

How Board Games Conquered Cafes

As social life gets ever more digital, new coffee shops and bars encourage face-to-face interaction via the likes of Settlers of Catan and Connect Four.

By Hana Schank - November 3 2014

In the past few years, board-game cafés have popped up across the globe, in places as varied and far-flung as Galveston and Beijing, and if the number of people seeking funding* on Kickstarter for these types of establishments is any indication, lot more board-game cafés could be opening up in the near future.

Board game sales are correspondingly up, with sales at hobby stores rising for the last five years in a row, and growing by 20 percent last year, according to ICv2, which tracks industry sales. Adults and kids the world over have all come to the conclusion that what they really want to do on a weekend is open up a cardboard box and decide who gets to be the blue piece.

Customers are typically people who didn't spend their teen years playing Dungeons & Dragons.

The rapid proliferation speaks to the need to connect with people in a public/private space, the need to have a meaningful* interaction that doesn't use emoticons, and perhaps the need, in an increasingly complex world, to work with friends and family toward a clear goal.

In addition to providing a physical place for people to interact, it may be that people are turning to board games now because the games themselves come at a time when people are starting to lose the ability to interact and have conversations with one another. But with a game there are rules and there is a logical structure to the conversation. For people who are used to interacting with others primarily online, board games may help ease* the way back into face-to-face conversation.

You need to work with your fellow* players and interact in a meaningful way in order to win.

Board games themselves have changed a lot in the past decade. The games that people tend to line up for at a board-game café are so-called European-style games that can be played quickly (no more five-day-marathon Risk sessions that take over the dining room table) and involve strategy and, in many games, cooperation. In Pandemic, one of the more popular cooperative games, players work together to stop the spread of four diseases; in Castle Panic, players unite to defend their castle against an invading monster horde. Players of strategic games get to try their hand at competitive farming (Agricola), building railroads to connect cities (Ticket to Ride) and developing a medieval French town (Carcassonne).

The cooperative aspect of many of the newer games also helps make them less traumatic for competitive types who hate to lose. Instead of rushing around a board trying to capture everyone else's pieces, you need to work with your fellow players and interact in a meaningful way in order to win the game. In addition to the cooperative aspect, many of today's games require complex strategies that make them more compelling* to play, and to return to.

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Today's games typically have fewer rules and more variability. As opposed to a single winning strategy, many games have multiple ways to approach them, or strategies that evolve depending on who the players are or how the game board comes together. And in games like Settlers of Catan or Carcassonne, even the boards themselves are different in each game.

In an increasingly complex world, board games allow players to put their problem-solving skills to the test just as they do in real life. Chess, Flanagan pointed out when we spoke, "may have been a good model for how war operated at one time," but it bears little resemblance to war in the modern era. If our games reflect society, then perhaps modern society no longer sees things in the black and white of chess pieces. Today's game

players do not want to do mundane things like purchase real estate, collect an allowance, or even take over Europe. They're looking for bigger challenges. Today, when someone opens up a board game, it's so they can travel to mythical islands, build cities with roads and infrastructure, and save the world.

Adapted from The Atlantic

Vocabulary

funding = financing
meaningful = profound,
significant

ease = facilitate
fellow = of the same group
compelling = interesting, exciting

to put to the test = to check
performances
mundane = boring