# Saving Families, One Game at a Time

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God does not play dice….
                                        – Albert Einstein

We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.
                                        – George Bernard Shaw

I think it's wrong that only one company makes the game Monopoly.
                                        – Stephen Wright

That the traditional American family is crumbling is a well-established fact. While it is the most significant problem facing the United States in the 21$^{st}$ century, the time for further documentation of the challenge is really no longer needed. The pervasive rates of divorce, abortion, bullying, suicide, abuse, loneliness, drug use, and truancy, which have marred American life now for decades, all speak to the fact that American families have crumbled. Everyone knows or should already know this. The important task, then, is no longer to sound a warning bell, but instead to offer real, practical ways that families can be strengthened. After noting such a depressing and serious list of cultural solvents, it will undoubtedly strike the reader as odd, or perhaps even silly, to propose that part of the solution might be found in the trivial pursuit of games; nevertheless, that is exactly what will be suggested. The ills that mark American society largely result from the family's disintegration. The solution then is to find ways to bring the family back together. And, if a simple board has the power to do just that, it is worthy of serious investigation.

Historically, the American family worked, ate, worshipped, and played together. By the 21$^{st}$ century, however, American patterns of work, education, communication, and entertainment

ensured that this no longer happens. By the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century, parents typically

worked away from the home, children were schooled away from home, and the elderly were

housed away from the home, which meant that the generations would not interact with one

another on a regular basis. By the 21$^{st}$ century, even the dinner table rarely guaranteed that two

generations would interact with one another; the speed of modern life and electronic gizmos

assured no one ever really left their own peer group. Likewise, the entertainment cornerstones of

television, computers, video games, and movie theatres all centered on passive and isolated

consumption of media rather than group interaction. Likewise, smart phones, television, and

computers all helped to ensure that not only interests, but also frequently even language, were

not shared by multiple generations. The fact of the matter is that few elements of American life

remain that require extended familial interaction and perhaps even fewer activities exist that are

*attractive* to multiple generations or that encourage direct communal contact. So, here again, if

one can be found, it is worthy of serious investigation.

For families looking to reconnect and for a society that needs them to do so, board games

actually provide a potentially effective option. Now, when most Americans think of board

games, staples such as Monopoly, Candyland, Chutes and Ladders, Trivial Pursuit, and Risk are

what first come to mind. And, no one would find much hope in these games solving the

problems of American families. These games, however, which only a few find engaging, are now

a gross misrepresentation of the exploding world of "hobby," "designer," or "Euro" board games

that may, in fact, offer an attractive option to many. Though still relatively unknown to most

Americans, the board gaming hobby has been thriving in Europe, and particularly in Germany,

for a couple of decades and it has now crossed the pond with ferocity. The board game industry

today produces hundreds of new games a year, which are capable of attracting wide audiences

across multiple generations.[1] Thoughtful, thematic, and engaging board games provide an avenue for multiple generations to *want* to sit down together and spend hours interacting directly with one another on a regular basis. What else can make a similar claim?

## *History of Board Games*

From the earliest records of history, humans have played board games. This history at least suggests that boardgames are attractive to a fundamental part of human nature.[2] As Michael Elliott recently wrote in *Time* magazine, "Play is elemental to being human."[3] David Parlett argues that games "are an essential aspect of cultural activity, comparable in some ways to the performing arts. All but the rarest of primitive communities have games; those of the most advanced civilizations have been correspondingly advanced in content."[4] Board games were popular in the ancient worlds of Greece, Egypt, China, and India.[5] The oldest known game is the Royal Game of Ur, which was popular in Mesopotamia 4,600 years ago.[6] Irving Finkel, who has

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[1] Board game sales have risen the past five years and grew by 20% in 2013 alone. Importantly, target audiences are not traditional "gamers" and range in ages from children to adults. Hannah Shank, "How Board Games Conquered Cafes," *The Atlantic*, November 23, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/11/board-game-bars/382828/?single_page=true.

[2] While many scholars do consider playing board games as a universal human activity, others do not. Mark A. Hall and Katherine Forsyth for instance have carefully examined the introduction of board games to Britain and Ireland. They write that "Sterckx (1970) was mistaken in his assumption that the playing of board games is a human universal and that Celtic-speaking peoples are, therefore, likely to have played them since time immemorial. This idea is rooted in Huizinga's (1950) proposition that play was a universal human given. We root our proposition here in the ideas of Caillois (1958) and Dumazadier (1968) who argue for a culturally contextualized view of play. Board games then are not universal in origin but appear, as far as their Western history is principally concerned, to have a specific origin and dissemination from mid-fourth-millennium BC Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, around the Mediterranean and thence to temperate Europe (Murray 1951: 226-38). Cultural contacts with and within the Roman Empire were a particularly important means of diffusion and it was through contacts with Rome that board games entered the Germanic world, reaching far beyond the *limes* to Scandinavia (as Murray [1951: 230] long ago suggested)." Mark A. Hall and Katherine Forsyth, "Roman Rules? The Introduction of Board Games to Britain and Ireland," *Antiquity* 85 (2011): 1326.

[3] Michael Elliott, "The Games that Bring us Together," *Time*, June 19, 2008.

[4] David Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), x-xi.

