

CASUAL GAME

I ■ N ■ S ■ I ■ D ■ E ■ R



ON THE COVER

An app-driven, hidden identity word game from Bezier Games

ESCAPE ROOMS

The hit cooperative puzzle experience is coming to your table

DIGITAL GAMES

New digital gaming platforms are gaining popularity, but will they ever replace cardboard?

INTERNATIONAL GAMING

An inside look at the board gaming scene around the world



WEREWORDS



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see inside for details

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MY NEW PASSION"

"THOROUGHLY
ENJOYED EVERY
ARTICLE ...
I CANNOT WAIT
FOR FUTURE
ISSUES."

"I AM HEARING ONLY GOOD
THINGS ABOUT THIS MAGAZINE"

"I HOPE MORE FOLKS FIND THIS
GEM OF A MAGAZINE!"



<http://CasualGameRevolution.com/kickstarter>

Five years ago I embarked on a journey. All I had was a spark of an idea that had come to me in the middle of the night.

As the owners of a small game publishing company, my wife and I had spent years designing and publishing the types of games we enjoyed, yet something was missing. In a hobby market full of confusing labels and genres, we weren't really sure how we fit in. With all the noise, we had struggled to describe the types of games we produced and which most of our friends preferred to play.

As I woke up one night, it finally hit me as clear as day. We needed a new way of thinking about board games: casual games. *A Casual Game Revolution*. It worked for video games, why not board games? It made sense to me. I took pages and pages of notes as ideas poured into my brain.

We soon spoke to our publishing rep, who loved the idea. We put together marketing materials and took our thoughts to the GAMA Trade Show. We didn't really know yet how it would evolve — a website? A catalog? A program for retailers? Yet the response was overwhelming from everyone we spoke with. "Trademark that!" a sales team from a prominent distributor told us as they gathered around us at our booth. Publisher after publisher expressed interest in being involved, having faced similar challenges. We realized we needed to put our game publishing efforts on the sidelines and get to work creating something new, something bigger than just one game publisher.

We assembled a group of key players in the industry to help us define just what a casual game is, then we set to work preparing for a Kickstarter campaign and a magazine printing: the first issue of *Casual Game Insider*.

Five years later, we have since evolved from a one-man operation with no magazine design or publishing experience, to a team of many talented people contributing to each and every issue. The support from the community has been incredible — from our dozens of sponsors and authors to our many distributors and readers, this dream of ours couldn't have become a reality without you. The Casual Game Revolution is strong and growing, and I am so excited to see where it goes. Here's to another five years and many more to follow.

Happy *Casual* Gaming,

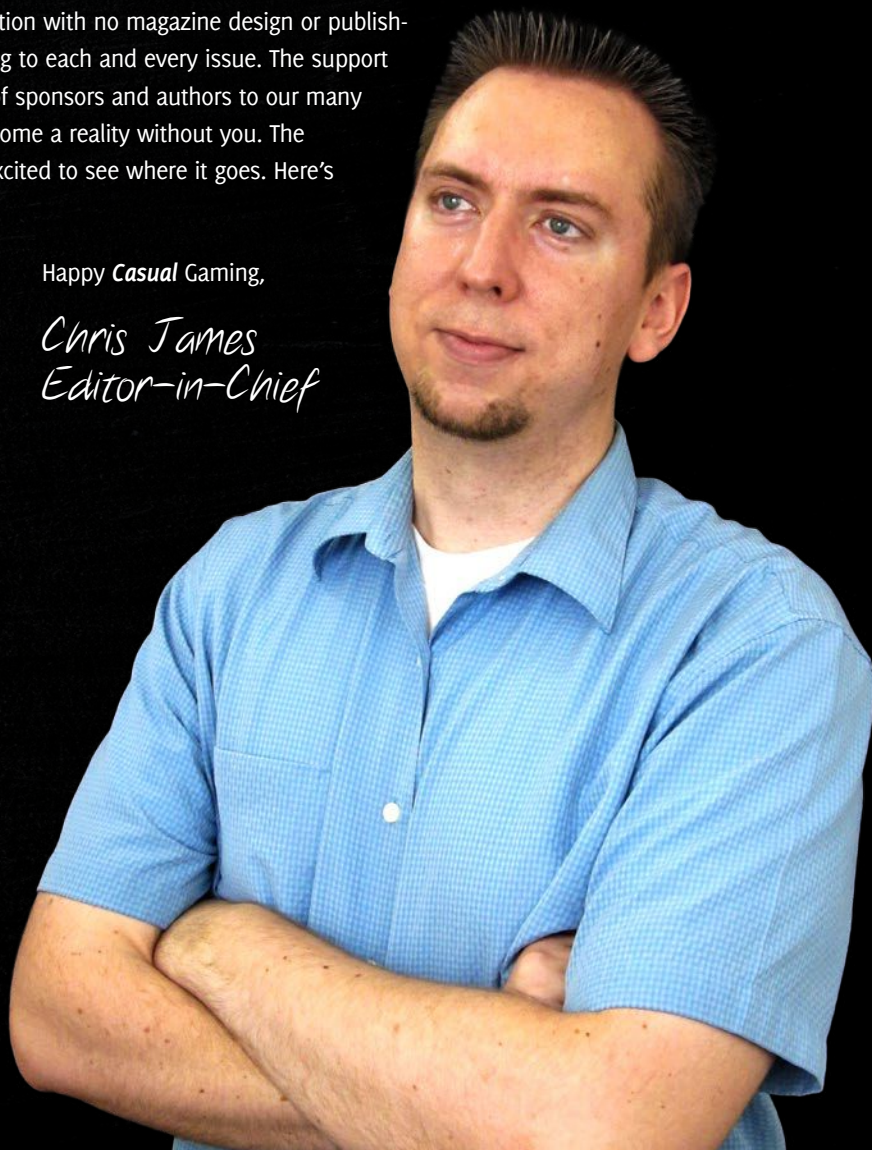
Chris James
Editor-in-Chief

5 YEARS

OF CASUAL GAME INSIDER

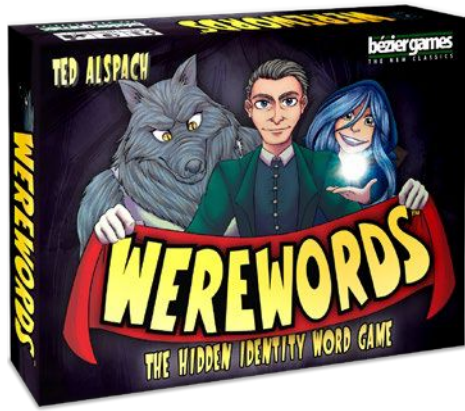
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CASUAL GAME
REVOLUTION™



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"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."

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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



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



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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



Cheapass Games is a small but mighty tabletop game publisher. They've been designing quirky, inexpensive games for 20 years. Look for deluxe games, cheap games, and free games at their double-secret website Cheapass.com.

Cheapass.com



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

StratusGames.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





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



Calliope Games publishes family-friendly tabletop games, including *Tsuro* and *Roll For It!*. Calliope games are carefully crafted so kids and adults can play on equal footing – fun and affordable for folks of all ages!

CalliopeGames.com



Founded in 2010, Cryptozoic Entertainment, Inc. is a premier developer and publisher of original and licensed board games, card games, collectibles, comics, and trading cards.

Cryptozoic.com



Ultra PRO International is a leading manufacturer of tabletop games & accessories based in California. Ultra PRO's Entertainment Division publishes a variety of strategy and deck building card games under the brands Jolly Roger Games and Stone Blade Entertainment.

UltraPRO.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



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



Thank you! *Casual Game Insider* wouldn't be possible without our generous readers. Everything we do, we do it for you.

We have lots of great content in store for you in this and future issues. We hope you enjoy it!





A Hybrid Game About Hybrid Humans

Until *Werewords*, the best example of app integration with traditional board and card games was *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*, which has a free companion app that facilitates the night actions in the game. It was so groundbreaking that it received the prestigious Spiel des Jahres Recommended award because of this integration.

Werewords, the newest title from Bezier Games, Inc., will include a free app that redefines analog gameplay by allowing players to focus on the gameplay itself, while taking advantage of the power that most of us have in our pockets all the time anyway.

In *Werewords*, players are assigned secret roles such as Villager, Seer, or Werewolf. One of the players is designated the mayor, and it's his job to try to get the players to guess a magic word that will protect the village from werewolves. However, the magic word is so powerful that he's been rendered speechless, and can only answer questions with the provided Yes/No tokens. Fortunately for him, the village Seer already knows the word and can help the village. Unfortunately, so does the Werewolf, who is trying to derail the village from figuring out the word.





If the players manage to guess the magic word before time (or the limited supply of tokens) runs out, they win! That is, unless the werewolf figures out who the seer is. If the village can't figure out the word in the time provided, they still have a chance to win if they can identify a Werewolf among them.

While the game consists of physical cards and tokens, the free app runs the game, allowing the Mayor to select a magic word, displaying it for the Seer and Werewolves, and then counting down the time that the village has to figure it all out.



There are other benefits to the app: there's virtually no setup time, the game explains itself as you play, and it can be configured to allow players of all ages to be competitive, which in any party game with words is always a challenge.

Werewords takes less than 10 minutes per game to play... but you'll probably say "just one more game" enough to make an entire evening out of it! 🎲

beziergames
THE NEW CLASSICS

"The app is just another component to the game, like the cards and tokens, but one that provides things you couldn't physically add, like a word list with more than 10,000 words in four difficulty levels, an interactive set of timers, and even the ability for players to create their own custom word lists that integrate seamlessly with the game." — *Werewords* Designer Ted Alspach



Dungeon Time

You will need to think fast, communicate well, and remember every card you've played if you hope to complete the quest and win the game in *Dungeon Time*.



