

2010.Q1  
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# thru-the-portal



Our 1st Issue!

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This issues news is...

The launch of our new digital magazine, of course! page 4 & 5

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Launching:

# thru-the-portal

In 2008 I played Memoir 44. To me, it was an odd game - there wasn't a strip around the board for me to move along, based on the value of my dice score. I had some cards, but I could play them when I wanted and I had lots of playing tokens to move... not just a little top hat. My future wife was a keen gamer, and thought I should at least try the game... "You might enjoy it!"

Well, I can't say that Memoir hooked me, but I did enjoy it, and I was keen to try other games... Ticket to Ride, Carcassone, Settlers of Catan... these were all different to the usual games I had played. I can't say I was addicted to gaming, but my eyes were definitely opened to the fact that there was so much more than just Monopoly, Scrabble or Operation!

Next, World of Warcraft came into my life! Trying to have a relationship across the Atlantic is a stretch - to say the least. My wife had the solution (again!) - sign up for this addictive game! Over the next few months we spent quality time by running around and killing Quilboars and various raptors. I work in IT as a project manager, but I was totally shocked at the quality and experience that this massive multi-player online game offered!

In 2009 my wife moved over to the UK and suddenly I found I had access to lots of boardgames - about 60 or so! It was like having a candy store open in your house! I'm lucky having a wife that likes boardgames, I'm told that having one of these is enough of a rarity in itself, let alone having all the games thrown in as well!

And where do you take a boardgaming wife for a perfect getaway holiday in Europe? No, not Paris or Rome... Essen! This largely industrial part of Germany also happens to host the world's largest boardgame convention. Before Essen I was keen to read up on games and tried to find a magazine that covered board gaming and card games. Unfortunately there wasn't anything at the news agency and a search online suggested that a few that had existed in the past were no longer in publication.

In Germany we saw that there were a handful of magazines, but nobody could tell us about any English publications - so we thought there must be a gap here.

Initially we were thinking of producing a more traditional paper magazine. We posted a notice on Boardgame Geek and had some valuable feedback - including a suggestion to consider a digital publication.



We liked this idea for a few reasons:

1. Regardless of where you stand on climate change, there is a lot of waste due to printed publications.
2. The costs are much lower for a digital publication and you don't run the risk of producing stock that sits around unsold.
3. Distribution costs are high if you want to send the publication all over the world - a key aim for us from the outset.

And thus the idea of producing a quarterly digital publication was born. We do however understand the value of having a hard copy printed magazine and are strongly considering producing an annual edition by order only - reducing the risk of printing unsold stock.

Producing the magazine has been ... interesting.

My first email was to a well known game reviewer who responded within 24-hours confirming that they would like to write for the magazine! Fantastic! We contacted a few different game publishers, and feedback was cautiously interested. Over the course of late November and December 2009 we had a lot of people confirming that they would be interested in writing for the magazine.

We were very happy to find a cover artist in Cynthia Sheppard, who was enthusiastic and had the sort of style we were looking for in the magazine. I outlined what I was looking for, and she ran with it.

As time went on, we found that the different people who had initially volunteered to write for the magazine were caught up in other activities. Given that we do not pay for contributions there was little we could do and unfortunately we did not get the number of reviews and articles that we had anticipated.

Step in my own enthusiasm! I was very happy to write some articles and set about contacting Days of Wonder for a

discussion, and really enjoyed talking to Mark about how the industry was developing from their point of view. Christian Zola was an infectiously enthusiastic developer who was showing his Where-wolf cards at Essen - which we followed up as an interview a month later.

Slowly we built up more content and developed a system to review and rate the games. At the start of January we made our decision to continue or pull the plug - the result, as you can see, was to go ahead.

We really like the hobbyist community and enjoy the social games, and are very proud to offer this publication to the wide world of gamers. That said we are still looking for regular writers as well as 'per issue' contributors. As a free publication we are not in this for the money, and the reality is that it is actually very costly (more in terms of time than money).

thru-the-portal strikes me as a mix between a magazine and a blog, and we hope that whether you contribute content or not, you do let us know what you like and what you hope to see in future issues. From our perspective we aim to cover game reviews, provide interesting articles, attend the main conventions and generally promote the social gaming interest.

We are committed to releasing a digital magazine each quarter with an annual printed edition for this year at least. Thereafter, we will judge the ongoing production in the same way as you would judge a business - is there a demand, is it fulfilling and is it profitable.

Thank you for downloading, forwarding, copying, or otherwise getting your 'virtual' hands on this publication and we hope you enjoy reading it!

*Neil Meyer*  
*Founder / Editor*

# Werewolf: *Bloody fun for everyone...*

TtP was very lucky to meet up with Christian Zoli, the friendly, passionate and enthusiastic game designer of Werewolf, whilst visiting Essen 2009. Werewolf is a card supported variant of the Mafia/ Werewolf game play. Following our initial meeting, we were able to ask Christian some questions about how he went about taking his idea through to production.

**thru-the-portal: Hello Christian, can you start by telling us a little about yourself – what you do for a living, where you live, how long you've been playing games and perhaps tell us what are some of your favourite games?**

Christian Zoli: If what I say won't be used against me, sure

I live in Ravenna, a small city on the Adriatic coast in Italy. What I do for a living is a very interesting question. I've asked myself more than once. Let me say, I try to find the rules of the "other" games (the ones usually called "works") and try to tweak them too. There are always rules. Usually they are made much better in games than in real life, so I just try to play with them.

As to how long I have been playing games, this is a much easier answer: 35 years! Usually people outside the gaming world ask me how did I start with games, but the point is exactly the opposite: I never quit. Since I was a child there has always been one game or another, they just changed with time.

As for my favourite games, this is another difficult question. Concerning games I am really omnivore. Roleplay, board games, card games, miniature, math games, .. oh, and of course party games!

As a general rule, I like the games that explore the extremes of their respective categories.

Hmm, should we say that I like 'extreme games'? That could be misunderstood. Better go on.

**TtP: We are very interested in knowing more about your card game, Werewolf. What is this game all about? How do you play it and how is it different from other card games in**

**this genre?**

CZ: It's a version of the popular Mafia/Werewolf concept. The core game is very easy to understand: an informed minority plays against an uninformed majority. The game proceeds with a progressive elimination of players until only one of the two factions remain. I won't go further into the core game because it would be long and I think most of the readers may already know it (Editor's note: see Wikipedia link after article).

About the differences of my version compared to the others; The game amazed me from the beginning, it was very interesting and with a lot of potential, but it also seemed to me to be raw. The major change I made to the game is the creation of a set of player roles, each of them unique. The first reason is because everyone likes to play a specific part and not just to be "one of the mass", so why not make it so! The second reason is that, since everyone has a piece of information or ability, then reasoning, accusations and defences are always based on a web of clues and information. I am not stating that this style of game is intrinsically better, there could be players that like the pure psychological debate. I just prefer it much more when it is about trust and persuasion, but also logic and deduction at the same time.

**TtP: What made you decide to produce your own card game?**

CZ: The decision to produce the game comes from an interesting story; I first played the game Mafia in 2001, and after been amazed by it and working and testing it for several months I ended up with a version I was quite satisfied with. When wondering

about producing it, I knew that a similar version would soon be published in my country and so I just let it go. I went on to post my copy of game and rules on the internet and several communities playing my version and it started to spread around. After several years, during which I still played the game with friends and family, a friend told me to turn on the TV. On a reality show here in Italy there was a guy from Mensa speaking about my game and some days later there was a small report on another TV program. Not only was my abandoned game not dead, but it also got onto the TV by itself! I simply thought "Ok, I can read a sign when I see one. I will make it!"

About producing it myself, it was very easy. If no one would make it, and if you believe in it, then do it yourself.

**TtP: There seems to be a mix of publishers, from small publishers to much larger publishing companies. How have you found launching your own card game as small publisher?**

CZ: It was a lot of fun! This is of course if you find fun to mess with everything, to make a lot of errors due to inexperience, to find problems to solve at every step and to try to make everything work at the very last second. Luckily I find it fun!

Will it also be financially rewarding? I hope so, but I have no idea really. If someone reading is considering producing a game I will pass on some wisdom I remember from an interview with Steve Jackson .

- Steve, economically speaking, is it better for a game designer to sell the idea to a publisher and keep the copyrights or to produce the

himself?

- The answer is "no".
- But the question was.
- Yes, you got it.

**TtP: How did you go from having an idea, to producing the game? What were the steps and challenges you faced? How did you stay motivated?**

CZ: First of all I had to find the art designer. That was not an easy step since I was very demanding, both on the skill and on the style. I was very lucky with Enrico. Then I had to decide where to produce the game. The choices were China, Belgium or a small Typography near my home, so I rolled 1d3. No, joking here, there were a lot of challenges, there are still lots of them even now. How do I stay motivated? I am reckless enough. A part from this, every time I think about a group of people somewhere who are playing my game, well that it's motivating enough.

**TtP: Werewolf has some fantastic art that really captures the feel of the game. Was it easy to find artists to work with? How important is it to you to have the right art and card material?**

CZ: No, it was not easy! I found several good artists along the way, but none of them had the right style and so I waited and went on searching. The right art is always important, but in this case it was even more than that. As I often say, Werewolf is a game that can be played without having any special components, even with poker cards or even paper and pencil. So, if I am going to sell you a copy, and if you are going to buy it, there should be a very good reason!! Being beautiful could be one reason. For this very reason I tried to keep the highest level of quality for every part of the game, arts, box, paper used,



rulebook. I can say that the game is exactly as I wanted it to be. And this is very satisfying.

**TtP: I first met you at Essen 2009, where I was very impressed at your passion and enthusiasm for your new game. Have you been to Essen before? What did you think of this visit?**

CZ: Yes, I had been to Essen before, but not presenting my own game (well, once to be honest, but the game did not arrive in time!). What I can say about this visit: that I see much more of the fair the other times!! No, it has been great to be there, especially when I sold copies that would have gone around the world. I still wondering if the copies I sent to Taiwan reached some gamer.

Oh, it was also nice to meet Ted Alspach, the author of Ultimate Werewolf, he is really a cool guy! We had the chance to speak just a few words on the game, but I hope to have the chance to meet him again and the authors of the other versions too. Mafia/Werewolf is an open game, any brainstorming on it can fuel ideas.

**TtP: How are sales going? What is the main way you sell to people – is it online or through traditional game shops?**

CZ: After Essen (very shortly after) there was a very important fair in my country, and there sales went very well. Then there were the communities that already played it and had been waiting for years, that was quite easy. For all the rest, I entrusted the game to a very qualified Distribution company, the same one I used at Essen, Raven Distribution. They are already doing very good work in making the game reaching the shops around Italy and further afield.

**TtP: What advice would you give to someone who was thinking of developing their own game idea? Is there much support out there for new developers?**

CZ: I don't know if I am the right person to give suggestions. I usually do things and then I think about it afterwards. I can tell you how it worked for me. I thought: ok, I have two possible bad endings I have to choose from. One, produce the game and face the chance of financial loss or two, not producing it and never knowing how it would have gone. For me, there was really no choice at all. There are a lot of variables, different types of games, countries, people resources, but producing a game is not something so out of the reach for most people. The hardest part is the mental step of saying: ok, let's do it! But again, don't trust my words with confi-

dence, I could be the Werewolf. ...or the Vampire.

**TtP: So what is next for Werewolf – and for you? Are you planning to produce any new games, or expansions to Werewolf?**

CZ: I don't think I'll make expansions. More likely I will create a website for players to discuss the game and make proposals. Ideas exchanging is the natural ground for the game. As to producing new games, I will wait for another of mine to go on television by itself! No, really, it could be. There are a couple of ideas that we have in the drawer, but the focus is on Werewolf now.

**TtP: When did you last play Werewolf yourself? Who did you play with, and can you tell us how the game went?**

CZ: I played the other night. It was the first weekend without a fair since the game went out and there was an event in my gaming club with all the guys that contributed to the first playtest eight years ago! We had an incredible game! Can't explain why, because you should know the game to really appreciate it, but I will put it on the Memorable Games section in the forum I am working on.

Well, thanks for the interview, I hope I didn't say anything compromising!  
Cheers!

### Hmm... more info!

Mafia (also known as Werewolf or Assassin) is a party game modeling a battle between an informed minority and an uninformed majority. Players are secretly assigned roles: either "mafia", who know each other; or "townspeople", who know only the number of mafia amongst them. During the night phase of the game, the Mafia choose an innocent to kill. During the day phase, all players debate the identities of the Mafia and vote to kill someone whom the majority suspect. Players are eliminated until either all mafia are killed or the mafia outnumber the innocents. Mafia is rarely played in groups of fewer than five, and must always start with more innocents than mafia.





thru-the-portal

## We Need You!

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We are looking for articles, game and event reviews. You can get more details on our site.

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As a free digital publication we offer a great way for you to get closer to your customers with links that take interested readers directly to your site - contact us to discuss advertising options on our site or in our magazines.

### **Readers:**

Please join our site and post on our forums to let us know what you want to see in the magazine. We aim to provide content that is of interest to you, so let us know what you want to read about.

### **Artists:**

We are interested to hear from artists who would like to contribute to cover art in exchange for a feature in the corresponding magazine.

### **Website Owners/ Bloggers:**

Link to us and promote us on your site! Spread the word! ([www.thru-the-portal.com](http://www.thru-the-portal.com))

A discussion with

# Days of Wonder

Recently we were lucky enough to have a chance to speak to Mark Kaufmann, one of the co-founders and also the vice president of Days of Wonder. Prior to founding days of wonder Mark and another co-founder, Eric Hautemont, worked together in high-tech software development of 3D graphics solutions. Whilst Mark and Eric are based in the USA, Days of Wonder also have a larger operation in Paris, France.

