

READING 2

We're in a golden age of board games. It might be here to stay.

By Jaclyn Peiser - December 24, 2022

As he quarantined during the height of the pandemic with his wife at home in Frederick, Md., Jared Bryan would look longingly at one of the many shelves of card and table top games he has displayed in his home. But instead of finding joy as he admired the beautiful boxes, recalling memories from his many game nights, he found sorrow.

Bryan missed the shared experience and the ability to push aside everything going on in his life and just have fun with his friends — and he's not alone. Those feelings of community and gaiety are among the many catalysts driving card and tabletop games into a golden age not seen since the 80s, industry experts say.

The global board game market has an estimated value between \$11 billion and \$13.4 billion and is projected to grow by about 7 to 11 percent within the next 5 years, according to market research companies Technavio and Imarc. Year-to-date board game sales last month compared to the same period in 2019 increased 28 percent, according to market research company NPD Group. Card games are up 29 percent and strategic card games — such as Pokémon and Magic: The Gathering — are up 208 percent.

The crowdfunding platform Kickstarter has made it easier than ever for unknown designers to release games. Over 3,000 new games are released each year (excluding expansion packs), according to the website and online forum BoardGameGeek, which aims to log every game published. The industry now has more categories and themes, prettier boxes and higher quality game pieces. In many cases, the rules are simpler and there are more offerings that focus on cooperation rather than competition.

These developments have opened the doors for a broader audience to embrace the hobby. There are also board game YouTube channels, like Watch it Played, that aim to making it easier for people to become gamers.

Games started gaining popularity in the years leading up to the pandemic, said James Zahn, the editor in chief of trade publication the Toy Book. Board game bars and cafes had been popping up around the

country and attendance at major games conventions was increasing.

Even as covid sent people home, many still bought card and tabletop games. Sales surged, the NPD data shows, suggesting that many families who found themselves forced to spend time together looked for ways to connect through games and puzzles.

The trend continued once restrictions eased, and people craved social interactions following years of seclusion, NPD data shows. Major retailers are also embracing the hobby — broadening past the classic board games produced by major toy companies.

More than Monopoly and Candy Land

Blasting off into space. Running a farm with your family. Hunting down a werewolf. Building railroads. A Viking competing for a place of honor during Ragnarok. The themes and genres in the games industry are so vast and diverse that most people can find a point of entry.

One of the best-selling games on Amazon this year was Wingspan, which is about birdwatching, from Stonemaier Games.

While the classic games — such as UNO, Guess Who?, Trouble — are still very popular, games like Wingspan filled a hole in the industry, which had been stale for decades, Lee said. The Exploding Kittens creator said that void inspired him to create his own games at a time when the majority of the new options were dense German strategy games with a book's worth of instructions.

"All the games that were on the market were trying very hard to be good games, instead of trying very hard to let me form new memories with my friends and family," he said.

Now, there are more cooperative games such as Just One, Unfathomable and Codenames: Duet. Recent years have also seen an increase in silly games such as Unstable Unicorns and A Fake Artist Goes to New York that draw in people whose maybe only previous gaming experience was a long session of Monopoly.

85 Even older games — Ticket to Ride, Pandemic — have grown in popularity. A company called Restoration Games is revamping decades-old offerings by upgrading them to modern design, sensibility and production value.

90 “Now there’s so many games that are just pleasant and fun and sort of comforting and generate laughter and entertainment around the table, as opposed to just sort of brute competition,” Watch It Played’s Smith said.

95 Social media is also playing a larger role in the space. Wavelength, a social guessing game that involves a topic and a dial, grew in popularity after TikToks of people playing it went viral.

100 Brewster, from Shut Up & Sit Down, predicts that more game makers are going to consider the social media screen and length restraints when designing games. He said he has seen a surge in TikTok videos about board games. “People are going to want to start making games that are visually poppy and really easy to explain, which to me is a great thing,” 105 Brewster said.

A nimble and accessible industry

110 Lee’s start in the industry began like most other unknown board game designers — through the crowdfunding website Kickstarter. He teamed up with a friend, Matthew Inman, and they posted their Exploding Kittens project on Kickstarter with a goal of raising \$10,000 to print 400 copies of the game — the minimum offering at the printer. But within 30 days, they had raised \$9 million, enough to print 700,000 115 copies.

Now a full-fledged company under the same name with over a dozen offerings, the company has sold more than 20 million games.

120 Lee and other industry experts point out that card and tabletop games are relatively inexpensive to produce — “just ink on cardboard,” he said — so there is also minimal barrier to entry.

Adapted from [the WashingtonPost](#)

125 “If you have that one good product and managed to connect with people, there’s a real opportunity to build something great out of it,” Toy Book editor Zahn said.

130 The relatively easy production process gives game makers a leg-up on others in the toy space, said toy expert and consultant Chris Byrne. “Because of the fashion-based nature of the [toy] business, the ability to be nimble and bring something to market really quickly when you see a trend, that’s a really defining aspect of certainly the modern industry,” he said.

135 Jen Armstrong, a former live events coordinator turned home-school instructor, had an idea to make an official boxed game for the holiday gift swap White Elephant. She, along with her husband, son and daughter, made a prototype and posted it on social media. Hallmark soon contacted them and asked 140 about stocking the game in its stores.

145 Armstrong and her family now have a Tulsa-based company called SolidRoots with over 20 games, among them is Mind the Gap, a multigenerational family game that includes pop culture trivia and silly challenges. The company was acquired in August by Toronto-based children’s entertainment company Spin Master.

150 “It’s been a really surreal experience,” Armstrong said. “I was a home-school mom with two ‘tweenagers’ and we made a game that worked. So, you know, anyone can do this.”

155 Companies like SolidRoots are thriving, according to Byrne, as opposed to the big players like Mattel and Hasbro. Both companies cut their annual profit forecasts this year as stubbornly high inflation impacted consumers’ shopping habits.

“There are small companies that are doing gangbusters with product right now because they are smaller and more flexible,” Byrne said.

