

# Casual Game™

## INSIDER

The Premier Guide to Casual Board and Card Games  
Issue #13 – Fall 2015



ALSO FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE...

*tiny*  
**epic™**  
*GALAXIES*

### THE RISE OF GAME CAFÉS

A new kind of gaming  
experience taking hold

PAGE 14

### GEN CON HIGHLIGHTS

The best games at this  
record-breaking show

PAGE 30

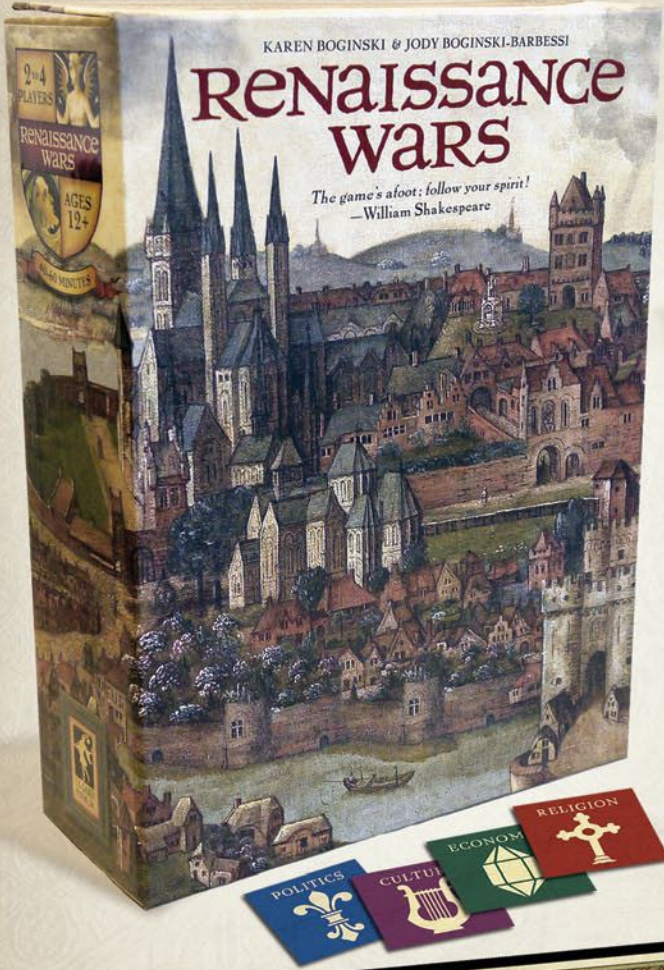
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30-minute game that offers an  
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PAGE 6

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# RENAISSANCE WARS



Take on the role of a Renaissance Luminary, battle opponents, and accumulate the wealth and power to dominate each Era of the game!



You must quickly adapt to changing circumstances and events, using the cards in your hand and the powers of your chosen Luminary.

But be careful...when you least expect it, an Intrusion may occur that completely upsets the balance of power and may destroy even the most carefully laid plans!

For 2 to 4 players, ages 12 and up.



CONTENTS: 128 Cards, 6 Luminary Mats, 4 (D4) Dice, 6 Card Envelopes, 1 Initiative Indicator, 4 Condition Markers, 4 Quick Reference Guides, 90 Coins, 1 Game Board, and a 28-page full-color instructional Guide Book.

**ERA ENVELOPES**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**  
1564-1616

ENGLISH POET, PLAYWRIGHT AND ACTOR, Shakespeare's work includes 38 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 epic narrative poems. Successful in his own time, the scope of his genius was only fully realized posthumously. He is considered by many to be the greatest dramatist in history and the finest writer in the English language. Shakespeare was a master at creating characters with human fullness and depth. His plays are studied by academics and enthusiasts alike, and are performed worldwide. Shakespeare created thousands of new words and phrases, many of which are still commonly used today.

*"And this, our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything."*  
- William Shakespeare, As You Like It

**The POWERS of WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

**DRAMATIC FLAIR**  
After winning a SKIRMISH, you may perform ONE of the following actions:  
Wordsmith: Automatically receive 5 FLORINS from the BANK for your contributions to the English language!  
Compose a literary work by rolling your die:  
1 → Flop: Pay 20 FLORINS to the BANK.  
2 → Moderate success: Take 5 FLORINS from BANK.  
3 → Sonnet: No one pays for poetry; receive nothing but the satisfaction of composition.  
4 → Mega Hit: Take 10 FLORINS from each opponent.

Woo an opponent's POPULACE card into the theatre by rolling your die:  
2 or 4 → POPULACE card joins your troupe and is placed on this LUMINARITY MAT.  
1 or 3 → Card remains with opponent.

**DEATH SCENE**  
Once per ROUND, target ONE CARD an opponent has played. Roll your die for the following results:  
1 → Boast off stage: Replace targeted card with an UNWANTED card.  
2/3/4 → Applause: Card remains in play.

**LUMINOSITY**  
You may lay down the SHAKESPEARE LUMINARITY card (unaccompanied by other cards) as a MELD for 20 FLORINS.

**CULTURE**  
**TO BE OR NOT TO BE**  
At the end of the ENCOUNTER PHASE, take 30 FLORINS from the BANK if CULTURE is the DOMINANT CONDITION.

**FLORIN DEPOSITS MEDICI VAULT**

1637

1500 1400 1300 1200 1100 1000 900 800 700

ERA 4 BEGINS ERA 3 BEGINS ERA 2 BEGINS

20 10 5

**CULTURE**

**THE MUSICIAN**  
THE RENAISSANCE saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of secular music, and the creation of new musical genres including the ballad, chanson, madrigal, motet, rondeau, villancico and virelai. MANY MODERN INSTRUMENTS, including the violin and guitar, were developed in this period. COMPOSERS OF NOTE: William Byrd, Joaquin Desprez, Guillaume Dufay.

**ERA 1**

2 IMMEDIATE INTRUSIONS  
2 IMMEDIATE EVENTS

**CONDITION MARKERS**



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VIDEOS:  
• INTRODUCTION  
• HOW TO PLAY



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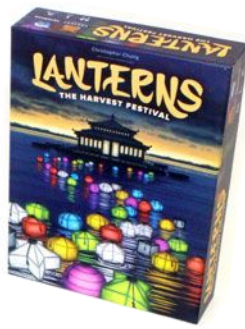
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6 **tiny epic** GALAXIES



8



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**GEN CON**  
THE BEST FOUR DAYS IN GAMING!

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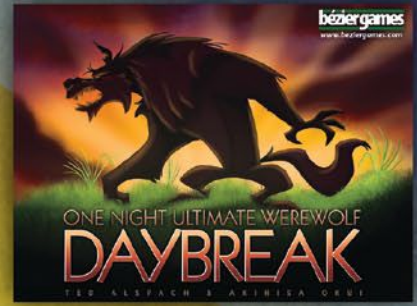


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Printed in the U.S.A.

“A casual board (or card) game is played in under an hour, set up and taught in under 10 minutes, and requires some light strategic thought. Casual games are not specifically marketed to children, but can be enjoyed by anyone from older children to adults.”



# ONE NIGHT ULTIMATE WEREWOLF™

No moderator. No elimination. 10 minutes. 3-10 players.



## ★ SPONSORS ★



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](http://GamelynGames.com)



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

[LooneyLabs.com](http://LooneyLabs.com)



Bezier Games, Inc. publishes award-winning party and strategy games, including *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*, *Suburbia*, *Castles of Mad King Ludwig*, *Terra*, and *Favor of the Pharaoh*.

[BezierGames.com](http://BezierGames.com)



SlugFest Games wants you and your friends laughing, shouting, and having a good time with games that are easy to pick up and hard to put down. If you love humor and clever mechanics, then you've come to the right place!

[SlugfestGames.com](http://SlugfestGames.com)



Daily Magic Games is a designer-friendly and customer-focused publisher specializing in casual tabletop games that are easy to learn and play, yet layered with strategy and depth.

[DailyMagicGames.com](http://DailyMagicGames.com)



NSKN Games is a small and robust publisher of games that combine engaging themes with cerebral gameplay. Regularly present on Kickstarter since 2014, we are also known for delivering quality products ahead of schedule.

[NSKN.net](http://NSKN.net)



Mayday focuses on light, family-friendly games like *Get Bit!*, *Walk the Plank*, *Click Clack Lumberjack*, and *Coconuts*, plus some strategy games like *Bootleggers* and *Viceroy*. We also manufacture an extensive line of card sleeves and accessories.

[MaydayGames.com](http://MaydayGames.com)



APE Games is the publisher of several great games, including *Rolling Freight*, *duck! duck! GO!*, *Island Siege* and the inexplicably popular *Order of the Stick Adventure Game*.

[ApeGames.com](http://ApeGames.com)



U.S. Games Systems has been producing quality games and specialty playing card decks for over 40 years. Our wide selection of games has something for every age and interest.

[USGamesInc.com](http://USGamesInc.com)

## ★ SPONSORS ★



Game time is quality time! Our four award-winning games have gone from our kitchen table to homes in many countries. When you want an engaging, portable, fun game, remember Grandpa Beck's Games!

[GrandpaBecksGames.com](http://GrandpaBecksGames.com)



Our mission at Renegade Game Studios is to publish games that are fun, challenging, and unique. We believe that gaming is for everybody and that everybody is a gamer; you may have just not found that right game yet!

[RenegadeGames.com](http://RenegadeGames.com)



Goldbrick Games publishes games that are challenging, exciting to play, and most of all...fun! Our line includes *Perpetual Commotion* and *Skōsh*, the trivia game for people who have more fun figuring it out than knowing it all.

[GoldbrickGames.com](http://GoldbrickGames.com)



Green Couch Games, founded by game designer Jason Kotarski, makes great little games that make great big connections; specializing in easy-to-learn card games for families, gamers, and families of gamers.

[GreenCouchGames.com](http://GreenCouchGames.com)



### FoxMind

FoxMind publishes and distributes an array of original games that are cunningly fun while underlying beneficial mind-sharpening skills. Founded in 2000, the company offers academically endorsed educational games, strategy games, and social party games.

[FoxMind.com](http://FoxMind.com)



Undaunted, back in 2005 we set out to create a line of games designed to get people out of their comfort zones and have fun while doing it.

[HaywireGroup.com](http://HaywireGroup.com)



An indie studio from sunny little Singapore founded by long time designer Dominic Huang that focuses on games that have either very unique themes or different mechanisms from the current tabletop universe.