[5] It is unquestionable that board games appear in the earliest records of all these civilizations, but there is some debate over the oldest known game. Though noting the significance of the Royal Game of Ur, Keith Law argues that reliable references to the Ancient Egyptian board game Senet "appear as early as the thirtieth century B.C." making it the "oldest board game currently known...." Keith Law, "5000 Years of Board Games (Part One)," *Mental Floss*, November 15, 2010, http://mentalfloss.com/article/26389/5000-years-board-games-part-two.

[6] William Green, "Big Game Hunter," *Time*, June 19, 2008.

worked at London's British Museum for decades, recently found a man who had played the game as a youngster. As Alan Boyle points out, that makes the Royal Game of Ur "the game that has been played for longer than any other in the history of the world….It has outlasted all of the world's greatest empires, and is older than all the world's major religions. That's the power of board games."[7]

Though Americans tend to think of play generally and board games specifically as a childish pursuit, Parlett argues that "the playing of formal games—as opposed to "just playing"— has throughout history been an essentially adult activity. Children have hitherto played with toys, not games. The development of board games and card games for children is historically recent and particularly characteristic of western culture, dating back not much further than the late eighteenth century."[8] In fact, many have speculated that not only were board games traditionally for adults, but they developed as pastimes for the elite and were used in diplomatic exchanges to signify status.[9]

In the 18th century, companies, frequently as an outgrowth of their related business, such as printing and paper products, began publishing board games as Americans think of them today. In 1822, the New York booksellers F. & R. Lockwood published *Traveller's Tour Through the United States* and its sister game *Traveller's Tour Through Europe*, which are the first known board games printed in America.[10] Large game companies such as Parker Brothers,

[7] Alan Boyle, "10 Most Important Board Games in History," *Listverse*, January 20, 2013, http://listverse.com/2013/01/20/10-most-important-board-games-in-history/.
[8] Parlett, *Oxford History*, x-xi.
[9] Jennifer Viegas, "Board Games Originated as a Pastime for the Elite," NBC, December 6, 2011, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/45569816/ns/technology_and_science-science/t/board-games-originated-pastime-elite/#.
[10] Viegas, "Board Games Originated."

Waddingtons, Milton Bradley, McLoughlin Brothers, and Ravensburger emerged in the 19th century in both the United States and Europe. [11]

The exploding popularity of board games in the United States from the 1880s to the 1920s led Margaret Hofer to declare it "the golden age of board and table games."[12] Nevertheless, most Americans' perspective on board games in the 21st century probably center on America's most popular board game, Monopoly, which was somewhat ironically published during the Great Depression. Americans' interest in board games has waxed and waned throughout the years, but playing Monopoly, checkers, and a few other titles with siblings or grandparents has become familiar rites of passage.

Periodically, board games have occasionally enjoyed moments of notable prominence in the United States. During the Cold War, chess, like the Olympic Games, at times stood in for outright war as the grandmasters of Russia and the United States battled for supremacy. The 1970s and 80s witnessed the rise of role-playing games with the birth of *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974 along with hand-wringing over whether D&D promoted devil worship and suicide.[13] Anyone who lived through the 1980s experienced the Trivial Pursuit phenomenon, which arguably did not completely disappear but morphed into support for long-running television game shows such as *Jeopardy!* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

Interestingly, Americans actually have a somewhat established history of turning to board games in times of trouble. Board game sales soared at the outbreak of the Civil War as well after

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[11] Parlett, *Oxford History*, 345.
[12] Margaret Hofer, *The Games We Played: The Golden Age of Board & Table Games* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003), 11.
[13] Mark Strauss, "That Time When People Thought Playing Chess Would Make You Violent," *io9 Blog*, June 10, 2014, http://io9.com/chess-was-once-deemed-a-menace-to-society-1588675766.

September 11, 2001.[14] And, perhaps the current state of the American family should send

Americans back yet again.

*Board Games Today*

Though they enjoyed periodic popularity, the second half of the 20th century and the

beginning of the 21st century would never be declared a "golden age" for board games in the

United States. Nevertheless, a revival of board gaming is, in fact, occurring. The epicenter of the

current board game revival is Germany. As Andrew Curry writes,

> Germans, it turns out, are absolutely nuts about board games. More are sold per capita in
> Germany than anywhere else on earth. The country's mainstream newspapers review
> board games alongside movies and books, and the annual Spiel board-game convention
> in Essen draws more than 150,000 fans from all walks of life. Because of this enthusiasm,
> board game design has become high art—and big business—in Germany. Any game
> aficionado will tell you that the best-designed titles in the world come from this country.
> In fact, the phrase *German-style game* is now shorthand for a breed of tight, well-
> designed games that resemble Monopoly the way a Porsche 911 resembles a Chevy
> Cobalt.[15]

The "German-style game," which is now more frequently referenced as a "Eurogame," is

generally marked by several features that distinguish it from more familiar American fare.[16]

Eurogames feature rules that strive to be elegant rather than complex and detailed. Consequently,

Eurogames tend to be far more accessible to non-gamers, making their potential for adoption by

families greater. Likewise, though competitive, Eurogames avoid direct conflict between

players—an attitude arguably resulting from Germany's experience in World War II.[17] Instead,

competitors seek to maximize their own performance in a game's point-generating mechanics

without interference from others. Unlike Monopoly or Risk for instance, the goal of Eurogames

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[14] Hofer, *The Games We Played*, 21.

