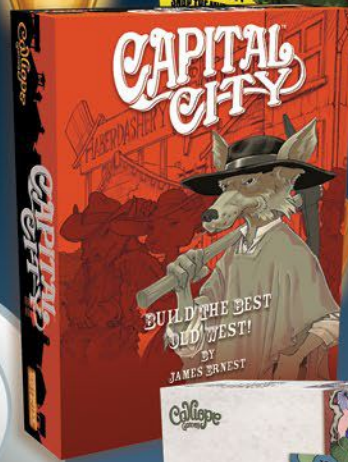
Great job to the PAX crew for hitting the ground running. I can’t wait until next year! 🎲

[Glenn Flaherty can be found on Twitter at @gamesandbourbon](#) and on his YouTube channel, “Boardgames & Bourbon”





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Co-op Connoisseur
and Wordsmith

Board games are investments. Whether you're picking one up because it looks interesting, or it's a buzzworthy title you're hoping to try out with your group, ultimately you're purchasing the game with the intent to play it. So, how often do you need to play a game before it becomes worth the investment? It seems commonplace to hear about a new game hitting the table less than one or two times before finding a permanent home on the shelf. Yet there are titles out there that seem to always make it into the rotation, regardless of the number of times they've been played.

Determining which board games have a higher replayability over others will always be a bit subjective, as players and groups naturally trend towards different genres and tastes. Where one group might thrive on competition and games that pit players against each other, other groups might enjoy less direct confrontation and more cooperation, finding games that pit the group against ever-increasing odds of defeat.

When it comes to head-to-head titles, classic games like *Carcassonne*, *Monopoly*, and *Catch Phrase* will always find time on the table, whether out of nostalgia

or familiarity. But newer games competing for those common competitive spots include titles like *King of Tokyo*, *Catan*, and *Splendor*. The same can be said for the recent rise in cooperative games. Games like *Pandemic*, *Big Book of Madness*, and *Sentinels of the Multiverse* are throwing hopeless scenarios together for groups seeking to challenge (or punish) themselves.

So, what do *Catan* and *Pandemic* have in common? What are some characteristics of games that stay in the table rotation longer?

VARIABILITY IN GAME MODES



What's better than one game that's fun every time you play it? One game that's *different* every time you play it. A recent trend that's been rising are titles that involve multiple game modes that are chosen at the start of the game. The *Zombicide* series from Guillotine Games includes several different missions in the back of the rulebook with different win conditions — players must team up to rescue a survivor trapped in a building, or scavenge a certain amount of supplies before reaching the exit. The missions range in difficulty and time, giving players the choice to change things up each time they bring it out.

Then there are titles where the game mode isn't chosen but instead unfolds throughout the course of the game. In *Betrayal at House on the Hill* by Wizards of the Coast, players explore a spooky mansion by flipping floor tiles and adding them to the growing floor plan of the house, finding cursed items and creepy rooms as they go. Eventually a combination of rooms and events reveals that one of the players has turned against the rest of the group, and the rest of the players must pit themselves against the creatures that come to the traitor's aid.

VARIETY IN WINNING STRATEGIES

A common thread for popular games with staying power includes the variety of ways you can win the game. "But isn't that every game?" Well, not exactly. Some games might play out differently each time, but have the same general gameplay and win condition.



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But what happens when you have a game that gives you different ways to win? Having several different strategies going into it allows for a player to revisit the game multiple times with a new mindset. Alternatively, if your opponent is dominating one area, switching gears to try for a different win condition allows for exciting come-from-behind victories.

7 *Wonders Duel* and *Evolution* both capture this replayability element perfectly. 7 *Wonders Duel* by Repos Production offers not one, but three ways you can win: gather the most resources to grow your civilization, go for the military win and invade your

opponent's capital, or secure a win through scientific advancement. *Evolution* by North Star Games allows you to evolve creatures to fight over a dwindling collection of food and survive the harsh times ahead. You can either pursue the safe, slow-and-steady resource collection, or risk an aggressive approach and attack your opponent's creatures directly. When you stumble across a fun combination of creature features, you can store that away for the next time it hits the table and explore new ways to exploit one or more traits.

PLAY STYLE CUSTOMIZATION

Sometimes the win condition stays the same, but how you approach it differs each time. A recurring aspect of games that stay popular is the ability to customize your experience. It could be a matter of choosing which character, army, or faction you play that introduces unique abilities or mechanics — giving gamers that flexibility to play to their tastes, while new flavors add a continued draw. *Forbidden Desert* by Gamewright is a great example of casual-meets-customization. Crashing in the desert with an approaching sandstorm, players take on different roles (Archaeologist, Navigator, Meteorologist, etc.) with unique abilities to help them locate parts to a flying machine so they can escape before it's too late.

Sentinels of the Multiverse, a co-op card game published by Greater Than Games, also brings unique mechanics for a new

CO-OP AND DEFEAT (THE FUN KIND)

Cooperative games encompass a growing portion of titles on the market, and have a broader appeal to gamers who aren't fans of competition but rather confrontation. Not all co-op games find themselves with high replayability, however — escape room games or narrative mysteries may only have one outcome and, once played, leave nothing new to discover with future plays. Other games might be viewed as too easy, and players find themselves unchallenged and eventually bored.

Instead, communities like Board Game Geek and Reddit have discussed what a good win-lose ratio is for a co-op to make it worth playing again. Some common numbers lean towards winning only 25% of the time, meaning that gaming groups suffer defeat the other 75% with these games. Others tend to be fine with a 50/50 win-to-lose ratio. The point is that players are looking for something that's not only challenging, but something that is not a sure win in the first place. *Pandemic*



approach to alternating threats. Players can choose from an ever-expanding list of heroes that have their own flavor and in-game mechanics, while selecting which supervillain they take on. New environments bring even more complications into the mix, giving even more variety and exploration for hero choice.



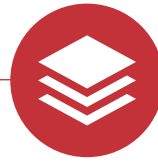
(Z-Man Games) and *The Big Book of Madness* (IELLO) are two titles that tend to jump out for low chances of winning, yet high chances of playing again. Both feature teams trying to stop a growing threat, with the difficulty ramping up as the game progresses.



LAYERED MECHANICS

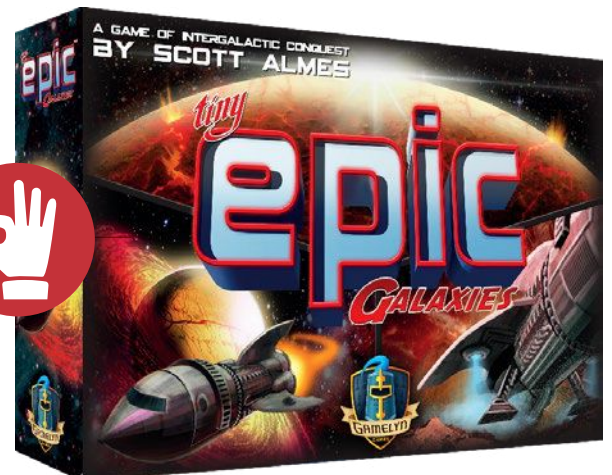
There's nothing better than learning the rules to a new game, having that first play through, and immediately realizing the sheer depth of strategy that can be involved with the game. This specific replayability element lends itself especially well to abstract games, where games are not designed for interesting characters or thematic elements, but rather a strategic depth that can be tested and played out time and again.

Element by Rather Dashing Games fits this category beautifully. The game revolves around catching your opponent's Elder by using randomly drawn elements: fire grows and generates an extra fire piece on the board; water flows and moves the adjacent water pieces; air creates a current for elders to float away on; earth creates an impassable mountain range. As you play, the board fills up, and the clever board play wins the day. But the random draw and the clever combination gives players the desire to go another round.



SIMPLICITY AND CASUAL TITLES

Replayability can also stem from sheer simplicity. Think about a number of times that you've had friends over who aren't gamers but are willing to play a game. There's a fairly good chance you're not reaching for *Twilight Imperium* or *Scythe*. Some games keep hitting the table because they're accessible, easy to learn, and quick to play. These titles are known as casual games. (Thanks for reading!)