Unlike Mark, Eric's initial interest in social gaming came from his experience with Dungeons & Dragons, whilst Mark's interests centred more around family orientated games. This combination provided the founders of Days of Wonder with an interesting balance that makes their products appeal to both hardened gamers as well as providing a gateway selection for

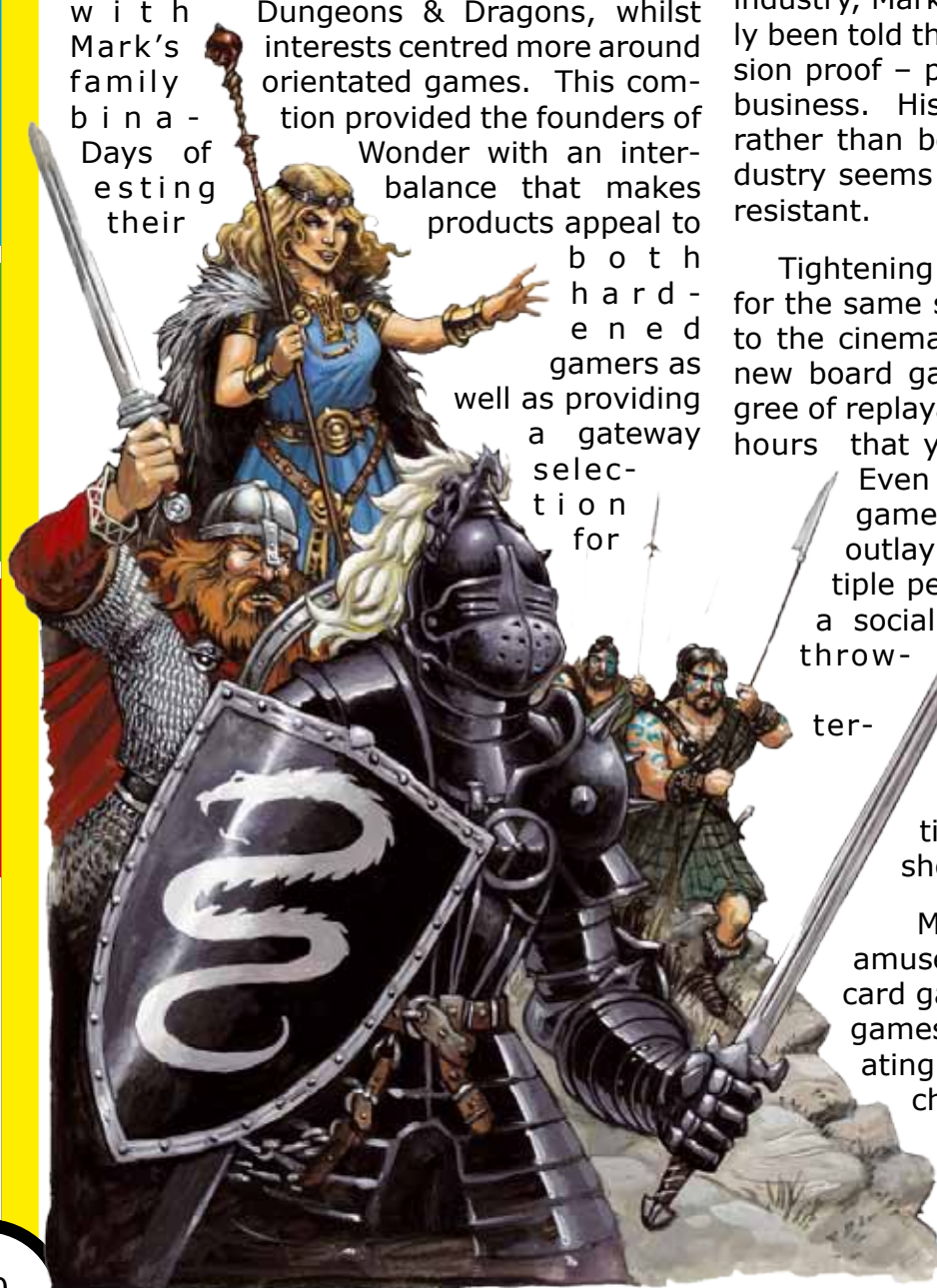
mainstream gamers.

Their move from software solution delivery to gameplay products was an extension of their desire to build products that people enjoy using. In fact the company name, Days of Wonder, was conceived to represent the wonder and enjoyment that people should experience when receiving and playing one of their products.

In discussing how the current economic downturn was affecting the boardgaming industry, Mark told us how they had initially been told that games were largely recession proof – prior to going into this line of business. His own view has evolved, and rather than being recession proof, the industry seems in fact to be more recession resistant.

Tightening family budgets mean that for the same sort of cost as a family going to the cinema they can instead pick up a new board game which offers a high degree of replayability beyond the typical two hours that you would get from a movie. Even when compared to electronic games which may have a similar outlay cost, the benefit is that multiple people can interact together in a social environment. In today's throw-away society electronic games offer instant entertainment but very seldom demonstrate the sort of ongoing enjoyment and interaction that boardgames have shown.

Mark further noted, with some amusement, that boardgames, card games and other similar social games, would not fall foul of operating system upgrades, patches or changes in technology trends, in the way that electronic games typically do. With boardgames and tabletop games once you make the



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investment it is something you can come back to time and again.

To illustrate the recession resistance of his industry, Mark was able to share that Days of Wonder is currently enjoying one of their strongest sales years. Established titles, such as Ticket to Ride, as well as newer titles, such as Smallworld, are both selling very well.

When asked if the reverse was true, that boom times might indeed be a negative factor in social game sales, Mark told us that this was not the case – at least not as experienced by Days of Wonder.

My first direct experience with anyone from the Days of Wonder team was at Essen where I found their French stand staff to be very helpful and informative. Mark and I discussed how Days of Wonder is different in that they are spread between the USA and Europe, with offices in Paris.

Although the company initially started in the USA they very quickly opened the Paris office, which now has many more staff than in the USA. Mark explained how this international aspect and approach directly impacts on the sort of games that Days of Wonder invests in. The company is not interested in developing a game that is tightly tied to a single geography or territory interest (such as baseball in the USA), but rather looking at games that offer a solid gaming experience and have universal appeal. To further support this global attitude, Days of Wonder publish their games in a minimum of three European languages.

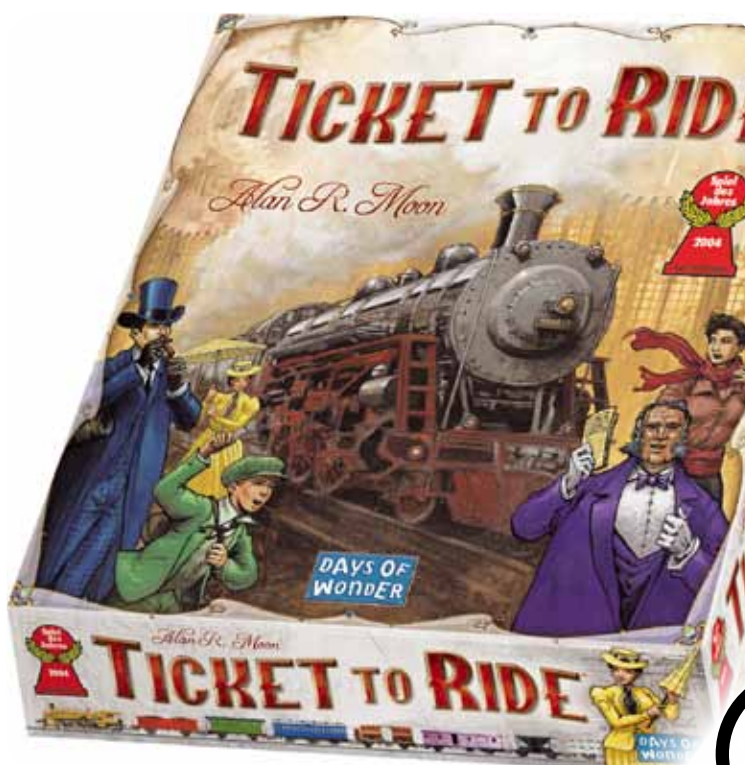
Mark offered examples, such as Ticket to Ride, which offers a broad thematic enjoyment regardless of the players geography – “Trains are trains,” he pointed out. Smallworld, one of the newer releases, offers the same broad interest level with a light-hearted fantasy theme. Even games such as Memoir 44, which traditionally have received some resistance amongst older German players, are selling well with younger Germans who are able to enjoy the strategic and tactical gameplay elements without necessarily reading

too much into the game’s World War setting.

Days of Wonder is also at the forefront of translating the gameplay experience from the tabletop to online gaming. This online realisation of the games is undertaken from their Paris office where the bulk of their developers are located. The online initiatives were initially conceived to teach more people how to play their games, however this has grown beyond their expectations and should exceed 20 million games played online via their portal in early 2010!

Beyond gameplaying, Days of Wonder use their online presence to promote and build interest in their games. Mark explained how they are fortunate to have attracted a very strong online community, where over 99% of questions are typically answered by the community before Days of Wonder staff even have an opportunity to respond. This digital innovation extends through to social networking groups, such as Facebook.

Given the consolidation that has, and is taking place within the broader entertainment industry, such as Disney acquiring Marvel most recently, I asked Mark what his appetite was to sell to the wider mainstream community. He pointed out that a mass marketing strategy was very different to the approach that they had taken



up until this point and that the economics of such sales were also very different to those enjoyed by Days of Wonder currently. He joked that he did not believe that he would feel any more successful selling half a million games to Wal-Mart each year. Instead of aiming for higher volume sales the company continues to focus on producing high-quality games and distributing these through the traditional retail channels - mainly hobbyist game shops.

One area of development that has proven to reinvigorate and generate sales is the release of expansions. When an expansion is released Days of Wonder have observed how sales in the core product also go up. In this way they are able to receive a secondary peak beyond the base games initial release. Existing owners pick up the expansions, involve new players in their game play, and these new players in turn go out and buy the base game for their own collection. In this way games such as Memoir 44 and Ticket to Ride continue to enjoy very strong sales.

This approach of having a base game with expansions goes to the heart of Days of Wonder's business strategy; to have games that offer broad range appeal and a high-level of replayability over an extended term.

When we discussed sales, Mark explained how North America, Europe and the larger English-speaking countries con-

tinue to show the strongest demand for their games. He noted that sales for Latin America can be hit or miss, however interest in parts of Asia was growing, and this was something that would warrant further investigation in future.

One of Days of Wonder's strongest selling product lines, Ticket to Ride, is enjoying its fifth anniversary and to support this event a number of international games are taking place with the finalist winning a trip on the Orient Express towards the end of next year. This fantastic prize along with the international involvement demonstrate strongly how in touch Days of Wonder is with their community.

When asked what was next for Days of Wonder, Mark would not be drawn to reveal details of any upcoming releases, except to say that there will be something brand new coming out in the first half of 2010. Mark was conservative in his final response with regards to his future hopes for Days of Wonder, saying simply that they intended to continue investing in and publishing games that they believed in and that brought wonder to existing and new game players.

Later in this magazine you can read a review of Smallworld as well as a review of a Ticket to Ride qualifying round held at Dragonmeet, in London.





**thru-the-portal:** *Hello Michael, thank you for taking the time to speak with us. I recently contacted you about the fantastic artwork that can be found on The Spoils, but before we come to that can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what your involvement is with The Spoils?*

Michael Nielson: I don't find my own story terribly interesting – I would much rather talk about The Spoils.

But I can say that I have been a gamer since I was a kid playing card games, board games, roleplaying games ranging from Monopoly to Agricola, from Risk to Advance Civilization and from Bridge to Magic and of course a lot of The Spoils.

I have been fortunate enough with Arcane Tinmen to build a company centered around gaming, so I couldn't be happier about my work. And with The Spoils I have gotten a fantastic opportunity to be part of something great!

**TtP:** *Can you give us a quick overview of what The Spoils is and how it is played?*

MN: What I am about to say will sound like a long sales pitch, but in my humble opinion The Spoils has the best game engine of any TCG ever made!

The game is more dynamic than any game I have tried (and I have been around the block once or twice) – and with The Spoils the player has the greatest control of the game possible while still retaining the fun the random draws from a deck gives.

One of the great things about The Spoils is that you never run out of options – you always have things to do, for example:

- At any time you can pay three resources

to draw an extra card

- At any time you can pay four resources to put an extra resource into play
- Any card can be used face-down as a resource

What this means is that any card you draw is useful in some way – and having a lot of resources just means that you will be drawing and playing a lot more cards.

The same line of thought is also applied at the start of the game:

- You start with two resources in play
- You are allowed to discard any number of cards to the bottom of your deck and then draw the same amount of cards.

This will greatly increase the chance that your game is off to a good start – and thus give both players a much more enjoyable game.

As a player once told me: "With The Spoils you know that you lose to your opponent – and not just to your own deck because of bad draws!"

### **The world of The Spoils**

The above is all about how the game is played, but The Spoils is also a unique vision of a wacky and gruesome fantasy world. A clever writer on the old TG staff described it like this: If you resurrected JRR Tolkien, HP Lovecraft and Lewis Carroll, and then forced them to write an epic together, it might come out something like the Spoils.

The Spoils™ is also the unique vision of a fantasy world gone terribly wrong. Sometimes comical, often bizarre, the dark whimsy and grisly humor of the Spoils™ is sure to delight and entertain.

Ever present in the cards is a dark, whimsy and grisly humor in terms of the artwork, but

also in the flavortext which often reaches beyond the card game world and into our own world with references to pop culture and media.

**TtP:** *In speaking to you I was surprised to hear that The Spoils has been relaunched – what happened that caused it to fail initially?*

MN: It is a long story – I will try to give you the short version.

The Spoils was originally published by Tenacious Games. They made a really great game, but probably overextended themselves – and in the end their debt was so massive that they couldn't continue.

At that point we were working as a distributor for The Spoils on the Scandinavian market – and hearing that the game would stop tore our gamer hearts apart. So we opened up negotiations with TG to take over the game. The negotiations dragged on for quite a while with one of the main issues being with the IRS (USA tax office) because since they were owed money by TG they also needed to approve of the deal which they finally did.

**TtP:** *Given these initial challenges, how are you and your team looking to renew interest in this game?*

MN: Bringing back a “dead” game is of course no easy task! And there are surely many challenges to face with our mission to resurrect The Spoils.

