

SAANICH NEWS

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Game On!

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Although faithful standbys like chess, Monopoly, Trivial Pursuit, Pictionary and Scrabble continue to sell well, there is a new generation of board games made in Saanich gaining a legion of fans around the world. Outset Media is a fast-growing game distribution company, and owner David Manga is experiencing first-hand the renewed interest in boardgames.

He says there has been "huge" growth in the boardgame industry, even in the past two or three years.

The number of games now available is seemingly endless and many of the newer titles will be unfamiliar even to avid game buffs. An influx of exciting imports, homegrown originals and even reincarnations of classic games can make choosing a game that much more difficult.

Cranium is a party game marketed through Starbucks and it has proved to be very popular amongst the latte set. But Manga says it's essentially a combination of time-tested favourites that have been cleverly repackaged and marketed for a new generation of game players.

"For a while, all the games coming out were variations (on what had been successful before)," Manga points out, "nothing very new, nothing very original."

But the last few years has changed all that, as the industry has seen many high-quality and entirely original games come onto the market. There is also a growing category of "interactive" games that has emerged alongside more traditional North American games. A lot of those games (like The Settlers of Catan, Puerto Rico, Carcassonne) offer a different gaming experience than many people are used to.

"There is more control in the game for each player. You have more



Jessica Korr/the saanich news

David Manga poses with some board games that are proving popular this Christmas season. The Settlers of Catan, Puerto Rico and Carcassonne are available from Interactivity Games and Stuff on Fort Street. Things..., Telepaths, Conjecture and other games are available from the Calendar Club in the Bay Centre.

decisions to make and you're more involved in what goes on in the game. It's not simply 'roll the dice and move along the board'," explains Seymour Berg of Interactivity Games and Stuff, a specialty games store in Greater Victoria. "They're well-designed to keep everyone involved in the game, competitive and interested." Unlike Risk or Monopoly (where a player wins by annihilating his or her opponents), many of the games Berg talks about incorporate cooperative elements where players can assist each other in reaching specific goals - while still maintaining a fast-paced, competitive atmosphere to keep it interesting.

Choose carefully to pick the best board game

So how do you choose a winner from the hundreds of games on store shelves?

One way is to think about the sort of games you've enjoyed in the past and also what category of game is most likely to be popular in your house. There's classic abstract or strategy games (like chess, go or backgammon); trivia games; empire-building or settlement games; word-based games; guessing games; trading games; family games; educational games; or party games - to name just a few. The family game and party game category are the "hot tickets" right now, says Manga, noting that "that's where the innovation has been in the last few years."

He acknowledges that "award stickers" on a game's box cover can be fairly good guides to start you off in the right direction. But the best way to buy a good, solid game is through word of mouth: talk to friends, find out what people around the office are playing and opt for long-term playability over trendy games that may disappear forever after a year or two, he says.

"Make sure the game is good," Manga notes. "There are a ton of games that get bought (but are only) played once."

He also suggests seeking out advice from staff at a specialty toy and game store, where the staff are usually more familiar with the products they sell. Tell them what kind of game you're looking for and who will be playing it, he adds, and ask them to recommend something appropriate. Don't be afraid to try something new, either, he adds.

Things is causing a buzz

The Canadian game Things... (which the Saanich company also distributes) is quietly creating quite a buzz both here and abroad. Over 5,000 units have already been sold in Canada this year, making it one of the best-selling games in the country. It's now been picked up by about 260 stores across the nation and is making inroads in the United States as well.

Things... designer Tom Quinn told the News that there are now negotiations underway with a company in Finland to introduce the game to the huge European game market in 2005.

Whether they're new, traditional, highly competitive or just for fun, boardgames are clearly experiencing a resurgence in popularity.

"It's about what you do with your recreation time or your leisure time," says Berg. "Playing games like this allows you to have intellectual enjoyment and some friendly competition, but at the same time be with your friends..."

People who are now in their 30s but grew up playing video games

are slowly returning to boardgames, joining others of all ages who appreciate an evening without TV or other electronic distractions. "They're working all day on the computer," says Berg of Interactivity Games and Stuff about the new breed of boardgame players. "They don't want to come home and sit at their computer alone without interacting with people. They want to play games where they get to sit around and talk to people."