It can be argued that casual games have a longer shelf life by filling gaps in game nights, entertaining visitors or family, or having something light to play when you're out and about. *Love Letter*, *Sushi Go*, the *Tiny Epic* series (more information later in this issue) and a growing number of titles are finding themselves well in this category. Although some games may seem "simple" in terms of rules, making them ideal to teach to nearly anyone, they can also hide a depth of strategy that rivals larger presentations. For instance, it may look like there isn't much to *Onitama* by Arcane Wonders, what with being played on a five-by-five grid – but intense thought and planning is needed to gain an advantage over your opponent.



TRENDS, EXPANSIONS, AND TRENDY EXPANSIONS

As a community, gamers are constantly looking for those games that are fun no matter how many times they are played. These characteristics can give titles a longevity that others lack, and the more of these characteristics in a game, the better! But what else keeps a title relevant? Sometimes, it can be a matter of popularity. Whether or not a title has the hallmarks of being rotation-worthy, if it's a trending title that's garnered plenty of buzz, friends and game groups alike will want to try it out. Though not a characteristic that will last when it comes to quality, it can be argued that a title's trendiness and buzz can sometimes outlast the owner's desire to play it through sheer request power. (Hopefully when a game has received plenty of buzz, it translates to quality, but that's not always the case!)

Expansions can be a different story. An expansion could bring new-and-exciting features that can breathe new life into an old game, but is that the same as having a game with high replayability? Sometimes expansions can be added onto the base set, allowing players to try a combination of the new and old in exciting ways. *Smash Up*, a competitive card game from AEG, has players combining two mechanically-distinct theme decks together into a single deck to face off against



each other. Fan of pirates? Like robots? Shuffle them together and throw down against Werewolf Spies or Time Traveling Plants. Though the expansions continue to add new decks, most are compatible with the core set and give new options.

Sometimes, though, expansions are something entirely different than the core, acting more as a standalone continuation. The *Pandemic* series by Z-Man Games has plenty of expansions that are not compatible with each other — it capitalizes on the core concept of racing to cure a spreading illness, but explores new time periods and themes. For instance, *Pandemic Iberia* is not the same game as the core, but instead is a similar game that takes place in 1848, with a new board and different mechanics that reflect the time period and setting.

YOUR GAME IS CALLING

Now, the question remains: what do *Catan* and *Pandemic* have in common? In reality, they seem like very different games. *Catan* includes a modular board for variability, and victory points are earned in multiple ways — which allows for a variety of strategies. *Pandemic* uses the same board each time, but offers challenging cooperative gameplay in which the stakes continually increase. Both games have a seemingly endless number of expansions, but there is something more that they have in common: they both call to people.

A game is replayable if it motivates you to take it off the shelf. And the more it hits the table, the more experiences and memories it creates. Ultimately, it's these memories that call to you, begging you to play again — and a game that creates good memories is bound to stay in your collection for a very, very long time. After all, isn't that what gaming is all about? 🎲

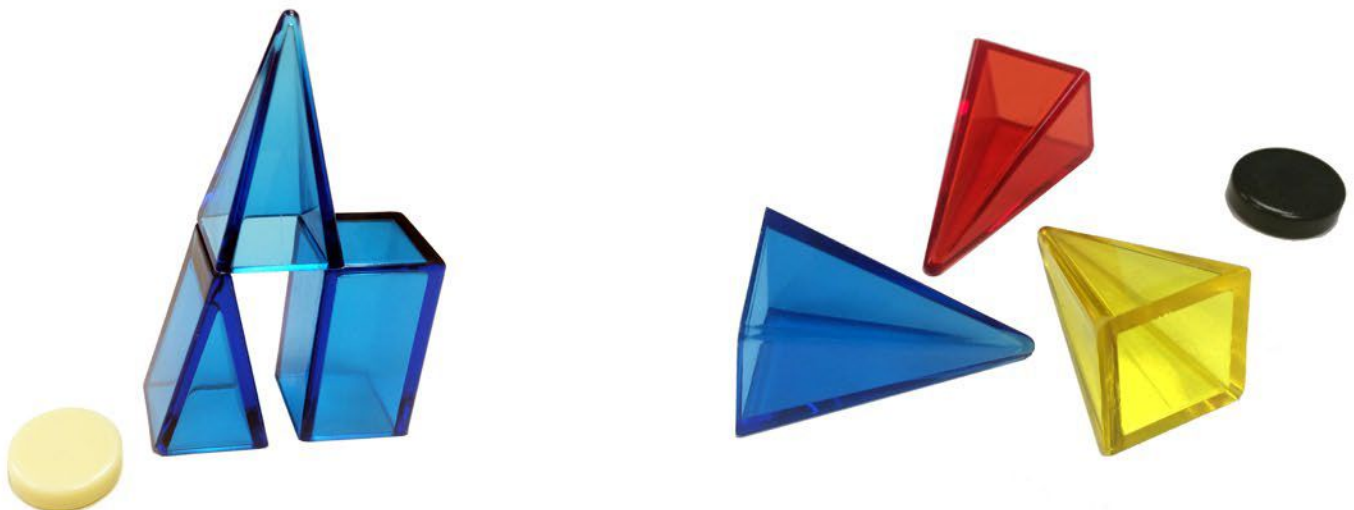


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ARE YOU LYING?

Bluffing Games and the Ethics of Deception



Andrew Birkett

Freelance Journalist and Chief
Storyteller of Atheris Games





You look around the table. Someone is lying to you, but you're not angry or offended. As you search the sea of familiar faces, you can't help but to question each and every one of them. You know someone at your table is a murderer, but who?

Could it be Larry...or Brittany...or maybe it's Fred? Fred keeps making some weird faces, but Brittany is being more quiet than usual, while Larry is in the clear because none of his weapons fit the crime. This dubious scene has played out countless times with gaming groups with titles like *Deception: Murder in Hong Kong* by Grey Fox Games. There are not many games of this type that are casual and can accommodate a large number of players, but this gaming sweet spot will often include titles like *Deception*, *The Resistance: Avalon*, and *Werewolf*.

These games are often referred to as social deduction games (also known as bluffing games), which focus upon either hiding information from your opponents or downright lying to them, while at the same time uncovering other players' lies. Though the core tenet is often the bluffing aspect, these games also typically involve hidden roles or secret identities. In a hidden identity game, players will all assume the role of a character, which will not be shared publicly with the group. The characters are typically divided between two



In Werewolf, players are dealt a card that determines their hidden identity.

teams. The players then try to award victory to their team while not revealing their true identity.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

One of the hallmark social deduction games out there that does this very well is *Ultimate Werewolf*, a game that has been published by Bezier Games. In *Werewolf*, most players will be common villagers, but some will have special roles that will award them abilities, including the main antagonists—the werewolves—and a moderator who will facilitate the game (though *One Night* versions of the game are quicker, require less players and use an app to circumvent needing a moderator).

The game is played in two phases: night and day. During the night, the werewolves will kill one villager while the rest of the players sleep, and the moderator will ask the deceased player to reveal their identity. During the day when the villagers wake up, the entire group must discuss the night's murder and determine who the werewolf might be, voting to hang the person they suspect. If they pass a vote, the player's identity is revealed. If this player was indeed a werewolf then the villagers rejoice! Though if they accidentally lost one of their own, they

might be more susceptible to werewolves subtly decimating their village.

Ted Alspach, the CEO of Bezier Games and designer of *Ultimate Werewolf*, commented on the *Werewolf* line. "At their core, social deduction games are about two things: trying to deceive other players, and trying to uncover deceptions. The great thing about *One Night Ultimate Werewolf* is that you're often doing both of these simultaneously. By contrast, in *Ultimate Werewolf* or *The Resistance*, you're only doing one of those two depending on your role."