[Medievalords.com](http://Medievalords.com)



Blue Orange Games is a leading creator of tabletop games that excite and challenge all ages. The company is driven to inspire families to "unplug" and connect over a game.

[BlueOrangeGames.com](http://BlueOrangeGames.com)



Stratus Games publishes quality casual games for bright minds! Our fun line of games includes the award-winning *Gold Mine* and *Eruption*, the hilarious improv party game *Off Your Rocker*, and more.

[StratusGames.com](http://StratusGames.com)



# TINY EPIC

— a way of gaming.

Rewarding gameplay, simple rules, high strategy, low downtime, short playtime, high replayability, and small footprint: these are the trademark qualities of the smash hit *Tiny Epic* series by Gamelyn Games, and they shine through in the latest entry into the series, *Tiny Epic Galaxies*, a game for 1-5 players that plays in just 30 minutes.

In *Tiny Epic Galaxies* each player controls a galactic empire, aiming to expand their influence by acquiring highly contested planets and increasing their cosmic armada. The game revolves around an innovative dice-rolling combo mechanic. The number of dice you roll is determined by the strength of your galaxy. Each die is beautifully crafted and engraved with symbols representing the various actions you can take, such as moving a spaceship, increasing your culture or energy resources, or advancing your political or economic influence over newly discovered planets.



Through careful planning, you must make the most out of your turn, taking the available actions in whichever order you consider most beneficial. But be careful, as each of your opponents can choose to follow each action you

take by expending valuable resources. This means that it can always be your turn, even when it is someone else's turn!

Players will colonize new planets throughout the game, thereby earning victory points and accumulating special abilities which they can activate for their galactic empire. Careful spending of resources will ensure the fastest growth of your empire, while allowing you to receive the biggest possible payoff from the actions you take.

Will your influence be enough to control the most powerful planets in the galaxy? Will you be able to meet your secret objective along the way? Will your empire stand victorious?

**PLAY TINY EPIC GAMES  
TODAY!**





## Fun Facts:

A stunning 15,000 copies have been pre-sold to *Tiny Epic* fans worldwide. The game has already been translated into four additional languages for the European market.

Available everywhere: October 30, 2015

MSRP: \$25



Following the success of award winning *Tiny Epic Kingdoms* and *Tiny Epic Defenders*, reviewers and board game critics call *Tiny Epic Galaxies* “the best one yet!”

The game comes loaded with individual player galaxies, a central activation bay and converter, beautifully illustrated planet cards, secret objectives, exclusive engraved dice, and high quality custom shaped wooden components – all packed into a box small enough to fit in your pocket! Truly both **TINY** and **EPIC**.

Race against the other players to claim control over powerful planets, or deploy spaceships to enrich your empire’s culture or to increase your energy supply. Special abilities allow you to make the most use of your turn actions, creating rewarding combos with high payoff.



a boredom solution company



*Gamelyn Games is committed to publishing world class board games for players of all ages. Each title is carefully playtested and produced using high quality materials, inviting artwork, and vibrant colors.*

[www.GamelynGames.com](http://www.GamelynGames.com)



# Lanterns: The Harvest Festival

If you're smart, what you do on your turn usually only benefits yourself. But what if your actions also benefit all of your opponents, every time? This is the unique twist behind the tile-laying game *Lanterns: The Harvest Festival*.



## Chris James

*Editor-in-Chief and Award-Winning Game Designer*

**MSRP: \$35**

**Designer: Christopher Chung**

**Publisher: Foxtrot Games, Renegade Game Studios**

**2-4 players, ages 8+, 30 mins.**

In *Lanterns*, players place tiles adjacent to one another to earn Lantern cards that can be used to make dedications for points. Each time a new tile is placed on the table, all players draw a Lantern card of the color that is facing them — thus, all players will earn at least one new card on every turn. The current player can earn additional cards by matching colors with adjacent tiles. Matching a tile containing a special Platform icon earns the player a Favor Token, which can later be exchanged for a card of any color.

To score points, players trade in sets of Lantern cards for Dedication tokens that contain various point values. It is possible to score with 4 cards of the same color, 3 pairs of different colors, or 7 uniquely colored cards. Each time a Dedication token is scored, the next available token may have a lower point value, requiring players to strategize early on for the best rewards. After all the tiles have been placed (and a final round completed), the harvest festival begins and the player with the most points wins.

If you are looking for a game with meaningful player choices, *Lanterns* is the game for you. Every tile placed has an effect

on the game, whether it matches the adjacent tiles or not. The challenge is to ensure that you place each tile in such a way that it benefits you more than your opponents by matching colors and possibly earning Favor tokens. But just collecting cards and tokens is meaningless unless you also make the right trades at the right times for the highest possible amount of points. It's intriguing, it's elegant, it's wonderfully produced, and it belongs in your game collection.





# Cube Quest

Sometimes you want to play a strategy game, other times you want a dexterity game. But can a game scratch both itches at once? *Cube Quest* is a two-player game that intends to do just that.

Players begin by setting out mousepad-style mats on the table that depict two opposing kingdoms. They then take a few minutes to create a formation in their kingdom consisting of cubes that represent various types of characters (King, Grunt, Striker, Healer, etc.). Cubes can be freely arranged or stacked as desired, including lines, groups, walls, or towers. Each character has different strengths, weaknesses, and special abilities – some are better for offense and others for defense. The King is the most important cube, however, and care should be taken to protect him adequately inside the castle area of the mat.

Players then take turns flicking one cube of their choice using a finger and thumb. Any cube that leaves the mat is defeated. If a cube lands in the opponent's kingdom with a captured ("shadow") side facing up, the cube is captured and the player must roll it like a die to determine if it escapes or is defeated. If it escapes, it is placed back in the castle; otherwise it is removed from play. The first player to defeat the opposing king by knocking him off the mat, wins.

**MSRP: \$35**

**Designers: Oliver & Gary Sibthorpe**

**Publisher: Gamewright**

**2 players, ages 8+, 15 mins.**



## WARNING:

*Cube Quest* is highly addictive and should only be played by responsible adults. Or irresponsible adults. Or anyone with opposable thumbs.

This is one game we had serious trouble putting down. Sure, it helps if you're good at flicking things precisely. But perhaps more important are your starting formation and your choice of cube to flick on each turn. For about 15 minutes or less, you have an active, engaging, shout-out-loud battle to the finish – then you can't resist playing again to see if you can build an even better starting formation. Advanced players can even draft a custom team of cubes based on a point value system. Aside from a few possible wrinkles in the mats, the components are great and the cubes are hollow and light enough to avoid much finger pain after repeated plays.



## Juxtabo

If you enjoy abstract (themeless) games like *Connect 4* or *Qwirkle*, *Juxtabo* just might be the game for you. While it gives off a sense of familiarity, it is quite unlike any game we've played.

The object of the game is to stack colorful, double-sided discs to create patterns of 3 or 4 discs that match those on your Challenge cards. The game begins with a single layer of discs arranged in a square formation and players add a stack of discs on exactly 2 spaces during each turn. Discs must be stacked so that similar colors are on top of each other. For instance, a player can convert a yellow space to blue by placing a yellow/blue disc on top of it. Colors can also be "chained" using multiple discs — so, converting yellow to blue can also be accomplished with a yellow/green, green/purple, and purple/blue disc stack.

When a player spots a pattern that matches one of his two Challenge cards, he shouts "Juxtabo!" and wins that card. This can occur on any player's turn. When the draw bag is depleted and no more discs can be played, the game ends and the winner is the player who captured the most Challenge cards.

**MSRP: \$30**

**Designer: (Uncredited)**

**Publisher: Funnybone Toys**

**1-4 players, ages 6+, 30-40 mins.**

*Juxtabo* has a very simple premise, yet it is deceptively challenging. It requires much planning and thought to identify potential matches and create the right color combinations with stacks of discs. Since everyone shares the same play area, stacking discs on the right spots can also hinder an opponent's carefully crafted plans. To facilitate play among a variety of skill levels, it is possible to customize the game by changing the size of the play area, using cards with easier or harder patterns, adding a timer, etc. While the game is very well made, with a sturdy draw bag and brightly-colored components, the discs could benefit from poker-chip-style "teeth" to aid in stacking.





# Dragonflame

Ah, a day in the life of a dragon – burning villages, plundering castles for treasure and princesses, driving fear into the hearts of the locals – could it get any better? The only problem is that you’re not the only dragon out there. If you want to be the most feared dragon of all, you’ll have to step up your game with *Dragonflame*.

The object of the game is to earn the most Glory points by collecting loot and burning villages. Village cards are placed in a 3x3 grid on the table and Castle cards are placed in a row. In each round, players are dealt 3 cards, which they take turns placing (one at a time) onto the Castle cards. After all of the cards have been placed, each player decides which of the castles to keep for himself, along with all of the cards it contains. Different cards score points in different ways, either individually or in sets. Some cards are worth negative points or bring a curse upon the player. *Dragonflame* cards allow a player to place Fire tokens on one or more villages in a row or column – the players who add the most fire to each village will score big at the end of the game.

In this set collection game, there are many ways to score. However, what really makes the game unique is that the cards dealt to players in each round do not yet belong to them – they must first strategize how to divide them up among the castles. Some cards are placed face up, while others remain hidden. Choosing a castle not only earns cards, but it also determines the turn order for the next round. This card dealing/drafting mechanic adds a layer of bluffing and

**MSRP: \$30**

**Designer: Matt Loomis**

**Publisher: Minion Games**

**2-5 players, ages 13+, 30 mins.**

psychology that ultimately drives the fun of the game – for instance, how can you entice an opponent to choose a castle that secretly holds a curse? How can you get the cards you want the most even if you are the last player to choose? This little game holds a hidden depth that is enjoyable to both casual and experienced gamers, alike.