Naomi Laeuchli

Game Reviewer and
Casual Game Groupie

An octagonal board is set in the middle of the table. This represents the party's backpack. A deck of mission cards is selected. The game comes with four different decks of increasing difficulty. The mission cards are shuffled in with the item cards and each player is dealt their starting hand. The five minute sand timer is flipped and the adventure phase begins.

There are twelve different types of items in the deck and each quest calls for a different amount and set of items in order to be completed. During the adventure phase, players can all add cards to the backpack in any order and at any time, but if you don't properly communicate, you won't win this cooperative game. You must place items and quests on the backpack board, face-up, on top of each other. As you play cards, you also draw up from the item/mission deck. You may discard from your hand as well, but the item deck is not reshuffled, so once a card has been discarded, it cannot be redrawn.

Once the sand timer runs out or the draw deck is depleted, players move on to the resolution phase. You flip over the pile of cards on the board and start drawing them in the order that they were played. Item cards are placed around the edge of the board. Each of the backpack edges can hold up to three copies of the same item. Whenever a mission card is drawn, you consult it to see if you have the necessary items to complete it around the edge of the board. If you do, those items are discarded and you complete the mission and gain a reward (often an item which must be added to the backpack). If you don't have the necessary items, the mission fails.

If at any time you gain an item and there is no room in the backpack,

MSRP: \$29

Designer: Carlo A. Rossi

Publisher: Ares Games

1-5 players, ages 8+, 10-60 mins.

the game is lost. If you do not complete a certain number of quests, you also lose.

Dungeon Time has a lot of ambiance. There are heroes you can play with to give every player a special ability, multiple games can be strung together to create a campaign, and there are special adventure cards with their own rules and requirements for winning. The game is hard and you'll be playing it several times before you start to win – but you'll want to, because the madcap teamwork is addictive and engrossing. You'll want to keep questing!





Hanamikoji

Blending beautiful artwork with rules that are as intriguing as they are simple, *Hanamikoji* is an engrossing two-player game that looks and feels like stepping into another world.



Both players are vying to convince seven well-known geishas (or artists) to perform at their restaurants. Each geisha is worth a certain number of charm points, from two to five. In order to win the game you must win over four geishas or eleven charm points.

The geishas are laid out on the table in a line. Each has a certain item that she likes. The number of charm points she is worth indicates how many copies of her preferred item are in the deck. You start the game with six cards from the item deck. On your turn you must draw a card and perform an action.

Players have four actions which they must perform once during the round: Secret (set aside a card face-down), Trade-off (discard two cards facedown to be out of the round), Gift (select three cards from your hand and place them face-up; your opponent chooses one of the cards and places it on his side of the geisha cards, next to the geisha who likes the item, while you place the other two cards on your side of the geishas), and Competition (select four cards from your hand and place them face-up into two groups of two; your opponent selects one group, placing the items next to the corresponding geishas on his side, while you do the same on your side with the remaining cards).

After players have used all the cards, both players flip over their Secret cards, placing them next to their geishas. Players then check each geisha. The player who has more of that geisha's preferred items wins over the geisha and that geisha's victory marker moves over to their side. If there is a tie, the victory marker does not move. After all the geishas have been scored, if neither victory condition has been met, another round is played. During future rounds, you may win back geishas from other players.

Hanamikoji combines push-your-luck, strategy, and bluffing, while using unique actions and having its own distinctive look. Everything about the game feels fresh and delightful with gameplay that intrigues and captures the imagination. The game can run a little long, but is easily remedied with an optional rule that limits the game to three rounds. Overall, it feels like a work of art, and one that you will want to play again and again.

MSRP: \$17
Designer: Kota Nakayama
Publisher: Quick Simple Fun Games
2 players, ages 10+, 15 mins.



This Belongs in a Museum

Don your archaeologist hat and compete for finds in this tile-laying game filled with mummies and tombs.

MSRP: \$25

Designer: Mike Richie

Publisher: Rather Dashing Games

2-4 players, ages 10+, 20-30 mins.

This Belongs in a Museum begins with every player choosing an archaeologist and its matching mummy. The mummies are all placed on the Tomb tile, which is the starting tile. Each player is randomly dealt five artifact tokens out of a possible eight. These are the artifacts you can collect during the game. Players are then dealt three dig site tiles plus their base camp tile, and the game begins.

On your turn, you play a tile. Tiles contain artifacts, colored temples, rivers, mountains, or even an airport. Once you have played your base camp, your archaeologist is placed on it, and may move up to three spaces on your turn. One of the ways you score points is by connecting temples that match your archaeologist's color to your base camp, either by physically being adjacent to it or being connected via mountains and sea. A set of connected colored temples is considered a dig site — any digs of your color that are adjacent to an airstrip are also considered to be connected to your base camp. You can also score points by collecting artifacts — this is done by moving your archaeologist onto an artifact that matches one of the tiles that were dealt to you at the start of the game.

Some tiles allow you a special action when played, such as rotating any tile or swapping one out. However, you can choose to move a mummy instead of taking the action. You can move any mummy, but it cannot be moved onto

a dig site that matches its own color, nor can it be moved onto a location that contains an archeologist or another mummy. While a mummy occupies a dig site, it blocks it from scoring at the end of the game.

Ultimately, you earn points for each colored temple that connects to your base camp or that your archaeologist occupies, for each artifact in a dig site connected to your base camp, and for any collected artifacts. Also, if your mummy is blocking a scoring site at the end of the game, you steal those points.

All these rules sound a bit complicated, and it can make for a slow scoring phase while everyone figures out what is connected. But it doesn't take long to learn the basic gameplay, and the various scoring methods mean that you have a lot of different strategies you can follow. *This Belongs in a Museum* is a nice midway point between meaty and casual — it's accessible while still working those brain cells.





Odin's Ravens

Sometimes you just want a quick, simple card game, something that can be played when you're tired or short on time. *Odin's Ravens* is exactly such a game. The gameplay is straightforward and easy to learn, but at the same time you are left with a very satisfying experience.

In this two-player game, each player takes on the role of one of Odin's ravens, racing each other around the world. Sixteen land cards are spread out in a line. Each land card is divided into two halves, with one location at the top and one at the bottom. Players start at the same end of the line, but on a different half of the card. In order to complete the race, your raven must fly all the way to the last card in the line, switch to the other side of that card, and then fly back to the starting card.

Players start the game with any combination of five cards from the flight deck and their personal Loki deck. The flight cards show terrain that matches those on the land cards. Each Loki card shows two special abilities, such as drawing extra cards or adding an additional land card that your opponent must fly through. When playing a Loki card, you must choose which of its two abilities you're using. Be sure to use your Loki cards wisely, however — once played, they are out of the game.

On your turn you may choose as many cards to play from your hand as you wish. Players fly their ravens by playing a flight card that matches the terrain of the card the raven is adjacent to. If multiple spaces in a row are the same terrain, a single flight card will carry your raven over them. If you have no matching flight cards, you may choose to play any two flight cards of the same type to fly over a non-matching space on the flight path. At the end of your turn, you draw three cards of any combination from the flight deck and your Loki deck, discard down to seven cards if need be, and then pass the turn to your opponent. The first player to reach the final card wins.

Odin's Ravens is really simple to learn and play. There's a lot of luck, perhaps too much for some players' tastes, but the Loki cards add a nice splash of strategy and the game feels elegant in both its look and design. Each game is swift, light, and entertaining — a perfect race and a laid-back, delightful experience.



MSRP: \$24

Designer: Thorsten Gimmler

Publisher: Osprey Games

2 players, ages 8+, 20-30 mins.



Happy Salmon

Sometimes a game comes along that seems too simple at first glance to actually be any fun. But after witnessing dozens of industry folks having a blast playing *Happy Salmon* at the GAMA Trade Show, we knew we had to give it a try.

In this lightning-fast party game, each player takes their own deck of cards. Each card has one of four actions written on it: high five, pound it, switcheroo (switch places with another player), and happy salmon (a salmon-inspired handshake where players slap each other's arms like a fish tail). Players hold their decks in their hands and when the game starts, they flip them face up. You must shout out the top card, looking for another player who has that card as well. Once you find a match, you both perform the action and then discard the card. If you cannot find a match, you can move the card to the bottom of your deck and try the next one. The first player to discard all of their cards wins the game.

Happy Salmon gets messy. It gets chaotic. It gets loud. It gets confusing. And that's exactly what makes it such a perfect party game. It makes you laugh and have a good time without really caring whether you win or lose. It is a game that is all about having fun and has very little to do with competing. The salmon-shaped travel case it comes in is both cute and convenient and the cards are a nice sturdy quality,

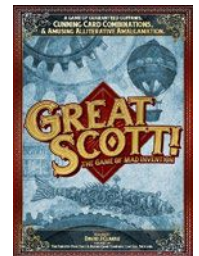
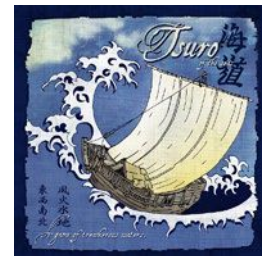
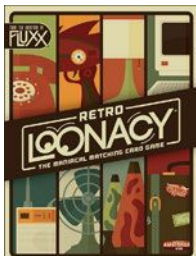
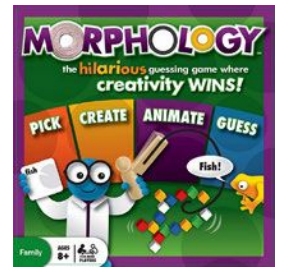
likely to hold up well in a game in which players are not too gentle with them. If you like being silly sometimes you should absolutely play and enjoy. 🎲

MSRP: \$15
Designers: Ken Gruhl, Quentin Weir
Publisher: North Star Games
3-6 players, ages 6+, 5 mins.