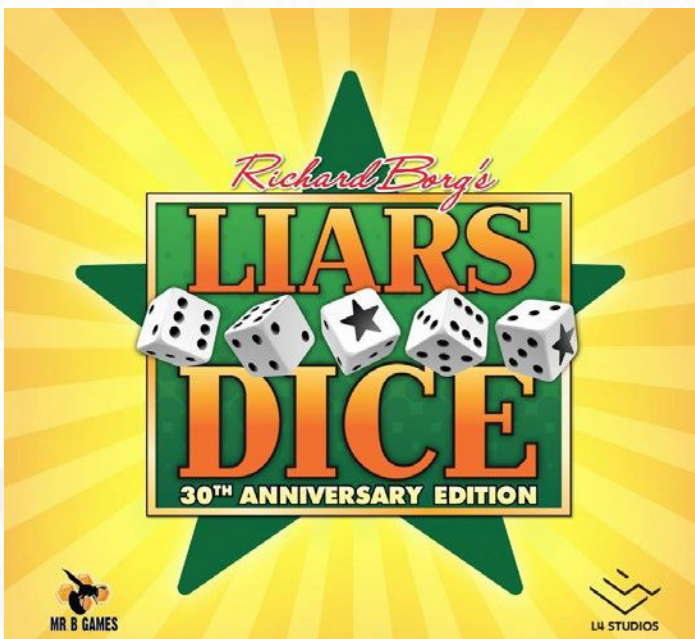




ROLLING DICE AND CHECKING BAGS

There are other social deduction games that utilize bluffing but do not have hidden roles. One classic example is a game by the esteemed designer Richard Borg (best known for the Command and Colors System) called *Liar's Dice*. The game was originally published by Milton Bradley in 1987

and was republished as *Bluff* in 1993, when it became the 1993 Spiel des Jahres winner. With *Liar's Dice*, every player rolls a certain number of six-sided dice and keeps the results hidden under a cup. Once they take a look at what numbers they rolled, one player begins by guessing how many dice showing a certain number have been rolled. (“There are eight threes on the table.”) Players then go around the table, either declaring a higher quantity of dice (“nine threes”) or a higher number shown on the dice (“eight fours”). When someone makes a guess that seems inaccurate, a player can challenge them. All dice are revealed, and the difference between the guess given and the actual number of dice is removed from the player who was wrong. It encourages reading the players’ reaction to adjusting a certain amount of dice, or guessing a certain number, that clues you in to what they may have under their cup.



Another notable title to have come out in recent years that challenges your insight is *Sheriff of Nottingham* by Arcane Wonders. In *Sheriff of Nottingham* players are competing merchants trying to get the most goods to market. However, there is a sheriff watching over the market, making sure that they don't bring in any contraband. The trick is one player

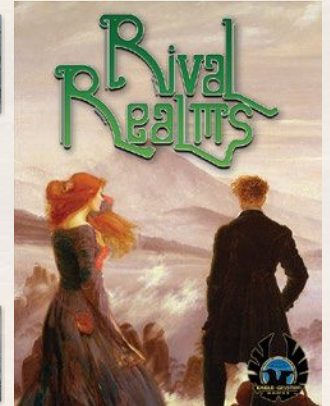
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will become the sheriff every turn and all the other merchants will place cards that represent their goods into a bag to give to the sheriff. They then must declare to the sheriff what is in the bag, including the actual number of cards and only one type of legal good. For example, if a bag contains four apples (legal good) and a crossbow (contraband), the

player could declare four apples. The sheriff can take bribes to agree to not check certain bags, or open the bag to see who is lying. When merchants are caught lying, they must pay penalties. Otherwise, if the sheriff opens a bag that matches the merchant's declaration, the sheriff must pay penalties.



“ It’s fun to [lie] without the negative consequences that real world lying might have. When it’s part of the game, it lets players act in a way they really couldn’t [...] in regular social interactions. ”

— Ted Alspach
CEO of Bezier Games

WON'T SOMEBODY THINK OF THE CHILDREN?

As the tabletop game industry has grown in the past several years, so has the category of social deduction games where players are encouraged to lie to one another in order to win the game. This brings up the interesting question of whether or not it is ethical to play games that encourage such blatant lying, or if this type of deception should be excluded from games.

There are many who may feel that any violence or other inappropriate activities in media (including board games) will have a lasting negative impact. According to this viewpoint, the games played in the community and the experience these games bring can widely affect a player's view of the world. If a game encourages becoming better at lying on command, it might not be seen as an entirely moral activity.

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Lying for pleasure might influence players to lie more often within real life, and tender-aged children who play these sorts of games may not know any better. Allowing players to develop their abilities to deceive and manipulate others is morally detestable to those of this mindset, and it may seem unreasonable for publishers to produce such games or for consumers to buy them. Why, then, would it make sense to make a habit of such a negative character attribute? Why enforce a behavior which society believes to be so morally questionable?

Alspach says the reason someone would play this sort of game is that “there’s something immensely satisfying with getting away with some sort of deception; crafting a narrative that is just believable enough that you convince most other players that you must be telling the truth. On the flip side, it’s really gratifying to figure something out, and then discover that you were correct.” Borg, the designer of *Liar’s Dice*, thinks the appeal of social deduction



games is that they have “easy to explain rules...a quick result in determining a winner, and although there is some confrontation, it is more trickery than a direct assault.”

YA GOTTA KEEP ‘EM SEPARATED

Contrary to the opinion that lying in gaming is always bad, others feel that bluffing games share no semblance of reality and that players will have no difficulty differentiating the two.

Though in real-life serious lies could get us fired from our jobs, dumped by our significant others, or in trouble with authorities, none of these issues exist in the world of social deception games. When you finish the game, in all likelihood life will go on as normal. Alspach said, “It’s fun to [lie] without the negative consequences that real world lying might have. When it’s part of the game, it lets players act in a way they really couldn’t (or, at least, shouldn’t) in regular social interactions.” Players should be mature enough to understand the difference between the two, and if so, they are not going to become chronic and compulsive liars because of it.

Additionally, there is something exciting, almost euphoric, about getting away with a massive lie in a tabletop game. However, lying in the real world not only carries heavy consequences but also leaves one with the feelings of sorrow, regret, and remorse. Additionally, as Borg points out, “Although the word ‘Liar’ is in the name of the game *Liar’s Dice*, it is really more about determining the odds and bluffing.” This is probably true of most games in this category.

Most gamers have strong moral codes that they wouldn’t just throw away simply because they found lying to be an engaging

and fun experience in a game. As a tabletop game player, it is easy to distinguish what should be left within the gaming world, the same way you would never try to interact with the real world as if it were a movie.

Even so, with issues like these, there are really no right or wrong answers. Maybe science will one day prove to what extent playing bluffing games has on the amount of lies a person tells. Until then the vote is still out. What do you think? 🎲

Join the discussion by tweeting to @AtherisAndrew with the hashtag #CGIBluffing.



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Josher Lumpkin

Freelance Writer and
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It's a quandary perhaps as old as board games themselves. You want a game that plays in a short amount of time, but has enough depth and choices to keep you interested. Maybe you're going on a trip and don't have room in your suitcase for a giant box. Or maybe you like to play games on your lunch break. There are times when you want a small game that plays in a short amount of time but still packs a lot of punch.

Not long ago, you simply would have been out of luck in these scenarios, but that was before Gamelyn Games' *Tiny Epic* series burst onto the scene. These games boast a big-box feel in a small package. The half-dozen titles in the series are all wildly different from each other; each covering different gaming ground. However, they all have the same features in common: play time in less than an hour, high-quality components, a box small enough to take with you in your purse or backpack, and interesting gameplay.

The *Tiny Epic* games are easy to learn and teach for the average casual gamer, yet they bring enough crunch to keep even hardcore table toppers engaged. A lofty goal, for sure, yet Gamelyn has managed to knock it out of the park with every one of these titles.

For Scott Almes, the designer of the *Tiny Epic* series and past CGI author, it just comes naturally.

"I've always been a bit of a tinkerer," says Almes. "When I get really into a hobby, I like to kind of make my own mark. For instance, I've always been an avid reader of all kinds of books, so I felt the need to put my own spin on things and started to write and got actually some short stories published back in the day."