[15] Andrew Curry, "Monopoly Killer: Perfect German Board Game Redefines Genre," *Wired Magazine*, March 23, 2009.

[16] Ironically, many identify the game *Acquire*, which was originally published in 1962 by 3M and designed by the American Sid Sackson, as the first German style game. Stewart Woods, *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 35-36.

[17] See: Woods, *Eurogames*, 56-59, or Curry, "Monopoly Killer."

is not to grind down your opponent.[18] And, also unlike Monopoly or Risk, Eurogames are typically designed to play in approximately an hour and have all players engaged at all times.

Eurogames emphasize choice and abjure luck. Eurogames are not lost due to an opponent's surprise attack, a random game-generated event, or, worst of all, a bad roll of the dice. While Eurogames will often incorporate randomness, variability typically affects the games' options, not the results. In other words, in a Eurogame, a player will make choices in a randomly generated situation (i.e. Here is the situation, what do you choose to do?) rather than have the results of choices determined randomly (i.e. You chose to do "x," now roll a die to see if you succeed.). Consequently, defeat in Eurogames results from not performing as efficiently and effectively as your opponents and by making suboptimal strategic and tactical choices.[19]

Eurogames, while not abstract, typically do not revolve around evoking powerful themes. (In fact, a common criticism of Eurogames is that their theme has been "pasted on.") Trading goods in the Mediterranean during the 15th century, the developing of railway companies in the 19th century, or manipulating political systems in Ancient Greece or Rome are common tropes for Eurogames. Game components in Eurogames feature high production values—excellent card stock and wood pieces—though at the same time are not exactly a featured selling point of the games. For instance, small, colored wooden cubes, rather than detailed miniatures, stand in for a

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[18] In fact, violence will immediately disqualify a game from Germany's game of the year completion—the *Spiel des Jahres*. Sen-Foong Lim in "What Makes a Game Worthy of the SdJ Award?," Inspiration to Publication, August 2, 2014, http://inspirationtopublication.wordpress.com/2014/08/02/what-makes-a-game-worthy-of-the-sdj-award/.

[19] An extended quote from Stewart Wood on the difference between hobby gamers (Eurogame enthusiasts) and non-gamers (who occasionally play a well-known game) will further clarify the distinction. He writes "the principal reason cited [Eurogamers] for the dismissal of mainstream board games is that they rarely offer players meaningful decisions through which they might affect the outcome of the game. This esoteric criticism reflects the way in which hobbyists think critically about games as vehicles for entertainment. While for the non-gamer a boardgame might be seen as a way to pass a few idle hours without too much thought, for the hobbyist games are often only valued to the degree they allow players to engage with a system that produces meaningful decisions and outcomes. Woods, *Eurogames*, 130.

host of things in Eurogames.[20] Excellent artwork on the board game itself as well as any cards that might be used is emphasized, but this art is celebrated for pleasing aesthetics and practical functionality. Garish colors, violent images, and unrealistic depictions are not the stock and trade of Eurogames.

The popularity of board games in West Germany spawned in 1978 the formation of the *Spiel des Jahres* award—Germany's board game of the year. Winning this award today is generally considered the greatest accomplishment a designer or publisher can achieve and can certainly result in fame and fortune.[21] As noted on their official website, the *Spiel des Jahres* was formed "by a working group of leading game reviewers in German-speaking countries." Their intent is to "promote games as a cultural asset to encourage gaming amongst family and friends and to provide an aid to selecting the best games from a wide range of products on offer."[22] The judges evaluate games according to the following aspects: "Game idea (originality, playability, play value); Rules Design (structure, clarity, understandability); Game Materials (features, workmanship); and Layout and Presentation (box, game board, rules)."[23] The committee created the *Kinderspiel des Jahres* award in 2001, which is "intended to give guidance to families with children as well as educators and to draw attention to excellent games for children."[24] In 2011, the *Kennerspiel des Jahres* was established "to give guidance to those people who have already

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[20] Eurogames also frequently use "meeples" or small, wooden abstracts of humans. These components originated in Germany but the popular term was created by an American. See: "Meeple Story" in the Bonus Clips of the "Going Cardboard" documentary DVD.

[21] After winning the award, the lowest print run for a Spiel des Jahres winner has been 200,000 units. Hanabi, the 2013 winner, had a print run of 700,000 for Germany alone. Sen-Foong in "What Makes a Game Worthy of the SdJ Award."

[22] Spiel des Jahres, "The Spiel des Jahres Award," http://www.spiel-des-jahres.com/cms/front_content.php?idcat=148&lang=4 (accessed July 25, 2014).

[23] Spiel des Jahres, "The Spiel des Jahres Award."