★ OTHER RECOMMENDED GAMES ★

For a complete list, visit CasualGameRevolution.com/games





BOARD GAMES AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF BETTER



Glenn Flaherty

Author, Reviewer, Teacher, Biz Owner
& Sit Down Comedian

Every day it seems like a fantastic new game comes out. And I tell you, each one is better than the last. Isn't that what we think? The mechanisms have advanced, the player involvement has developed, and let's not bother discussing player elimination — it's so passé. Each individual element has been a step forward and a progression beyond its predecessor.



...or so we think.

To dig a little deeper, let's set aside the question of 'better' and ask if game development and production have progressed over time. I think it's safe to say this in an undeniable truth. The degree of decision making and engagement in today's games compared to a few decades ago is incomparable. Who would argue that *Stratego* is as deeply thought provoking as *Twilight Imperium*? Even the super complex war games of yesteryear, ones that took an entire weekend to play, aren't as pressing as today's games. Even with all of their charts, tables, chits and things, they weren't really that difficult. The complexity lay mostly in actuating your turn and reading all the implications.

SCYTHE AND TITHE

Think about some of the big games out there right now. For me, *Scythe* and *Sola Fide* quickly come to mind.

Scythe combines area control, economics, fighting, and has a solo experience to boot! All while being wrapped in a beautiful Russian sci-fi backdrop. Socially, do you think this would have existed a few years ago? In the 60s, 70s, or 80s? It's hard to say, but I think not. Not only was our palette not in the right place for this combination of mechanics, but it would be a hard sell to get Cold War-era *Monopoly* players en masse to enjoy thriving in a solely USSR-esque environment.

But does progress in design of modern games equal improvement? We should be wary of conflating complexity, progress, and being better. Candidly, better is often misconstrued and, as a result, is used readily without gravitas or concern over its implication. Moreover, the concept of better often does not even belong in most gaming conversations because it's a vacillating mark of quality. Better is a quality marker relative to what? Games in general? Our own personal tastes? This propensity for claiming every new chit-pusher as bigger and better begs us to ask why do we keep saying better, Better, BETTER?

Perhaps we don't mean better at all. Maybe we mean to say that our interests and wants for a game, both personally and socially, have changed over time. Not improved per se, but just different.

Tastes change, however. With time, and other influencing factors, we can appreciate what *Scythe* has to offer now. But back then, this game would have been a flop. Today, though, it has arrived at the right time, the right place, and with the right tone to be a hit.

Sola Fide is the new Reformation based game published by Stronghold Games. It takes elements of former successful titles and places it into the world of religion. The game mechanics hearken back to the older tried-and-true designs and presents a solid modern effort. Yet it isn't getting the high marks that *Scythe* does.

Here is an example of an anachronistically misplaced item – one of the reasons its reviews don't necessarily reflect how the game ultimately plays out. The mechanisms it employs succeeded a few years ago as *Twilight Struggle* and *Campaign Manager*. Both are games that touched on the war gaming elements of the past while managing to imbue newer, fresher play mechanisms of their day.

Sola Fide, while using similar mechanics of highly regaled games, is arriving during a contentious political climate that could be too much for a game focused on fracturing a religion, pitting one group against another. This is simply not an appealing premise to most. On the other hand, it certainly is an evolution of older games that borrow mechanics from games that were very well received. Therefore shouldn't it also be a better game?



THE BETTER PLACE, THE BETTER TIME

And there lies one factor of ‘better’ perception. Being at the right place, at the right time with the right type of game is central to how we favor games. And there are tons of examples that prove this point in other disciplines. Look at the important timing in nearly any other form of entertainment: art, fashion, music, and culinary arts. One false step and you dive off the precipice and into the pit of sales doom.

Imagine if Julius II was combing through submissions to paint the Sistine chapel:

Well, there’s this Michelangelo guy. He makes large life-like statues, and has helped usher that 3D feel into paintings. I think he would be perfect for this. We also have Jean-Michel Basquiat. His art looks like untrained doodles that avoid realism like the plague. So who should we pick?

THE NEXT CARCASSONNE

The Internet has allowed gaming groups to bloom and taste-makers to exert influence. Exposure to new ideas has been shared and people are more involved than ever. The gaps between super-simplistic and ultra-complicated games has been filled in. A bridge has been made from *Scrabble* to *Letter Tycoon*, from *Rock ‘em Sock ‘em Robots* to *King of Tokyo* and beyond. Stores have opened. Interest has been spurred, and now a market for once esoteric games like *Scythe* and *Sola Fide* has been developed. Times and taste have changed. But tastes are not better, they have only transmuted.



The choice is clear but that doesn’t make Basquiat less of an artist. He was the natural progression of our wants and needs for something new. Stale was celestial realism. So they moved towards impressionism like Van Gogh, Monet and so on. Between these two renowned artists, one was not better. Just in the right place at the right time. In this vein, games have a similar progression. One game does not eclipse the former, but is built upon its back and is, at minimum, equally as valuable.

This is true for all creative mediums; clothing, cuisine, music. Neither timeframe, sales figures, or famed designer inherently make something better. So what does give us the impression that something is better? What is leading today’s evolution in personal flavor; who is at the vanguard of taste; why do our preferences change over time? The modern answer to this is the Internet.

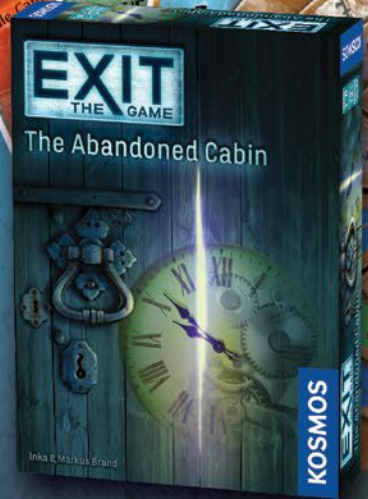
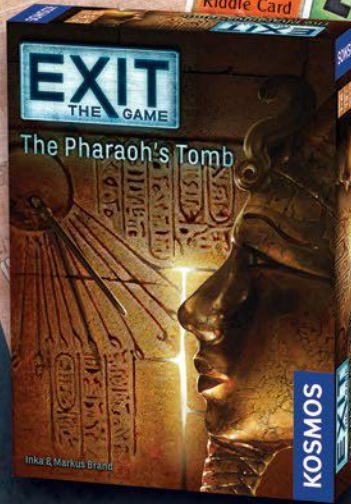
Renegade Games has a new tile-laying knockout game called *Castles of Caladale*, a game that could arguably be the next *Carcassonne*. I can see a tagline now, “A *Carcassonne* for MY generation!” Essentially, it has expanded on the idea of *Carcassonne* but everyone is building their own castle that can be rearranged at will. By all indication, it seems to reinvigorate the mechanisms we might have grown a bit familiar with in *Carcassonne*, and this might serve as a welcomed kick in the pants. But is it a *Carcassonne* killer?

I’ve often heard lines like “it’s a game killer” referring to new games that so vastly surpass older games that those clunkers must be vanquished to the thrift store pile...and good riddance!

But really? What makes it better? “Oh man it is SO much more streamlined.” Is that better? Is *Eldritch Horror* actually better than *Arkham Horror*? It is, after all, much more streamlined, and a game I do enjoy. But as far as my personal tastes, I can’t really say it’s an improvement.

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EVERYONE'S A CRITIC

My feelings echo those I encountered during an interview with a well-regarded business developer. He said, "Creating something that appeases the most people will create a product that more people like but fewer love." It is those design quirks that might drive away some sales, but they are the very same things that convert people into lovers and advocates for your brand.

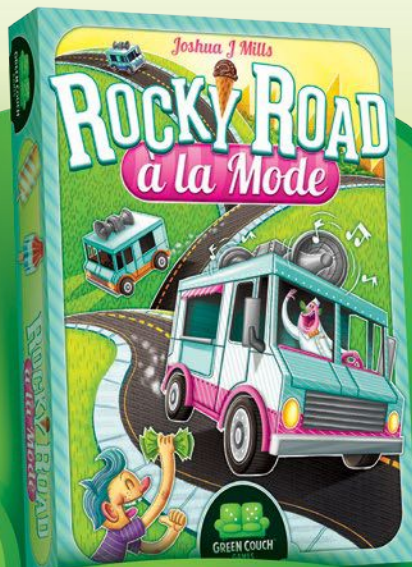
In the end, everyone will have their own say on what they like or dislike and why. Perhaps it's a matter of rethinking how we as a community share our excitement for new games. Say you just got done playing a new game that you really enjoyed. Instead of saying it was better than an existing title, take a look at the elements. Did it do something that surprised you? Speak to those points. Did it try to build off of old mechanics? Then discuss how it streamlines the gameplay. "This new game is a twist on an old title that really excels by building off of existing mechanics, making the game worth checking out."

For new titles coming out, to win fans is to simply be unique. Be yourself. Being trendy doesn't make a game better. It makes it well-timed and perhaps a big seller. Ultimately, is it better though? Tastes will change over time. So let's think about whether a game is actually better over another. I know I'll mull it over during a game of Arkham Horror. See you there! 🎲

"CREATING SOMETHING THAT APPEASES THE MOST PEOPLE WILL CREATE A PRODUCT THAT MORE PEOPLE LIKE BUT FEWER LOVE."

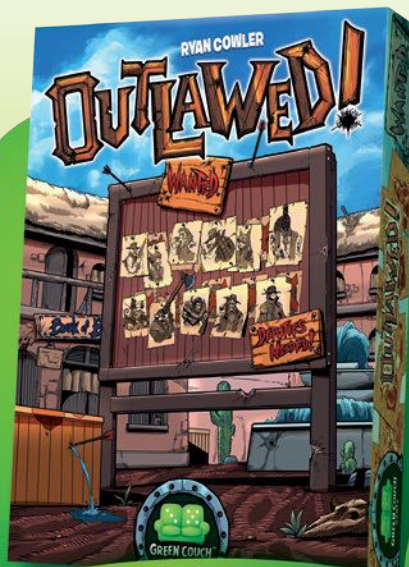
Great *little* games that make great *BIG* connections!