Almes set his sights on creating board games and dove right in, finding design to be an extension of what he was already doing at the time.

"My day job is product development engineer. The process of bringing ideas into actual, physical realization and actual outcome marketing is what I do. Game design actually fits that very well," Almes explains. "That little engineering bulb in the back of my mind went, 'You know, I could probably do this, too.' It came super natural to me."

A Call for the Small

When Almes saw Gamelyn Games tweet a call for small-box game submissions, he jumped at the chance.

"I happened to be working on, at the time, a game called *Tiny Epic Planets*," Almes recalls.

Gamelyn Games founder Michael Coe liked the game, but the sci-fi theme wasn't exactly what he was looking for. Coe asked the designer if Almes could reskin the game with a fantasy theme.

"His response blew me away," Coe says, "because it's not that he came back and was like, 'Yeah, I'll think about it,' or 'Give me some time.' He literally came back the next day, with his very next reply to me, and he had already redone everything. He'd redone all

the cards. He'd redone the rulebook. He'd renamed it *Tiny Epic Kingdoms*, and was like, 'If fantasy's what you want, try it now!'"

A few months later, *Tiny Epic Kingdoms (TEK)* hit Kickstarter, where it was a huge success. Gamers loved the 4X-style (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate), area control play in which players, each controlling a unique fantasy race, or "faction," manage and carefully spend resources. BoardGameGeek.com even honored the game with a Golden Geek award for best print-and-play title.

"I think it was a little bit the right moment, the right time, for both of us," says Almes. "Michael obviously has a great business sense. He saw the game and knew what

Tiny Epic Timeline

Tiny Epic Kingdoms (2014)
2-5 players, 30-45 minutes



The 4X hit that started it all. In TEK, players travel around Aughmoore, collecting resources used for researching magic, expanding their populations, and building a tall tower. Combat uses a die which you do not roll, but instead is used to indicate how many of your resources you wish to allocate toward war efforts. Also available as *Ultra Tiny Epic Kingdoms*, which is the size of a deck of cards.

Tiny Epic Defenders (2015)
1-4 players, 30 minutes



In this cooperative game, the factions previously at war must team up against an epic scourge that wishes to annihilate Aughmoore. Players take turns drawing a card from a turn deck. Most are enemy cards which raise the threat level of specific regions, but others allow players to take actions such as move, defend, and fight.



Gamelyn Games founder Michael Coe and Tiny Epic game designer Scott Almes

he could do with it. We both had this fire underneath us, I guess. It's just amazing where it's grown from there."

Gamelyn followed *TEK* up with the cooperative game *Tiny Epic Defenders*, which was also extremely successful on Kickstarter. Both *TEK* and *TED* are set in a highly immersive fantasy world called Aughmoore.

Since then, the series has exploded. Coe and Almes have released at least one new title every year, as well as expansions to two of the games. Thanks to a devoted Kickstarter following, the *Tiny Epic* games have flourished and thrived.



Breaking Orbit

It was the third entry, 2015's *Tiny Epic Galaxies*, which really made the series blast off into the board gaming stratosphere. In *TEG*, players roll fistfuls of dice in glorious pursuit of galactic conquest. The game was an instant smash on Kickstarter, raising over \$411,000. The game

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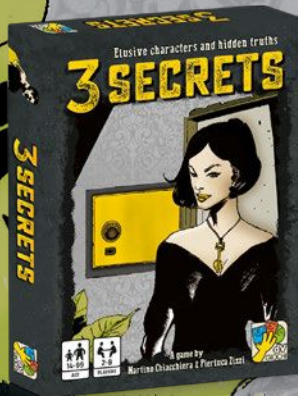
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Tiny Epic Timeline (continued)

Tiny Epic Galaxies (2015)

1–5 players, 30–60 minutes



You could say the series really took off with *TEG*. This sci-fi hit has players chucking dice and activating their different faces to take actions. They move their ships onto the surfaces of randomly selected planets, or attempt to colonize them through economy or diplomacy. They acquire energy and culture from the planets, which they can use to upgrade their empire, giving them more dice to roll and ships to use. Highly recommended.

Tiny Epic Kingdoms: Heroes' Call (2016)

1–5 players, 30–60 minutes



This expansion adds 13 new factions to *TEK*. It also introduces two new regions to the territories of Aughmoore, tundra and snowy peaks. Silver, a wild resource, is now available. War towers were added that reduce the price of combat for the owner, but they can also be attacked! Heroes are now also in play, with their own special abilities. Retired heroes are worth 3 victory points at end game.

was featured on Wil Wheaton's Tabletop web series, which made it even more popular. *TEG* fetched Gamelyn their second Golden Geek Award, this one for best solo play.

One of the hallmarks of the *Tiny Epic* series is that each title has its own solitaire variant. Yet the games have also been lauded for how well they scale for different player counts. According to designer Scott Almes, that's one of the most challenging aspects of creating a *Tiny Epic* game.

"From a design point of view, the fact that it has to be able to be played solo up to four or five players is a very intense goal," Almes explains. "A lot of games can't go that way. The goal, of course, is for someone to be able to look at the box and for any player count in that range, it should be worth the 25 dollars. So, if someone buys it only for solo play, we want it to be worth that. The bottom line is that some games just can't become a *Tiny Epic* game because they can't handle that scale count. Some mechanics, like auctioning or trading just don't scale well into that unless they're a modified version."



Taking a Gamble

Gamelyn Games continued to shake things up in 2016 when they released *Tiny Epic Western*, a unique entry in the series that fuses worker placement with a unique poker mechanic. The game is completely unique from anything else in the series.

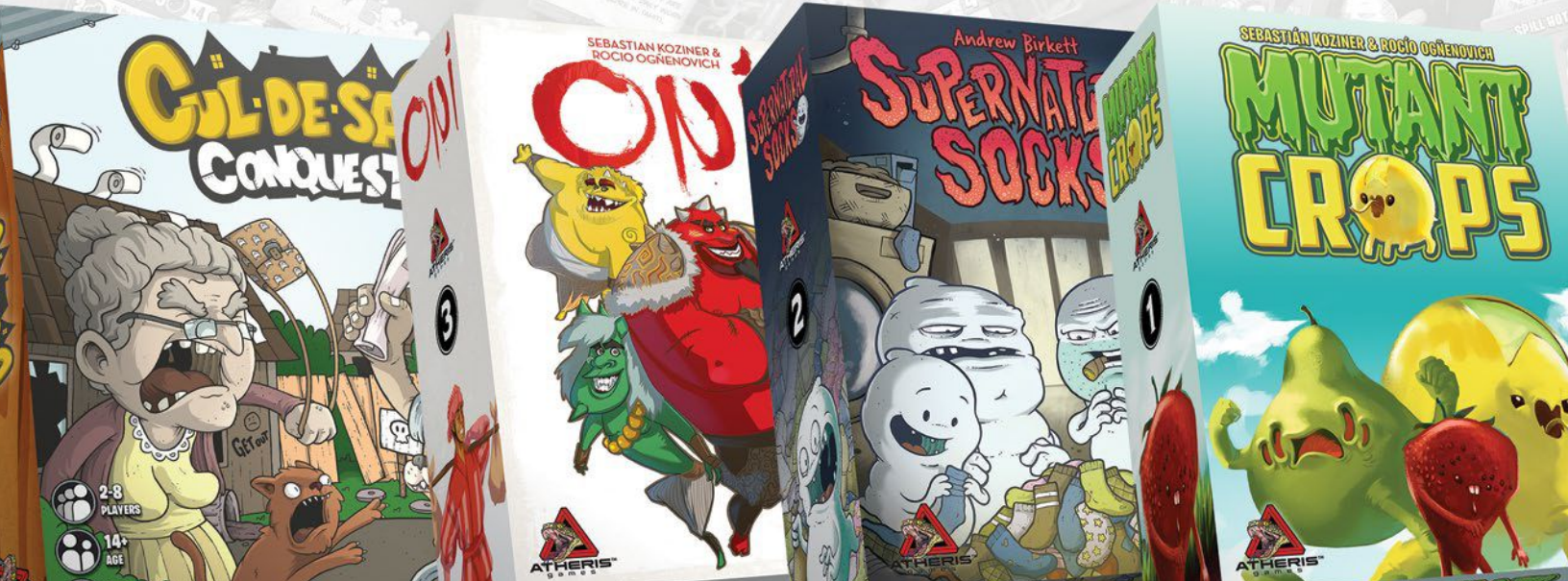
"It started with a crazy idea," Almes remembers. "We knew we wanted to do a western next, so when deciding on mechanics, I wanted to do it as a worker placement game. I liked the idea of putting your cowboys around town. The initial note I made myself was 'Worker placement plus poker.' The whole game was built around that idea. That was the core that kept the whole thing together and we did a lot of development work on it."