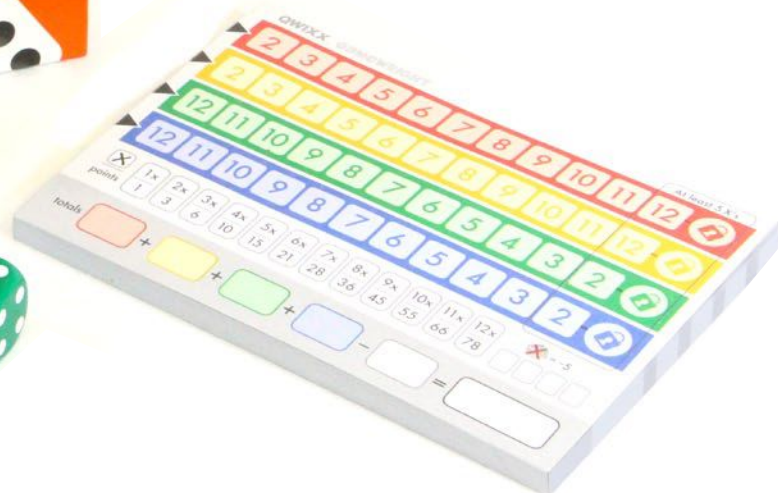
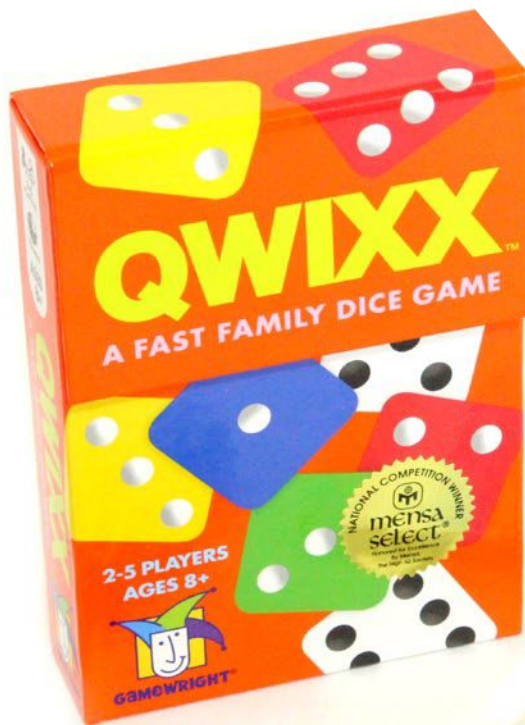
# Qwixx

Qwixx has been on our radar ever since it received international acclaim with a *Spiel des Jahres* nomination in 2013. Since winning the *Mensa Select* award in 2014, the English edition has gained a lot of traction in the U.S. — but what is it that makes this little dice game so special?

In the game, each player is given a scoresheet with rows numbered 2 through 12 in red and yellow, and 12 through 2 in green and blue. The object of the game is to cross out as many numbers as possible to earn the most points. However, they must be crossed out from left to right — a player cannot go back and cross out numbers that were skipped previously. On a turn, the current player rolls 5 dice (2 white and 1 of each of the 4 colors). The sum of the white dice is available for all players to cross off a number in any row. The current player can also combine 1 white die and 1 colored die to cross

out the sum in the row of that color. If the current player does not cross out any numbers, he must take a 5 point penalty. A row can be “locked” (preventing other players from using it) by crossing out at least 5 numbers, followed by the final 2 or 12 in the row. After 2 rows are locked or a player crosses out 4 penalty boxes, the game ends and points are totaled.

It may sound more complicated than it really is, but the appeal of the game comes down to the tough choices it creates on every turn — even when you’re not the one rolling the dice. This removes downtime between turns and it helps to equalize the playing field. It’s simple, it’s charming, and it creates more interesting choices than similar games like *Yahtzee* — a winner in our book.



**MSRP: \$11**

**Designer: Steffen Benndorf**

**Publisher: Gamewright**

**2-5 players, ages 8+, 15 mins.**



## Bellz!

A small, zippered pouch; colorful, custom bells; a wand with magnets of different strengths on each end — put them together, and you have *Bellz!*, a surprisingly addicting dexterity game for all ages.

Setup is a snap: just unzip the pouch and mix up the bells. Then, each player takes turns using the magnetic wand to try to pick up as many bells of the same color as possible. Bells can be chained together to pick up more, but if any drop outside of the playing arena or a bell of another color is picked up, the turn ends and all bells are returned to the arena. Players have the choice of using a weak or strong magnet — the strong magnet can pick up



more bells, but the weak magnet is less risky. The first player to collect all the bells of his own chosen color wins.

As with nearly every magnet game we've tried, *Bellz!* is great fun. It requires precise movements and concentration to grab only the bells you want and avoid the rest. But what makes it particularly interesting is the press-your-luck element that allows you to continue to try for more bells by chaining them together. Each time you try for more, however, you risk losing all of the previous ones. With its brightly-colored jingle bells, the game easily captures the attention of bystanders. It's a perfect solution for parties, family activities, schools, youth groups, or even as a fun start to your next game night. 🎲

**MSRP: \$20**

**Designer: (Uncredited)**

**Publisher: Wiggles 3D**

**2-4 players, ages 6+, 15 mins.**

## ★ RECOMMENDED GAMES ★

For a complete list, visit [CasualGameRevolution.com/games](http://CasualGameRevolution.com/games)

### Casual Games

Alpha Bandits  
Backstab  
Bang! The Dice Game  
Battle Sheep  
BraveRats  
Camel Up  
Can't Stop  
Carcassonne  
Castle Panic  
Chocoly  
Cube Quest\*  
Dozen Doubloons\*  
Dragonflame\*  
Eruption

Evolution  
Fastrack  
For Sale  
Forbidden Desert  
Forbidden Island  
Get Bit!  
Get Lucky  
Gold Mine  
Gravwell  
Hanabi  
Hive  
Hold Your Breath  
Incan Gold  
Indigo

Just Desserts  
Juxtabo\*  
Kerflip!  
King of New York  
King of Tokyo  
Kulami  
La Boca  
Lanterns\*  
Let Them Eat Shrimp!  
Love Letter  
Ninja Dice  
Pairs  
Qwixx\*  
Rattlebones

Relic Expedition  
Scotland Yard  
Sellswords  
SET  
Smatrix  
Splendor  
Stuff & Nonsense  
Survive  
Sushi Go!\*  
Takenoko  
The Hare & the Tortoise  
Ticket to Ride  
Tsuru  
Walk the Plank

\*Newly added

### Party Games

20 Express  
Apples to Apples  
AttrAction  
Bellz!\*  
CDMC 3000  
Choose One!  
Coconuts  
Concept

Last Word  
Loonacy  
Mad QUAO  
Off Your Rocker  
Pluckin' Pairs  
RANDOMonium  
ROFL!  
Sketch it!

Skōsh  
Smarty Party  
Spot It! Party  
Snake Oil  
Taboo  
What's It?  
Wits and Wagers  
Word on the Street

Publishers: would you like to see your games reviewed or added to this list? Please send 2 sample copies to:

**Casual Game Revolution**  
1000 N. Beeline Highway #259  
Payson, AZ 85541



# BOARD GAME CAFÉS

*A Recipe for Success*



The world is full of obvious ideas, awaiting discovery in the dusty corners of the mind—the sorts of things that make you slap your head in disbelief when you hear how successful they are. “Wow,” you think to yourself, “why didn’t I think of that?”



**Matt Thrower**

Freelance Board and  
Video Games Journalist







For gamers, one of the most astounding of these missed opportunities is the rise of board game cafés. Bars and coffee shops often would stock a few battered games for patrons to enjoy. You'd see people bent over well-used copies of *Scrabble* or *Monopoly*, their beverages held dangerously over the board. It was just as common to see gamers putting out snacks and drinks on game night.

Eating, drinking, socializing, and playing games are all natural bedfellows. Yet it wasn't until 2010 that anyone connected the rising popularity and accessibility of board games with this phenomenon. That person was Ben Castanie, and he opened *Snakes and Lattes* in Toronto in the late summer of that year.

His business model was simple: patrons pay a flat fee upfront to come and play games from the café's vast selection for as long as they like. While they're there, they can order from a selection of sensibly priced food and drink. If players enjoy the games, they can buy copies directly from the café. Simple.

Yet on reflection, it isn't quite as obvious as it sounds. If a game café is to have wide appeal, the staff members have to teach games to customers. That's going to eat into profit margins. There's also the question of spoilage. We all know how nervous a certain type of gamer gets having Cheetos dust around their



*Draughts, located in London, is a board game café inspired by Snakes and Lattes. (Photos by Matt Hass Photography and EASTWEST ARCHITECTURE)*





*A game of Chess in the lounge at Draughts, London.*

*(Photo by Matt Hass Photography and EASTWEST ARCHITECTURE)*

precious games. How much worse are soup, coffee, and chocolate brownies wielded by people who don't own the games they're playing?

In spite of these problems, Snakes and Lattes was a triumph. Within a year they'd purchased an adjoining property, and knocked through the walls for extra space. Now, in 2015, they've brought alcohol into the mix with their new venture Snakes and Lagers.

## SPREADING THE LOVE

Their success has led to similar establishments springing up around the world. Draughts opened in London in 2014, after owner Toby Hamand heard an interview with an employee of Snakes and Lattes. "It happened when I had been at my old job for two years," he told me. "I was looking for something new and exciting to occupy my time."

A new business venture is never an easy ride, and Draughts was no exception. "I went freelance," Hamand continues, "spending all the time I could on planning how to open a café. I started off doing the things I was comfortable with, like building a website and creating a brand. I was contacted by Nick Curci, who was also looking to open a board game café in London and had seen my website. After many meetings, we decided it made more sense to collaborate than create two similar yet competing businesses."

Making a success of a board game café isn't just a matter of geography. Many owners have come up with a different spin on the original concept. One example is the Brooklyn Strategist which aims services at the family and educational market.

Founder Jon Freeman has a background in neuropsychology. "I noticed that my daughter, around the age of 7, was drifting into a world of digital isolation," he told me.





“There weren’t a lot of activities for her to participate in after school. I thought there has to be a better option of intellectual engagement than hanging out in front of digital media. I knew we enjoyed playing board games and I wondered if this was an activity that would generalize to other kids around her age.”

It turns out that he was right. “I started the business as an after school club program in our neighborhood,” he explained, “to see if other kids and parents would find it a valuable resource. Once that gained traction, there was enough demand from adults to offer a similar model in the evenings and weekends. Now we’re a full-time game café with after-school clubs, camp, and evening and weekend clubs for kids, adults, and families.”

To Freeman’s surprise, this offering has had an impact way beyond a space for people to socialize and play. “Parents have approached me in tears, thanking me for the service we provide for their kids,” he said. “They’ve noted substantial improvements in their school performance and social behaviors. They’ve also thanked me for providing a place in the neighborhood that ‘kids can call their own’ and where parents feel safe allowing their children to venture off on their own perhaps for the first time.”