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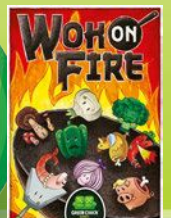
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ESCAPE ROOM GAMES: THE COOPERATIVE PUZZLE EXPERIENCE HITS THE TABLE



Jon Den Houter

Freelance Writer and Avid Gamer





The clock is ticking backward from sixty minutes, the game has begun! You and your friends sift through various objects, looking for some sort of clue. One of the people in your group sees something. “Look,” she exclaims, “I think these letters mean something!”

If this scenario sounds familiar, you’ve likely been to an escape room. The first escape room in the U.S. opened just five years ago. Called “Real Escape Game” (and later, “Real Escape Room”), Kazuya Iwata started it in San Francisco as a branch of his friend Takao Kato’s escape game company in Japan. At first, Kazuya only ran real escape games — large group puzzle-solving events that didn’t involve escaping from a room. “Escape from the Mysterious Room,” which opened December 2012, was their first actual escape room.

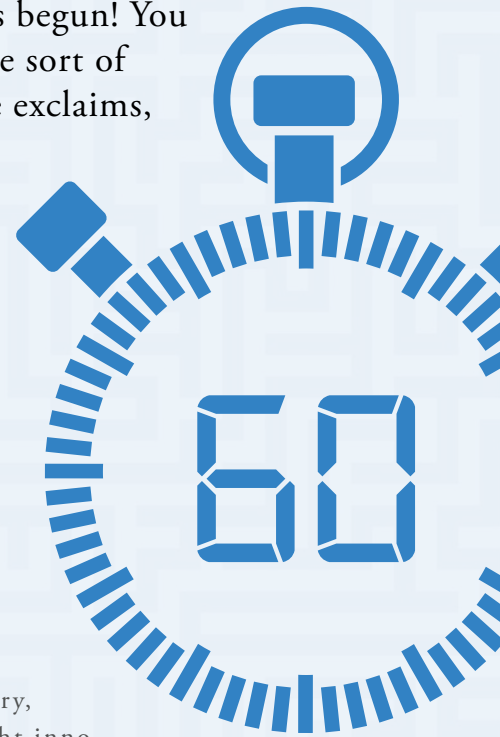
Teams of up to twelve people, consisting of friends or strangers, were locked in a room and given 60 minutes to escape and asked to complete three basic tasks: scour the room for clues, arrange the clues into puzzles, and solve those puzzles. The ultimate solution of all the puzzles opened the door out of the room.

Since that time, the growth of escape rooms has been nothing short of revolutionary. There are now escape rooms in all 50 states, and according to RoomEscapeArtist.com, there are over 1,700 in the U.S. alone (with thousands more worldwide).

The first U.S.-based escape room company, Puzzle Break, was founded in Seattle in August 2013 by Nate Martin and Dr. Lindsay Morse. For their first room, “Escape from Studio D,” Morse designed all the puzzles. “At the time, there were no other escape rooms in the country except ‘Escape from the Mysterious Room’ in San Francisco, which Lindsay and I had already played,” Martin reminisces. “I wanted to play another escape room.”

In their four-year history, Puzzle Break has brought innovation to the escape room industry. From magical boxes with custom-built technology, to an escape room on a cruise ship and a team escape competition, Puzzle Break has been able to continually thrill and surprise their customers.

Escape rooms around the globe continue to advance in both the use of technology and puzzle development. Some escape rooms have a linear formula for their puzzles (i.e. one puzzle leads to the next puzzle, and so on) while others have several puzzles that could be solved in any order. For all the increases in escape room technology and nonlinearity, the thrill of solving puzzles together is what continues to draw people to escape rooms across the country. “What makes these things so much fun,” Martin affirms, “are truly the puzzles. They are the stars of the show.”



Puzzle Break, the first U.S.-based escape room company, has produced many innovative rooms to thrill their customers.



FROM LOCKED ROOMS TO TABLETOPS

Since puzzles are literally what make escape rooms tick, the escape room experience translates surprisingly well to the tabletop. Realizing this, several major game publishers have jumped on the escape room bandwagon with home-based escape games.

The first known tabletop escape room game, *Escape Room In A Box: The Werewolf Experiment*, was funded on Kickstarter on March 4, 2016, raising over \$135,000 in funding. As of the time of writing, the final product is yet to be delivered. To fill the void, publishers like ThinkFun, Spin Master, and Thames & Kosmos have created their own versions — and there are sure to be many more to come.

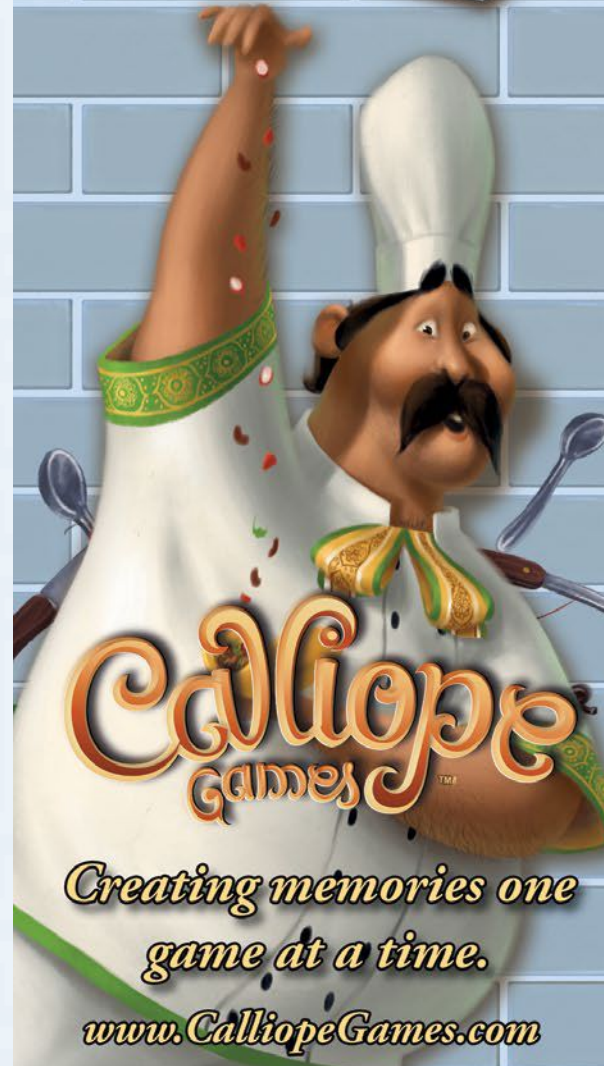
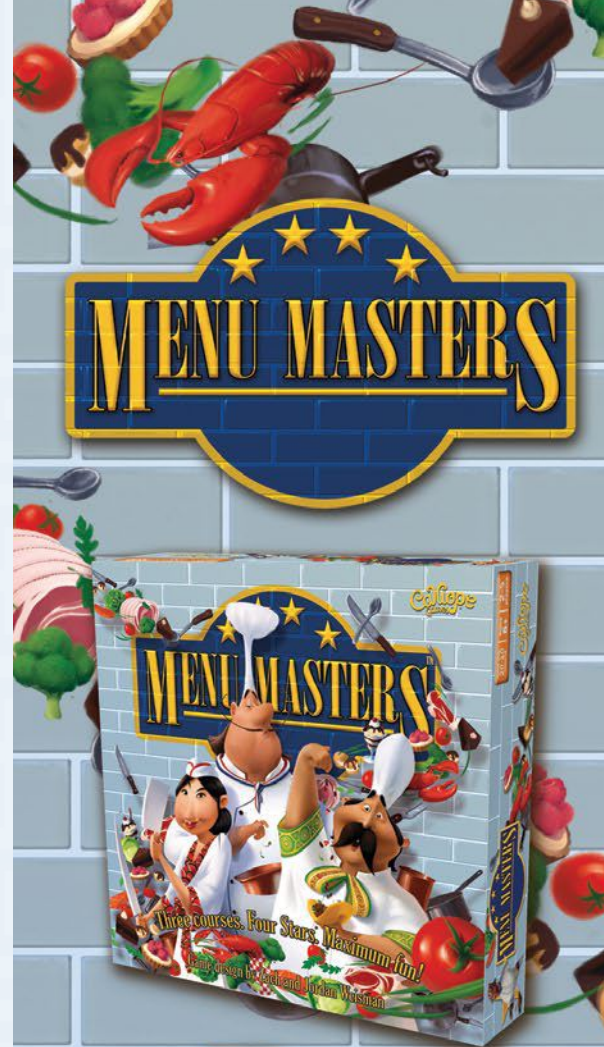
Below are reviews of some of the great puzzle- and fun-filled escape room games we've played recently.



This game's engrossing storyline pulls you in from the start. It's 1869, and you and a group of friends set off to investigate Stargazer's Manor. Its occupant, the astronomer Richard Harrison, started acting strangely when his wife died a few years ago. He hasn't been seen in some time, and his estate appears abandoned. But the bizarre noises, smells, and billowing smoke coming from the manor indicate that something curious is happening inside...

You and your friends have 90 minutes to figure out the manor's mystery and escape (or 120 minutes if you have less than six players). The game progresses linearly from puzzle to puzzle. When you think you've found a solution to a puzzle, one of you tests it by inputting it into a solution wheel. If your group is correct, you open the corresponding envelope, revealing more clues to another puzzle.

Because there is typically only one puzzle to solve at a time, and because the clues and puzzles can't be seen by everyone at once, it is difficult to keep everyone involved when playing with more than four players. The clues and puzzle components are beautifully produced and add thematic flavor to the story. Although the box says ages 10 and up, families can easily play this with younger children.