When we bought The Spoils it was because we had fallen in love with the game – and you could argue that it was a purchase made more with the heart than necessarily with the bank account in mind.

Of course we do believe that the game has a good fighting chance but we also know that we need to fight a tough fight at times.

One of the challenges that The Spoils faces is that it is not based on any license. And as such it is harder to convince storeowners of the game's merits. The hard part is getting people to try the game – once they have tried it everybody agrees that the game engine is superb!

We demoed the game to a lot of people in Essen and got practically no bad feedback. The only poor feedback I recall getting was from a person that told me he preferred game that was more random/luck-dependent – and we will have to admit that this is one thing that The Spoils has done a great job of eliminating, something most people like, but of course games and gamers come in many flavours and varieties.

An advantage of “being in love” with the game that you sell is that you are prepared to go to extra lengths for it. Of course we hope that someday we will also be able to turn this into a good business, but presently this is of very little concern to us. If we can just break even with this game for the next few years, then we are ab-





solutely thrilled. All we want is for the game to be able to prove itself to the world. Because as stated above: All it takes is for enough people to try the game, then the game will sell itself!

We have also introduced an "Open R&D forum" on the website [www.thespoils.com](http://www.thespoils.com) where Spoils fans contribute with ideas for new cards.

Of course the final decision lies solely with R&D – but many great ideas have seen the light because of this innovative process.

In general we are very happy with the support we are getting from the loyal community. We have had a lot of people write us and offer their help without asking anything in return. Gestures that we are humbly awed by – and it does make us feel that we are doing something right!

**TtP: Coming back to the artwork, *The Spoils* really has some wonderful atmospheric artwork, although it may be targeted towards a more mature audience. How do you go about finding such talented artists and how do you maintain the high quality across so many different pieces?**

MN: We currently have around twenty artists working on making art for the new set; some of these have worked on *The Spoils* before and some are brand new.

This mix is working very well and we are very happy with our team of artists. We are sure that both old and new fans will be as delighted with the new set as they have been with any of the former sets.

When we took over the reins from Tenacious Games there was a lot of information that had

gotten lost – amongst this the contact info for many of the old artists. So with a small core still helping us we had to build ourselves an artist database.

Some of the new ones have heard about the project and contacted us themselves. But others we have found searching some of the many artists sites on the internet. A funny story here is that in our search for new artists we have actually six or seven times come across an artist that had worked on *The Spoils* – and four of them are working on the new set. I guess it goes to show that these guys have high standards since we picked them out amongst the many on the internet.

The approach we have to the art and the approach that TG had differs in one important way. TG had a team of artists working on each card, so only some of the art was done by just a single person. We instead allow all artists to follow through all the way from sketch to finalization. This way we will lose some in terms of every card conforming to a strict set of rules and look – but then we gain the benefit of having different styles and touches to the art. All the while we of course still make sure that we have the craziness and gruesome nature of *The Spoils* intact.

I don't think one way is better than the other – and I am very happy with the art we have so far, but of course I will leave the final judgment of that to our fans.

**TtP: How does *The Spoils* fit in with other card games – such as *Magic: The Gathering* or even *Pokemon*? Are they similar or very**

**different? Will those card players like The Spoils style?**

MN: The Spoils is less luck-dependent than the games you mention and probably in comparison to most TCGs out there. A game of The Spoils is bound to carry on for more turns because the players will always have options and cards to play because of the basic rules that you can always pay three resources to draw a card and always use any card facedown as a resource.

But if you like to play TCGs then you will surely like The Spoils as well. It is as a fan once told me "The King of TCGs"

**TtP: Can you tell us about your different markets – Europe, the US and any other areas of focus? How do you manage your resources to grow interest in such a wide set of markets, or do you focus in one territory before moving onto another one?**

MN: A game such as The Spoils without a big license to autosell the product for you heavily, relies upon some local force being able to carry the game into the stores and to the players. So before going into a new territory we make sure we have someone local that wants to put some work into the project because they agree with us what a great game The Spoils is (This could be a distributor, a store or perhaps just an enthusiastic individual that is willing to go that extra mile to make success for the game)!

**TtP: How has the current economic climate impacted on your business?**

MN: It is not something we have felt at all. Popularly speaking you could say that our target audience being students and/or adolescents never had much money in the first place – and that hasn't changed much with the decline of the world economy.

**TtP: Card games, board games and other role playing games are often seen as 'geeky' or niche. Do you think this is the nature of the industry, or do you believe**

**that these social games can compete with digital entertainment?**

MN: Wow – good question. And I will admit that being a gameloving geeky kinda guy myself I am probably too biased to be qualified to answer this question.

But yes, I do think that person-to-person games will always be around. Computer games are great fun, but playing face to face just adds another quality to any game, that I for one wouldn't miss out on (though I do play both computer games and other games online).

**TtP: And what about you, Michael. Are you a game player and/ or a collector of any sort? What do you play and when did you last play? What was the outcome?**

MN:I am a gamer at heart – and have been for the longest time. I have played games ever since I was a kid. And continue to play games as much as I can be that board games, role-playing games and of course The Spoils (which is the only card game I play these days). Being father of two wonderful children and running a business of course means that my time has become more limited, but I prioritize my time for gaming very high! And luckily my family understands my passion.

**TtP: Thank you for taking the time to chat with us today. Before we wrap it up, is there anything else you would like to tell us about The Spoils?**

MN: Just this: We are working on making a new set for The Spoils. The name of the set will be Seed 2: Gloamspike's Revenge and will wrap up the storyline of Seed (which takes place 150 years prior to the "present"): Once this is done we will revisit the 1st edition.

I dare not set a date for the release just yet as we do not want to make any promise that we cannot keep. We are very well aware that we will be measured upon how we deliver on any promises we make, so before stating anything we want to be 1337% sure!!





# The Benefits of Board Games

Playing games with your kids is a perfect way to spend time together — and build learning skills at the same time.

What your child most wants — and needs — is to be with you with no goal in mind beyond the joy of spending time together. He wants you to take pleasure in him, play with him, and listen to him. Nothing bolsters his self-esteem more! So why not pull out an old board game tonight? Playing games is an easy and excellent way to spend unhurried, enjoyable time together. As an added bonus, board games are also rich in learning opportunities. They satisfy your child's competitive urges and the desire to master new skills and concepts, such as:

- number and shape recognition, grouping, and counting
- letter recognition and reading
- visual perception and color recognition
- eye-hand coordination and manual dexterity

Games don't need to be overtly academic to be educational, however. Just by virtue of playing them, board games can teach important social skills, such as communicating verbally, sharing, waiting, taking turns, and enjoying interaction with others. Board games can foster the ability to focus, and lengthen your child's attention span by



encouraging the completion of an exciting, enjoyable game. Even simple board games like Chutes and Ladders offer meta-messages and life skills: Your luck can change in an instant — for the better or for the worse. The message inherent in board games is: Never give up. Just when you feel despondent, you might hit the jackpot and ascend up high, if you stay in the game for just a few more moves.

Board games have distinct boundaries. Living in a complex society, children need clear limits to feel safe. By circumscribing the playing field — much as tennis courts and football fields will do later — board games can help your child weave her wild and erratic side into a more organized, mature, and socially acceptable personality. After all, staying within the boundaries (not intruding on others' space, for example) is crucial to leading a successful social and academic life.

## A Word About Winning

Children take game playing seriously, so it's important that we help guide them through the contest. When a playing piece falls to a lower level, our kids really feel sad; when it rises up high, they are remarkably proud and happy, even if we adults know that it happened only by chance. Therefore, you need to help balance your child's pleasure in playing the game with his very limited ability to manage frustration and deal with the idea of losing.

For 3, 4, and even 5 year olds, winning is critical to a feeling of mastery. So generally, I think it's okay to "help" them win. By about 6, kids should begin to internalize the rules of fair play, tenuous as they may seem to a child who is losing a game. So I am also fine with a 6 year old "amending" the rules

to win if he feels she has to. I encourage you to acknowledge your child's need for special rules. At the start of the game, you might want to ask, "Are we playing by regular or cheating rules today?"

### Choosing the Right Game at Every Age

While in the long run we need to teach values, ethics, academic skills, and the importance of playing by the rules, in the early years the primary goals are helping your child become more self-confident and ambitious and to enjoy playing with others. If you're playing with more than one child, divide the family into teams, giving each player a job he can do well: A younger child may be responsible for rolling the dice (which he considers important, since that is where the luck comes from), and an older child the job of sorting the Monopoly money.

As children approach 5, they have more sophisticated thinking skills and can begin to incorporate and exercise their number, letter, and word knowledge in literacy-based games. By 6, children may prefer more cognitively challenging games like checkers, which require and help develop planning, strategy, persistence, and critical thinking skills. Here are some of our favorite game picks for 5 and 6 year olds.

**Scrabble Junior** (Milton Bradley): This is the younger cousin of the tremendously educational and challenging Scrabble, which we all know and love. Using large yellow letter tiles, players match letters to words already written on one side of the board. The reverse side has an open grid where older children can create their own words. Learning highlights: Fosters literacy and language skills.

**Boggle Junior** (Parker Brothers): The prelude to Boggle — one of the best learning games for older kids — is Boggle Junior, in which players link pictures to letters and words. The game comes with 6-sided letter cubes and numerous picture cards that have the name of the object spelled below. Players place a card on a blue tray and use 3- or 4-letter cubes to copy the item's spelling. Older children can hide the written words and spell the word just using the picture. Learning highlights: Teaches letters, words,

spelling, and matching skills.

**Zingo** (Think Fun Company): One of this year's "hot" games, this Bingo-style matching game relies on a player's ability to spot pictures (of a dog, say, or the sun) and match them quickly to the words and pictures on his play card. As in Bingo, the first one to finish a complete line of items wins. Learning Highlights: Encourages matching skills and quick thinking.

**Monopoly Junior** (Parker Brothers): As they do in its senior sibling, players roll dice to move around the game board and buy real estate. The game is shorter and uses smaller dollar denominations so kids can figure out winnings and penalties more quickly.

Learning highlights: Develops math, color recognition, reading, reasoning, and social skills.

**Junior Labyrinth** (Ravensburger): Each player gets a large, easy-to-handle piece shaped like a ghost, which she moves through an extra-large maze in an attempt to reach a treasure. While the path may appear straight, the walls move and shift, so getting there is a challenge. This game imparts the idea of impermanence and change, since a path that was open just a moment ago might now be closed and vice versa. Players have to figure out what to do when circumstances change unexpectedly — a good life skill to learn.

Learning highlights: Teaches spatial relations and relies on some manual dexterity.

### Thank you!

This article was reproduced with kind permission from **Scholastic Parent & Child magazine** and was written by **Alvin Rosenfeld**.



Thank you Alyx Price at Scholastic UK for your help too.

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# thru-the-portal

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## WELCOME!

6 January 2010 - 10:14am | thru-the-portal

Welcome to **thru-the-portal.com**, a site created to support the distribution of our digital magazine which will be published quarterly, available from the last Friday of January, April, July and October. At the end of November we will also be shipping our annual printed edition, with featured articles from throughout the year as well as some exclusive content (and perhaps some goodies as well...).

The publication is free to download and share. We are producing the magazine as our way of contributing to what we believe is a wonderful set of social activities.


In the magazines you will find information on:


-  Board games;
-  Card games;
-  Role playing games;
-  Miniatures; and
-  MMOs

We are always interested in getting contributions, so if you have an interesting article, game review or want so simply share your thoughts, please do get in touch!

thru-the-portal

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My name is Wyvern  
 I have been a fighter, a thief, a lover,  
 and more. I have seen magic and  
 faced death more times then I care  
 to count and lived to tell my tale...

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# UK GAMES EXPO

***thru-the-portal: Hello Richard, Mike – Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. Can you start by telling us a little about yourselves, your role at UK Game Expo and how long you’ve been involved?***

Richard Denning: I am 42 and for the day job I am a Birmingham general practitioner. I have been gaming in one form or another since around 1978 when I cracked open a box of Airfix soldiers just after watching a movie with a wargame in it. From that day on, a lifelong passion for games of all sorts flowed. Having been to many games conventions over the years and finally to the mind blowingly fantastic Essen in 2006, myself and a few others wanted to create our own event. I was one of the original organisers and have been involved in planning and running Expo since 2006. The first Expo was in 2007.

Mick Pearson: I have become involved formally this year. In the previous shows I have helped out to assist Richard and Pat with the running of the Expo, but not in the planning and preparation. I volunteered to become a partner this year as I retire on or before 1st June 2010, and the Expo will provide me with something interesting to do.

***TtP: Although I did not have the opportunity to attend the 2009 Expo, I heard that it was quite different to the format of previous years. Can you tell us what the 'old' format was, and how this was different in 2009?***

RD:I am not sure quite what you mean here. The basic format of Expo has been the same over the three years. We aimed to have Board Games, War-games RPG and Card games, but very strongly we believed in the idea that a games convention should be accessible to not just hard core gaming nuts like us but families and the public. As such, we made sure we had costumed groups, Daleks and a computer game arcade. The only difference in 2009 was we extended the event to three days – with the



Friday being a games day where RPG sessions and open board gaming could go on. In fact, this is already what was happening on the weekend so it was more of an extension than a change of format.

**TtP: What sort of feedback did you receive after the event, from visitors, publishers and retailers?**

RD: Pretty good really. Given the economy we had feared that attendance would be down. In fact it went up. We now have the UK's biggest boardgame and Role Playing Game convention if you look at attendance, numbers of companies exhibiting (including the entire British Board Game Industry of note: Martin Wallace, Ragnar, Reiver Games, Jklm, Surprised stare and others) and total number of RPG games and seats available (Over 600 slots were taken up this year in the RPG games). I think the traders and public recognise this. There are always a few grumpy guys who just moan, but that does not bother me if 90% are telling us we do a good job.