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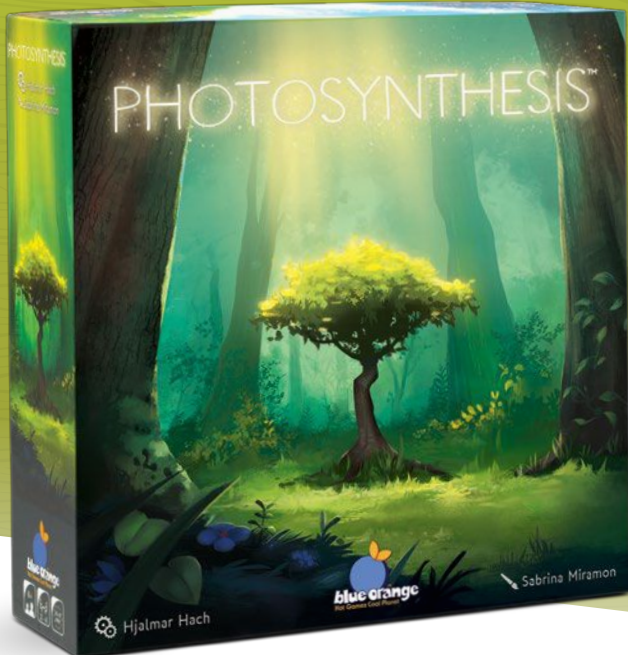
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Tiny Epic Timeline (continued)

Tiny Epic Western (2016)

1-4 players, 30-45 minutes



In *TEW*, players assign their posse members to various locations around town, collecting resources they use to build new buildings. Unlike other worker placement games, players can choose to take a small immediate reward or a larger prize if they wait until the end of the round to collect. Players can duel for a space's reward. There's also an awesome poker mechanic where players compare hands to win even more goodies.

Tiny Epic Galaxies: Beyond the Black (2017)

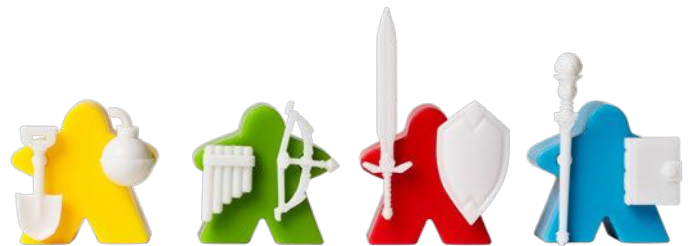
1-5 players, 30-60 minutes



Making an awesome game even more epic, this expansion adds a bevy of new choices to the galaxies. Players can now contract pilots to fly their fancy new upgraded ships. They can also now press their luck in unexplored space, risking danger in hopes of making discoveries. *BtB* also brings a cool set collection mechanic for end-game scoring. This expansion will make your head spin, in a good way.

The Gamelyn team avoided a logistics dilemma by making a few changes to traditional poker rules and switching up the standard playing card format.

"The idea was to have one card in your hand to compare with your neighboring spaces to make a three-card hand," Almes explains. "The problem you have with any *Tiny Epic* game is you have to keep your component count low. If you have a 54 card poker deck, that's almost half your components right there. So we trimmed it down to just three suits and limited numbers. Then I saw the ability to have the modified *Texas Hold 'Em* feel, where you get to choose where your card gets placed. It all came together really quickly, but the mechanics around it changed a lot during development."



All the Small Things

Part of what makes the *Tiny Epic* series so cool isn't just the gameplay, but the incredible components. Gamelyn takes pride in offering games with high-quality and inventive new pieces. For instance, in the most recent release in the series, 2017's *Tiny Epic Quest*, Gamelyn patented "ITEMeeples," ingenious plastic meeple pieces with small holes in which accessories can be inserted.

Michael Coe explains, "One of the things we wanted to give was the experience of traveling an overworld, going into dungeons, and filling your inventory with awesome items. You've got three characters, and they all look the same, and they share the same player card. We needed to have some sort of way to represent, 'that one is the guy holding the sword' and, 'that one is the girl holding the shield.' We needed to be able to distinguish that."

Gamelyn struggled with how they should represent those items in play without making players manage three different character sheets.

tiny EPIC QUEST



Your Quest Awaits



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tiny EPIC QUEST



www.GamelynGames.com



Tiny Epic Timeline (continued)

Tiny Epic Quest (2017)

1–4 players, 30–60 minutes



This incredible exploration adventure game draws inspiration from console RPG video games of the '80s and '90s. Players travel by day, attacking goblins at portals, exploring temples for cool items, taking special actions in mushroom grottos, learning spells, and gaining health and power at castles. At night, players roll dice for good or bad outcomes. This title includes the patented ITEMeeples — plastic meeples that can be equipped with items.

Tiny Epic Defenders: The Dark War (2018)

1–4 players, 20–60 minutes



The latest in the chronology of the world of Aughmoore, *TDW* adds new defenders, locations, dire enemies, epic foes, and artifacts to *TED*. Defenders can now obtain experience points and level up, earning them new skills. Players must also spend experience points to deliver a caravan to the capital city if they wish to win the game. *TDW* even introduces a new campaign mode. (Coming Summer 2018)



“It’s not like we could’ve just had the items on cardboard punch-outs. We had considered some other options, but ultimately it came down to making the meeples hold the items, and why not just do it right and do it in the best way that we possibly could?”

Once they’d set their minds on making the meeples able to equip the items, however, Gamelyn had to consider the financial feasibility.

“It was very expensive. The cost of the molds for *Tiny Epic Quest* were through the roof. I’m convinced that most publishers out there wouldn’t touch a \$25 game with the kind of mold costs and innovation that we’ve done with these components. They would have insisted that it be a \$50 game that has to come in a big box. But that’s the difference between Gamelyn Games and other publishers. Our backers and fans have been very good to us, so they’ve given us the ability to innovate with these products so that we can give back to them and continue to blow their minds with new components.”

A Large Following for a Tiny Series

Gamelyn Games hopped on the Kickstarter wave at just the right time to ride it out. Along the way, they’ve continued to pick up new, loyal fans who have helped carry the *Tiny Epic* series.

“We’re in a unique situation because we have a series of games, and it’s like a rising tide. When one does well, they all do well. The series continues to help itself in that sense. When we release a new game in the series, I know that a lot of people will come and

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support it because they don't want to have a gap in their collection. They really like the series and they want to have all of the games. But we don't take that for granted," Coe says. "We understand that from a creative standpoint that you're only as good as your latest work. So never once have we leaned on it being a series in order to sell the next title."

The folks at Gamelyn Games intend to continue to release high quality and groundbreaking new games that aren't quite like anything else on the market.

"We've always made sure that when we release a new game we're convinced it's the best in the series," Coe says. "Otherwise we wouldn't feel comfortable releasing the game. I'm not going to be releasing something that I knowingly would admit is subpar.

If it's not going to push the envelope and make the series that much more compelling, then I'd rather be working on something that would."

Will Scott Almes and Michael Coe ever run out of ideas for the *Tiny Epic* series? Not if they have anything to say about it.