[24] Spiel des Jahres, "Kinderspeil des Jahres Award," http://www.spieldesjahres.de/cms/front_content.php?idcat=149 (accessed July 25, 2014).

been playing games for a longer time and are experienced in learning new rules."[25] Though less powerful than the *Spiel des Jahres*, each of these newer awards can also boost sales of games exponentially.[26] Importantly, as the jury chairman for the awards notes, the power of the S*piel des Jahres* award is that "it is not meant for hobbyists. The target audience is everybody."[27]

The popularity of board games in Germany erupted decades ago, but the Renaissance of contemporary board games worldwide has to be considered 1995 with the first publication of *Die Siedler von Catan*—known in America as The Settlers of Catan. Created by Klaus Teuber, The Settlers of Catan won the *Spiel des Jahres* in 1995, has been called "the pinnacle of the German style," and has sold more than eighteen million copies worldwide.[28] Published in over thirty languages and now carried in big-box chains such as Target, Wal-Mart, and Barnes & Noble, "Settlers" is the highest-selling Eurogame of all time.[29] Played on campuses and in homes across the country, The Settlers of Catan "is actually inducting board-game-averse Americans into the cult of German-style gaming."[30] Its large following has "spawned an empire of sequels, expansion packs, scenario books, card games, computer games, miniatures, and even a novel— all must haves for legions of fans."[31] Settlers has now even appeared on network TV in the popular shows *Big Bang Theory* and *Parks and Recreation*.[32]

In keeping with the general description of Eurogames offered above, The Settlers of Catan is a game for three to four (although expandable for up to six) where players seek to

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[25] Spiel des Jahres, "The Kennerspiel des Jahres Award," http://www.spieldesjahres.de/cms/front_content.php?idcat=180 (accessed July 25, 2014).
[26] For instance, Stewart Woods claims that "a *Spiel des Jahres*-winning game can expect a ten-fold increase in sales…." Woods, *Eurogames*, 50.
[27] The International Toy and Game Innovation Conference, "An Interview with Tom Felber, Jury Chairman of the Spiel des Jahres Award," April 17, 2014, http://tandgcon.com/business-of-play/an-interview-with-tom-felber-jury-chairman-of-the-spiel-des-jahres-award.
[28] Blake Eskin, "Like Monopoly in the Depression, Settlers of Catan is the board game of our Time," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2010.
[29] Adrienne Raphel, "The Man Who Built Catan," *The New Yorker*, February 12, 2014.
[30] Curry, "Monopoly Killer."
[31] Curry, "Monopoly Killer."
[32] Raphel, "The Man Who Built Catan."

develop their settlements on the fictional island of Catan by producing and trading sheep, lumber, brick, and ore. Through the skillful management of resources, players develop their starting civilizations on a randomized board to win points. The first player to reach ten points is recognized as the best settler of Catan. Capturing the revolutionary nature of German board games, Teuber described his game thusly, "The world of Catan is built on the philosophy of peaceful building, rather than war and violence. So the majority of people, who believe in constructive aspects in life, probably like playing Catan also for that reason."[33]

Any description, particularly an overly brief one, of a Eurogame, even one as popular as The Settlers of Catan, will inherently fail to do the game justice and certainly not indicate how a phenomenon could result from it. Ultimately, a game, and gaming more broadly, must be experienced. And, that—the experience—is the center of the magic of gaming. It is a playful experience that seems to tap into the nature of man. Most importantly, it is a communal and playful experience, both of which are essential parts of healthy living.

## *A Modern Board Game Primer*

The heretofore-offered description of Eurogames generally and The Settlers of Catan specifically, while accurate, can nevertheless quickly distort a correct understanding of the board gaming hobby. Board gaming, as a contemporary phenomenon, has now not only crossed the borders of Germany but has crossed oceans in its increasing popularity. Thereby, as one would expect, board-game design has expanded and changed with its adoption by different cultures. So, as already noted, "German-style" board games have become "Eurogames." And now, the United States of America, which has also gotten into the act, has become one of the largest influences on the hobby. Ultimately, this expansion of board gaming means that, for those not initially

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[33] Woods, *Eurogames*, 58.

attracted to the rather dry nature of Eurogames, other well-designed games fitting different cultural tastes exist.

On his immensely popular Dice Tower website, Tom Vasel, the most admired board-game reviewer in America, actually identifies no less than thirty-three categories of board games, from abstract to word games, from area control to trick-taking.[34] For the purposes of this argument, knowing all thirty-three is not important, but what is significant is to understand the great variety that now exists in board games. Gaming is no longer a simple "roll and move" exercise in tedium. Instead, hobby board gaming has grown in such a way that games can be found that embrace any theme or interest. And, what is even more important, apart from categories, is that designer games have a myriad of game mechanisms which are fascinating and fun to explore and play. Again, Americans for too long have not understood this fact as demonstrated by the hundreds of versions of Monopoly that exist. For decades, Parker Brothers, Hasbro, Mattel, and other large toy manufacturers have slapped popular licenses on existing bad games for quick profits. A bad game, however, remains a bad game even if it has been themed to a favorite television show. In his analysis of games, Parlett went so far as to describe these promotional and TV spin-off games as being "of an essentially trivial, ephemeral, mind-numbing, and ultimately soul-destroying degree of worthlessness."[35]

Serious hobby gaming in the United States probably originated with war games that arguably experienced their "golden age" of popularity in the 1970s.[36] Though there certainly exists some overlap with the groups, however, "war gamers" are not really board gamers.[37]