MP: Feedback from retailers has been generally good - proof being that many are returning in 2010

**TtP: I visited my first boardgaming event in Essen and was blown away, and somewhat daunted. I understand that the American conventions are more about playing, whereas Essen seems more about demonstrating and selling. Where does UK Game Expo fit in, in terms of experience style?**

RD: We wanted to build that Essen model of model of demo / participation type events where traders show off their games, into a Gencon style residential event as well. So, at Expo, you can walk around the trade stands, sit down and try out a demo, sign up to tournaments and RPG games but also get in lots of open gaming. Add to that an entertaining and fun, open to the public, spectacle and you have Expo. So, it's not a replica of any one other show - but a blend of what we believed was the best aspects of many.

MP: We have a mix of the two styles - there

are plenty of opportunities to buy and for retailers to demonstrate their games, and also there are competitions held, such as Carcassonne

**TtP: What do you think of the UK gaming interest - how would you compare it to the US and German gaming communities for instance?**

RD: Now this is a difficult one. The odd thing about gamers is that you get some which are purists. I know wargamers who ONLY touch 6th edition WRG ancient battles with 28mm soldiers and think you are weird when you get out a board game. Or roleplayers who smirk if you get out a toy soldier. There are board gamers who look at either of those genres as bizarre. So quite a lot of very narrow interests are around. Then, we have the general gamer like me and most of those that I game with who will actually have a go at most things. I think the only thing you could say is that pure wargaming is a minority interest in Germany and board games are much more prevalent there. Here, boardgaming is the growing genre and certainly the type of gaming which all ages and sexes will try, unlike wargaming say which mainly appeals to males and in the case of historical wargaming, 40+ year olds, like me!

A: Mike: Another one for Richard to answer. Neither of us have been to a US convention, I may be able to get to Historicon next July, but that is more a wargames con.

**TtP: How do you balance the different interests of gamers, publishers and retailers? And how do you make this more than just a 'geek' event, something that is more inclusive towards family and 'tame' gamers?**

RD: I covered this a bit in an earlier answer but what we do is get costumed groups in like Star Wars Characters, Daleks etc and they can entertain the public a lot. Then we get in some computers and arcade games, which goes down well. Quite a lot of the games, in particular the puzzles, are accessible to all ages and sexes. Traders need space to show games and demo

them and we give them that. The gamers want to see the games. Really all we do is bring the two together.

MP: The range of games that are available includes many family-orientated products, we have also set up school competitions in the past and marketed the event to local schools. We also have other entertainment happening during the weekend, for example, this year we had Star Wars Stormtroopers wandering the halls, assisting with security, and Doctor Who and the Tardis were also present (with assistants). We have also had Daleks present during the show and other 'non-geek' attractions such as face painting

***TtP: As we approach the 2010 Event, what lessons have you learnt that will impact on that event? What can people expect to see at UK Games Expo 2010?***

RD: 2010 will see the model repeated - lots of Board game companies with (we hope) a number of new releases, will wall RPG gaming over 8 sessions now, a redesigned Living Dungeon (our immersive walk in fantasy event) and still all the family entertainment as well as some of the largest Miniatures tournaments.

MP: In terms of board gaming, there will be more new products, as well as familiar favourites. We are re-designing our "Living Dungeon", which has always been a sell-out. We are keeping the details close to our chest for 2010, but promise a steep change

in the quality of the dungeon experience.

***TtP: How do gamers, publishers and other interested groups find out more about the Expo? For international visitors that may be staying a little longer, what else should they try see if they visit Birmingham?***

RD: Our website: [www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk](http://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk) contains information about the Expo. This will get progressively updated with more and more material as we approach the show. You can also get the newsletter (via the website) and we have a face book and twitter feed which again you can link to from our home page. There is an exhibitor pack for 2010 out now - it's on the site. I can recommend the Black Country Museum (a living history site), The Bull Ring - which is a large very modern shopping centre, the Canals in and around the trendy Brindley Place complex of shops and restaurants, Think Tank - an interactive Science Museum, Birmingham Art Gallery in the Town Hall and also the Tolkien Trail (the great author lived in the city for a while). Further afield, Warwick Castle and Stratford on Avon are great, if you like your history.

MP: The best place to find us is via [www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk](http://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk), they will find our email addresses. There will be an on-line booking service for tickets, tournaments and competitions, this will be available and live in 2010.

Birmingham is everything that the sec-





ond city in England should be. There are plenty of hotels close to the venue, which is also only a short bus ride into the city centre. Once in the city there are many pubs, clubs and restaurants catering for all tastes and wallets (or purses). Within 2 miles is the entertainment area for the city "Broad Street", ideal for nightlife, with 2 multi-screen cinemas very close to the venue, as well as theatres. Birmingham is truly a 24-hour city, for partners who may not want to spend all day at the Expo, there are many world-class shops in the city centre, including the Bull Ring.

**TtP:** *And what about you – are you a game player? What sort of games do you like and do you have a large collection? Are there any favourite games that you enjoy going back to time after time?*

RD: Yes I am first and foremost a game player. There was no Expo type event here so we created it. Ironically, I am usually too busy at the show to play much, but we always grab a table at the Hotel in the evening and crack open some new game. I once was purely a wargamer, got into RPGs at University in the 80s and then board games in the late 90s. I guess I play more boardgames these days than any other, but still like a skirmish wargame or a bit of hack and slay RPG as well. I am also a board game designer. I am bringing out Great Fire: London 1666 in 2010. That's under the Medusa Games label and published by JKLM. See [www.medusagames.co.uk](http://www.medusagames.co.uk) for more on that.

MP: I am something of a casual gamer. I have quite a collection of traditional board wargames, as well as other board games. With my current job I get little time for

gaming, as earlier stated, this changes in 2010. I also have a traditional background as a figure gamer (I started in the 1970s at school) and enjoy role play games as well.

**TtP:** *In our digital, celebrity focused lives, how do you think we can raise the profile and interest in gaming? Whilst almost everyone knows about Monopoly and Risk, games are still seen as a largely child-focused activity. Do you think there is something we should be doing, or doing differently, to make this more mainstream?*

RD: It's tough. Whatever we do, I think gaming will be a minority subject. But I think that if we show folks that there is a world of great fun games out there – many that do exercise the mind as well as being just entertaining, well we pick up a new recruit each time. There are some 6000 board games in the world. There are hundreds of roleplaying games and miniatures games. Bored with monopoly? Then it's time to open up your mind and try something new. You might like it. Gaming is also a social activity. You have a good time, meet your friends and catch up with them.

**TtP:** *Well thank you again for your time. Before we finish, is there anything else you would like to add?*

RD: Yes, If you are a gamer – and most definitely if you like Board Games, Card Games, Roleplaying and Miniatures – then come to UK Games Expo on 4th to 6th June 2010. I guarantee you will enjoy yourself. Bring the family as well!

# What is LARPing?

Written By Matthew Pearson & Joseph Valenti

In today's world, with its stress and complexity, there is a need for quality recreation that lets you get away from the daily grind. Take a vacation from the mundane and try your hand at a Live Adventure Game, known as Live RPG, Live Action Role Play, and Interactive Literature. In a Live Action Role Play (LARP) Game you create a character with a personality and back-story of your own design and play the character on a giant set, in real time, with other players and actors.

There are different types of LARP games. Theatre Style rely on judges, dice rolls, a deck of cards or other abstract way to decide the outcome of actions and conflicts among players. Live Combat Style uses an honor system that allows players to engage in safe combat using foam sculpted weapons to resolve combat and perform actions based on the skills of the character they created.

Many readers of popular fantasy fiction become lost in the exciting worlds created by the author and form a picture of the worlds in their mind. In a LARP, the story unfolds organically with no predetermined outcome, and every player is dressed the part, wearing clothing and other accoutrements that makes him or her look good and fit in.

LARP players enjoy all the elements that make a good fantasy movie or novel great, but players also have an impact on how the story develops and moves forward. The depth of interaction and immersion in a well run LARP game simply cannot be matched by any tabletop, computer, or console role play game - it is much more exhilarating and the adrenaline rush is immense.

Every player acts their chosen role. Everyone uses costuming, make-up, prosthetics and other types of special effects to look as real as possible. An Elf looks like an Elf. An Orc looks like an Orc. When you put on your costume and interact with scores of other players, you become that other person you created for that short period of time. You do the sweating when confronted by the town guard looking for a band of thieves fitting your group's description. You feel the adrenaline pump through your body when a mob of Orcs rushes out from the brush and attacks your group. You feel fear when swinging a sword against

your attacker. And you feel the pain when one of your comrades perishes in the battles. This level of immersion cannot be achieved in any other gaming medium.

LARP events are run at game conventions, game stores, local parks and campgrounds. LARP Events can last anywhere from 1 hour (at a game convention) to several days (a NERO LARP Weekend Event). Sometimes you get a pre-made character, guidelines for making one for the game, and other times you can bring a pre-existing character into the LARP game.

Most LARP groups meet every few weeks or once a month, weather permitting, at a local inexpensive park or game store. Smaller games have between 20 and 50 participants. LARP Large scale games commonly rent entire camps for entire weekends entertaining between 50 and 300 players from Friday night until Sunday Noon. NERO LARP has more than 30 Chapters and anyone can open a Chapter in their area.

A LARP Module is generally designed for a small group of players to move through a series of encounters much akin to "Modules" that many know from table-top RPGing. LARP Adventure Modules are available at the GA LARP Park in Barnesville GA, owned by Joseph Valenti. Visit [Http://GALARPPark.com](http://GALARPPark.com) for more info.

The more professional LARP groups, such as NERO® LARP, have dedicated staff that write the story and act in roles. These people work very hard between events writing new adventures and stories based on players' actions in the game. You can take the NERO LARP Tour at [Http://nerolarp.com](http://nerolarp.com)

Matthew Pearson and Joseph Valenti are Vice President and President of the NERO LARP Adventures Company. Joseph began LARPing in 1990 and opened his first LARP in CT in 1997. In 1998 Joseph bought NERO International from its original owners and has grown the organization from 15 Chapters to nearly fifty. Matthew Pearson has been LARPing since 1992 and has been the Vice President of NERO International under Joseph's ownership since it opened on August 03, 1998.



# WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft is a massive multiplayer online role playing game - or MMORPG - and is a realisation of technology working perfectly with story telling and player led interaction. The world offers diversity, challenge and the opportunity to socialise as much or as little as you choose. It can, however, be slightly intimidating for gamers to make the transition from the table top to the laptop.

In this article we try to introduce you to World of Warcraft and a few of the wonders it offers.

To play World of Warcraft (WoW) you will first need a reasonably good computer to install the client software - what this means is that you will have a local installation on your computer that connects via the internet to the servers that host the game. You can download the game from Blizzard's site or buy the boxed game from most computer game stores. The game is currently made up of three parts:

1. World of Warcraft;
2. Burning Crusades; and
3. Wrath of the Lich King.

Once you have the client installed, the next thing you will need to do is create an account via Blizzard's Battlenet system - during this process you will be able to decide whether you want to 'pay as you go' or set up a monthly payment.

This is a key consideration in playing almost all MMORPGs - whilst you pay for the initial software, there is also typically some sort of ongoing payment required. You should budget in the region of \$10 per month, however you may find that the true cost of your time is much higher as the game can be very addictive.

Once you've created your account the next thing you do is choose a realm where your character (or characters) will make their home. A realm (also called a 'shard' or more simply a 'server') is a dedicated environment of the game that has a limit on the number of players that it can accommodate. It means that you will typically only interact with other players from that realm



- although certain conditions may allow for special areas where you can interact across realms (usually for some sort of battle scenario).

Creating a character is a fun process and is important as it will be your identity in the realm you have chosen. Will you opt to side with the 'goodies', the Alliance, or do you want to be the 'misunderstood' Horde? Within these choices you then select the different races (Human, Orc, Taurean, Dwarf, etc) and then your class (Fighters, Spell casters, Thieves or some combination of

these skill sets).

For the purpose of this article I will tell you my experience from the perspective of my main character, Uranaugh a 70th Level Shaman Orc in Tanaris. Firstly, let's look at what all that means:

1. You can pick any available name and you will see that most of the common ones (such as from every Lord of the Rings or Dragonlance edition) have been taken. Here you tend to find a selection of the silly (Harrydotter or Sandwich, for example) through to the more mundane (Ryan or Annejones).

2. As you progress through the game your character will advance in levels based on experience it gains from completing quests and killing creatures. The first release allowed characters to advance to level 60, the Burning Crusade took this to level 70 and the Wrath of the Lich King moved this further to level 80.

3. I enjoy both the fighting and spell casting aspects of play, and so chose to play a Shaman. In WoW a shaman is able to cast magic in line with the elements (fire, water, wind and earth), but is also strong enough to hold his own in most one-on-one fights within his level.

4. I chose to play as an Orc, one of the options for the Horde. I have characters in both the Alliance and Horde camps, but tend to enjoy the Horde play more - there is no reason to this, it is just a personal preference and the game is fairly balanced so that no faction is overwhelmingly stronger than another.

5. And finally I play in the realm of Tanaris - it was the one my wife was playing when I joined.

After choosing a character you will want to run around and kill things, explore the world and try to work out how to do more damage quicker. Soon you will want to move quicker too, which is where

different mounts come in handy - allowing you to move across the land or even fly in some areas.

If you are discovering WoW by yourself or as a group of new-to-WoW players, one of the first things you might wonder about is how many lives you get, or what happens if you die. In WoW if you are killed, your world goes grey and you find yourself with the option to "Resurrect Now" as a ghostly version of your character stands over your corpse! When you accept this option, your ghostly version transports to the nearest graveyard and you have to run back to find your body, at which point you can resurrect and continue playing. You can do this over and over again, but note that your armor will usually take some damage each time you die.

Something else that you will notice is all the yellow exclamation marks floating above the heads of different characters. These indicate that the character has a quest for you - go talk to them and once you accept a quest you will see that the exclamation mark turns into a grey question mark. Once you complete the quest the question mark will turn yellow and you should turn it in for any reward and experience.