"I want to make sure there's always *Tiny Epic* stuff in the works, which is so far not a problem," Scott Almes tells us. "We just came back from a game design retreat. The core people who work on the *Tiny Epic* series were there. We were talking about titles that aren't going to come out until 2023, so we work very far in advance. Every game you do, you learn a little bit more about game design or how to achieve player balance."



In addition to their smaller and more casual Tiny Epic games, Michael Coe and Scott Almes have also found epic success with their big-box game, Heroes of Land, Air & Sea.

As of this writing, both Coe and Almes remain tight-lipped about the next *Tiny Epic* title. It will launch on Kickstarter shortly after this issue of CGI hits newsstands — but Michael Coe did give us one tiny epic hint as to what we can expect.

"We have a lot planned for ITEMeeples with our next *Tiny Epic* game," he says. "So that's something that our backers can continue to look forward to seeing. It's going to get better and better and better." 🎲



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Mario jumps to board games in *Super Mario: Level Up!*, a game full of beloved characters, classic power ups, and one extremely cool board.



Naomi Laeuchli

Game Reviewer and
Casual Game Groupie

The game is played on a 3D game board with steps numbered zero through five, and a final top step numbered as ten. Each player starts the game with a score sheet and several vote cards (one ‘yes’ vote and multiple ‘no’ votes). Everyone is also dealt a Line Up card which lists six characters, then the first round begins.

There are two phases to each round: the placement phase and the movement phase. During the placement phase, players take turns selecting one character at a time and placing it on any level between one and four. After players have placed a certain number of characters, all remaining characters are placed on level zero. There are four spaces on each level of the board. After characters have been placed, question block tokens are shuffled and placed face down on any empty spaces on levels one through five.

During the movement phase, players take turns choosing one character and moving it up one level. You can only move a character to a level if there is an empty space or a question block on it. If you move a character onto a block, you take it off the board and flip it over. Some blocks will give you abilities which must be used immediately, while others can be saved to be used later. Some have you draw Power Up cards, which are kept secret until you choose to play them and can allow you to do things such as manipulate votes or exchange characters’ locations.

MSRP: \$20

Designer: [Uncredited]

Publisher: USAopoly

3-6 players, ages 8+, 10-30 mins.

When a character reaches the top step, players vote on whether or not to make that character the champion. A single no vote will mean the character is removed from the board for the rest of the round – however, you only have a certain number of ‘no’ votes each round, and they are discarded after being used. Once a character is elected the new champion, the round ends, and players reveal their Line Up cards. You earn points for the step number each character from your card is on. The board is then reset, new Line Up cards are dealt, and a new round begins. After three rounds, the player with the highest score wins.

Super Mario: Level Up! is more than just a fun theme and an eye-catching game board. Strategy balances nicely with the luck of the blocks, as players bluff, compromise, vote strategically, and maneuver characters into advantageous spots. Family friendly and gamer friendly, it’s a delightful trip to the Mushroom Kingdom.





Inspired by the classic dice game *Liar's Dice*, *Spills of War* is a game of deception, betting, and just the right amount of press-your-luck.

Each player has a dice cup along with six or more dice, and starts the game with seventy gold. One player is chosen as the Viking Chief and the game begins. There are nine stacks of treasure cards which increase in value as you go along. At the start of each round, the next stack of treasure cards is spread out. Some of them are Artifacts which have special abilities and are kept facedown, but all other treasure cards are placed face up for all players to see.

Players all roll their dice and keep the results hidden under their dice cups. Next, the Viking Chief chooses who will bid first. To bid, you say how many of one number appears on all the combined dice of all the players – for example, three sixes or two ones. Each subsequent player must either bid higher (more dice or a higher number) or challenge the previous bid.

Once a bid has been challenged, the betting phase occurs. All players secretly decide whether to side with the challenger or the defender and they each bet at least five gold coins. All dice are then revealed. The players on the losing side discard their bets. The players on the winning side get to keep their bets and select cards in order from the highest to lowest bet. The player who bet the most becomes the new

MSRP: \$24

Designers: Bryan Pope, Jason Medina

Publisher: Arcane Wonders

3-5 players, ages 14+, 45-60 mins.

Viking Chief and gets to take three treasures, while all other winners only take two.

The game is played over nine rounds. Player screens included with the game come with a handy guide to help you remember the round order (though they're a little too short to properly hide your gold from other players). At the end, players then calculate their gold, including what their treasure cards are worth as well as bonuses for collecting certain sets of treasure. The player with the most gold wins the game.

Spills of War has taken the key mechanics of *Liar's Dice* and added new mechanics to create something original and clever. The artwork is both rich and colorful and the components are all great quality. There's plenty of strategy as bidding comes down as much to what you have as it does to what other players have hinted with their own bids. The ample opportunity for bluffs and the set collection of the treasure adds just one more layer to an already rich push-your-luck dice game.



All the games featured here have received our Recommended award.





Agamemnon is a deeply strategic two player game in which you are constantly changing your strategy as the threads of fate shift around you.

The game board is made up of a series of spaces that are connected by lines or, as the game calls them, Strings of Fate. There are three different types of Strings and you can tell them apart by their pattern. During game setup, you place the String tiles on top of the Strings on the board according to the patterns. The Strings of a single type are considered connected when the spaces between them hold a player tile, so a String may be several tiles long. Each player then takes a set of fifteen playing tiles, and the game begins.

On your turn, you draw two of your playing tiles and place them each on an empty space on the board. Player tiles come in four types: Warriors, Leaders, Warps, or Wefts. Warriors have a strength of one to three. Leaders have a strength of one to four as well as a rank. Warp tiles allow you to swap any two String tiles that are connected to the space it is played on, while a Weft acts as an end point for any Strings that connect to it.

Once the last player tile is placed, the game ends and players check to see who won each String. The different types of Strings are won in different ways. Strength Strings are won by the player with the highest combined strength total connected to them, Leadership Strings are won by the player with the highest rank, and Force Strings are won by the player with the most playing tiles connected to them. Each string is won separately, so one player may win one Leadership String, but lose another. Players take the String tiles of the Strings they won and the player with the most tiles wins the game.

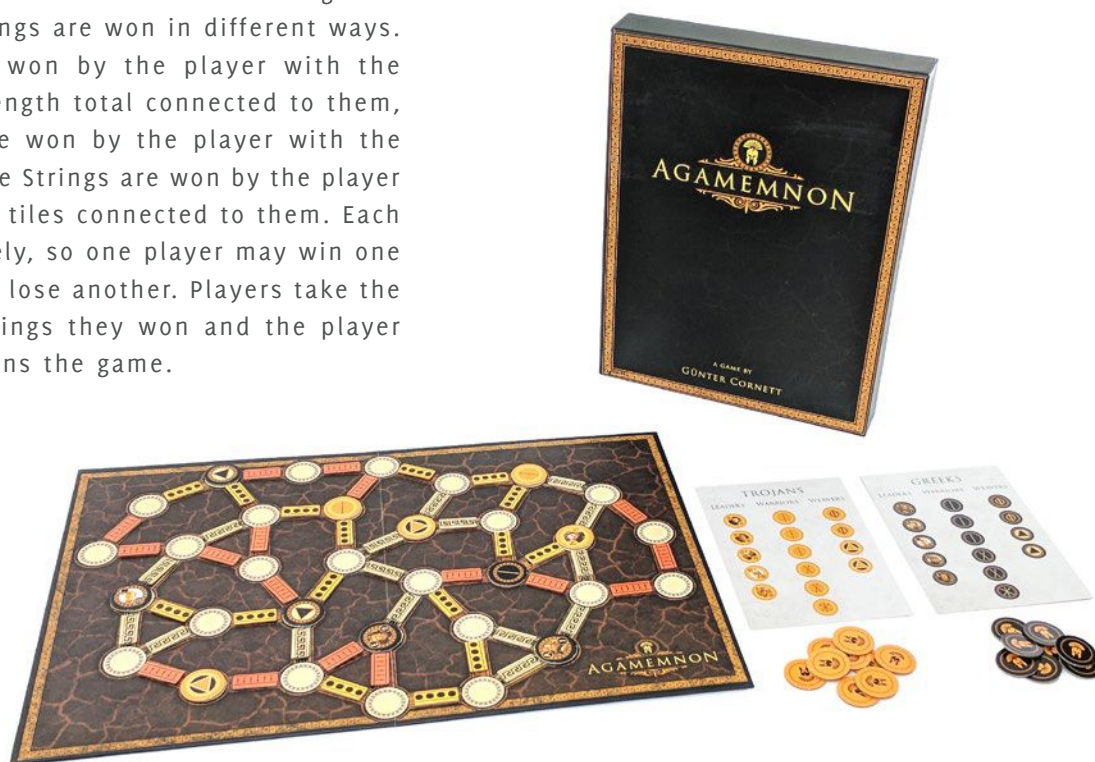
MSRP: \$24

Designer: Günter Cornett

Publisher: Osprey Games

2 players, ages 12+, 15-30 mins.