This game comes with four 60-minute scenarios in increasing difficulty: *Prison Break*, *Virus*, *Nuclear Countdown*, and *Temple of the Aztec*. The *Prison Break* and *Temple of the Aztec* scenarios follow the idea of escaping the room; in *Virus*, you have 60 minutes to find the antidote and in *Nuclear Countdown*, 60 minutes to diffuse the bomb.

Each scenario is divided into three parts, culminating in a major puzzle. To test out your solution, you insert four keys (variously representing letters, numbers, and shapes) into the game's Chrono Decoder. If you are correct, the Chrono Decoder plays a success sound and you move on to the next part of the scenario.

There is impressive variety and challenge in the puzzles you encounter. One of the puzzles even involves “metagaming”—to solve it, you have to work outside the supposed limits set by the game. The Chrono Decoder has four encryption methods inscribed on its sides: a Caesar cipher, Pigpen cipher, Enigma cipher, and Morse code. In each scenario, you will have to reference one of these encryption methods to solve some of the puzzles. The Chrono Decoder also has a clock, ticking down from 60 minutes in digital red letters, creating the feeling of excitement and tension just like a real-life escape room.

The box says the game is for players ages 16 and up, but kids as young as 10 or 12 will enjoy playing this game with older kids or adults. The puzzles can be quite difficult, but there are hints included if you need them. You'll need the Chrono Decoder to play the two expansions Spin Master has released so far: *Welcome to Funland* and *Murder Mystery*.

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The *Elite* is a free print and play demo of the *Unlock!* system (yet to be released at the time of writing). At 30 minutes, it's half as long as the three stand-alone *Unlock!* games — *The Formula*, *Squeek and Sausage*, and *The Island of Doctor Goorse* — but long enough to demonstrate Space Cowboys' unique take on escape room games.

In *The Elite*, you and your friends have been hired to search the hideout of a man suspected of illicit gambling activities. The game consists of a short deck of cards, with backs that have either a letter or a number. To begin, you open the *Unlock!* app on your phone and start the timer. Then you flip over the first card, revealing an overhead view of the suspect's hideout on which are letters and numbers that correspond to some of cards in the deck. You flip over these cards to reveal clues. One of the cards you flip over might show a bookcase, another might show a hammer.

Cards with a red puzzle piece icon can be combined with cards that have a blue puzzle piece icon. For example, you might combine the hammer (red) with the bookcase (blue) by adding the number on the back of the hammer card with the number on the back of the bookcase card. If there is a card with that number in the deck, you reveal it to see the effect of using the hammer on the bookcase. Cards that have a yellow lock icon are puzzle cards, signifying that you need to input a four-digit code into the app. Each time you input an incorrect code into the app, the app takes away three minutes from your remaining time.

Another new ingredient in the *Unlock!* series is hidden objects. Some of the card faces have very small numbers or letters hidden on them. If the bookcase card had a small number or letter hidden somewhere on it, there is an item hidden in the bookcase. To see it, simply turn over the card indicated by that number or letter.

The puzzles in *The Elite* weren't as challenging as the other escape room games we played, but the innovative new mechanics in the *Unlock!* system provide fresh challenges for even the most experienced escape room gamers.



STACKING UP TO THE REAL THING

How do escape room tabletop games stack up to real-life escape rooms? The games reviewed here bring various aspects of real-life escape rooms to the table, from the 60-minute countdown clock to the ability to search for hidden objects — but what they all have in common is creative puzzles and the need for teamwork. While they lack the visual and tactile experience of being locked in an actual room, they successfully capture the thrill of working together with your group to solve a challenging puzzle. In both real-life escape rooms and their tabletop counterparts, the puzzles are the stars of the show.

Below: Puzzle Break's neon sign; seance table and mirror from Puzzle Break's The Eventide Departure escape room



Are you
naughty...
...or nice?



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The story begins when you and your friends take refuge one night in an abandoned cabin, are locked in, and have until morning to escape. In fact, the game will last as long as it takes you to solve all the puzzles and exit the cabin. At the end of the game you will give yourself a score based on how quickly you escaped and on how many clue cards you used.

There are three kinds of cards in the game: three clue cards for each of the 11 puzzles, 23 riddle cards labeled A-W, and answer cards numbered 1-30. The game also comes with a puzzle book, three “strange items” that you cannot examine until a riddle card tells you to, and a decoder disk that is similar to the solution wheel in *Stargazer’s Manor*.

The game begins as you and your friends flip through the puzzle book. Some of the puzzles you can solve right away; others you must wait to solve until you find more clues. You check your answers by inputting it into the decoder wheel, which tells you to look at one of the answer cards. If you’re right, the answer card will instruct you to turn over certain riddle cards, which will provide further clues. There are at least two or three puzzles to solve at any given time, making this a great option for larger groups.

Markus and Inka Brand, the husband and wife team behind the *Exit* series, used the cards, puzzle book, and mysterious items to maximum effect. Many of the puzzles, although difficult to solve, are ingenious; how satisfying it was to solve them! The *Exit* series lacks the urgency of a real-life escape room because the only time pressure is to get a good score, but the quality of the puzzles more than makes up for it. 🎲



MORE ESCAPE ROOM EXPERIENCES

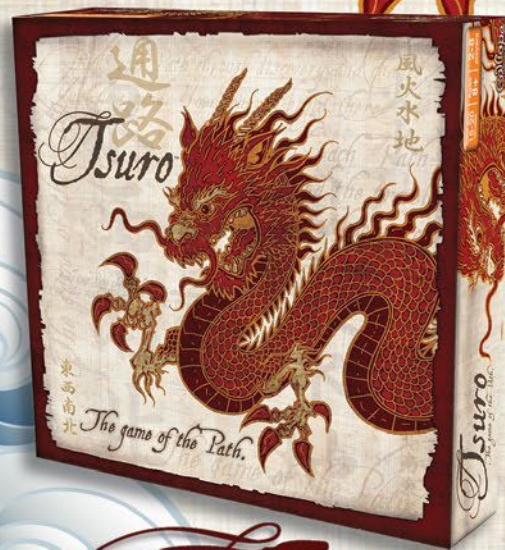
PanIQ Room is another popular escape room chain, having first launched in Hungary in 2012. They have since expanded with nine locations currently running or under construction in the U.S. and many more worldwide. The rooms feature a mix of logic and dexterity-based puzzles. Their Phoenix location features three immersive experiences: Aliens, Kidnapped, and Wild West.



Below: Aliens, Kidnapped, and Wild West rooms at PanIQ Room Phoenix



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From TABLETOPS To DESKTOPS:

The Rise of Digital Board Games



Dann Albright

Freelance Journalist and
Lifelong Board Gamer

Board gaming is an inherently physical, analog hobby.

Right?

The idea of a digital board game strikes some people as strange. And that's not surprising—one of the best things about the hobby is that it connects people. In an age where many people feel that digital technologies are pushing us further apart, and that technologically-advanced hobbies are not ideal, a digital board game almost seems like a contradiction.

But there's no denying their popularity. New digital board games come out all the time. Massive online platforms continue to attract new users. Some people find that strange. Is there something paradoxical about digital board games?

For digital board games enthusiasts like myself, it's an interesting question to think about. And to really find an answer, we need to look back.



Lords and Vassals

Years ago, if you wanted to play a game with someone far away, you had two options. You could either travel – which was likely expensive – or play by mail. And play by mail we did. People have been playing chess by mail (“correspondence chess”) since the early 1800s, and there are still enthusiasts who use posted letters to play with friends around the world.

Each letter contains a single chess move. And it could be weeks until you receive the response. For some of us, this pace is hard to imagine. But it was exceedingly popular, with multiple large clubs and associations springing up in the 18- and 1900s.

Most people, however, have since switched to online variants. A chess server called PLATO was used in the 1970s, and a Usenet group sprung up in the 1980s, long before the modern Internet changed gaming. It wasn’t all that much more advanced than chess by mail – but it was a sign of things to come. Chess by email – the more modern version of correspondence chess – kicked off in the 1980s, and advancements in digital board gaming have come fast and furious since then.

One of the most notable moments in digital board gaming was the release of VASL (Virtual Advanced Squad Leader), now known as VASSAL, in 2003. Initially designed to let players face off in the popular tabletop war game *Advanced Squad Leader*, it has expanded into a highly customizable game engine that sports thousands of modules for everything from mega-scale monster war games to *DC Dice Masters*.

VASSAL’s interface is rather rudimentary, and takes some time to get used to. There are no fancy 3D graphics here – just user-created visuals that give you enough information to play the game (which is fitting for war

What’s the Appeal?

By now, you might be wondering why so many online board gaming options have popped up. The answer is simple: digital board games allow people to spend more time playing the games they love.

Sometimes you don’t have enough people around. Sometimes you just want to play a game for a while

games, as they’re not usually very graphically advanced anyway). Despite that, VASSAL remains quite popular, with new titles being added all the time and players using it for a wide variety of games all over the world.

Similar desktop gaming clients have arisen since the release of VASSAL, but none have approached its popularity. Zun Tzu, first seen in 2006, doesn’t have the thousands of games available on VASSAL, but it does host a range of titles. Brettspielwelt, a German online board gaming site, also offers a downloadable client. Another called OCTGN (Online Card and Tabletop Gaming Network) was recently developed, though hasn’t seen much uptake yet.

In 2017, those downloadable clients still have a notable presence, but the real development has been elsewhere (see the sidebar on the next page).



VASSAL, released in 2003, is a customizable game engine that remains popular today

before you go to bed. Maybe your favorite game isn’t a big hit in your current game group. Or your favorite people to play with live across the country (or even the world). No matter the reason, many people just don’t get to play the games they love as often as they want. The internet, apps, and board-game-playing AI solve this problem.



