

Board games' golden age: sociable, brilliant and driven by the internet

PlayStation and Xbox may get all the glory these days, but independent board game designers have kicked off a cardboard revolution

Owen Duffy - Tuesday 25 November 2014

Tell most people that you're a "gamer" nowadays and they'll subconsciously add the prefix "video". But while digital games are grudgingly acknowledged as part of the entertainment mainstream, the past decade has also seen unexpected growth in an industry that many assumed would become redundant in the era of screens: tabletop board games.

Sales are still dwarfed by the latest PC and console blockbusters, but the past four years have seen board game purchases rise by between 25% and 40% annually. Thousands of new titles are released each year, and the top games sell millions of copies.

To successive generations raised on the Mega Drive, PlayStation and iPhone, the concept of sitting around a table rolling dice and moving pieces may seem positively archaic. But beyond mass-market titles like Monopoly and Guess Who, a community of independent designers and publishers has been steadily producing innovative, exciting and beautiful games offering experiences beyond even those of the most sophisticated gaming hardware.

Ugg-Tect, for instance, challenges players to build a series of 3D structures while communicating only in primitive cave-man grunts. Make a mistake and you'll receive a smack on the head from one of the inflatable plastic clubs that come with the game – an element of physicality that would be difficult (or at least painful) to replicate with a console controller.

It's the result of an approach to game design that considers the creation of shared social experiences to be every bit as important as writing rules or

designing physical components, and while *Ugg-Tect* plays for laughs, there are thousands of other games which tackle a broad range of subjects from monster-slaying fantasy to serious social issues.

Pandemic casts players as a team of medics attempting to rid the planet of four deadly and highly infectious diseases. *Dead of Winter* challenges a group of survivors to stay alive in a world overrun by flesh-eating zombies. *Freedom – The Underground Railroad* examines the history of the US abolitionist movement, with players working to shelter runaway slaves while simultaneously fighting to end the practice of slavery by political means.

Many industry figures point to the internet as a key factor in the growth of tabletop gaming. The rise of smartphones and tablets has given players an inexpensive way to try digital versions of board games, and many go on to buy physical copies as well.

Online retailers have made games far more easily available than in the past, when many could only be procured from a small number of specialist shops. At the same time, the power of blogs, online video and social networks has created word-of-mouth buzz for an industry that, until recently, has been largely ignored by mainstream, non-gaming media.

But players and designers are keen to suggest another reason for the hobby's resurgence. Games are simply getting better. Publishers are turning out products with elegant mechanics and impressive artwork as fast as their customers can snap them up. Board games are going through a golden age. [...]

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