If you are playing as a team or even as a couple and are not at the same location the investment in a reasonable headset/ mic and Skype is well worth considering to allow you to chat as you play. This is so effective



in fact, that WoW formed the basis of my girlfriend (now wife) and I spending quality time together while I was in the UK and she was in the US!

Getting used to the user interface when you first start playing WoW can take some time, so we've included some key information for you to review when you first start playing. We hope it helps!

## Interface Overview



A. Your character's summary information, showing their name, health and any energy in the form of two bars. Note in the small circle that a crown symbol shows who is the leader of a party if you are in a group.

B. This area lists who is in your party - another name for a group. You can also see a summary of their health and energy.

C. This area shows any special bonuses that apply to your character - called 'buffs' - as well as how long they last. Below this area is where any negative influences will be shown.

D. This is your 'mini map' and shows your location in the centre. It will also show any exclamation marks or question marks for quests and can also be turned on to show one other area of interest - such as herbs or mineral deposits - useful for characters with these professions. You will see in the circle

that there is a small envelop symbol - this indicates that you have mail waiting for you, which can be collected outside all inns.

E. This is your experience bar. It shows you how far along you are towards achieving your next level. Note in the circle the little dagger symbol - this indicates a rest bonus during which time you will typically get double experience for killing things.

F. This is your quick tool bar. You can put different effects, spells or abilities here to launch by clicking the corresponding number value on your keyboard (from "1" though "=" on your keyboard).

G. These are your bags, in which you keep all your goodies. In the screenshot above you can see three bags open with their contents shown, as well as how much money your character has.

Preview:

## Great Fire: London 1666

I was fortunate enough to attend Dragonmeet (in London) and I had the opportunity to get a preview of Richard Denning's new game "Great Fire: London 1666" (which will be available from Medusa games in early 2010). Richard and his colleagues have been designing the game for over a year, having played the first prototype on the ferry to Essen 2008. The game is based around the events of the 1666 Fire of London which started in Pudding Lane and spread through most of the City of London, inside the old Roman City Wall.

A game was already underway when I first arrived giving me the opportunity to watch and discuss what was happening with one of Richard's colleagues. I found out some wonderfully interesting history about the Great Fire of London: During the fire many of the properties were insured by a variety of insurance companies, each with their own interests in preserving the properties that they insured. This meant that as houses were burning down insurance companies would rush to save the houses that they were covering often at the expense of houses that they were not.

In the game each player has a number of houses placed randomly across the board, in addition they are also given three secret objectives. The fire itself starts in Pudding Lane (just north of the Thames) and moves slowly outwards. The fire is controlled via a number of cards which the players have access to during their round - in this way they can move the fire north, south, east or west. At the same time as the players are each trying to put out fires that are threatening their own properties they are either actively or apologetically sending fires towards other player's houses.

Fires are extinguished by mobilising a small selection of local firefighters that are scattered across the board. To influence the direction of the fire-fighters the player's control token must be in the same

area as the fire-fighter and the flames. If this is the case, the firefighter extinguishes the flame and the player takes this flame, which counts towards his points at the end of the game.

Whilst players may initially start with the best intentions of playing nicely with each other, directing a fire away from your houses soon takes priority over being a friendly player. As the board is slowly covered in flames you find yourself scrambling to push these flames anywhere other than towards your own housing area. In addition, you also have your other objective cards which encourage you to protect a number of special areas, such as the Tower of London or St Pauls Cathedral.

The game progresses until all the draw cards are used up at which time the points are calculated based on the number of houses still standing, the number of fires extinguished by a player and whether a player has met their objectives or not.

The game I observed, and later tried, was played on a final design board. Richard is in the final stages of game development and design before going to formal production. At the time of playing the game (early December) game artwork was being finalised with their planned release date in early to mid 2010.

I particularly liked the game because of the London theme and the history of how the insurance companies acted during this time. I hope this richness of history comes through in the game itself.

Richard and his colleagues should be commended for coming up with an original game that provides historical insight in such an interactive and engaging format. I look forward to seeing the finished product and offering a more comprehensive review at that time.

For more information you can visit [Medusa Games](#).

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**Welcome to the Dice Tower, a podcast about tabletop games!**  
 New to the show? [Here's an introduction to the Dice Tower.](#)

**January 5, 2010 - Happy New Year, everyone. Tons of new reviews are being added. Episode # 164 is coming up with the best and worst of 2009.**

**December 4, 2009 - Mary interviewed Jim Pinto from AEG. [Check out the interview!](#)**

**December 3, 2009 - OK! Looks like we got the site back online. Things are still being updated - but check out the top 100 and the top 10 lists.**

**November 10, 2009 - Latest interview is with [Keith Dalton](#), from Multi-man Publishing.**

**October 12, 2009 - New [interview up, with GMT Games!](#)**

**September 28th - There's all kinds of stuff being added, but not all of it is going up here. Major edits are underway - so anything that's broken - I know about it. Sorry about the problems!**

My Videos // Thedicetower // (50 videos)

**Caligula Review**  
 Added: January 19, 2010, 05:08 AM  
 by [thedicetower](#)  
 Views: 1,518  
 Comments: 7

**Battle Line Review**  
 Added: January 19, 2010, 04:47 AM  
 by [thedicetower](#)  
 Views: 1,383  
 Comments: 12

**Endeavor Review**  
 Added: January 12, 2010, 05:50 AM  
 by [thedicetower](#)  
 Views: 3,225

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Featured Post

## The Beast of Limfjord

Currently in development, *The Beast of Limfjord* is a game of dark ages fantasy inspired by the tales of Beowulf, the Norse sagas and other historical texts. The playtest version of the game is free to download now.

[Read More](#)

## Dungeon Quest

Posted by [Peril Planet](#) | Posted in [Products](#), [RPG](#), [Uncategorized](#) | Posted on 20-01-2010

0

Two Saturday's ago I caught up with one of my nephews and ran him through his *first ever* RPG adventure. We went through the entire process of creating a character - he wanted to be a wizard

An interview with

# Cynthia Sheppard

this issue's cover artist!



We are delighted with the cover art that Cynthia Sheppard has produced for us. Her initial brief was to create a fantasy world that mirrors our own, with their version of a Gaming Convention. We think she did a great job and took the opportunity to ask her a few questions after she completed the work.

***thru-the-portal: Hi Cynthia, thank you for taking the time to speak with us. Firstly, I want to congratulate you on providing us with the cover art for our first issue. How did this project compare with a 'typical' project for you?***

Cynthia Sheppard: Thank you, Neil. This project has been a real pleasure to work on, and yes, a bit of a departure from my usual work. It's been both challenging and fun to paint a large number of figures and small "easter eggs" in one painting. The other major departure was using oil paint, since many of my projects are digitally painted. I think it really adds to the old-world fantasy feel.

***ttp: How did you start as a professional artist? Can you tell us about your first commission or paid work?***

CS: I started doing art professionally in 2007, with my first commission being an oil portrait of a Czech bride. I've always felt that my roots were in fantasy illustration, during that time I was just getting involved with the fantasy art community, and by 2008 I was working on small card games and RPGs.

***ttp: Can you tell us about your creative process - is there a certain atmosphere that you work in, music you listen to, do you have a muse? Are their favourite tools in your art bag?***

CS: Though my process changes depending on the piece, there is definitely

an atmosphere I like in my studio! Currently I work out of my apartment, where I have a second bedroom as a dedicated art space. I have a bright red accent wall because it's my favorite color, and I intend to make that a theme in all my future studios. I have a soft spot for early-90's American grunge music, since it reminds me of my childhood- I listen to a lot of Soundgarden and Alice In Chains and the like while I work.

I don't exactly have a muse, but I do have heroes that have inspired me, a group of artist friends that share critical feedback, and a husband who asks engaging questions about the choices I make. These things all factor into the flow of my work and give me goals I can aspire to, practical feedback I can grow from, and the question "Why?" which keeps me in check when I get too lost in my own head.

***ttp: How did you find working on the thru-the-portal project? What was typical, and what was different about this project?***

CS: The first thing that struck me and what really got me interested in this project was the concept. The idea of the fantasy creatures playing human games seems like such a fun play on a classic archetype that as soon as I read the description there was an immediate image that popped into my head. From there all I had to do was figure out how to translate from mental image to visual product and my work as an illustrator was that much easier because of it. Waiting for the paint to dry so I could keep going

was more difficult than conceptualizing the piece!

**ttp: Our magazine addresses the interest of social gamers. From some of our discussions I understand that you are working with Wizards of the Coast. Can you tell us about any work you have done relating to gaming interests?**

CS: I'm currently working with Wizards on some pieces for the February issue of Dragon Magazine - they have a very specific brand, developed over decades, that makes working for them unique among other game companies. Sinister Adventures puts out campaigns that are much darker, but also extremely fun to illustrate. On the lighter side of the spectrum, I lent my hand to a collectible card game called "Oz" in 2008, based on the classic L. Frank Baum stories, but unfortunately the game never made it to press.

**ttp: Do you play any social games - board games, card or perhaps role playing games? If you do, what do you enjoy most and when did you last play?**

CS: At home we are Scrabble junkies! Honestly, painting takes up so much of my time that I rarely have the opportunity to play games these days. As a kid I was really into D&D and Magic, so I have a soft

spot in my heart for them to this day.

**ttp: What are some of the highlights of your artistic career to date?**

CS: On my 14th birthday, my grandfather got me a book called Spectrum (4th edition). Spectrum is an annual book showcasing top art in the fantasy/sci-fi genres, and after looking through the book, I became fascinated by fantasy art and artists. Almost exactly ten years later, the last conversation I had with my grandfather before he passed away was to thank him for changing my life, and that after dreaming about it for a long time I'd been included in the book.

In terms of "highlights," another of my favorite experiences didn't start so positively. Within one week, I was rejected from two fantasy art publications (one of them, incidentally, was the following edition of Spectrum). The resulting feeling of defeat inspired me to focus harder, to pour my soul into my next piece, and seven days and sixteen hours later I had produced "Half Her Heart's Duet," which in 2009 became widely published and proved to be pivotal in turning my life's passion into my life's career.

**ttp: What is your dream commission? A company you want to work with, a subject you're interested in painting?**

CS: I have a few short-term dream goals at the moment; I'm looking to get into more book cover illustration; urban fantasy and modern subject matter with a fantasy twist have always piqued my interest. Magic cards are also on my list of things I hope to do this year.

I guess you could say that my biggest BIG

Miss Muffet's Revenge  
Cynthia Sheppard ©



dream would be to work on concept art for the WETA Workshop in New Zealand, but from what I understand it's nearly impossible to join their ranks, and doubly impossible for people who aren't already living in New Zealand!

**ttp:** *Well thank you again for your time and the wonderful work you have done in producing our cover art. Before we finish, is there anything else you would like to add?*

CS: Thanks very much, Neil! I'd only like to add that I hope the readers enjoy the cover and get the most out of your new magazine!



**Shall We Count His Rings?**  
Cynthia Sheppard ©



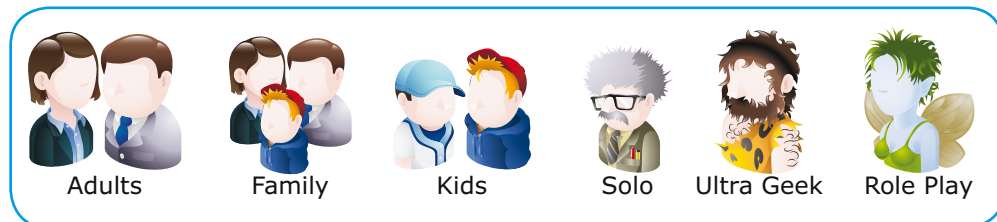
**Wonderland Deconstructed**  
Cynthia Sheppard ©



# Reviews

## Player types:

These icon's are used to describe who we think will enjoy the game the most.



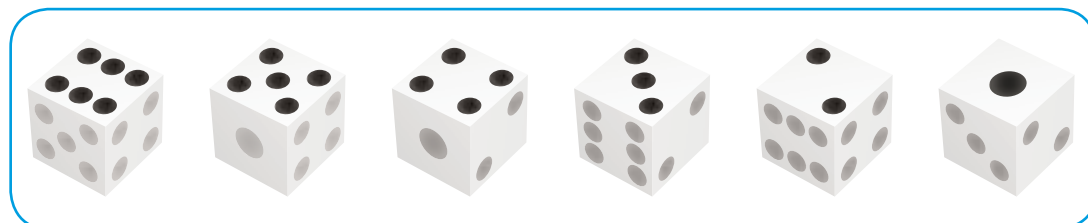
## Awards:

To offer some way of recognising our appreciation for games we enjoy, we will offer annual and quarterly awards.



## Review Ratings:

Each comprehensive review will show a summary dice value for a number of different areas - that we believe are useful in evaluating a game.



## Summary Scorecard:

We will include a summary scorecard for all games we review, for example:


**Game Title** 

*Boardgame*

**Publisher:** Xxxxxxx  
**Reviewer:** Xxxxxxx  
**Play Time:** 125 mins  
**Age Range:** 4 and up  
**Summary:**  
Xxxx xxx x x xxxxx xxxxx x x  
xxxxxxx xxx x xxxxxx xxx xxxxx xx  
xxxx. Xxx xxx xx xx x xxxxxxxx x x.

**Site:** www.Xxxxxxx.com  
**Review Issue:** Xxxxxxx


3-6 players  **81%**

**Game Title** 

*Boardgame*

**Publisher:** Xxxxxxx  
**Reviewer:** Xxxxxxx  
**Play Time:** 125 mins  
**Age Range:** 4 and up  
**Summary:**  
Xxxx xxx x x xxxxx xxxxx x x  
xxxxxxx xxx x xxxxxx xxx xxxxx xx  
xxxx. Xxx xxx xx xx x xxxxxxxx x x.

**Site:** www.Xxxxxxx.com  
**Review Issue:** Xxxxxxx

3-6 players  **81%**

Hmm...

Advertising to a group of people who are already interested in games that you sell, promote or produce... with embedded links directly to your site and your products... makes sense...