Of course, there are other reasons, too. Designers can build and test prototypes faster and more realistically than ever before. Complicated games are easier to learn. Games with tons of pieces are easy to set up and tear down. Gameplay is faster. Games can include new mechanics that aren't possible (or, at least, would be very difficult) in physical versions.

There are many reasons why people like digital board games, whether they're playing a month-long game of *18XX* on VASSAL or flying through a five-minute game of *Race for the Galaxy* on BoardGameArena. In most cases, it comes down to the fact that we love board games, and digital games let us play more. And who can argue with that?

The Advantages of Digital Board Games

Being a digital board game evangelist, I get a few of the same questions often. As you might expect, "But aren't physical board games better?" and similar queries are common.

Few people will argue that digital board games are the best way to play. Most of us are in this hobby at least partially for the social aspect, and digital games can lessen that (though pass-and-play games can be a lot of fun, too). Learning, teaching, rules-enforcing, and mind games are all part of the board game hobby, and digital games either change or completely get rid of them. In some ways, it's like a different hobby altogether.

But as I mentioned before, digital games do solve one huge problem: they let us play the games we love even if we aren't in the right circumstances to play the physical version. Playing *Through the Ages* can take, as you might expect, ages. But I can play one turn at a time against people from around the world whenever I have a couple extra minutes.

I'd love to buy *Tokaido*, but can't really afford it at the moment. The app only costs a few bucks, and I can play it with my wife or people from around the world. BoardGameArena lets me play games that I've wanted to learn for a long time. Tabletopia introduced me to my favorite game, and is very nearly as immersive as a real life gaming session.

There's an App For That

A quick browse through the App Store shows a range of games of various weights. Titles range from *Patchwork*, the lighthearted quilting puzzle game, to the mechanically-and-strategically complicated *Brass*, which sees players developing industries, connecting railways, selling goods, conducting research and development, and outwitting their opponents in a long economic campaign.

Of course, you can find everything in between as well. Mainstays like *Agricola*, *Le Havre*, *Terra Mystica*, and *6 Nimmt!* fare well on the digital tabletop. Newcomers, including *Colt Express*, *Potion Explosion*, and *Tokaido* are garnering attention as well. Card games—*Paperback*, *Ascension*, *Dominion*—are great on mobile devices. Even the classic gateway games now have apps: *Ticket to Ride*, *Carcassonne*, and *Catan*.

Potion Explosion



Hybrid games, such as *Werewords* (see page 6) are also becoming more common. In these games, physical components blend with a digital app that drives the gameplay and adds additional features such as music, timers, and game content.

New Sights and Websites

It's not just on your phone or tablet where you can play board games, though. More full-featured online services have sprung up, allowing for 3D modeling of boards and pieces, virtual reality interaction, and much greater freedom of creation.

Tabletopia is a prime example of this. With over 350 board games, gamers from all over the world can connect over a variety of genres: light games, heavy games, social games, solo games, card games, and everything else you could possibly imagine. I first learned to play *Scythe*—possibly my favorite game—on Tabletopia with a Brit and an Australian ex-pat living in France. The platform has become so popular that some publishers are releasing their games digitally before the physical version comes out.

Since Tabletopia is structured as a 3D online sandbox, you can do whatever you want in a game session. The rules

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No, digital games will never replace their analog counterparts. But they can supplement them in a very real way that helps people better enjoy the hobby.

Back to the Future

With advancements moving the realm forward all the time, there's no telling what we'll be doing with digital board games in even five years. Virtual reality already allows you to experience Tabletop Simulator as a fully immersive 3D realm. More and more impressive AI is being developed all the time. And with developers beginning to experiment with augmented reality, there's more room for creative innovation than ever.

As with other digital technologies, we're only limited by our imagination when it comes to digital board games. We've come a long way from playing chess by mail, and we will soon be much further along than where we are today.

It's a big world of board games out there, and digital games only help to expand it. 🎲

(If you want to play some games online, send me a challenge on BoardGameArena! My username is dralbright.)

Screenshots from Castle Panic on Tabletopia



aren't enforced like they are in apps—so you can play with house rules, fan-made rules, or no rules at all. You can drop pieces on top of each other, flick things off of the table, or consult a digital tablet with the rules loaded onto it.

And Tabletopia isn't the only online sandbox like this. Tabletop Simulator, a popular Steam program, offers similar features. It supports virtual reality, so you can move around an immersive game room with a VR headset. The possibilities of these 3D game engines are absolutely staggering—and they're being explored every day.



On top of all these platforms is a growing number of websites that also offer slightly less intimidating (and more rules-based) environments for playing games online. BoardGameArena, Brettspielwelt, Yucata, Happy Meeple, Your Turn My Turn, Boîte à Jeux, and others let players face off in a rules-enforced arena on a number of games, from classic abstracts like Go and chess to modern powerhouses *Puerto Rico*, *Race for the Galaxy*, and *Through the Ages* with no need for setup. You can knock out a game of *Puerto Rico* in 40 minutes instead of the usual 90 (which I often do).



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Jesse Tannous

Writer, Gamer, Editor, and
Professional Nerd

IF EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN, THEN TABLETOP GAMES TOP THE LIST OF MAJOR COMEBACKS.

IRONICALLY, IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY BOARD GAME SALES ARE ON THE RISE AND HAVE EVEN HELD SURPRISINGLY STEADY IN THAT GROWTH FOR CLOSE TO A DECADE. AS TABLETOP GAMES GROW, SALES HAVE ECLIPSED EXPECTATIONS AND HAVE EVEN GONE GLOBAL. SOME OF THE MOST INNOVATIVE AND POPULAR GAME CREATIONS HAVE COME FROM DESIGNERS IN COUNTRIES LIKE AUSTRALIA, ITALY, AND EVEN SINGAPORE.

THE USA MAY BE THE FINANCIAL TARGET FOR MOST TABLETOP GAME CREATIONS, BUT COUNTRIES LIKE GERMANY ARE HOLDING THEIR OWN AND EVEN DESIGNING FOR REGION-SPECIFIC INTERESTS THAT QUICKLY GAIN POPULARITY INTERNATIONALLY. AS THE BOARD GAME INDUSTRY SHIFTS GLOBALLY, COMPANIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD EXAMINE HOW THAT IMPACTS LOCAL MARKETS AND THE WAY GAMES ARE DESIGNED.



EUROGAMES OUTSIDE OF EUROPE

Błażej Kubacki is the Project Manager at NSKN Games, a company established in Romania in 2011 but currently maintaining an office in Warsaw, Poland.

Kubacki explained that NSKN was “Born out of an idea that with the heads we could put together, a great board game could be made, and it turned out we were partly right.” Kubacki was referring to their (now retired) quirky game *Warriors and Traders*.

Since then, Kubacki admits that the focus of NSKN has been on what is labeled as “gamers’ games”—heavier, strategic, and deep, with an occasional outlier like *Progress: Evolution of Technology* or the more recent and lighter *In the Name of Odin*.

“In most cases, we produce games we like to play, both in terms of theme and mechanisms,” explained Kubacki. “We do have a soft spot for empire building and civilization as themes, hence the continual existence of the *Exodus* line on the market.”

When asked where the majority of his customers live, Kubacki explained that while most customers live in Germany, they’ve had *Praetor* (their heaviest and most-involved Eurogame) picked up for publishing in French, Polish, Romanian, Japanese, and Korean.

“We can safely say that we get to where people like to play games,” Kubacki said.

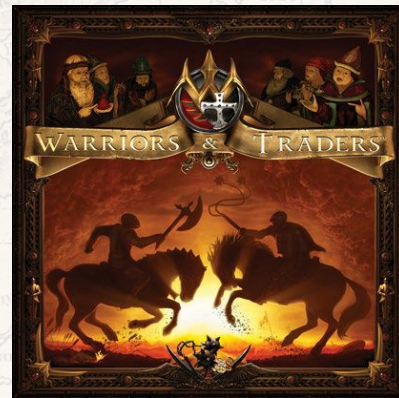
Kubacki’s crew tries to be up-to-date on not only what goes on in the market, but with gaming in general.

“We make games, and we play games, and the more we do, the more it seems evident that gaming is a global concept. While some ideas are

still new in some countries (like crowdfunding), gaming is becoming as wide and diverse in any region we have access to,” Kubacki said.

While many in the industry assume that games are played differently in different countries, Kubacki disagrees and says that today there are heavy and serious Euro gamers, war gamers, adventure gamers, light and casual gamers all over the world.

And just to revisit for a moment the “Eurogame” concept: although it originated in Europe, companies in the USA are publishing Eurogames (see games like *Viticulture*), and companies based in Europe (and in other regions as well) are creating deeply thematic games, which has long been a characteristic attributed to games created in the United States. Names now seem to be the only remnant of what used to be indeed tied to specific regions.



NSKN
GAMES

MEDITERRANEAN MARKETS

Italy is well known for a lot of things, but Roberto Di Meglio wants people to know that Ares Games’ headquarters, the small seaside town Viareggio (famous for its Carnival), is home to one of the most important comics and games shows in Europe. Ares also has a subsidiary office in (of all places) Missouri, USA, that utilizes one full-time and one part-time employee. This is particularly significant to Di Meglio because his staff comes from almost twenty years of experience with Nexus (after that company closed its doors), so the focus is on exceptional, high-quality thematic games often including miniature and other special components.

“While the hobby games market is very important to us, we do a big effort to make them very accessible—our *Wings of Glory* and *Sails of Glory* lines are a good example of games which can be played by veterans, but also by children and families,” Di Meglio explained. “We are also diversifying our catalog and expanding it with lighter games—card games, family games, light ‘Euro’ games—but they are still a smaller part of our business, even if we have some very good titles.”

Unlike other international creators who shy away from region-specific labeling, Di Meglio admits that there is an “Italian style” in terms of game design which through the years has made itself popular all over the world.