*The bar at Draughts. (Photo by Matt Hass Photography and EASTWEST ARCHITECTURE)*

## HEAVY DUTY

Freeman and Hamand gravitate, like many gamers, toward heavier strategy titles. But they’re both aware that their establishments need to cater for a wider range of tastes. “Our library is intentionally very diverse,” Hamand told me. “We have kids’ games, family games, cooperative games, party games, betting games, and deep strategic games. We want to offer something to every person and group who arrives.”

Freeman is a little more discerning, because he wants to foster interest in more demanding fare. “Our bias is for

games that require moderate to intense strategy,” he revealed, “although we do keep around a handful of nostalgic games that may be less challenging but are popular due to sentiment. I think the success of game stores, in general, is creating an overall trend in ‘strategy games.’ The big retailers are catching on to this.”

But there’s another, more practical reason for limiting the games available to his customers. “Rent prices in Brooklyn and New York City are out of control,” he said. “Due to storage space limitations we have to cherry pick what





Customers at the Brooklyn Strategist enjoying some of the many games available. (Photo by Neil Beckerman)

we put on the shelves. We have a basement storage area for the rest, and customers are free to request any of the games in our library.”

The possibility of games getting damaged in use is something that owners have to accept. Part of the cover charge paid by patrons goes toward cleaning and replacing games. In Draughts they have a “missing meeples” box where

people can place stray pieces they find. This is regularly combed and the pieces returned to their home boxes. “It’s quite a fun challenge for our staff,” Hamand smiled.

Given this constant abuse, it’s surprising to learn that the Brooklyn Strategist has a small library of rare and out-of-print games. They don’t, however, give these out to kids without adult supervision.

## TEACHING THE CONTROVERSY

It’s understandable that hobby gamers would want to show customers the most interesting games. However, it leads to another problem: most people will be unfamiliar with even the paradigm of modern European-style games, let alone specific titles. So teaching customers how to play has to be an intrinsic part of the game café offering.

Both our owners don’t see this as a challenge, but something to celebrate. Draughts has “Game Gurus” at the café. “They have huge board gaming knowledge and are well practiced in recommending and teaching games,” Hamand explained. “The gurus are one of the reasons people are happy to pay for the cover charge.”

Freeman offered comparable comments. “One of the biggest attractions for our community is that my staff will take anyone through the rules and how to play a game,” he told me, “sometimes even sitting in and joining when time and social protocol permits.”

There’s a definite skill involved when trying to demonstrate longer, more challenging titles. “If you take a game like *Civilization*, it might take a couple hours for customers to get through the rule book,” he pointed out. “But we can usually shorten the process to less than 30 minutes.”

Hamand takes a more prosaic approach. “Some games that may take an hour to setup and teach are available in the library,” he said. “But they won’t be taught by the gurus.”





## FROM TABLETOP TO COMMUNITY

Whatever way the customers get to grips with the game, there's a definite element of gaming evangelism going on at most cafés. This is not surprising when the people that run them are so passionate about their hobby. They take positive delight in introducing the pleasures of modern gaming to neophytes. "A large proportion of our customers in our first months were very unfamiliar with board gaming," Hamand recalls. "They'd come to play *Guess Who?* or *Monopoly*. It's a very satisfying thing to show people who are new to the hobby our selection, then recommend a game they've never heard of and see them enjoying it straight away. One favorite is introducing people to cooperative games, like *Hanabi*."

Freeman had a similar story. "The lion's share of community members were not familiar with modern hobby or Euro-games," he said. "Especially when we first started. Our community has been more exposed to and interested in these types of games through playing them."

He wants people to go beyond play, however. "We also provide a game design and mechanics workshop. From time-to-time, we also have local game inventors providing demonstrations. This has also fostered a community interest in game play."

Freeman uses that word "community" a lot. It's at the heart of everything his café does. Indeed, it's at the heart of everything a board game café ought to be aiming to achieve. Because, as we all know, gaming isn't really about games: it's about the people you play them with. Otherwise, we might as well be at home, playing through a screen.

By making it about community, board game cafés become something special. No longer is it just a place to meet, drink, and play, it's somewhere we can learn about the people that matter most to us. Freeman describes the transformation best: "It's become a positive and supportive environment where families can escape from the duties of home – chores, work, and so on. A space where they can focus on each other."

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# Absence of Choice

Where “Roll & Move” Went Wrong

**R**oll the dice and move your piece that many spaces—sound familiar? For many people, the “Roll & Move” mechanic is the quintessential board gaming experience, being key in many mass-market board games like *Monopoly* and *Snakes & Ladders* for decades.



**Charlie Hoopes**

*Designer of Fill the Barn (and Hopefully More Published Games)*



In these types of games, movement is typically one-way on a board of sequential spaces, arranged in a track from a start space towards a finish space, or laid out to loop around a circuit. Board Game Geek uses the term “Roll/Spin and Move”, which it defines as “Games where players roll dice or spin spinners and move playing pieces in accordance with the roll. This term is often used derogatorily to imply that there is no thought involved.”

Some Roll & Move games replaced the dice with either a spinner or cards with numbers. As a child, the *Trouble*® *Pop-O-Matic*® was my favorite variation to the rolling of dice. Yet whether you rolled, spun, drew, or popped, they all shared that common mechanic of movement along a one-way closed path or circuit, where the number of spaces moved was determined by random chance, not human decision.

Ironically, the game mechanic best understood by typical American families has become the most frowned-upon mechanic among today’s casual game players, designers, and publishers. What is the fatal flaw of Roll & Move? Is it a bad idea for a game to randomize player movement? Before you instantly answer “yes,” remember that a recent Spiel des Jahres award winner uses Roll & Move—do you know which one?



The Roll & Move mechanic has been included in games like *Monopoly* for many decades.

## Roll & Move Through History

The game mechanic of rolling something to determine movement in a race along a path or circuit is thousands of years old. The original rules for some of the oldest board games uncovered in ancient tombs have been lost to time. Yet enough has been re-constructed about them to know that Roll & Move was their key mechanic. In Ancient Egypt, *Senet* players threw four double-sided sticks, then counted how many landed with their marked sides facing up to move pawns along a board of 30 houses (spaces). Ancient Mesopotamian players of *The Royal Game of Ur* rolled 4-sided dice to move their pieces through a board of 20 squares. 2,000 years ago, Roman soldiers rolled three 6-sided dice when playing *Tabula* (the direct ancestor of *Backgammon*). Indian players of *Pachisi* were throwing cowrie shells and counting the number whose

mouths landed face-up to determine how many spaces to move around a cross-shaped circuit several centuries before the Westernized variations of *Parcheesi* and *Ludo* appeared on American and British game shelves with dice in the late 1800s.





All of these games were played by ancient gamers who rolled and moved pieces along one-way closed paths or circuits. Yet ancient game players continued to play them long before the creation of any of the games on *Casual Game Insider's* list of recommended casual games. How did they stay on tables for centuries? These first Roll & Move games used multiple tokens to offer players meaningful choices. The key decision

every turn was which token(s) to move with that roll of the dice or sticks or shells. Players of both *Senet* and *The Royal Game of Ur* had to choose which of seven pawns to move. Like modern day *Backgammon*, *Tabula* players had to choose between 15 checkers. *Pachisi* was played by two teams of two players, with each player controlling four pawns.

## Modern Flaws

By contrast, many of the mainstream 20<sup>th</sup> century Roll & Move games only gave each player a single token. Interesting games engage players with interesting choices. When a game's use of the Roll & Move mechanic doesn't allow a player any choice of how many spaces to move, nor which direction to move, nor which piece to move, then it had better offer some interesting decisions after the player has moved their single pawn that number of spaces along the one-way track. If it doesn't, then the players are no longer playing a game—the game is using the players' dice rolls to play itself.

The fact that a game offers decisions isn't enough; those decisions must be meaningful. Games must offer meaningful decisions that avoid the pitfall of the *illusion* of choice. What is the illusion of choice?

Consider the 1980s' mass-market smash hit *Trivial Pursuit*. The object was to answer questions correctly to collect 6 pie-shaped wedges, each representing a different category of trivia. These wedges could only be earned by landing on a special wedge space and answering a question correctly.



*Trivial Pursuit* offered players a choice of which way to move, but often the choice was just an illusion.

While the game used a Roll & Move mechanic, players could choose to move either direction around the circular track (or through the center of the board). The example below demonstrates why this choice was often just an illusion.

## Imagine you are playing Trivial Pursuit, you roll a 3, and:

1. Moving clockwise lands you on a non-wedge space in a category where your knowledge is weak. Answer correctly and you Roll & Move again, but answer incorrectly and your turn ends;
2. Moving counterclockwise lands you on a wedge space of a category you need, giving you the opportunity to earn a wedge if you answer correctly.

You can choose to move either direction, but is this a meaningful decision? Only one of those choices is a good move. Every player at the table knows which direction you will choose before your hand ever touches your piece. Other players might even speak up if you don't choose that only obvious move. There is no strategic or tactical advantage to ever choose anything but that one clearly superior choice. **This is an illusion of choice.** While the situation gives the appearance of the player making a decision, that decision was already made for the player by the die roll.



## Meaningful Choices & Balance

By contrast, meaningful choices force players to decide between two (or more) equally attractive courses of action, each offering different benefits and costs. Choosing one of the benefits comes at the cost of forfeiting the opportunity to claim the other. Beyond limiting interesting player choices, there is another danger to using dice (or spinners or cards) for movement. That weakness is the difference between the lowest and highest possible movement values. For a typical six-sided die, those values are 1 and 6. The player who rolls a 6 moves six times further than the player who rolls a 1. That difference can matter in a race game when there is an advantage to being first to land on a space or cross a finish line. The laws of probability dictate that given enough dice rolls, the highs and lows will even out...over time. Those laws of probability are little consolation to the frustrated player in last place who has just rolled his third 1 or 2 in a row. Using two dice causes a bell-shaped distribution where rolls of 6, 7, and 8 become far more common than the extremes of 2 and 12. But 2 and 12 will sometimes be rolled, possibly giving a huge tactical advantage or disadvantage from a

random dice roll. Cards allow a game designer to alter the probabilities of how often certain movement values come up, yet the difference between the low and high extremes must still be considered.

### Is Roll & Move a flawed mechanic?

Not necessarily, so long as a game uses the mechanic carefully in a manner where the game:

1. Offers players meaningful decisions
2. Avoids illusions of choice
3. Does not give too great a tactical advantage or disadvantage when players roll high or low for a few consecutive turns.