[advertising@thru-the-portal.com](mailto:advertising@thru-the-portal.com)

Dice Value	Components	Ease of play	Fun/ Enjoyment	Replayability	Socialising	Value for money
1	Very poorly produced, some missing, confusing items, etc.	Had no almost no idea what the game was about. The rules were difficult to read or the game mechanics were unworkable. Set up time may also have been very long.	The game left us feeling very negative about it. This was not a fun game.	This game will gather dust and rot in a dark corner of my house.	All I remember is a tumble weed blowing past.	You paid what for it??!
2	Low quality components, 'feels cheap', not going to last very long.	Very slow going. Had to check back on the rules regularly and some of the mechanics seemed broken. Set up time may also have been long.	Not a fun game. Most of the time we were bored or held up by some heavy game play mechanics that brought the game mood down.	If all my other games are burnt or lost, I might see if I can use components from this game for some other game.	A dog howled in the distance and woke one of the players.	I would not pay that for it, unless you threw in some extra goodies.
3	Average quality, probably going to last for up to 10 game sessions.	Not bad once we got going - still had to check on the rules a few times and/or some of the game play felt a little unbalanced.	An average game. We enjoyed parts of it, but not so much that it will be something we tell friends or family about.	It's not one I'll rush to play again, but if someone is begging me we can take it out again.	There was a little interaction, but I still don't know the name of three of the other players.	It's expensive, but you can twist my arm.
4	Nice components. Easy to understand their use, no fancy extras but they do the job.	Aside from having to check the rules for the exceptions, the game played easily.	A fun game that kept us entertained for most of the time.	This is on my 'will play' again list if someone is interested. There are 2 or 3 others I'd rather play though.	We got along fine. There was generally a discussion of some sort going on.	Fair price - that's what I'd expect to pay for it.
5	Really good components, high quality and provide intuitive value to game. Easy to pack away for future games.	Able to play almost without reading the rules - the quick start guide was good enough for play.	A really enjoyable game that kept us engaged for most of the time. One we would definitely tell others about as a good fun game.	This is my default game at the moment - I'd take it out at almost any opportunity.	Interaction was a key part of the game and the atmosphere of the game was improved by this.	Wow, good price. Does that include all the pieces or are you going to charge extra for the dice?
6	Amazing quality - they contribute to the feel and atmosphere of the game.	Highly intuitive game with setup that added to game enjoyment. Very little need to review rules at all.	A perfect example of an enjoyable game - kept players engaged throughout with game mechanics and challenges that made the experience great.	I'm making reasons to play this game, again, and again. The only way I'm playing something different is if it's going to be an expansion to this one!	We bonded. I felt like all of us were somehow connected for the game session!	That's amazing! I can only assume these are stolen goods, so here's my cash in a brown bag.

# Bombay

**Juan Jose Fernández** reviews Bombay, a boardgame published by Ystari.

## Set up, Components & Preparation:

The first thing we can say about Bombay is: "cute". Really. It comes with 5 wonderfully detailed elephants, each with a place for two wooden cubes that represents silk bales. The board is a bit chaotic for the initial set up (it would have been better with letters or numbers to help find the different cities), but as an artwork job it is beautifully presented. They really took care with the symbols of the cards and boards, you understand at first look that Stars represent actions and the Coins are rupees. My kudos to the artist Stéphane Poinot for the great work.

However, the box is extremely big (for what comes inside) and the cardboard tokens are just ok, in a way that the money spent on the game gives a taste of an overpriced game. The quality is great, I know, but compared with other games with similar components of same quality, Bombay is too expensive.

The rules are pretty straight-forward, so the game was explained once and all the players were ready to start without complications. The goal of the game is to be the richest player.

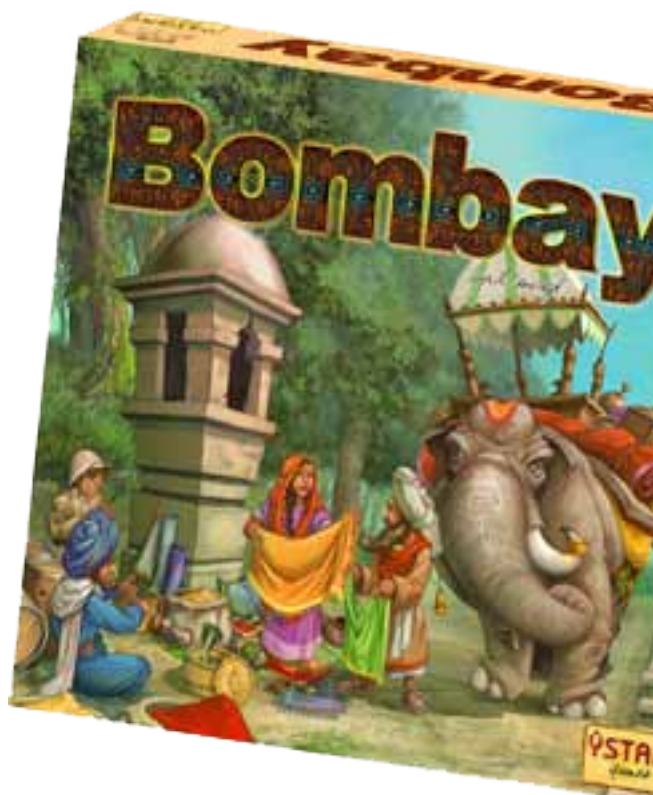
## Game/ Event Play Notes:

A game of Bombay, with 4 players, consists of 4 sets (a set includes a restock of the market and 4 game turns; each turn consists of executing 3 actions). The idea of the game is to take silk bales from the trading posts and carry them to the cities where they will be resold. The availability of the goods is shown on the market at the corner of the board. Not every city will buy every kind of silk bales, and the price of the silk will vary if that kind of good has been sold recently on that city, so the timing matters a lot in Bombay.

The core of the game is the action point mechanism, and they are so limited that it can frustrate a little (just 3 AP per turn). To move costs 1 or 2 AP, to sell costs 1 and buying will depend on the availability on the market (the less silk bales on the market, the more points you have to spend). This limited quantity of AP leads to one of the problems of the game: you can't do much on your turn, and you may think that the turns are short... but they aren't.

There are other extra options during the game as to build palaces that will give you rupees at the end of the game or every time someone lands on it. Also, when you construct a palace you can take one bonus token that will give you an advantage later.

Each time you commerce on a city you can take a token from there and if you collect 3 or 4 different tokens you'll get rupees



at the end of the game. You can hide your money and tokens behind a beautifully illustrated screen.

Turns pass slowly, and every time you have a strategy prepared, BAM! You're out because someone did that before you. This happens all over the game, giving a taste of "no long term strategies" and a lot of "this is what I got... hmmm". There is not much analysis paralysis, but yet there is a long time between turns, and the waiting is not the more productive because of the impossibility of making a strategy that can last a full round.

### Outcome:

The game's ending is very tight, with players getting differences of 2 or 3 points between each other, however the game is not thrilling, just plain; a big disappointment. It seems like the flow of the game is too slow for a light family game. There are plenty of decisions to make during your turn, but you have to plan them on the run.



### Review and Comments:

Being that it is easy to teach and understand game, Bombay falls in the category of family game. It's more of a racing game than an economic one, leaving it as an empty experience because the economic part was the distinctive item of it. There are plenty of excellent pick-up and deliver games like Auf Achse, Mississippi Queen out there, all of them very well done and absolutely playable with the family and kids.

## Bombay

Boardgame

**Publisher:** Ystari

**Reviewer:** Juan José Fernández

**Play Time:** 30 - 60 mins

**Age Range:** 10+

**Review Summary:**

Being easy to teach and understand, Bombay falls in the category of family game. It's more of a racing game than an economic one, leaving it as an empty experience because the economic part was what made it distinctive.

2-5 players



57%





### Set up, Components & Preparation:

Smallworld offers a great array of components - victory tokens, race tokens (lots!), mountain markers, fortress markers, lairs, encampments, race banners, power badges, and more! The box has also been well designed to contain this vast selection of items. It doesn't, however, have room for expansions.

Setup takes a few minutes - choosing a game board depending on the number of players, handing out the starting victory points and then selecting your starting race and powers.

Days of Wonder have also included 5 player Summary Sheets - which are also handy and help get new players involved very quickly.

You will need a reasonable amount of playing room, for the board, the available selection of new races/powers as well as your own play area for victory tokens, races and any other race specific tokens.

### Game/ Event Play Notes:

The object of the game is to accumulate the most victory points by the end of the set number of rounds.

Victory points are typically awarded for the amount of land occupied by your races, as well as some bonus conditions depending on different powers or special abilities.

For this review, there were 3 of us playing - with ages 7 through 37. Although the game is aimed at 8+, with some help younger kids can also enjoy it.

## ***Smallworld, a Days of Wonder boardgame reviewed by Neil Meyer***

Play started with each of us selecting a race/ power combination at the start of our turns. Our selections led to the following entering play from the outset: Were-Trolls (The 'were' is from the 'Cursed' expansion), Alchemist-Giants and Pilliging-Sorcerers. Play progressed as player's took over unoccupied land spaces or conquered the 'Lost Tribes'. Eventually players occupy all the land and instead of attacking the default 'Lost Tribe' you start to conquer each other.

Each race/ power combination defines how many units you have to place on the board, and you soon have to replace your race because they are all used or conquered limiting your ability to claim new land. In this event, you put your current race into decline and select a new race/ power combination from the available selection. If you don't select the top selection you need to pay a victory point for each combination you skip.

Land is claimed by having enough race tokens to capture the land - which depends on how many resources are already on that land space and what defenses they have in play.

In this way, our game saw some great combinations of race/ powers - such as: Wealthy-Orcs, Flying-Dwarves, Heroic-Ratmen and Commando-Wizards.

The game mechanics allow for a reasonable mix of strategy and luck - having to decide when to put a race into decline (you can only have one race in decline normally) so as to maximise land held whilst also trying to gain new land with the new race. A dice role can also come into play to help capture land spaces.

### **Outcome**

Our game took about 60 minutes, with scores of 129, 124 and 99 victory points.

Two of us had played the game before and



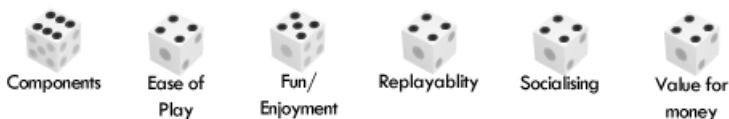
were familiar with the game mechanics, using the Summary Sheets occasionally when selecting from the list of available race/ power combinations.

The general mood after play was good. We had all enjoyed the game, the variation and amusement of characters had contributed to make it a very fun game.

The game duration felt right, finishing before you felt the mechanics becoming repetitive.

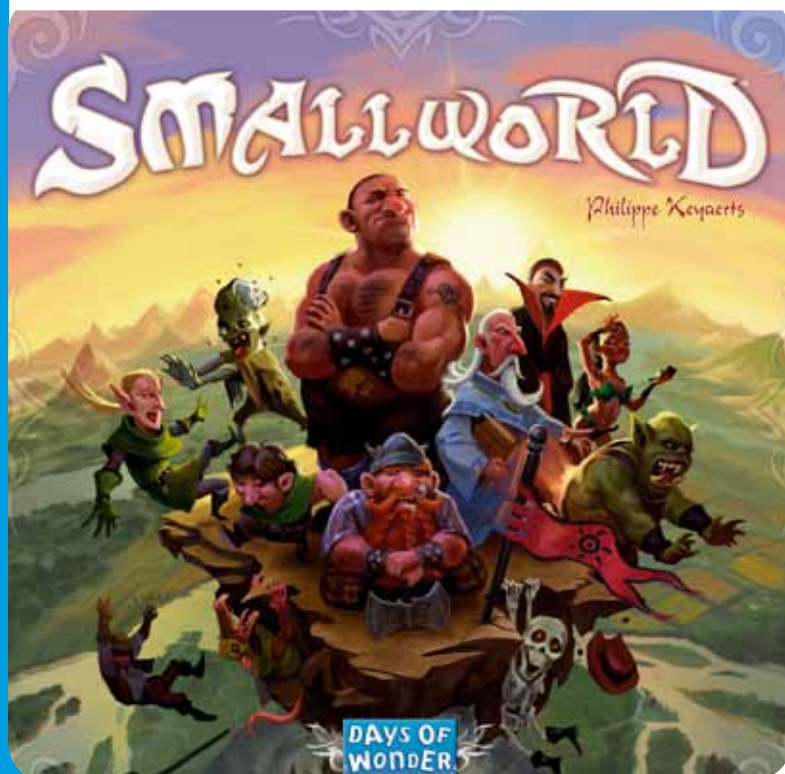
### Review and Comments:

This is currently my favourite game. I



think the fantasy art and humour help build a very fun atmosphere for play, and the different combinations of race and power make it replayable.

I think this game makes a great gateway game for people who are interested in trying something outside of the mainstream games. The theme makes it attractive to groups, younger players and families, with a reasonable balance between luck and strategy.



### Smallworld

Boardgame

thru-the-portal  
Q1/2010

**Publisher:** Days of Wonder

**Reviewer:** Neil Meyer

**Play time:** 40-80 minutes

**Ages:** 8+

#### Review Summary:

I think the fantasy art and humour help build a very fun atmosphere for play, and the different combinations of race and power make it replayable. I think this game makes a great gateway game for people who are interested in trying something outside of the mainstream games. The theme makes it attractive to groups, younger players and families, with a reasonable balance between luck and strategy.