Agamemnon also includes a double-sided board, where one side randomizes where the different String types are placed and keeps the game fresh over multiple playthroughs. The game's player aid cards are the only real weak link as they only list the player tokens, with no reminder of how each String type is won. However, player turns are straightforward and simple while still packing quite the strategic punch. Each token counts towards each String it touches, so one token can affect multiple Strings. When you draw each token also affects how you can play it, as more and more spaces are taken up on the board during the game. This makes every decision important and packs each turn full of tough calls.



JAMES
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Tak

PATRICK
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A Beautiful Game
University Edition



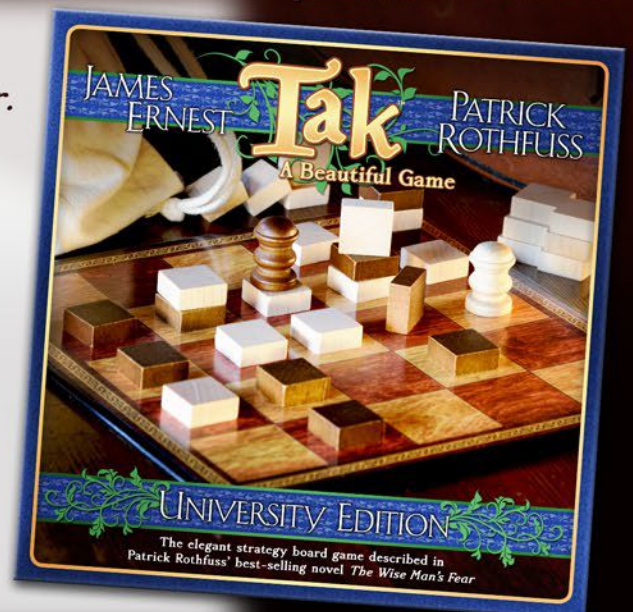
jamesernest.com/tak

Tak is the beautiful abstract game described in Patrick Rothfuss' bestseller *The Wise Man's Fear*. It is an elegant two-player game, a refined diversion from the court of Vintas.

"Tak is the best sort of game: simple in its rules, complex in its strategy." —Kvotbe

The University Edition of **Tak** is a compact and portable new version of this classic game.

Available **February 2018**



As escape rooms grow in popularity, more and more companies have been boxing the experience. *Deckscape: Test Time* does one better and fits it all in one deck of cards, making a portable, pocket-sized escape room.

The story of the game is straightforward: the players are all trapped in the Laboratory of Doctor Thyme. In the room is a series of puzzles you have to solve. All the cards in the deck are numbered to ensure they're in the correct order and they are also color coded. The deck is separated by color into four stacks of cards.

There are two types of cards: puzzles and items. Items are found during the course of the game and are used to solve puzzles. Puzzles show an image (such as a keypad, a drawer, or a secret panel) followed by a question such as 'which button do you press?' or 'what is the code for this lockbox?' When you believe you have the correct answer, you flip over the card. It will give the answer. If you were incorrect, you mark an X on your score sheet, but you continue onto the next card in the deck — unless you are missing an item card that the puzzle requires, in which case you earn a second X, and must wait to continue further along that particular deck until you have found the item elsewhere. Your final score is calculated by the time it took you to reach the end and the number of X's you earned.

As with all other escape room games, you can only really play the game once, but *Test Time's* size means it can be sold cheaply, so it's less of an investment for one game.



MSRP: \$12
Designers: Martino Chiacchiera, Silvano Sorrentino
Publisher: dV Giochi
1-6 players, ages 12+, 60 mins.

Nor does the fact that the game is entirely composed of a deck of cards limit it. There are some clever ideas in the design that we won't spoil here, but are quite ambitious and make for some unexpected twists.

Playing in a group, it can be hard to ensure everyone sees the cards you're working on, since you need to be careful not to see later cards, but the puzzles themselves are clever and varied. You never feel like you're solving the same puzzle twice. The game does come with two clue sheets should you ever get stuck.

Escape rooms aren't inherently portable, so to have that experience in a single deck of cards is a fabulous idea. *Test Time* may not be a game to be played more than once, but it does offer a fun experience that you can pass along to a friend once you're done. If you love puzzles and a tricky good time, you'll enjoy *Deckscape: Test Time*.



Read about more great escape room games in the Summer 2017 issue of Casual Game Insider.





Delve into ancient Japan in this card game with rich, historic art that is a treat to look at as well as play.

The goal of *Martial Art* is to either win twelve land points or to win three bridge icons. At the start of the game each player is given five cards from the draw deck. The land deck is shuffled, a land card is flipped face up (or two land cards if you have two decks of the game and are playing with three or four players), and the game begins. Land cards are worth between one to three points and some of them have a bridge icon.

Each player chooses a card from his hand and places it face down on the table. The cards are then flipped and the card with the highest value wins. This is the battle phase. However, some cards have special abilities that activate after the battle. Other cards have abilities that activate if you discard them from your hand. The archer card, for instance, can be discarded to add three points to your card in the battle if your battle card has a value of seven or lower.

The winner of the battle takes the land card. In a three or four player game, the winner chooses one of the two land cards and the runner up takes the other. If no one has yet won the game, all cards that were played during the round are then discarded, each player draws a new card, and a new round begins.

MSRP: \$15

**Designers: Adrian Marrs,
Jonathan Ruland**

Publisher: Spider-Goat Games
**2 players (2-4 with two decks),
ages 10+, 15 mins.**

There are two Legend cards worth thirteen points, which can't be drawn from the draw deck but are only won with card abilities. Knowing an opponent has a Legend and trying to figure out when he'll play it is a great example of the game's player interaction. You might have an assassin which can easily defeat a high card with its ability, but when should you play it? Is your opponent going after bridges or land points? Trying to figure out what your opponent will do next is where the game shines.

Played in about fifteen minutes, *Martial Art* packs a surprising amount of strategy, bluffing, and out-thinking your opponent into simple gameplay, a short amount of time, and cards that stand out with their lovely artwork.





Take a magical journey into a game that brings out your inner child, where the components are as whimsical as the gameplay.

HOP! is a dexterity game about trying to climb your character high up into the sky, represented by a multi-layered board. Everyone starts by placing their character on level one. The game will end once someone reaches the seventh level or loses all five of her balloons.

On your turn, you are the “Hurler” and must choose one other player to be your “Skewerer.” The Skewerer places his elbow on the table and points his index finger up. The Hurler must toss the game’s circular rainbow onto that finger. However, before doing so she must draw a dare card. The dare card gives you special rules for making your toss more difficult. It can also involve other players, bringing in someone to help with the toss or to sabotage you.

Before the toss, any players who are not involved in it can bet whether it will succeed or fail. Once the rainbow has been tossed, the Skewerer can lift his elbow off the table in an attempt to facilitate catching it. If the rainbow is caught and the dare was achieved, the Hurler advances to the next level of the board and the Skewerer takes one of the facedown cloud tokens that are scattered around the board (worth zero, one, or two points). If the toss fails, the Hurler loses one of her balloons. If you correctly bet on the outcome of a toss, you gain a dove token. If you bet incorrectly,

you gain a crow token. Once you have three of either token, you discard all of your birds and either advance a level or lose a balloon (depending on the type of bird).