There are opportunities for a game designer to carefully use the Roll & Move mechanic in ways that give players meaningful choices. Allowing players to move pawns in different directions, or creating multiple paths on a game board are simple first steps to restore player choices. However, it is not

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*Gravwell (above) and Camel Up (right) both use a Roll & Move mechanic in a way that still guarantees meaningful player decisions on each turn.*

enough to just allow a player to move their pawn different directions. There must be pros and cons in those movement choices beyond simple tactical decisions of which space is best to land on during that turn with that roll.

Returning to the ways of ancient game designers and giving players multiple pawns is another way to restore interesting choices. How many pawns would a Roll & Move game require in order to be interesting? Enough so that the number of pawns with good moves exceeds the number of pawns that the rules permit the player to move on a turn.

I mentioned earlier a recent Spiel des Jahres winner that includes Roll & Move. *Camel Up* uses the Roll & Move mechanic to move camels along the race track towards the finish line. The custom dice have values of 1 to 3, shrinking the gap between the lowest and highest possible roll. The meaningful decisions are not in how many spaces to move the camels, but rather in betting on the winners and losers of that mini Roll & Move race.

In *Gravwell*, players move a single token in accordance with the number on the card in a race game along a fixed path. Despite that description, nobody would dare label this Mensa Select winning game as “no thought involved.” The game requires strategic thought as you draft the cards to your hand, then choose when to play each movement card. Your decisions are further complicated by the fact that other players’ cards can alter which ship is closest to yours, with the result that your ship may move in the opposite direction of what you had intended. Thus, there is a psychological element to the game, in which you must try to predict the moves of your opponents for the best outcome.

Neither *Camel Up* nor *Gravwell* use Roll & Move as their core mechanic. Yet both games are examples of how elements of Roll & Move can be incorporated into casual games in ways that do not rob players of meaningful decisions on each turn.

# AssassinCon

Binh Vo

In AssassinCon you play as an Assassin at a convention participating in a contest to prove your prowess. AssassinCon is played over rounds, and each round you are assigned a new Identity and a new Target to Pursue, but you have no idea who is out to get you. You score points by Knocking Out your Target or Calling Guards on your Pursuer. The first player with five points wins the game.



**Components:**

- 6 Assassin Pawns
- 84 Cards-
- 72 Movement Cards
- 6 Target Cards
- 6 Status Cards
- 25 Tokens
- 1 Game Board
- 1 Rulebook



**MAYDAY GAMES**

SKU: MDG-4225  
UPC: 080162887138



# MOW MONEY!

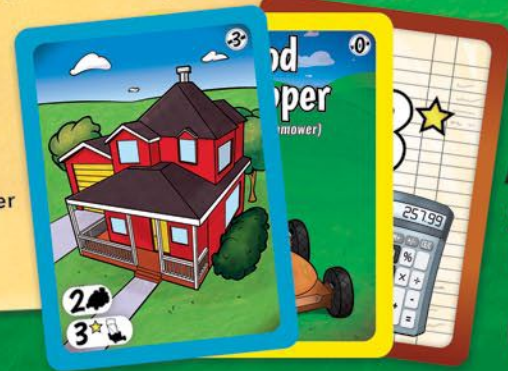
Matt Saunders

Welcome to Walkerville, a landscaper's paradise of green grass and lush yards. The Mayor of Walkerville is looking for the best landscaping company to care for all the city's luxuriant parks, awarding a lucrative contract to the company that earns the best reputation, and the chance to rake in Mow Money for years to come!



**Components:**

- 190 Cards-
- 106 Bid Cards
- 36 Contract Cards
- 18 Lawnmower Cards
- 18 Bluff Cards
- 6 Neighborhood Cards
- 6 Player Aid Cards
- 102 Tokens-
- 60 Money Tokens
- 42 Bid Tokens
- 1 Starting Player Marker
- 1 Rule Book



**MAYDAY GAMES**

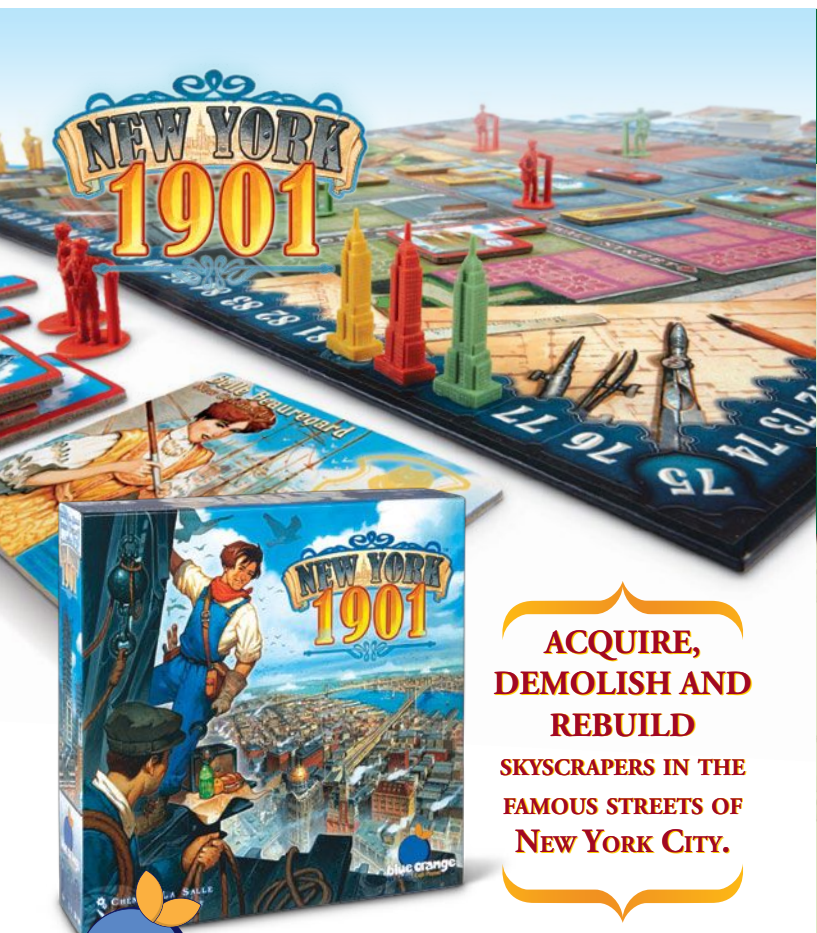
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# Choose the Right Game

Combine a single pawn with a fixed one-way path, with no meaningful decision to make before or after the pawn moves, and you have the recipe for the Roll & Move stereotype that today's casual game players avoid. However, the fact that a game uses dice or cards for movement does not necessarily make it an uninteresting game. When deciding which new games to add to your shelf, the key to look for is whether or not that game allows meaningful player choices on every turn. Find the games that do this consistently, and you will find the games that will remain fun, play after play. 🎲



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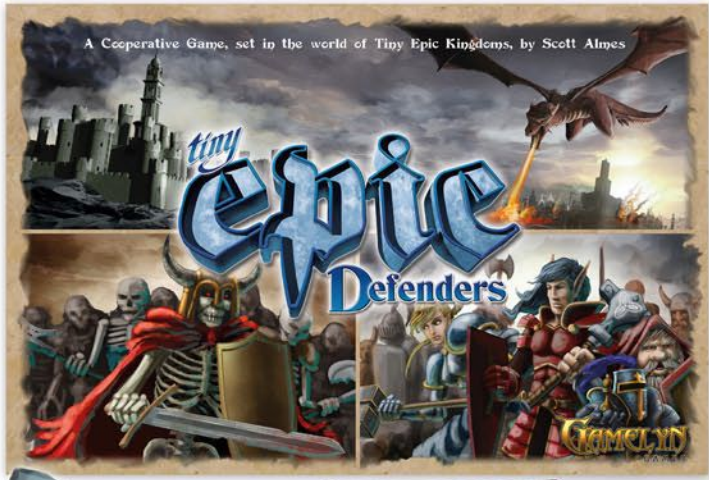
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# GEN CON

THE BEST FOUR DAYS IN GAMING!

board

Over 60,000 people attended Gen Con this year, a record number of attendees for this ever-growing convention. If you've never been to Gen Con before, this number can seem daunting. As this was my first Gen Con, let alone my first major board game convention, I didn't know what to expect and the scale and size of the whole event was intimidating.



**Naomi Laeuchli**

*Author and Casual Game Groupie*





On the first day of the convention, there was an enormous crowd of people teeming at the entrance, waiting to get in. It's easy to feel as if you could get lost in that mass. When the doors open for the exhibit hall, everyone swarms in and it takes a while to find your bearings. But as you quickly adjust to the flow of movement and start appreciating the colorful and creative costumes around you, you can begin to hunt up the booths of your favorite publishers and start to pick out the games you want to demo.

I had been informed by one Gen Con veteran that your first sweep of the exhibit hall should always be to map out your game plan, so I spent the first couple of hours at the show visiting various booths and building a list of games I wanted to try out.



Calliope Games shows off their new titles at this record-breaking convention.

The big publishers were easy to spot; Fantasy Flight Games had a booth right near the entrance, while Asmodee had a large sign hanging from the ceiling. The lines that form outside some of these publishers are amazing, with the one for Fantasy Flight alone looping around itself several times. But you can't neglect to visit the smaller booths or you'll miss some of the best gems of the convention.

It was fun to slowly notice which games people were talking about the most. *Mysterium* (above) quickly became the game everyone grew curious about, partly due to its intriguing gameplay but also because of the game's scarcity. A mix up somewhere along the Asmodee supply line resulted in the company only having 300 copies of the game for sale during the convention. There were also only two tables demoing the game, meaning that even getting the chance to try it out took some effort.



# Digital Gaming

One interesting trend at several of the booths was that publishers were also showing the mobile app editions of their games. Asmodee had several iPad stations set up for *Splendor*, and at the Calliope Games booth I was given a sneak preview of the *Tsuro* app.

Designed by Thunderbox Entertainment, the *Tsuro* app is sleek and simple. It very much keeps the visuals of being a board game and, as the company describes it, has been designed to use as little interface as possible. When you interact with the screen there are virtually no buttons or menus. You are lifting up the game box or picking up tiles. It is as close to replicating a physical game of *Tsuro* as an app possibly could.