2-5 players



76%

# DRAGON AGE

## Nathan Russell reviews the PDF version of Dragon Age, a Role Playing Game by Green Ronin

### Set up, Components & Preparation:

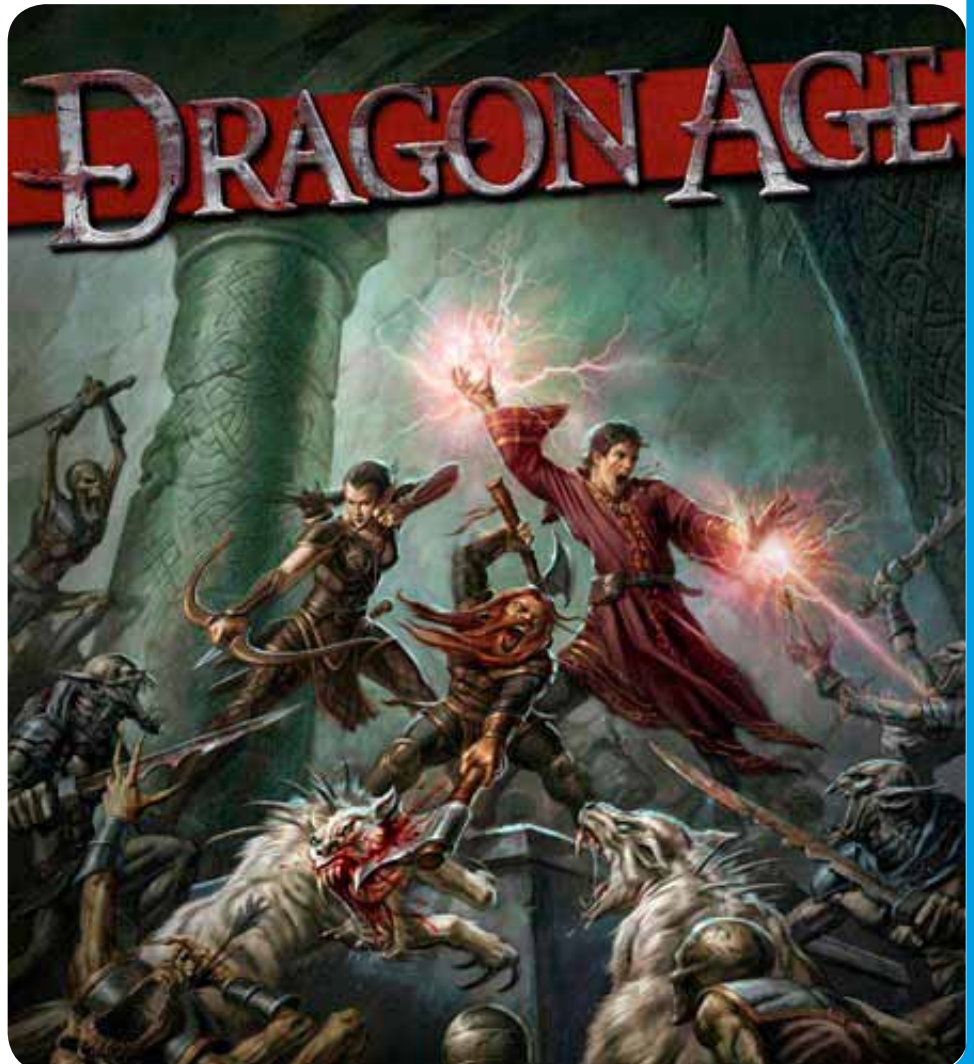
This is a review of the PDF edition of the Dragon Age role playing game. The physical box set is due for release early January and will contain two books, a poster map and dice. The box set will retail for US \$29.95, which is excellent value for a complete role playing game. The PDF is US \$17 on its own, which is expensive, but if you pre-order the box set from Green Ronin you get the PDF for free.

The PDF comes as a zip-file containing two full colour books and a map. The books, The Players Guide and The Game Master's Guide are both 66 pages, which is short for an RPG, but a great length for a "beginners" set, which this is. Both books are bookmarked, but do not have any "hotlinks", layers or other features that many PDF game books now utilise. This does not detract from the product. Both books are also full colour, with lots of beautiful art throughout. While a joy to look at, it will use an incredible amount of ink to print out (trust me, I know!). To Green Ronin's credit, they updated the original PDF file and removed the large watermark image that was on every page, perhaps saving a little ink when printing it out.

The rules are written for the complete beginner, but not for a complete idiot. They are

straightforward to follow and set out logically. Even though it is designed for someone that has had no experience with pen and paper role playing games, I would not have just given it to my nephews (about the target age, as far as I can tell) and just let them go. Like any RPG, it is best learnt from someone who has experience role playing.

This game is based on the computer game Dragon Age: Origins by BioWare. The Player's Guide has a short chapter describing the world and people of the Dragon Age game. It is probably better to describe this game as "inspired by" rather than "based on" the computer game as there





are a few shortcomings. This particular set (it is the first of four proposed sets) does not give you all the same character choices that *Dragon Age: Origins* does, which might disappoint some people who will not be able to recreate their computer game hero. The biggest let-down, however, is that you cannot play a member of the Gray Wardens. Being a member of this heroic group is at the very core of the computer game and not having this option in the pen and paper game will be a disappointment to many.

I was very impressed with the production elements of this game. It comes with

everything you need to get started and presents it all in a clear and logical manner. While it missed some opportunities for character choice, it is a good representation of the world of *Dragon Age: Origins* and a really neatly packaged game.

### Game/ Event Play Notes:

Before players can begin their adventures they must create a mighty hero. Character generation is a nice mix of random elements and player choice. You begin by randomly determining your ability scores with a die roll, after which you choose a background which gives you a pair of random bonuses. Your background determines your race (human, elf or dwarf) and where you are from. You then choose a class (Warrior, Magic User or Rogue) which provides you with some special abilities and finally pick your focuses (a bit like skills) and talents (special abilities). You round out character generation by picking a name and goals. Overall, character generation is quick and fun and gives you an interesting character that has obvious skill in a specific area. It reminded me of "red box" *Dungeons and Dragons* in its feel and simplicity, which I think is a bonus.

The game system itself is simple. When you want your character to do something you roll three six-sided dice and add the result to one of your character's abilities. If the total is equal to or more than a target number, the action succeeds. That's it. Now, there are a few interesting bits and pieces that go along with this. One of the three dice you roll is a different colour, called the Dragon Die. The higher you roll on this die, the better your action succeeds. Everything uses this basic system, from climbing walls to casting spells. If you roll doubles (on any two of the three dice) the Dragon Die generates "stunt points" that you can spend on a variety of special combat or spell moves. It is quick and easy to grasp and fun – you are eagerly awaiting the roll of doubles. Some players complained that because stunts only happened on a roll of doubles they did not have as much control over their hero's actions as they might in other games. From my perspective it sped play up as you were not waiting for players

The image shows a character sheet with the following sections:

- CLASS**: A box for the character's class.
- LEVEL**: A circle for the character's level.
- EXPERIENCE POINTS**: A box for tracking experience.
- STATS**: A row of five circles representing Speed, Defense, Armor, Penalty, and Health.
- ARMOR TYPE**: A section for armor details.
- CLASS POWERS & SPELLS**: A large box for listing abilities.
- MONEY**: A circle for tracking currency.
- MOVEMENT**: A section with sub-sections for "MOVE" (with "CHARGE" and "RUN" options) and "IN YARDS" / "IN SQUARES/HEXES".
- WEAPONS**: A section with sub-sections for "MELEE WEAPON", "ATTACK ROLL", and "DAMAGE".
- WEAPON GROUPS & NOTES**: A section for weapon details, including "DAMAGE", "SHORT RANGE", "LONG RANGE", and "RELOAD TIME".
- MONEY**: A section with three circles for "GP", "SP", and "CP".

to decide which special move they would use each turn.

The Dragon Die mechanic is not perfect, however. If you have to roll against a high target number, and succeed, your dragon die is always going to be high. This means that there will never be a "passed by the skin of your teeth" moment when you do something very hard.

Overall, the game is simple, easy for new players to pick up, and fun.

### Outcome:



Components



Ease of Play



Fun/Enjoyment



Replayability



Socialising



Value for money

Dragon Age really captured a sense of role playing games of my youth. It is straightforward, a little random, and clearly focused on getting you into the game as quickly as possible. It limits the options you have, without making you feel restricted and while the rules are comprehensive, they are not bogged down in a system or mechanic for every eventuality – you just use the basic system to work out if your action succeeded or not.

### Review and Comments:

I really like this game. If you are looking for a straightforward and entertaining fantasy rpg that captures a sense of the early years of role playing, with a modern

and streamlined system, this could be your game. If you haven't role played before and want to give it a try, or you want to introduce some younger players to role playing, this is also a great choice. Perhaps the only people that will be disappointed with this game are those looking for an exact recreation of the computer game, as they will not be able to recreate the same kinds of heroes. For everyone else, I can't recommend the Dragon Age RPG high enough.

## Dragon Age

Role Playing Game

**Publisher:** Green Ronin  
**Reviewer:** Nathan Russell  
**Play time:** 90+ minutes  
**Ages:** 10+  
**Review Summary:**  
I really like this game. If you are looking for a straightforward and entertaining fantasy RPG that captures a sense of the early years of role playing, with a modern and streamlined system, this could be your game. I can't recommend the Dragon Age RPG highly enough.

Review Issue: 2010/Q1

3+ players

81%



# FAST FOOD

**Fast Food is a fun, active, family game published by Goliath Games, reviewed by Neil Meyer.**

rules - you cannot take two cards with the same colour in a row and if you buzz incorrectly you take a card and turn it over as a penalty - but nothing that is too difficult to teach kids quickly.

Play time really depends on how enthusiastic your players are!

## Outcome

Playing amongst three kids was fun to watch and the scoring at the end seemed of little interest compared to the playing of the game itself. The scores were very different with one of the kids finishing with a negative score - more penalty cards were collected due to more enthusiasm than concentration!

## Review and Comments:

We found this to be a great kids game. It would be attractive to kids who played together regularly as well as for getting new kids to play with each other.

As a family game it is also perfect to liven up a lazy day.



Components



Ease of Play



Fun/Enjoyment



Replayability



Socialising



Value for money

## Set up, Components & Preparation:

Fast Food includes a number of round cards with different fast food ingredients - such as lettuce, tomato, gerkins and bacon - a buzzer and scoring packet for each player. After shuffling all the cards between the players you all turn your top card face up at the same time - if there are any duplicate cards between the players you try to hit the burger shaped buzzer to claim one of these duplicate cards.

Play continues until all cards are played and the person who has managed to claim the most cards - or ingredients - wins the game!

All these items come packaged in an oversized 'take out' box and include a nice storage tin for the cards.

## Game/ Event Play Notes:

This really is a fun and fast reaction based game for families with young kids (6 - 10, I would suggest). There are a few



**Fast Food**

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*Card Game*

**Publisher:** Goliath

**Reviewer:** Neil Meyer

**Play time:** 15 - 20 minutes

**Ages:** 7+

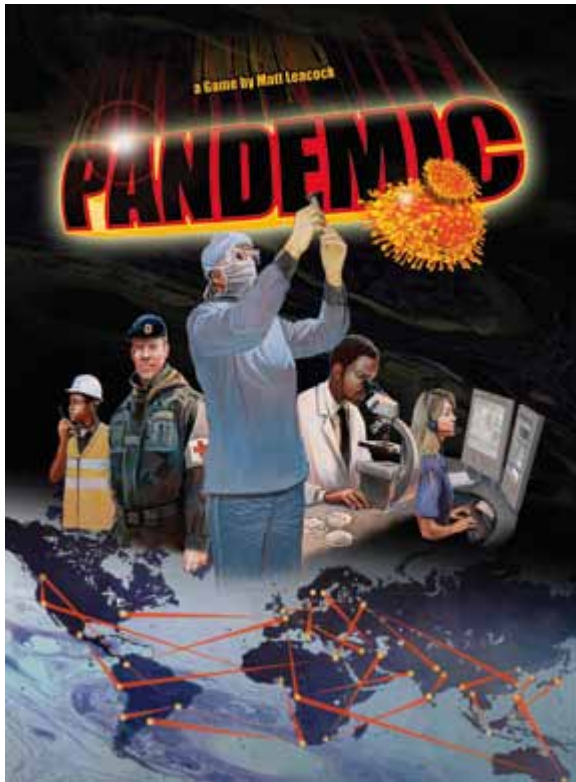
**Review Summary:**

A fast paced game that is ideal for kids - either as established groups of friends or to get new kids interacting. The game relies on quick reactions and recognition.

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Review Issue: 2010/Q1

2-5 players **67%**



**Pandemic, a collaborative game, puts you and your team in control of managing the outbreak of deadly viruses! Neil Meyer provides this game review.**

Roles are randomly assigned with different roles offering different abilities to the players, such as being able to swap city cards without having to be in the city on the card or allowing a player to find a cure with one less city card. Each player also starts with a number of cards - most of which are city cards but some with special abilities.

### Set up, Components & Preparation:

Pandemic has a nice set of components - a map board with different areas connected and colour coded, little wooden blocks to indicate the different diseases, two sets of game cards, player character cards and pawns, research stations and markers. The game is cooperative, with players working together to try find cures for the four different types of diseases.

Set up depends on how challenging a game you want to have - Introductory, Normal and Heroic. You control this by increasing the number of Epidemic Cards in play. At the start of the game, cards are drawn to see which cities are already infected - with the coloured wooden cubes indicating the level of infection (up to 3 blocks per city).

After a few games the set up phase is easy as you start to understand the game dynamics better.

### Game/ Event Play Notes:

As this is one of the few cooperative games I have played, it was a great novelty to be able to collaborate in everyone's round. I can see how this could put assertive players in more control than those who are more reserved or passive in their gaming style. That said, when played correctly the game is fun, with all



parties giving advice on where to move to avert disaster or maximise the abilities of each players role.

In our games we have found a fair mix of 'fire fighting' (where you are trying to limit the number of cities with 2 or 3 infection blocks) and producing the cures. We also found ourselves running out of time when the Player Draw pile had been run through before we had found the cures - it was a bit of a 'Oh ... so we lost?' kind of moment.

The game has 1 victory condition - find all 4 cures before you lose. There are 3 lose conditions - running out of cards, use of all the disease blocks for any one colour or the 8th outbreak occurs.

During a players turn they have 4 actions that they can carry out - an action can be moving to an adjacent city, flying to a city if they have the corresponding city card (although this causes the card to be used up), treating a disease in a city, creating a cure, etc. This combination of actions, together with the special abilities of your role, give you a lot to consider during the game.

