

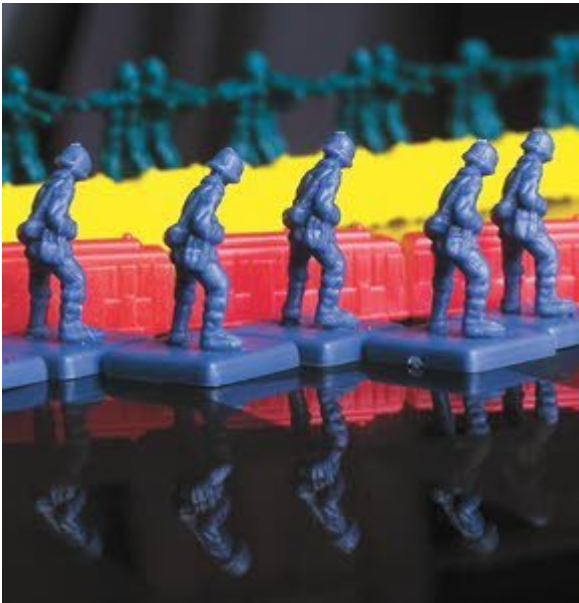
Your move

Board games gaining a comeback as pastime

By Omie Drawhorn Daily News staff writer

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On the surface, there is the board game itself: the strategies and mechanics and testing of the skills with friends.

But enjoyment of a board game goes deeper than that, said Sherri Kopel-Hamburg, Moscow resident and president of the Palouse Board Gamers group.

"It's competition but on a friendly basis, the social interaction that people do, the talking is a lot more than over what game is doing," she said. "As opposed to movies and bars, which are more expensive things to do, board games are an economical way to get out and socialize."

Designer board games, sometimes referred to as German style board games, have gained popularity across the United States and on the Palouse over the last several years, and some local retailers are having trouble keeping the games in stock.

The games are identified by their relatively simple rules, deep strategy, excellent replay value, and appeal to both hard-core gamers and casual gamers.

Kathy Sprague, owner of Safari Pearl in Moscow, which sells a variety of designer board games, said the games are a "nice, social lubricant that doesn't leave you feeling ill the next morning."

She and co-owner Tabitha Simmons, said the increased interest in the games were initially sparked by the games "Settlers of Cattan," "Carsassonne" and "Ticket to Ride."

"The games are infinitely replayable; some games use the same strategy to do the same thing repeatedly, with these games you can't do that," Sprague said.

With these games, especially "Settler's of Cattan," which she calls a "gateway game", so many people know the rules, it's easy to have someone teach you.

"The strategy is engaging, and women like it," Simmons said. "Gamer guys can get their girlfriends to play and actually enjoy it."

Sprague said the recession also appears to be a contributing factor in the games' popularity.

Sprague and Simmons gathered with board game enthusiasts Rob Yarbrough of Pullman and Dante Rodriguez of Moscow on a Saturday as Yarbrough demonstrated the game "Munchkin Quest" at Safari Pearl, surrounded by pizza, colorful game pieces, cards and whimsical game board that grows as the game progresses.

The game is a parody of role playing games like World of Warcraft and Dungeons and Dragons.

"It's been flying off the shelf so quickly we haven't had a chance to play it," Sprague said.

Yarbrough, a self-described board game geek, has been playing board games since he was a college student in the 1990s.

He takes his games seriously and went to the trouble to condense the instructions to a laminated double-sided sheet so new players can easily understand the rules.

The instructions to Munchkin Quest might seem time-consuming, but for regular board gamers, tackling a new game is a cinch, Simmons said.

Simmons drew a barrel of molasses card, a take off a barrel of monkeys.

Rodriguez drew a level 10 commode dragon card, and after considering the benefits, decided to keep it as a pet.

He said the social aspect of gaming is a huge draw.

"You engage everyone that plays. At a bar, if you aren't part of the conversation then you are just sitting there."

Kopel-Hamburg said there are online board games you can play, but she usually just uses them to practice strategy, preferring to play face to face.

She owns upwards of 100 board games, and the Palouse Board Gamers tackles different games each week, depending on the members' whims.

She said "Settlers of Cattan" is still one of her favorites.

"You are working on getting resources, what to spend the resources on and you have to predict what other players are going to do on the board," she said. "In some games you make a mistake and that's it; with this you probably aren't screwed the whole game if you make a mistake at the beginning."

Mark Kaufmann, vice president of sales and marketing for Days of Wonder board games, which manufactures popular board game, "Ticket to Ride" said board games really started to take off in as early as 2005 and 2006 and sales have increased as much as 20-25 percent annually.

"There's been a phenomenal rise in the sense that even during the last year when the economy was tough, there was a lot of interest in board games," he said.

He attributes this to the long term value of the games.

Even with video games, once people play through it, they know the strategies and they don't want to play it again, he said.

With a board game, every time you play it feels different, Kaufmann said.

"You can bring it out again and again," he said.

Traditionally, when the economy is tougher, people stay at home more.

"It's entertainment; something to do without traveling or paying \$50-60 just to get into a baseball game or see a movie."

- The Palouse Board Gamers meet at 6 p.m. Fridays at Moscow Jack in the Box

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