There is something quite exciting about meeting the actual people involved in creating the games you know and love. For instance, over at Lamp Light Games was the graphic designer who worked on *Nautilus Industries*, while *Apotheca* was demoed by its designer, Andrew Federspiel (above, top right). Meeting and talking to the minds that created something that can give you so many wonderful hours of fun is an experience not to be underrated. Hearing them talk about their work can often give you a new insight into what they have made.

In the afternoon, it was time to attend the events I had tickets for. I had been given the excellent advice months beforehand that I should try to get tickets for any games I was particularly interested in playing. Not only was it great advice—because some of those games were hard to get into if you don't have those tickets—but you really just need a break from the hustle and bustle of the exhibit hall.

The event I was the most uncertain about as a casual game fan was *True Dungeon*, a live action role-playing (LARP) experience. I had heard a lot about it and was certainly curious but didn't know what to expect. A large group of players go through a set of rooms that have been creatively set up to resemble a fantasy dungeon. There is a puzzle-oriented version of the dungeon and a more combat-heavy one. My group chose the puzzle one.

While there was more combat than I would have expected (which was mostly resolved in a shuffleboard style mini-game) and the combat certainly didn't appeal to me, the puzzles were intriguing and would be an excellent fit for fans of more logic-based casual games.



By the evening of the first day, I was already exhausted, but in the best possible way. And Gen Con doesn't sleep. Neither do most of the people attending—there are still countless events going on into the small hours of the night. Actually, some of my favorite moments of the whole convention were spent in our hotel lobby, trying out everyone's newest acquisitions and chatting with other Gen Con attendees. There is something truly wonderful about being completely surrounded by people who love the same things you love. It is not always easy to find a gaming group or people who will get excited with you over the latest releases from Z-Man Games. So, while I loved the new games, I loved the costumes, I loved

the excitement, the best part of Gen Con for me was being surrounded by so many people who loved the hobby as much as I do.

In the words of one of the convention attendees, "Gen Con is a convention for everyone." Whether you want to spend the evening playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, stay up all night lynching werewolves and saving villagers, or play the newest and best casual games that the industry has to offer, there is a place for you there.

Gen Con is certainly loud, crazy and raucous—just like all the best game nights. 🎲



In *Apotheca*, players attempt to create a potion by lining up three ingredients of the same color in a row. Depending on which of the apothecaries you have on your side, you may move the ingredients around the board in different ways such as diagonally, clockwise, or in an L-shape. Once you make a potion you must permanently retire one of your apothecaries and their own unique ability, forcing you to make strategic decisions whenever you make your potions.



Cowboys and outlaws go head-to-head in the dexterity-based game of *Flick 'Em Up*. This is the first release from F2Z Entertainment's new company, Pretzel Games (which is based on the premise that all their games will be playable while holding a pretzel in one hand: the best way to game). In *Flick 'Em Up*, players flick their cowboys around a western town and attempt to flick bullets at the other team using any finger except their thumb. It's a fun family-friendly game that was sold out before the end of Gen Con.

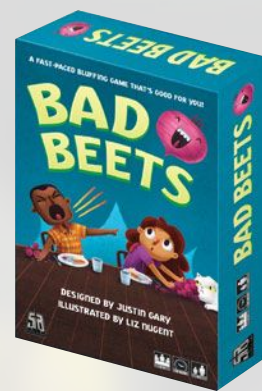


# The Gen Con Experience



When tens of thousands of gamers, designers, publishers, and artists gather together from all over the world, many memorable moments are created.

*Bad Beets* is Stone Blade Entertainment's first foray into casual games, and it's both colorful and easy to learn. The game play is fast and the artwork fun. During the game, players are attempting to get all the beets off their plate so they can move on to ice cream. Players have two cards in their hands. They pass one to the player on their left and keep the second card hidden. They may then make any claim as to what their remaining card is. If another player thinks they're bluffing and calls them on it, the card is revealed and the player who bluffed (or the player who incorrectly called the bluff) gets punished with an extra beet.



In *Co-Mix* players each tell a story by laying down pictures on a comic-book style page. After the stories have all been created, players vote on various criteria such as the most emotional story, the most creative story, and the best story overall. The story which receives the most votes in a category wins that category's points. The artwork is in keeping with the comic book theme and the resulting stories are great to watch unfold.



# ARCADIA

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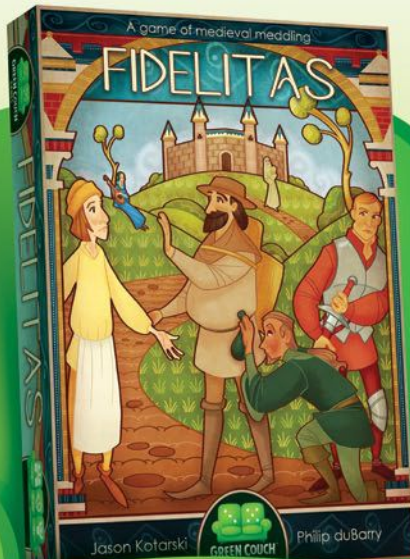


Mysterium is a creative cooperative game in which one player is the ghost while the other players are all psychics. Each psychic is trying to solve their own unique murder and must determine the killer, the location, and the weapon. The ghost plays cards featuring beautiful and abstract artwork, which the players then use to figure out the solution to their murders. Players all win or all lose together and the psychics may all confer and help one another interpret the ghost's clues. The game has great components, gorgeous artwork, and is just a pleasure to look at. 🎲

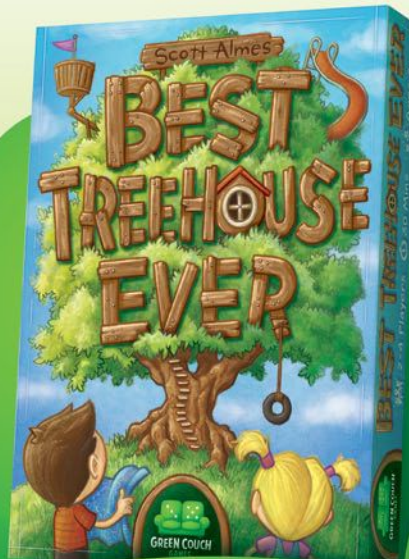
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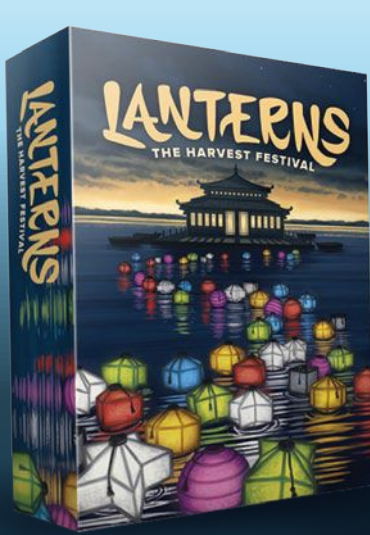
**FIDELITAS**  
A quick card game of medieval meddling from the designers of *Revolution!* and *The Great Heartland Hauling Co.*



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Choose cards to help build the treehouse of your dreams in this fast-paced drafting game by Scott Almes (designer of the *Tiny Epic* series).

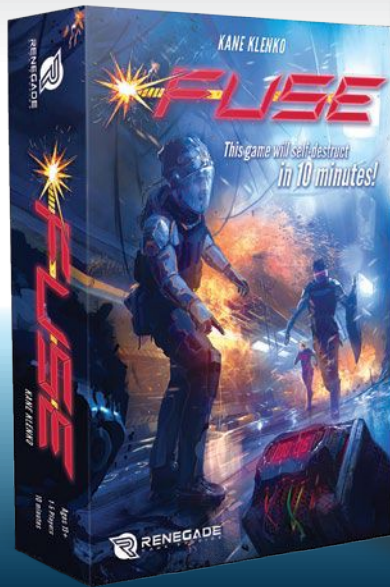


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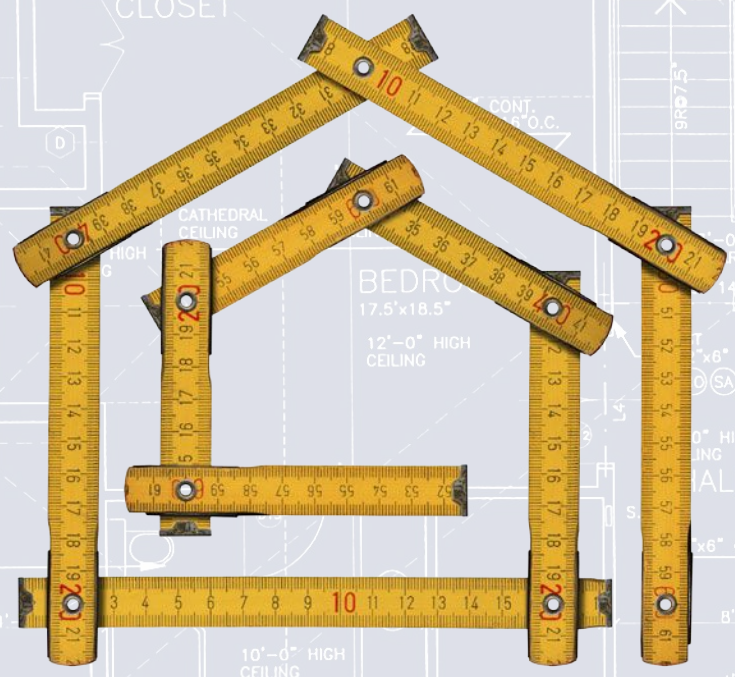
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# HOUSE RULES



## CHANGING A GAME WITH VARIANTS & UNIVERSAL MUTATORS



**Rich Hutnik (Author)**

Game Designer and "Classic Games Redefined" YouTube Channel Host



**Jesse Tannous (Editor)**

Writer, Gamer, Editor, and Professional Nerd

THE WORLD OF TABLETOP GAMES EXTENDS FAR BEYOND THE ONGOING INTRODUCTION OF NEW TITLES. EXPANSIONS, SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS, AND HOUSE RULES ARE REGULARLY UTILIZED BY PLAYERS TO MODIFY THEIR FAVORITE GAMES. SOMETIMES THESE RULE TWEAKS ARE USED TO ADJUST PLAY BALANCE, FIX PROBLEMS, OR SIMPLY ADD NEW FLAVOR TO REVITALIZE OLD EXPERIENCES. FOR BOARD AND CARD GAMES, THESE MODIFICATIONS ARE GENERALLY REFERRED TO AS "VARIANTS" IN THE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY.