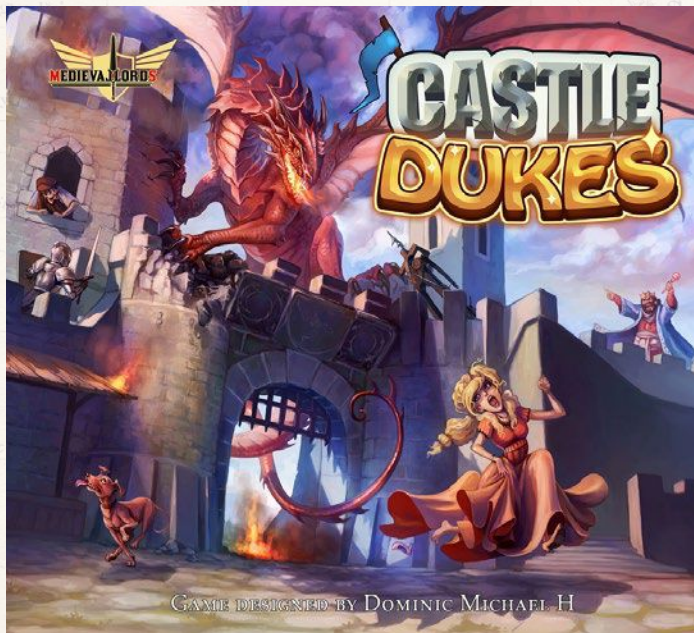
“The games designed and developed in Italy pioneered a trend, since the early 2000s, and I see it is becoming more widespread now,” began Di Meglio. “Where the traditional ‘American’ style and the ‘Euro’ style blended—a stronger attention to theme than in traditional ‘Euro’ games, and attention to elegant mechanics higher than traditional American-style games. I have seen a similar trend emerging recently with games developed in other European countries—France, Poland, Czech Republic—with the international audience in mind.”

“At least for Italy, I am quite sure this emerged from the encounter of two different gaming cultures—games coming to us from across the ocean and games coming from Germany, during the 80s and 90s—sooner than it happened in the ‘homelands’ of those styles,” said Di Meglio.

FOREIGN FANS FOR HOMEBRED HEROES

The Singapore based company Medieval Lords (*Castle Dukes*) was created when Dominic Michael Huang, a long time game designer working both professionally and freelance with several big name companies, decided he preferred the freedom to create over working in someone else’s studio.

The vast majority of customers for Medieval Lords come from the USA, at around 60% of its total sales to date. The runner-up goes to the EU, with about 30% and in third is Singapore



itself, at close to 8%, where locals have shown strong support for their homebred designer. Strangely enough, while one would think that the Europeans would love their no-luck game mechanisms and the Americans their dice chucking, Medieval Lords has yet to see any proper evidence supporting this statement. The percentage of sales has been consistent across various game types and styles, and it has led the studio to believe that the world today has evolved to a point where gaming has no more borders.

From Singapore, Huang predicted that the local gaming scene is about to enter its golden age, thanks mainly to Kickstarter.

“WHAT WAS PREVIOUSLY A COUNTRY WITH LESS THAN FIVE SERIOUS GAME DESIGNERS HAS BLOOMED INTO A PLACE THAT IS CHURNING OUT A POTENTIAL DESIGNER ONCE EVERY TWO MONTHS,”

— DOMINIC MICHAEL HUANG,
OWNER, MEDIEVAL LORDS





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Huang alerted us to a rather interesting trend in Singapore's game design, a trend that isn't exactly accidental—it often includes a higher educational value. Huang noted that this concept is included because several of the projects are funded by the government of Singapore and are required to hold educational value. It could also be that these designers seek to appeal their game to the local culture, which places education as a top priority. Government funding

may become something to consider for other creators who need funding.

According to Huang, there is another fact that not many people in the tabletop universe know: he argues that the best miniature tabletop game companies find their roots in Singapore.

THROW SOME DICE ON THE BARBIE

David Harding of Grail Games says he's been making board games since he was a kid, but confessed that it was his brother Phil Walker-Harding, who self-published a number of games in the mid-2000s, that inspired him to see board game design and publishing as potentially more than a hobby. Harding explained, "I learned a lot from [Phil], and made a lot of contacts in the industry via him as well."

According to Harding, Grail Games focuses on bringing games to the English-speaking market that are hard to come by—either because they are out of print, or because they are only available in other languages. This is where the name of the company comes from.

Harding says that most Grail titles are smaller card games and he looks for games that have potentially wide appeal with simple rules and a unique theme or style.

Harding agrees that Kickstarter has changed everything in the market. Before Kickstarter, the Australian game design scene was typically more focused on producing small card games. Harding attributes most of what Grail Games does to their region.

"I think this was because we are so distant internally, as well as from the rest of the world, that sending big games around costs a lot of money," Harding said. "Our population here is only 22 million, spread across a landmass approximately the size of the continental U.S. And even though most of the population is in the three biggest cities on the east coast, we are all still hours away from each other...by plane. It is sometimes cheaper for me to post something overseas than inside the country."

To Sean Carroll, owner of 93 Made Games (*Viewpoint* series), Australia's unique market can have an impact on local game design. According to Carroll, 93 Made Games and Rule & Make

(*Burger Up*) are some of the only companies that focus on local in-house design of games, whereas as a majority of Australian publishers almost exclusively publish designs from third parties.

"Whilst this isn't a terrible thing, it means that the Australian 'flavor' of games is being sucked out of the local industry," Carroll said.

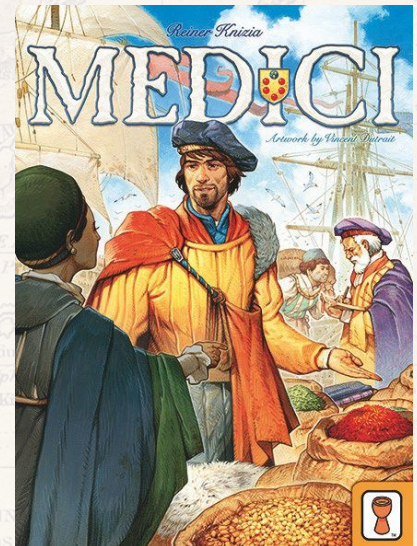
Carroll explained that their games are more distinctive and "tongue-in-cheek" to match the Aussie "larrikin" (a term referring to mischievous young people)—something that is integrated into their culture.

"So whilst I wouldn't go so far as to say that the unique style of Australian games will disappear completely, it has definitely been watered down," Carroll said.

Carroll sees localization as an unfortunate but understandable extinction in game design in order to meet broader appeal.



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“We’re too small of a market where the possibility for return on investment is so low. Essentially, we just play what we can get access to.”

In whatever language or region, from southern-most shores to mainland peninsulas, tabletop board games provide a specific appeal to audiences all over the world. They allow hobbyists to spend time with friends, build strategy skills, compete in organized events, and even educate their communities. As the popularity of the hobby grows, companies from around the world can now share new titles with international audiences, giving rise to unique regional styles and a fresh mix of genres yet to be seen in the industry. 🎲



Above: *Burger Up*, published by Rule & Make

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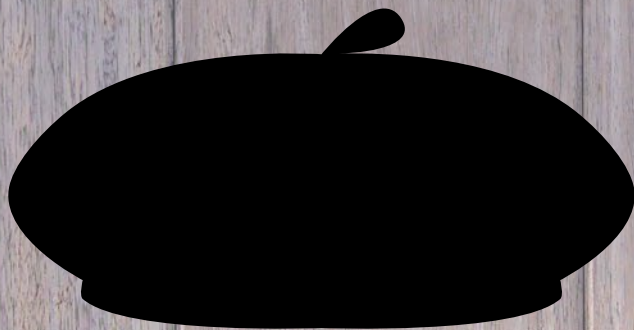
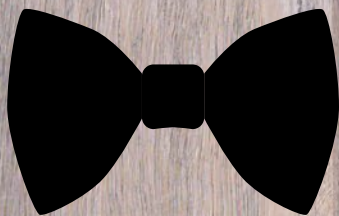
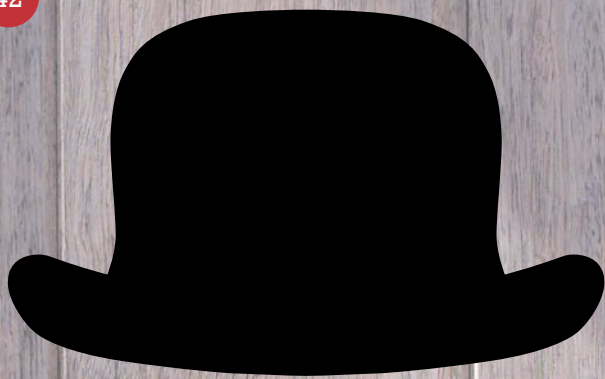
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A Rather Dashing Duo

Finding a Place in the Game Industry



Game Designer Mike Richie and Art Director Grant Wilson have been playing and redesigning games together since they were old enough to throw dice. Now, instead of writing out new *Risk* rules on scratch paper, they are launching award-winning games like *Element* and growing their popular *Drawn* and *Quartered* series with their latest release *This Belongs in a Museum*. The *Rather Dashing Games* titles are a mix of simple rules and complex strategies, accessible to casual gamers and embraced by competitive hobbyists. So how did this dashing design duo make their mark on the industry?