[34] Vasel, Tom. "The Dice Tower's Definitive 33 Tabletop Game Categories." Dicetower.com. http://www.dicetower.com/top_ten_lists/top33.html (accessed August 1, 2014).
[35] Parlett, *Oxford History*, 7.
[36] Woods, *Eurogames*, 22-25.
[37] David Parlett explains that "Board war-gaming, in its recreational sense, is an historically recent phenomenon. It can be dated back to the establishment of the American war games company Avalon Hill in 1958 and its subsequent publication of such classics as Gettysburg, Stalingrad, and Squad Leader. The world of war games has since

Though played on a board or map, war games are highly detailed exercises of tactics and strategy that require enormous amounts of time. War games seek to recreate actual events, frequently with a professional degree of historical accuracy. Typically involving just two competitors, war games have a long history in the United States but are not enjoying the same Renaissance as board games and are certainly not the playful communal experiences that are the focus here.

Within board gaming proper, there are two broad categorizations used to classify games.[38] The first and the oldest is Eurogames and the style of this group has already been presented. The second category bears the name of a derogatory term created by Eurogamers, "Ameritrash." Ameritrash games, as the name immediately suggests, are games designed to American tastes, or at least the stereotypes of American tastes.[39] Ameritrash games almost invariably involve direct conflict with other players (frequently known as "take that" mechanisms). Likewise, Ameritrash games are typically designed to incorporate a tremendous amount of luck, often through rolling dice. Theme plays perhaps the most important role in Ameritrash games—and indeed, many Ameritrash gamers prefer the term "thematic games" to Ameritrash. For these games, it is important that both the game's components and mechanics evoke the selected theme and tell an engaging story. At their best, these games facilitate a gamer's imagination to transfer himself to another place and time. As one would guess, trading in the Mediterranean does not dominate thematic games; instead, sword and sorcery, space

expanded to such a degree as to form an independent section of the games market, with its own publishers, clubs, magazines, and specialist shops." Parlett, *Oxford History*, x-xi.

[38] To be fair, some board game enthusiasts balk at any categorization regarding designs while others recoil over the overly simple binary division of Eurogames and Ameritrash. Oliver Kiley offers in his blog a far more robust exploration of board game designs. He identifies Ameritrash, German Family, Eurogame, Wargame, and Abstract as the primary schools of board game design and identifies key tenants of each. Interestingly, Kiley argues Ameritrash games emphasize "drama," German Family games "engagement," Eurogames "challenge," wargames "realism," and abstracts "minimalism." Oliver Kiley, "Schools of Design and their Core Priorities," *Big Game Theory! Blog*, June 17, 2014, http://www.big-game-theory.com/2014/06/Schools-of-Design.html.

[39] The term as described here aligns with the current usage of the word; however, the word appears to have first been coined to describe mass-market American games such as Monopoly.

exploration and battle, and impending Cthulhu or zombie apocalypses rule. In other words, Ameritrash games, while sophisticatedly designed, feature characteristics and mechanics that are polar opposites of Eurogames.

An important subgenre of games, especially for families, is "cooperative" games. While probably antithetical to most people's conception of games, by far one of the most popular forms of board games in recent years has been co-ops. As the name suggests, in a cooperative game the players do not compete against one another but instead collectively work against the game itself. Such games have proven a boon for those who were interested in participating in games but who dislike the competitive nature of gaming (even in the mild Eurogame form). In a cooperative game, all the players pool their wits and work together to defeat a common enemy or achieve a shared goal. It is frequently cooperative games that offer the best opportunity for families to come together in a mutually exciting, fulfilling, and fun activity.

The variety of board game styles and types speaks to the fact that the board game hobby needs to be accepted (or rejected) on its actual merits, not misperceptions. Informed 21$^{st}$ century American consumers will find a cornucopia of legitimately well-designed games in a host of themes. In fact, despite the helpfulness of classification, categorizing games has become a losing proposition because designers today are delighted to mix-and-match from all the gaming types to the equal delight of their customers. The bottomline is that consumers can easily find a game that fits personal interests and needs if they are willing to look beyond mass-market games.

*The Benefits of Board Game Revival (especially for families)*

An interesting trait found in most board gamers is that they tend to be very evangelistic regarding their hobby. Interestingly, Woods associates this trend specifically with the valuable social dynamics that games provide. He writes that "it is not so much the games that are being

evangelized, but the sense of sociability and security that must necessarily accompany them. That is, it is not the game, but the game encounter, that provides this."[40] This fact directly speaks to the primary question being examined here: Should parents and families incorporate board games into their lives? The answered offered is yes, but the primary reasons are not board game specific *per se*. Playing board games will not inherently make someone a better person or a family more loving merely by playing, but games facilitate this indirectly. As has already been noted, the solution to familial disintegration is already known. Families need to know one another and spend more time with one another. The problem is that they do not and the dominant culture increasingly draws them apart. The primary benefit of board games is that they facilitate face-to-face interaction with one another. If people are having fun spending time together, an invaluable palliative for relationships is generated. Board games do exactly that.