Any player who has ever wished one of their favorite games supported that one extra player, didn't have that certain game-breaking rule, or had that "something extra" to make it interesting again would benefit from variants.

Sometimes, a game that was once great can be ruined when players inevitably learn about a particular play style that gives unfair advantages. This can make the experience less enjoyable for an entire group, and spoil a scheduled game night. A great example of this was the discovery of a tactic dubbed "The Halifax Hammer," in the wargame *A Few Acres of Snow*.

## THE HALIFAX HAMMER EFFECT

Published in 2011 and designed by Martin Wallace, *A Few Acres of Snow* is a two-player game that mixes deck-building mechanics and tactical wargame elements. Players battle each other as either the French or British as they vie for control of North America. Not long after the title's release, players took to the forums of BoardGameGeek.com to explain the discovery of an exploit, that when utilized rendered the game unwinnable for players of the French faction.

This discovery went on to receive plenty of attention and discussion on the website, which prompted Wallace to come up with a solution he later posted on the forum. This proposed solution didn't seem to satisfy many who maintained that the game continued to be mechanically flawed. While several different workaround methods now exist for fans of *A Few Acres of Snow*, the entire situation is a singular look into how games can sometimes need variant solutions to fix ingrained problems. The fact that the community was so vocal and dedicated to finding these solutions just goes to show how passionate fans can be when they see a good game that may just need a little work.

## MINOR VS. MAJOR VARIANTS

As stated earlier, variants can be created to not only fix existing problems, but to create a new gameplay experience to bring added interest to an older title. These alterations can range from very minor, to major changes that affect the overall balance of the game. In fact, most players have probably already come up with some minor variants of their own, without ever even intending to.

Have you ever been with a group of players who decided to ignore a game's written rules on who should play first, and settle things with a roll of the dice or a quick game of *Rock, Paper, Scissors*? If so, whether they meant to or not, those players just created a minor variant. A small change like this is practically unnoticed to the game as a whole, and can be used universally between games of any style or genre. Variants like this can be a fun and simple way to change up a play experience, without having to do a lot of higher-level game design research, which is often the case when major changes are being considered.

While many players may like the idea of major alterations to a favorite board game, without a proper understanding of a title's mechanics as a whole, gamers can end up ruining their play experience. Consider the often-used game variant for *Monopoly*, where players put money under "Free Parking." While this may seem like a minor rule change, in actuality it can vastly alter the game's balance, and result in a session that drags out and becomes unenjoyable. Gamers who are considering creating their own variants should think very carefully about how their proposed changes may affect the balance and flow of the game. This will help ensure it remains fun and engaging for everyone!





# UNIVERSAL MUTATORS

While players often make tweaks to individual games, several variants exist that can be used universally to transform many different types of games. I like to call these variants “universal mutators,” which offer a great way to quickly and easily change up the play experience for games you’ve grown tired of playing. Here are a few examples:

## MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER:

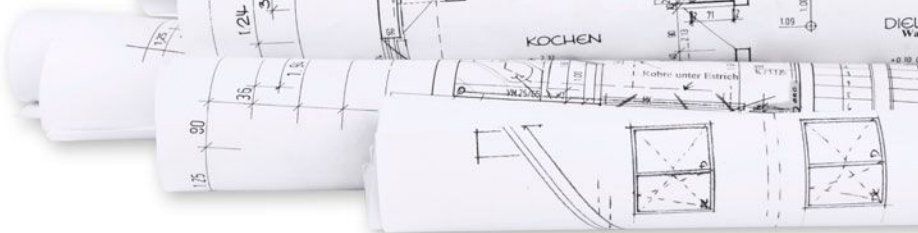
This universal mutator takes what is normally a 2-player only game, and makes it suitable for a large number of players. Groups divide up into 2 teams that are as evenly balanced as possible. When it is a team’s turn, the group collectively decides what move to make. When it isn’t the team’s turn, players on that team can drop out. A player wins the game if they are on the winning team when the game is over, and lose if they had dropped out. A player can also lose the game if they are the last player to drop out, leaving no one left on their former team. This variant can also allow for defecting to the other team in the game.

## DRAFTING GRID:

A Drafting Grid is an alternative to shuffling. Instead of dealing out cards to players, the cards are dealt face up in a grid, like you would see in a solitaire game like *Freecell*. Each turn, a player will take one or more cards, and by doing this free up other cards that lay behind it. Players then have to factor in not only what they take, but what becomes available for their opponent(s).



Cards from *Launch Pad*, published by Stratus Games, arranged into a drafting grid.



## DECK STACKING:

Deck stacking is a very simple idea. Instead of having players shuffle a deck, they are instead able to stack a deck however they choose. When applied to games like *Magic: The Gathering*, the “metagame” becomes even more important in trying to determine what moves a player would do, and not factoring in the luck of the draw. A version of this with *Magic: The Gathering* has also been done with a variant called Perfect Hand Magic. In Perfect Hand Magic, rather than stacking a deck, a player would set up a hand of 3 or 4 Cards that could beat an opponent’s hand.

## RESOURCE POOLING:

In Resource Pooling, resources that are normally exclusive to a player end up being shared between one or more players in a game. Using *Magic: The Gathering* as an example again, you can apply Resource Pooling to health to make a 3 player variant that minimizes ganging up by a single player. Instead of the 20 life points a player starts out with, the health points are split into two 10-life-point pools, which combine with similar pools from each of their opponents. This way all players end up with two 20-life-point pools. When a player attacks either of their opponents, they deal damage to the shared life pool. Once a single shared life pool is dropped to zero, the two players who shared that life pool are eliminated, and the remaining player wins the game.

## DIPOLE:

Dipole gets its name from Mark Steere’s game, *Dipole*. In the game, players can only move their pieces forward, unless they are actively capturing a piece (where backward or lateral moves are permitted). Dipole, as a universal mutator, is one in which standard moves are removed from a game, and instead work off of a similar system to *Dipole*. Applying Dipole to *Chess* makes it even more strategic than the original by requiring players to look far ahead, as an early move can have large consequences later on. Additionally, changing the rules so a stalemate in *Chess* ends up being a loss for a player that stalemates, changes the game to remove the possibility of a draw. All this is achieved by taking some rules out regarding movement, and changing how a stalemate works.

WITH PRACTICE, ANYONE CAN TURN EVEN THE WORST GAMES INTO A FUN AND EXCITING EXPERIENCE. VARIANTS AND UNIVERSAL MUTATORS ARE A GREAT WAY FOR A FAVORITE GAME TO BECOME FRESH, OR A DISLIKED GAME TO BECOME MUCH MORE ENJOYABLE. 🎲



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rich Hutnik has created over 100 games, and also a number of variants to established games. Included with his designs are 32 games on half a checkerboard, a trick-taking card game that is also playable solo or cooperatively, and what is arguably the worst board game ever created, *W.W.B.*, which garnered him 15 minutes of fame on BoardGameGeek.com. For more information on his designs and examples of how to use these and other mutators, visit the website GamesByRich.com or his YouTube channel, “Classic Games Redefined.”

### ABOUT THE EDITOR

Jesse Tannous has been writing articles for the video game and board game community for over 4 years. An avid gamer since he was first introduced to *Magic: The Gathering* and *Final Fantasy* in his youth, he currently operates a tabletop gaming group called Same Room Gaming, and continues writing articles and conducting interviews for Examiner.com.



# Going Bananas!

## *Bananagrams'* Journey from 0 to 6.5 Million Copies



**Eric Huemmer**

Co-op Connoisseur  
and Wordsmith

If you haven't noticed, *Bananagrams* is a bit of a phenomenon. It's sold around the world in 31 countries and 8 different languages, has won a *bunch* of awards, including the coveted Toy Industry Association's Game of the Year award, has been featured on sitcoms and talk shows alike, and even has a book published with a foreword written by Dame Judi Dench. Yes, *that* Judi Dench. And it's not even ten years old.





## So, the question is: how did such a game come to *fruition*?

(There will be some fruit puns in this article. You have been warned.)

If you're not familiar with the game, here's a quick rundown: Every *Bananagrams* pouch consists of 144 tiles, each with a letter on one side. Placing all of the tiles face down, each player draws 21, flipping them face up once every player is ready. Then it's a frantic race against the other players to quickly form and reform words crossword-style, "peeling" letters from the communal pile when you run out, which forces the other players to do the same. The first player to have used all of their tiles by the time no tiles remain in the center wins. The game lasts maybe 5 to 10 minutes, though ironically you end up playing for hours.

The creation of such a fast-paced word game is all thanks to three generations of the Nathanson family. Throughout his life, Abe Nathanson was someone who could find the fun in any given situation, as Rena Nathanson, Abe's daughter and current CEO of *Bananagrams*, explained to CGI from her office in London.

"Whether it was doing the dishes, driving around Rhode Island, or spending time with his family, everything could be made into a game," Rena said. "He loved word games especially."

One evening in early 2006, Abe *planted* himself at his kitchen table in Rhode Island with his grandson Aaron to play another game of Scrabble. They were well into their second frustrating hour of playing before the game finally ended. And it wasn't the loss that left Abe *sour*, but

rather the grueling pace and the amount of time it took just to finish. So, at the age of 76, Abe began the process of exploring different variants before creating rules for an entirely new word game.

"The game grew pretty quickly over a single summer," Rena said. "Any changes he made would be tested out with extended family and friends, taking his grandchildren's input just as seriously as his adult friends."

Rena recounted a number of times that Abe would call her while she was in London to discuss rule changes late at night. But once the main ruleset of the game was settled on, the details didn't evolve much further. He wanted it to be fast-paced and challenging, yet *apeeling* to all ages and easy to learn. To make it even faster, he designed it so that everyone is playing at once, scrambling for letters and rearranging them into new words.

The game was a hit with Abe's family and friends, all of whom encouraged him to market it. But they needed a name for the game, something that would make it *stand* out. Not one to miss a chance at a bit of wordplay, Abe had just the idea: "This anagrams game will drive you Bananas!"



Rena Nathanson,  
President & CEO of  
*Bananagrams*

## ***Bananagrams*... Get it?**

So, now that the Nathansons had a name and rules, what were their next steps? Actual game production. "My mom (Sandy) was a talented seamstress and got to work designing a banana-shaped pouch," Rena said. "The first prototype was actually made out of an old pillowcase."

While Rena and Sandy worked on packaging, Abe looked into the font and materials needed for the tiles. He contacted a local Rhode Island manufacturer for advice and production, who sat down with them

and discussed designs and cost. They still use the same manufacturer 9 years later.