Eric Huemmer

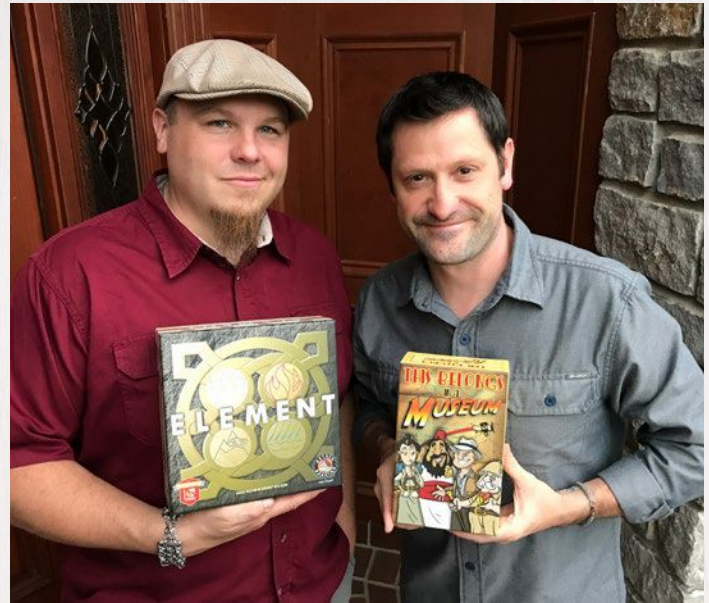
Co-op Connoisseur
and Wordsmith



Growing up, Richie had a knack for reinventing games, while Wilson has been drawing since he was able to hold a pencil. Whether combining *Risk* and *Nuclear War* or slinging dice with *Dungeons and Dragons*, they were always building off of existing rules to make new, exciting scenarios and games.

However, not all talents immediately translate into a career. Wilson worked as a system administrator for a local manufacturer, a plumber, and even produced and starred in the popular TV show *Ghost Hunters* for eight years. Richie worked in the upholstery and interior design industry, was a personal chef, and even had a stint in roofing.

But Richie never stopped working on games, eventually designing and consulting professionally in 2006. Soon he became a known name in the industry, working on a number of titles including *Onitama*, *Motocross Unplugged*, and *Skateboard Madness*. The more he contracted for other companies, the more he wanted to develop his own titles.



*Mike Richie and Grant Wilson pose with their games, **Element** and **This Belongs in a Museum***

Campfire Stories

Rather Dashing Games got its start as only a company run by lifelong friends could. It was 2011 when Richie, Wilson, and their wives went camping. As they were sitting around the fire, Richie described how he enjoyed working in the industry, but that something was missing.

“I just want to design games that I want to play,” Richie remarked. “I’m going to game stores and not seeing anything that fits that.”

“What’s keeping you from going out there on your own?” Wilson asked.

“Some capital,” answered Richie. “I have some of what I need, but not nearly all of it, and I need a good artist.”

“Dude, I’ve been drawing my entire life,” Wilson laughed. “I think I can give it a try.”

With the encouragement of their wives, Richie and Wilson immediately started working out the details. They both agreed on Rather Dashing Games for a name, with the logo being an amalgamation of their grandfathers. They researched how to start an LLC, how to secure loans, and everything that goes into launching a new board game company.



The Design Duo

Even before they agreed to start this up, Richie already had several games in the works that just needed art. They started by launching two titles at once: *Red Hot Silly Peppers*, a salsa-making math game geared towards children; and *X Marks the Spot*, a domino-like card game with sabotage elements. Designing the games was no sweat. But two creative minds handling the business sides of the industry — manufacturing,

shipping, advertising, and more — was challenging even with their combined experiences.

Despite the initial learning curve, Rather Dashing Games met with success and went on to release several more titles: *Pirates*, *Ninjas*, *Robots & Zombies*; *Four Taverns*; *Dwarven Miner*; and *Graveyards*, *Ghosts* & *Haunted Houses*. Now with even more titles, the

two-man team was spending most of their time managing product lifecycles and marketing and hardly any time developing games. This was the hurdle that almost tripped up Rather Dashing just as it was hitting its stride.

“We loved what we were doing, but while driving back from a convention we said, ‘look – let’s just stop this

whole company thing. Let’s dissolve it and take these game ideas and sell them to people,’” Wilson described.

“We had several other companies who were still reaching out to us that didn’t want to launch a product until they had our eyes on it,” explained Richie. “So we could consult, we could design. That’s where our strengths lie, so let’s be a design team.”

Serendipity – thy name is Kalmbach!

Before they could dissolve the company, the team received an introduction packet a day or two later from Kalmbach Publishing, a science and trade magazine publisher, looking to acquire Rather Dashing and help them manage the business side of the company, while keeping the team on to make games. Richie and Wilson had been contacted by other companies before, but Kalmbach Publishing was transparent and approachable. So the design duo decided to visit the publisher out in Waukesha, Wisconsin.

“We walked around and with every step we realized more and more these guys are poised to be the king of the game industry, minus the games,” explained Wilson. “Fantastic shipping department, they plan their own events, they have an innovations department. They had everything they needed in-house.”

Let’s Talk Process

The design process between Richie and Wilson is incredibly organic. Richie always has several games at different stages that he’s working on, but makes sure Wilson is brought in at the start. “Usually a game is nothing but a concept,” said Richie. “I try to not think too deep on it before I bring Grant in. Sometimes I will just call it like ‘the sword of awesome’ before giving any serious thought to themes or settings.”

Game mechanics, themes, and artwork heavily influence each other throughout development. Playtesting is continual, the guys always making sure their wives get a chance to see a game before testing it with more groups. Kalmbach adds another layer of production to refine it even further.

The end goal is to make the game a Rather Dashing game.

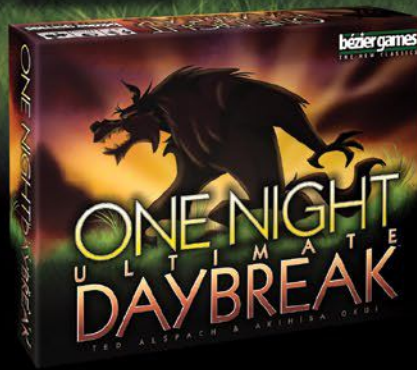


“With other game companies, when they want to do a video, they hire an outside film group,” Richie continued. “When they want to do marketing, they have to contract a marketing company. All of that is in this building: from videography to marketing to trade sales, it’s great.”

“What’s nice is they bring a lot of trust,” Wilson continued. “Mike and I can put our [game] into their hands, and they run with it. And it takes all that headache away to be able to go back home and just draw, run test games, and cultivate what’s coming out of us; it’s just better.”



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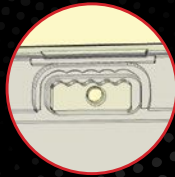
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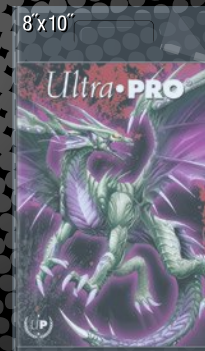


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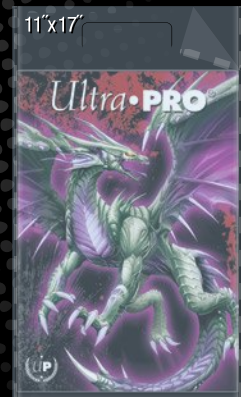
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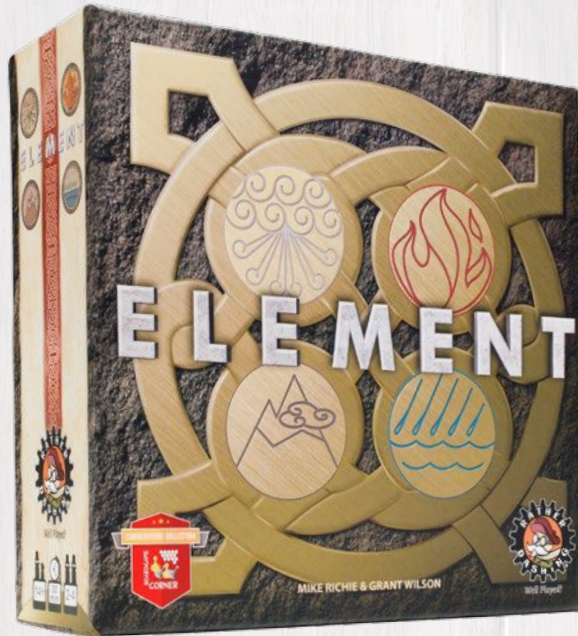
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“We wanted to make this game feel like it had been around as long as chess and checkers, but you just haven’t heard of it yet,” explained Wilson. “So we wanted old. And your first thoughts would be to go Asian, but so many designers are going with Asian themes recently. We both have Celtic roots, and I have never seen a Celtic abstract game yet, so we went that route.”

So what’s one of the best parts of the game? “I was raised by my grandparents,” Richie explained. “And Grant rolls out the first sketches of the sages for *Element* and I sat back and went ‘are those my grandparents?’ and he went ‘Yup!’”

Element released on March 1st, 2017, and has since won the Cornerstone Award and Dice Tower Seal of Excellence. The design duo are proud to see the proper release that Richie wanted for his first game, and it’s exciting for Kalmbach Publishing and Rather Dashing to see one of their first titles together winning awards and receiving fantastic reviews. They’ve already heard from reviewers and consumers that they want a high-end release of the game: polished wood, marble stones and elders.

What’s Next for Rather Dashing?

Rather Dashing Games is looking to release three to four titles each year, with the design duo working on as many as six-to-ten at any given time. They’re cognizant of other releases to ensure they’re bringing something fresh to the shelves – like *Hafid’s Grand Bazaar*, coming to stores in September.

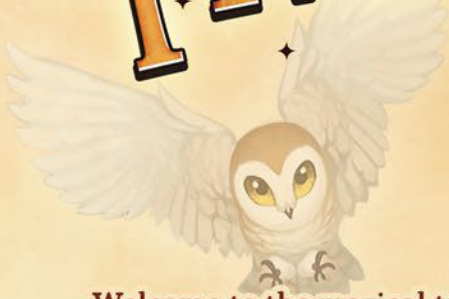
So put on your hat and hold onto your britches, because the future of Mike Richie and Grant Wilson looks Rather Dashing. 🎲



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