Likewise and relatedly, an ocean of ink has been spilt lamenting the demise of community in the United States. Though an extensive report on this problem is obviously beyond the scope of this paper, Robert D. Putnam's disturbing documentation of the rapid decline in America's "social capital" is a well-established problem interrelated to the family's demise.[41] Putnam first brought America's attention to the problem in 1995, but it has remained a seemingly intractable feature of American life—Americans are simply not building the healthy communal relationships that facilitate the successful operation of the American system of government. Just like with families, board games cannot magically put Humpty Dumpty back together again, but they do offer some hope and opportunities. Just as a family game night can facilitate positive interaction within a family, so too can a general game night with friends, neighbors, and co-

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[40] Woods, *Eurogames*, 171.
[41] See: Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

workers.[42] Quite significantly, board games' potential appeal to a wide variety of ages further strengthens the possibilities for drawing people together. Primarily relying on social media and game nights at hobby stores to find each other, board game aficionados certainly have frequent meet-ups to game, but some libraries are widening the appeal of games by successfully incorporating board game nights into their list of community activities.[43] The potential is there for churches and schools, not to mention neighbors, to do the same.

While the primary benefit of board games being considered here is their ability to facilitate families spending time with one another and strengthening communities, parents should also be thrilled that board games are proving to be highly beneficial for other reasons as well. Jessica Lahey recently wrote in *The Atlantic* on "How Family Game Night makes Kids Into Better Students" by explaining how board games develop "executive function" which is increasingly considered "more important to learning and educational success than IQ or inherent academic talent."[44] Lahey explains that executive function is "a broad term for cognitive skills such as organization, long-term planning, self-regulation, task initiation, and the ability to switch between activities. It is a vital part of school preparedness and has long been accepted as a powerful predictor of academic performance and other positive life outcomes, such as health and wealth."[45] Many psychologists, such as Boston College psychology professor Peter Gray, emphasize the essentialness of play in education and learning as captured by the title of his most recent book *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children*

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[42] In business for instance, Mark Zuckerberg and John Lilly played The Settlers of Catan on corporate retreats and the C.E.O. of Zynga, Mark Pincus told the Wall Street Journal that "it's like our kind of golf game." Adrienne Raphel, "The Man Who Built Catan."

[43] For a brief treatment of the growing use of board games in libraries, see "Games in Libraries" under the bonus clips of the "Going Cardboard" documentary DVD. Likewise school libraries are increasingly seeing in board games opportunities to academically support the school by enriching and enhancing instructional topics. For an in-depth treatment of that subject see: Brian Mayer and Christopher Harris, "Libraries got Games: Aligned Learning Through Modern Board Games" (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010).

[44] Jessica Lahey, "How Family Game Night Makes Kids into Better Students," *The Atlantic*, July 16, 2014.

[45] Jessica Lahey, "Why Free Play is the Best Summer School," *The Atlantic*, June 20, 2014.

*Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*.[46] Some child psychologists are

specifically using board games to both evaluate and strengthen these executive skills in their

patients.[47] For American youth, who increasingly live in a digital world, board games can play a

particularly key role in developing crucial social and life skills.

Furthermore, board games exercise general academic skills. As noted by Brian Mayer

and Christopher Harris, "The open nature of many designer games is one of the characteristics

that makes them especially powerful in schools and libraries. When players are making complex

decisions, they have to process more information and use higher-order thinking skills."[48] In

addition to these arguably abstract skills, many games such as Numbers League, Fauna,

Timeline, or the 10 Days in... series are games which are actually fun to play but will teach

formal academic knowledge such as, respectively, mathematics, zoology, history, and

geography. The potential for games to serve educational purposes is tremendous, and since

teachers are always seeking to "make learning fun," the effective use of modern board games in

educational efforts might fill several volumes.

When considering board games' power to teach, it should not be forgotten that

historically they have been used to impart moral lessons as well. Obviously, general but

important values of fair play and grace in both winning and losing can be enforced by playing

games, but more specific values and beliefs have a long history in board gaming, too. In fact, the

popular children's game known to Americans as Chutes and Ladders and the rest of the world as

Snakes and Ladders is actually a modified version of an ancient Indian board game designed to

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[46] Peter Gray, *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life* (New York: Basic, 2013).
[47] Jessica Lahey, "Family Game Night."
[48] Mayer and Harris, "Libraries got Games," 5.

teach Hindu lessons of reincarnation and how to reach nirvana.[49] Ironically, Monopoly was first

created in America at the end of the 19th century by Lizzie Magie, a devout Quaker woman who

wanted to teach children the immoral nature of industrial capitalism and advocate Henry

George's single tax.[50] Its modification by Parker Brothers into a celebration of capitalism led it

to be banned by Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia as well as communist China, North Korea, and

Cuba.[51] Likewise, during the Cultural Revolution, China prohibited Mahjong while the Taliban

have forbidden the playing of chess.[52] In both direct and indirect ways, board games throughout

time have been recognized as culturally powerful, a fact often missed by Americans who too

often think of them as merely children's toys.[53]

Board games undoubtedly then represent a treasure trove of educational possibilities, but

while the promise of board games to teach is undoubtedly exciting, that fact also must come with

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[49] Boyle, "10 Most Important Board Games in History."

[50] Chris Morris, "The Shady Origins of Five Popular Board Games," Yahoo! Games, February 28, 2013, https://games.yahoo.com/blogs/plugged-in/shady-origins-five-popular-board-games-202719027.html.