Starting off with 50 units of the game, they *split* them: Abe took 25 to sell in-and-around Rhode Island;

Rena took 25 with her back to London.

Having owned several businesses himself, Abe wanted to focus on small independent game stores instead of large chains. They would travel out to meet store owners to demo it, or if it was too far away they would send





them a copy for the managers to play and keep. (Rena believes that helped with the success of the game, but more on that later.)

So, what was the pivotal moment that helped *ripen Bananagrams* into a successful brand? Rena says it was the 2006 London Toy Fair.

“The London Toy Fair was bizarre and wonderful,” Rena recalled. “But it was definitely a turning point.” Abe and Sandy traveled out to London for the annual event and first show. The 2006 London Toy Fair consisted of rows

of game exhibitors, retailers looking for new inventory, and a small family from Rhode Island. So, what attracted the attendees to the Bananagrams booth? Rena says it was two things: the packaging and the laughter.

“Walking down the aisle, you would hear our booth before you saw it. My dad was the funniest person I’ve ever met. He was also loud and incredibly friendly, so more often than not people would be laughing away at our booth,” she said. At times there would be a line just to sample the game. Aside from their table, they placed a spinner out in front that you could spot from down the aisle.

**“You would see rows and rows of boxes, so a display with bananas hanging off of it made our booth stand out. Many people reached out to touch the Bananagrams pouches as they walked past and would stop. It’s a very tactile experience that draws people to wonder what’s inside.”**

With its quick and easy gameplay, it was no surprise that the Nathansons quickly sold out of all their stock and had backorders for more. 50 turned into 500, as well as an exhibit space for the 2007 Toy Fair in New York City. Larger and more competitive than their first event, Rena remembers it being a bit more intimidating after their success in London. Still, they knew it was an excellent opportunity for *Bananagrams* to get in front of their target audience all in one location, so they had fun with it as they usually do. Soon their veritable fruit stand attracted the same attention and lines the way it had in London.

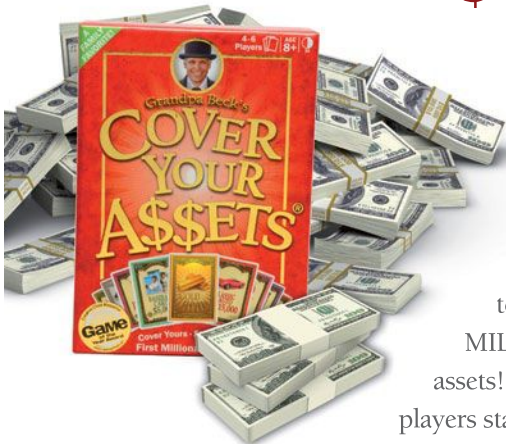




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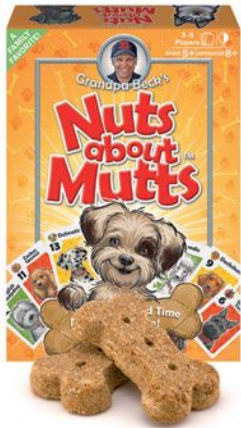
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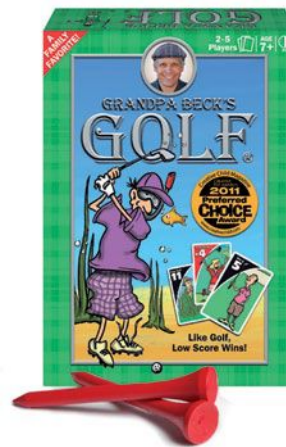


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After that, *Bananagrams* began selling across the country and across the pond as a joint-Nathanson production. The *Bananagrams* brand followed a no-large-chain-store policy while sending more test copies to “indies” and offering store support in the forms of displays and spinners. They didn’t rely on a large advertising budget, at least not at first, instead *growing organically* via word of mouth and portability—because, let’s be honest, it’s more acceptable to carry along a banana than a boxed-up board game.

With the popularity of the game continuing to grow, Abe began receiving offers from larger toy companies to buy the rights to *Bananagrams*. Every time he turned them down, saying that it was never about making the money but sharing in the fun and working with his family. It’s something they’ve always held themselves to, even to this day.

So it came as no surprise to anyone but the Nathansons that *Bananagrams* won the Toy Industry Association’s prestigious Game of the Year award in 2009. By that time, they had sold over 3 million copies globally. Never one to rest on his laurels, Abe set to work developing new game ideas like *Appletters* and *PAIRS in PEARS* the same way *Bananagrams* started: around the table with his creative team (his family).

In 2010, Abe Nathanson passed away at home in Rhode Island amongst his family. As with his game, he was energetic and lively, fun and always on the go. He was recognized within the gaming community as someone who worked with the small indies, starting off as a small businessman himself. He created a game that everyone could enjoy and made it his goal to share it. News of this beloved game creator made larger media sources, with the New York Times placing an obituary for him.

Since then, his daughter Rena has taken over the *Bananagrams* brand as CEO. As approachable as her father, Rena continues to carry on with the *Bananagrams* spirit. Though they have opened their markets to the




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*Other fruit-themed games have stemmed from the Bananagrams brand.*

larger chain stores, she says she will never forget their *roots*, offering game and merchandise support with small indies.

“I’ve never run a business before, and am learning something new every day,” she was quick to point out with a laugh. “But I’ve surrounded myself with the right people and ask the right questions. And with such a great team we’ve expanded our portfolio, always working on new games and products.”

But being part of the gaming industry isn’t always fruit puns and toy fairs. *Bananagrams* received push-back from large retailers initially, suggesting that the product be multi-SKU (stockkeeping unit) or that they change their packaging because it couldn’t stack very well. That was before the distinctive banana pouch and portability of the game had casual game players sold.

Despite all of the success of the brand, Rena was also quick to offer help to budding game designers. “My advice to anyone with an idea: get it protected,” she explained. “I learned that pretty quickly.” She confirmed that there were no legal issues with *Scrabble* or other existing games, but variations of faster *Scrabble* games had existed before, such as *Take Twos*. And once a new product becomes popular, similar cash crops will try to profit off the original’s success.

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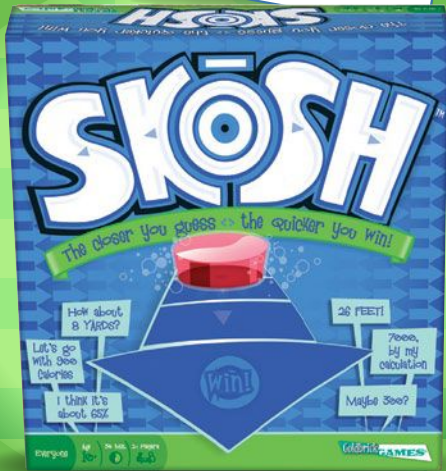
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# So, what's next for *Bananagrams*?

The Bananagrams team has come out with *bushels* of games: *Appletters*, *PAIRSinPEARS*, *Fruitominoes*, *Zip It*, etc. They've also released *Bananagrams* as a digital app, allowing you to switch out letters, backgrounds, and customize the experience. They've also had plenty of success with their recent special events.

"We had our first Bananagrams Challenge in the UK last year, where students and their schools competed with each other. In 2015 we saw 15,000 to 20,000 students participate in The Bananagrams Challenge with the finals being played in London with 12 finalists! We're doing it again in the U.K. and looking to bring it to the U.S. this year, probably starting regionally in the tri-state area."

"We're also relaunching *Zip It* with some updates. The game itself is fantastic. And we have a few other games in the works that we hope to release in time for our 10-year Bananaversary," Rena told CGI.

Yes, she said "Bananaversary"—and I wouldn't expect any less from a veteran provider of fun. 🎲



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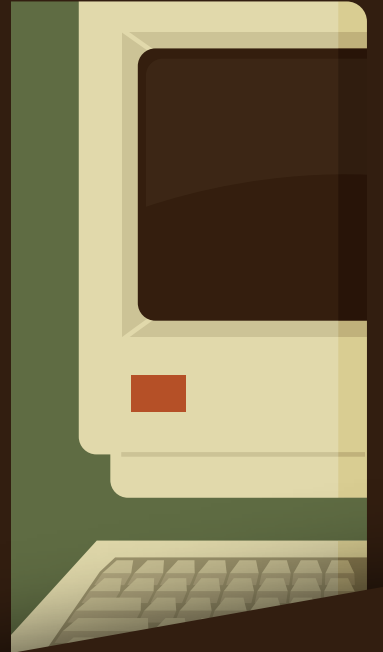
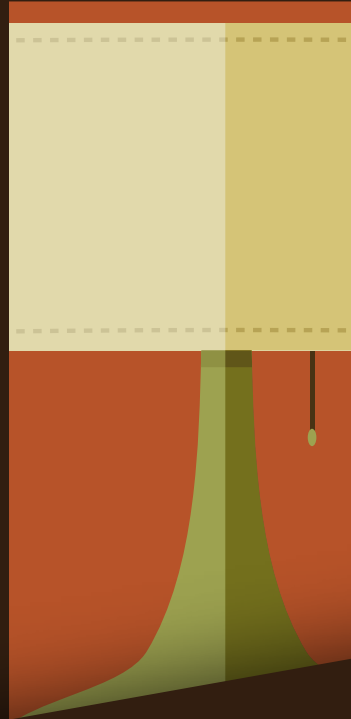
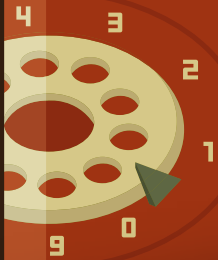
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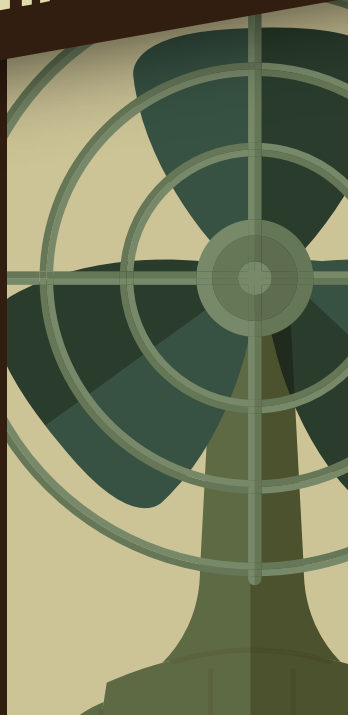
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