When the game ends, players calculate their score by adding the points on their cloud tokens to the level their character has reached on the board. The highest score wins.

The mix of betting and dexterity is a fun combination which keeps all players invested in each turn. It’s also always fun to discover what the dare cards will come up with next. Out of the box, a few of the components were in imperfect condition, but for the most part the game looks fantastic, from lovely artwork to the richly detailed character figurines.

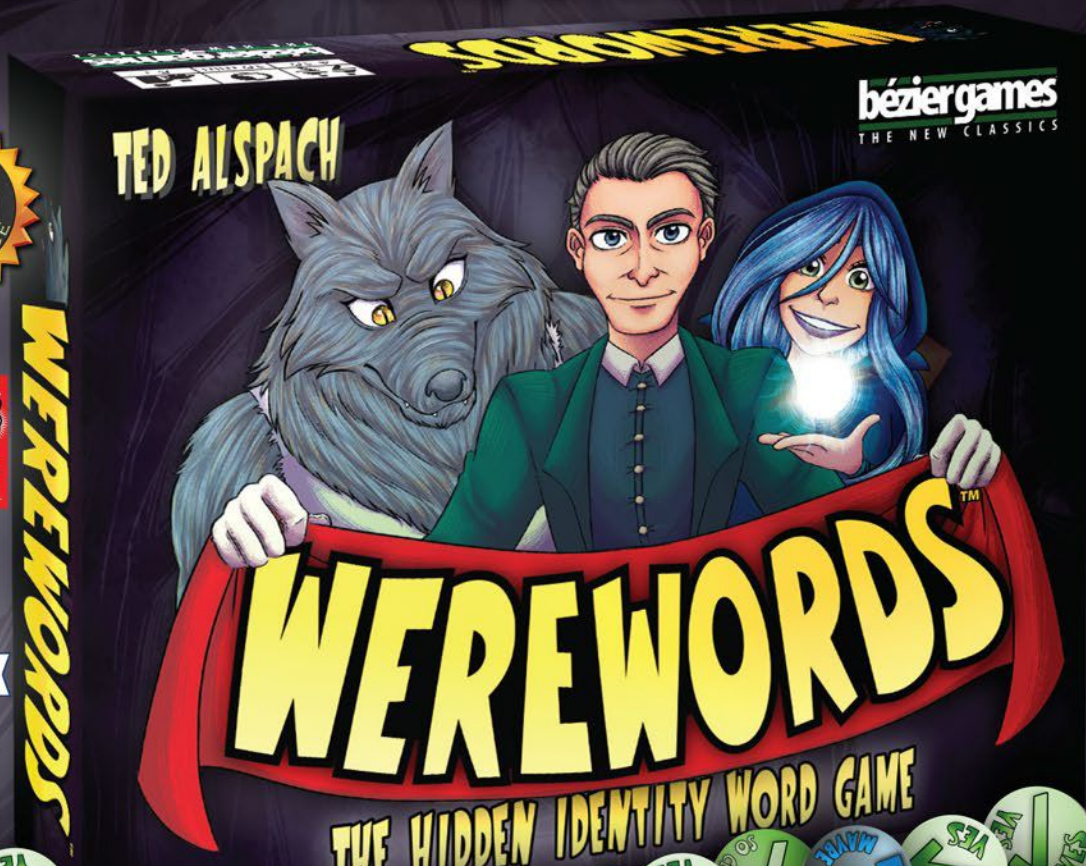
There is something light-hearted and quirky about *HOP!* that makes it fun no matter how bad you are at tossing that rainbow. The game’s story is that you are a group of children traveling to a fantastical kingdom, and the game captures that spirit beautifully. It’s a little silly, it’s light, and it’s joyful!

MSRP: \$30
Designers: Marie Cardouat,
Ludovic Maublanc
Publisher: Funforge
3-6 players, ages 6+, 40 mins.



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WordSpiel is a simple, spiraling word game that keeps gameplay quick and turns short.

Each round, players are dealt ten cards with a letter on them. The goal of each round is to be the first to get rid of all your cards. At the start of the round, the dealer draws the top card of the deck and places it face up on the table. The player on the dealer's left will go first and will use that card to build a word. When creating a word, you take cards from your hand and add them to the cards already on the table, in a spiral pattern. You can use as many cards from your hand as you want, so long as you are creating a real word when combining them with one or more of the last played letters. A timer keeps all turns under a minute.

If at any time you can't create a word on your turn, you draw a card from the deck and, before looking at it, decide whether to add it to your hand or to the word spiral. Each round you can also trade up to three cards from your hand with those from the deck. Once a player has run out of cards, all remaining players earn one point for each card still in their hand. All cards are then shuffled and a new round begins. The player with the lowest score after five rounds wins the game.

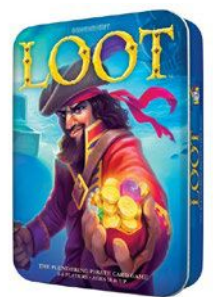
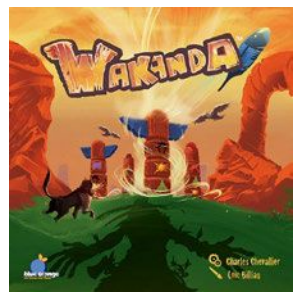
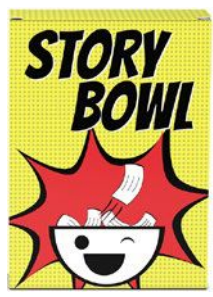
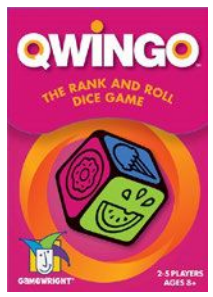
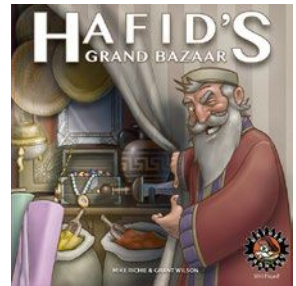
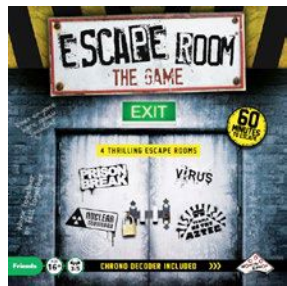
**MSRP: \$13
Designer: Marsha J. Falco
Publisher: Set Enterprises
1-6 players, ages 8+, 45 mins.**

Simple, easy to learn, and fast, *WordSpiel* is the perfect blend of casual game and word game, and creates a great meeting point for fans of either, or both. 🎲



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TAO LONG

THE WAY OF THE DRAGON



"There was something formless and perfect before the Universe was born. For lack of a better name, I call it the Tao."

LAO TSU

Tao Long is a circular abstract-like game in which each action taken leaves different options for your foe.

On it, each player controls a dragon striving to diminish the other. Both dragons, however, are bound to the Ba Gua, a special part of the board which players take turns manipulating, always influencing the possibilities left for the opponent.

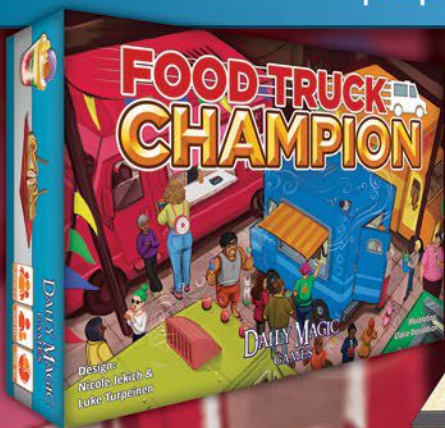
Among customizable scenarios and game modes with varying levels of difficulty, both dragons will move, attack, block each other's way and seek dominance. At the end, there can be only one.. That is, at least until tides of change come once again.



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