[51] Parlett, *Oxford History*, 353.

[52] William Green, "Big Game Hunter," *Time*, June 19, 2008.

[53] In an admitted aside, it is nevertheless perhaps worth noting in considering board games and morality an intriguing point that George Orwell made about the English in his essay *Socialism and the English Genius*. Though not speaking specifically of board games, Orwell's point regarding the power of hobbies to protect the British from the adoption of fascism is a fascinating connection to make and perhaps worthy of thought in this consideration of board gaming. He writes,

> Another English characteristic which is so much a part of us that we barely notice it, and that is the addiction to hobbies and spare-time occupations, the PRIVATENESS of English life. We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans. All the culture that is most truly native centres round things which even when they are communal are not official—the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the 'nice cup of tea.' The liberty of the individual is still believed in, almost as in the nineteenth century. But this has nothing to do with economic liberty, the right to exploit others for profit. It is the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above. The most hateful of all names in an English ear is Nosey Parker. It is obvious, of course, that even this purely private liberty is a lost cause. Like all other modern people, the English are in process of being numbered, labeled, conscripted, 'co-ordinated'. But the pull of their impulses is in the other direction, and the kind of regimentation that can be imposed on them will be modified in consequence. No party rallies, no Youth Movements, no coloured shirts, no Jew-baiting or 'spontaneous' demonstrations. No Gestapo either, in all probability.

Orwell, George. *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* 19 February 1941.
Orwell, George. "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius: England Your England." Orwell.ru. http://orwell.ru/library/essays/lion/english/e_eye (accessed August 8, 2014).

warning. When considering board games' educational benefits, care must be taken not to lose focus on the more valuable reason to play board games currently being addressed—its ability to facilitate familial bonding and encourage communal interaction. As David Parlett notes in *The Oxford History of Board Games*,

> Play validates itself. Its purpose and value are intrinsic. True games serve no conscious practical purpose beyond that of satisfying an urge to play which is sometimes regarded as an instinct. 'He who *must* play cannot truly *play*' declares James Carse, in *Finite and Infinite Games* (a theology book as some have found to their surprise). They may serve some unconscious practical purpose, such as to keep mind or body in trim, or to practice some skill of value in the so-called 'real' world; but anyone who embarks on a game for any such express purpose—including that of gambling—will not be much fun to play with.[54]

Parents seeking to incorporate game night into their home must avoid making it into yet another school lesson that will be resented rather than enjoyed. The playing of board games can help develop valuable academic and social skills as well as increase factual knowledge, but they should do this primarily indirectly and incidentally so that their power to revitalize familial and communal relationships is not diminished.

## *Challenges to the Board Game Revival*

As hopefully has been demonstrated, board games hold great potential for generating a host of benefits. Their demonstrably growing popularity is, in fact, an encouraging sign. For board gaming to reach its full potential, however, a much wider adoption will have to take place and there are significant barriers hindering this occurrence. Non-specific to board games are, of course, the current cultural traits that challenge the family—everything from broken marriages to the pervasive use of television and the Internet for entertainment. Ultimately, individuals personally and families collectively have to commit to spending time together, to loving one

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[54] Parlett, *Oxford History*, 2.

another, and sacrificing for one another. Board games cannot magically do that for people, but they do provide ways for the family to come together more easily.

In addition to the general barriers, board games seemingly face at least two unique challenges that are worthy of specific consideration. First, there is a widespread misunderstanding of the medium (the medium itself and its price), and second, there are widespread negative (mis)perceptions of board-game users. The first challenge is that arguably most Americans exposure to board games has been negative. Though Monopoly, Chutes and Ladders, Trivial Pursuit, Candyland, and Chess have proven to have appeal to some at certain times and particular situations, especially by today's gaming standards, these familiar titles are poorly designed games, or poorly designed for positive familial interaction, or both. Ignorance of the true nature of the medium thereby hinders the adoption of board games. Simply put, most Americans will reasonably assume that they have no interest in playing board games and/or that their family would have no interest in playing board games because the games they know are boring and unpleasant to play. Compounding the problem is the fact that people purchase the familiar. So, when Grandma seeks to purchase a game for her grandchild, she is far more likely to purchase Monopoly, which she thinks of as a proven "winner," over The Settlers of Catan or Ticket to Ride, which she has never even heard of.[55] That there are games that are truly delightful to play for all ages has become a fact, but it is a generally unknown one. The dissemination of knowledge can defeat ignorance, though, and so perhaps concerted efforts and natural word of mouth will prove powerful in changing minds and attitudes, and thereby open up this potentially valuable world for the masses.

A second component to the misunderstanding of board games could also come from "sticker-shock." Monopoly's suggested retail price, for instance, is around $18 while The

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[55] Curry, "Monopoly Killer."

Settlers of Catan retails for around $42.[56] Generally speaking, hobby board games, due to high

component quality, shipping costs, and small production runs, will typically retail anywhere

from $40 - $60. Within the familiar context of mass-produced games, these prices can seem

exorbitant. If one considers instead, however, that a family of four's trip to the movie theater will

cost $40, even without popcorn, for roughly an hour and forty-five minutes of entertainment in

which they do not interact with one another, the price of a Eurogame is cheap. Of course, taking

a family to a professional sporting event, play, or musical will dwarf the high cost of attending a

film and lead to expenditures in the hundreds of dollars. In contrast, designer board games

typically provide a one-to-two-hour interactive experience for two to six people and can do this

again and again. The interaction board games provide may well be priceless, but even just

considering monetary costs, Eurogames actually compare favorably to almost any other form of

entertainment.

Perceptions both real and imagined can be more daunting than ignorance, though, and so

a more difficult cultural challenge for games might sadly be "gamers" themselves, or at least

their reputation. Regrettably, the image conjured in minds of most Americans of someone who

enthusiastically enjoys games is likely of some socially backward and pasty youth desperately in

need of a shower but is instead gathered around a table, dressed as a wizard or elf. Simply put,

nobody wants to be a nerd and there is a real cultural fear that playing games makes you one.

More frustratingly, many gamers seemingly take pride in fulfilling the worst gamer stereotypes

and so put up unnecessary barriers for entry. In fact, as "geek" culture has taken a dominating

position in mainstream culture, a misplaced pride has overtaken some of those who are enjoying

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[56] Raphel, "The Man Who Built Catan."

for the first time being the "first to the party."[57] Despite a growing acceptance, though, "geeks" (a term generally embraced by gamers) and "nerds" (a term generally rejected by gamers) remain derisive terms that if connected with board games will prevent games from enjoying widespread adoption. Regrettably for instance, the most important source for board-game information on the Internet is the massive Boardgamegeek.com website. As a source of information and assistance for learning board games, its value is unsurpassed, but it surely causes many to balk at taking up gaming since using the hobby's most important site pejoratively labels one a "geek."

*Going Forward*

Ultimately, only mature adults can save families and mature adults do not worry about junior high name-calling, so labels need not impede board gaming dramatically.[58] Likewise, as has already been noted, many elements of "geek culture" already dominate mainstream culture, so board games should be able to make the same jump to the American mainstream as they already have in Europe. Ultimately, as has been seen through history, games seem to have a universal attraction and now that the quality and variety of board games matches 21$^{st}$-century standards, their popularity can and should grow dramatically. More importantly, as has already been witnessed in Germany, if parents and families are committed to spending time with one

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[57] For those unaware that American culture is dominated by "geek culture," consider the enormous success of comic book films such as Spiderman, Batman, Ironman, and the Avengers. Remember the continued popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and now *The Hobbit.* Consider the media empire that is Harry Potter or the fact that the most popular HBO series of all time is *The Game of Thrones*. Consider the prevalence of vampires in novels, television, and the movies. All of this has not even mentioned the ever-growing popularity of video games or the dominance of computer gadgetry in everyday life. It has long been joked that one should be nice to nerds in school because you would soon be working for one; as it has turns out, you are now also watching and consuming their tastes in entertainment.
[58] And, perhaps it is worth noting here that the typical *boardgamegeek* member is a highly "educated and relatively affluent married American male in his mid-thirties." Woods, *Eurogames*, 123.

another, board games could prove perhaps uniquely valuable in facilitating such commitments in

a world of seemingly shrinking opportunities to do so. [59]

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[59] Board game enthusiasts flock each year to large gaming conventions. Comparing the largest conventions in Germany with those in America offers a valuable contrast of gaming cultures. Rick Thornquist describes the differences this way:

> If you go to Origins or GenCon [U.S. conventions], it is mainly a gamer type of convention and you do mainly see gamer geeks, but Essen [Germany's largest convention] is not like that at all. It's very much regular people, families, teenagers, kids…it's everybody, and it's amazing to see all these people playing the games that we play all the time.

> As quoted in Woods, *Eurogames*, 60.

**Appendix A: Getting Started**

Though perhaps not fitting neatly within the official prose, it does seem appropriate to offer some guidance to those persuaded of board games' potential as to where to begin. Obviously, The Settlers of Catan makes sense as a starting point although most board-game enthusiasts, while appreciating what Settlers has done for the hobby, no longer consider it the best "gateway game" (the term used by gamers for games they consider ideal for evangelizing the hobby and something they take very seriously). The game Ticket to Ride, which has also sold over a million copies and also won the *Spiel des Jahres*, is now the most popular recommendation for introducing someone to the hobby. Ever since the publication of The Settlers of Catan in 1995, every few years a designer board game has appeared which has had mass appeal and has proven effective in attracting new players. Those titles include: Carcassonne (2000); Ticket to Ride (2004); and Dominion (2008). All of these titles won the *Spiel des Jahres* award, and perusing the names of other winners and the recommended lists is a profitable place to start. In addition, one can also always explore the initially overwhelming but incredibly helpful website boardgamegeek.com. The "Geek," as hobbyists refer to it, has ratings for every game known to exist and seemingly an army of friendly members eager to answer any question or provide advice.

As to where to get these games, as noted, the designer games explored in this paper are increasingly available at Barnes & Noble and some big box stores. The "friendly local game store" or comic shop is frequently (and hopefully) the best option for finding games as well as enthusiasts to play them. A host of on-line retailers exist as well; two of the most popular are coolstuffinc.com and minaturemarket.com.

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