At the end of a players turn, the infection has a chance to spread and cards are turned to show which areas are affected. The number of cards turned depends on the level of infection - basically a bad situation gets worse!

Another key element of a game is that a city that has 3 disease cubes is a high risk, as any further cubes added to that city then cause an outbreak to every city that is connected to it! This can have a knock-on effect if one of those connected cities also has 3 blocks!

## Outcome

We lost our first game mainly because

we were not thinking of 'the big picture' and trying to learn the game mechanics.

Subsequent games were much better with 1 more loss (on Introduction level) before 2 wins and then a move to the Normal level which we also won.

At times the way the game played out meant that one player's turn was largely dictated as we tried to keep the heavily infected cities under control. We also found that some of the roles were definitely more useful than others and we preferred the Medic and Scientist over other roles.

The game necessitates constant discussion and planning by all players, making the game very interactive and involving - even when it isn't your turn. The game atmosphere is also amazingly engaging and you definitely feel like you are working against the clock to stop the doom of the planet!

In the games we played, we also felt like we had collectively contributed to the victory - whilst we agreed that bad luck had played a big part in our loses. I think this is a good game result and a testament to great game design and production.

## Review and Comments:

Pandemic is a really fun game and the cooperative game play makes it different from many other games. The Roles and different levels make it very replayable, and the randomness of the draw cards mean no two games will be exactly the same.

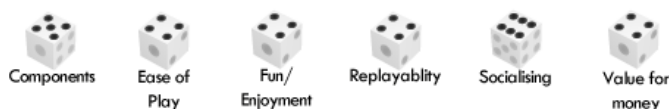
The game is not totally intuitive, and you will need to read through the rules a few times.

I'd like to think that this could be a gateway game for mainstream games, but I have yet to test this theory, and I suspect



that the collaborative open game play supports teaching during play.

Overall this is one that I will take out often (especially when I get the expansion, "On the brink") for friends that are more comfortable with playing games.



## Oh... and another thing!

Having bought Pandemic for my wife for Christmas, but still wanting to play it before Christmas seemed a situation where I wanted to have my cake and eat it too. Luckily we found BrettspielWelt (or BSW for short) - a wonderful online resource that lets you play a wide selection of boardgames and cardgames online!

This proved to be a great resource in learning how to play Pandemic, as the computer does a lot of the work for you, letting you focus on the player specific elements. After creating an account you simply log in, find a game that interests you and either join an existing group of players or wait until someone joins you.

Although the site is in German there is a very helpful article on Boardgame Geek (thank you Jim Cote!) that tells you more about the site and offers helpful advice on installing and customising the local client (an alternative to playing via your internet browser window).

For Pandemic specifically, we found it really captured the feel of the game - although we do still prefer the touchy-feely aspects of having the game out on the table.



## Pandemic

thru-the-portal  
Q1/2010

### Boardgame

**Publisher:** Z-Man  
**Reviewer:** Neil Meyer  
**Play time:** 45-60 minutes  
**Ages:** 10+  
**Review Summary:**

Pandemic is a really fun game and the cooperative game play makes it different from many other games. The Roles and different levels make it very replayable, and the randomness of the draw cards mean no two games will be exactly the same. Overall this is one that I will take out often (especially when I get the expansion, "On the brink") for friends that are more comfortable with playing games.

Review Issue: 2010/Q1

2-4 players



## The Meyer family review "Through the Desert", a game by Fantasy Flight.

### Set up, Components & Preparation:

In addition to a game board, there are a lot of components: plastic camel playing pieces, plastic camel-rider playing pieces, water hole counters, a few plastic oasis trees and point-counting chips. All items are of a good quality, and the board allows for different groups sizes by marking off an area used only for bigger groups.

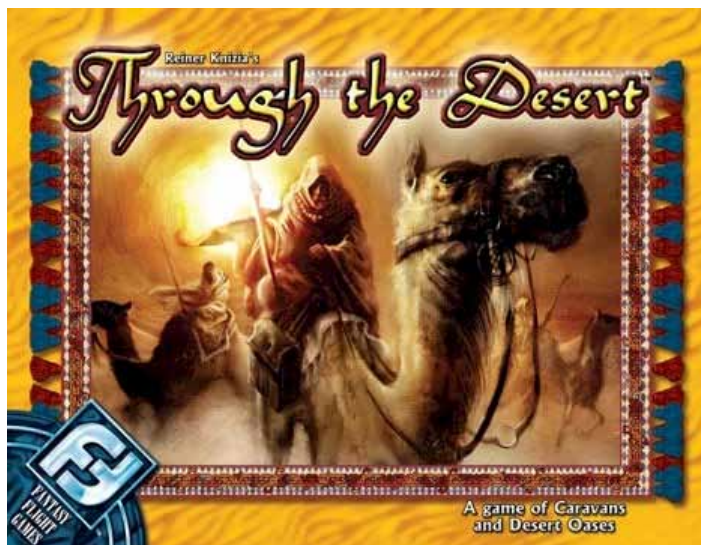
### Game/ Event Play Notes:

Game play progresses as each player places camels of different colours on the board to try to build the longest caravan, to connect to an oasis or block off a large section of game area. The rules are simple and after a couple of games there is little need to go back to them.

Play continues until one of the coloured sets of camels has been depleted, at which time points are awarded.

### Outcome

This has been our Thursday evening family game a few times now and each time we enjoy it. So far our young son has focused



on using all the green camels which dictates when the game ends but even with his level of 'focus at the expense of strategy', we still have fun with this game.

For three of us, a typical game goes on for about 30 - 40 minutes.

### Review and Comments:

A good game that offers different levels of challenge based on the people playing - enjoyable in any combination of kids and adults. The components and board offer a good thematic element to the game.



### Through the Desert

#### Boardgame

**Publisher:** Fantasy Flight

**Reviewer:** Neil Meyer

**Play time:** 20-40 minutes

**Ages:** 8+

#### Review Summary:

A good game that offers different levels of challenge based on the people playing - enjoyable in any combination of kids and adults. The components and board offer a good thematic element to the game.

2-5 players



# MONTY PYTHON FLUXX

## Set up, Components & Preparation:

Fluxx is a fun game where the rules change as cards are played. The Monty Python themed pack can also be played with other packs - although a degree of interpretation may be required.

Each player is initially dealt 3 cards and the basic rules (Draw 1, Play 1) got us going.

## Game/ Event Play Notes:

Our first goal "Squashed from Above" (requiring that we have the Finger of God and the Foot, to win), was quickly replaced by a new goal "This is an Ex-Parrot" (requiring the Resting Parrot and Grim Reaper to claim victory). Our hand of cards soon grew to over 8, before being hacked back to a hand limit of 1!

The game constantly changes as new rules come into play, replacing previous rules - this is common for all Fluxx games. The Monty Python theme (based heavily on The Holy Grail and the Flying Circus) make it all the more enjoyable giving you the opportunity to gain an advantage by singing songs that you know (... always look on the bright side of life, for example).



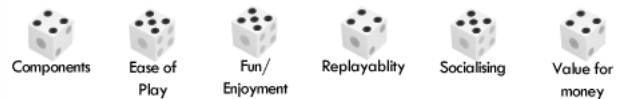
## Outcome

Play in Fluxx concludes when a player can meet the current Goal requirements - usually in the form of presenting the defined combination of 'Keeper' cards. For us, this proved to be Rabbits of Doom (in the form of the Trojan Rabbit and the Killer Rabbit) - which was handy as the Killer Rabbit is a Creeper which usually restricts it's owner from winning!

## Review and Comments:

The Fluxx system of ongoing changes to the rules makes it a fun choice for groups of players, both gamers and non-gamers. Anyone with more than a passing interest in the British Monty Python films will get even more out of this with the shrill shouting of 'Ni' or 'That is an EX parrot' sure to make an entrance at some time during the game.

The game is definitely high on luck, especially seen as the rules might only last a round or less! Hardly the best way to play a massive strategy! Still - very FUN.



## Fluxx: Monty Python

Card Game



**Publisher:** Looney Labs

**Reviewer:** Neil Meyer

**Play time:** ~15 minutes

**Ages:** 8+

### Review Summary:

The Fluxx system of ongoing changes to the rules makes it a fun choice for groups of players, both gamers and non-gamers. Anyone with more than a passing interest in the British Monty Python films will get even more out of this with the shrill shouting of 'Ni' or 'That is an EX parrot' sure to make an entrance at some time during the game.

Review Issue: 2010/Q1

2-6 players



74%



At the start of December, Laura, Mike and I went into London to visit Dragonmeet - an RPG/ Board gaming convention held in London. Although we were interested in seeing all the games our main reason for going into London was to take part in the Ticket to Ride World Championship qualifiers.

The event doors opened at 10am and we arrived shortly thereafter at around 11am. After taking a walk around the London venue we thought we had the wrong venue as there seemed to be no information about the Ticket to Ride event.

Eventually we found one of the venue staff who told us that qualifications were taking place up stairs.

We made our way to the hall of tables where we were greeted by a friendly young lady. A game was underway at another table and we were told we could register and come back in about 20 minutes for the next game.

When we returned we were told that nobody else had signed up for another game yet. As we sat waiting, another lady (Lady Growl) came up and started a discussion with some other people around the table suggesting that they should just move forward with the people from the two games that had already taken place - saying that those people had made the effort to get there on time!

It was about 12:10 at this time, and it seemed crazy that we were late - given that the convention was open until 6pm! I think my irritation was pretty obvious, and I need to thank one of the other players (Paul, I think) who pointed out that there were people (us) who had travelled to take place in the event and perhaps we could play two of the other players with high scores determining who goes through to the next round.

Whilst I think this was a good solution, it demonstrated how little communication or preparation had taken place by the event organisers.

We played our game - during which two other people were turned away saying

Event review:

## TICKET TO RIDE World Championship

they had missed the chance to take place (before 1pm). The outcome was that both Laura and I made it through to the next round.

In the next round Laura and I played at different tables. I managed to come second and Laura came third (out of a group of 4 at each table). We then had the players from both tables who came first and second play again, and again I managed to come second.

Our game finished before the table of thirds and fourths. Whilst we were waiting for the next round, two people came up to ask about Ticket to Ride, and as none of the organisers were available I sat down to go through a few rounds with them - I even think I made a sale!

After about 4 rounds of demonstrating the game Laura came round to say that we could go. Whilst I had been teaching the new people, it had been decided that four other people should go through to the final game and the game had already started.

When quizzed about what was going on, Lady Growl explained that she had no idea of what should happen as no instructions had been given for what to do by Days of Wonder or Leisure Games - and she had in fact not played the game before!

Needless to say the whole affair left us with a bad taste in our mouths.

I do however want to promote the Ticket to Ride World Championship more broadly! I think what Days of Wonder are doing here is fantastic and the theme and prize (a trip on the Orient Express) is well considered and a lot of fun.

Please do let us know of your own experience and I think with better organisation this will prove to be a fantastic event.



## Thank you: *Board Game Geek*

If you like board games and card games, and don't already know about BGG - or Boardgamegeek.com - then this could well be the best article you read this year! This is a fantastic site that offers a strong community focused on games and the people that play them. After more than 10 years, they have managed to amass a vast amount of gaming information. With very active forums and over 250,000 registered users, it is an ideal place to ask questions and share your own views.

Registered users can also log their own game collections and record games played. Geek gold, onsite currency, allows you to buy badges to show your affiliations. Another great initiative that I enjoyed for the first time, was their international Secret Santa.

I was lucky enough to get Dominion and an expansion to Ticket to Ride from my Secret Santa (thanks again!) - whilst I was Secret Santa to a welsh family. It was fun.

So thank you Derk, Aldie and all the others on BGG, the site is truly great!

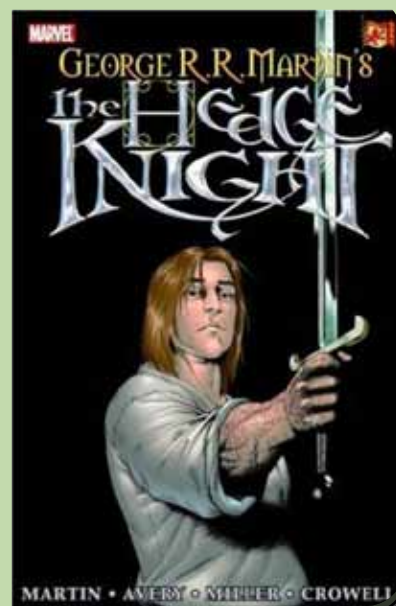


If you enjoyed "**A Game of Thrones: Living Card Game**", then you might want to try "**The Hedge Knight**", a comic adaptation by Marvel Comics. Whether you've read the core set of books by George RR Martin, or only played the card game, you will be able to enjoy this engaging comic. The story tells how a squire becomes a knight under trying situations.

A squire named Dunk picks up the sword and shield of his dead master and enters a tournament to begin his career as a knight. But 'Ser Duncan' has much to learn about this world of knights and nobles, and as he attempts to find a sponsor who will allow him to enter the tournament, he makes friends and enemies readily. Dunk is a capable fighter and has a strong sense of honor, but is that enough for him to become a true knight in the eyes of the others, or is he just a young man living a delusion and putting those he knows in grave danger?

The comic is aimed at adult readers - probably 16 or older - and contains some great moral lessons. Another key element is the study into families and how each family has it's good and bad.

At around \$10 (USD), £6.50 (GBP) or €8 this is a nice option to give you a little more depth into this well developed world.



## Choosing a PC for MMO gaming...

The choices for selecting a gaming PC is largely a matter of budget - as with so much else in life - and generally bigger is better. Bigger graphics card, bigger display monitor, bigger processors and so on.

There are a wide variety of MMOs, and they have different minimum and recommended specifications - most seem to run on both Windows PCs and Apple Macs.

Graphics (or Video) cards are one of the key elements in online gaming and the more MB you have, the better - or better yet buy GB worth. A basic video card will start these days at around 250MB, however they can go up to 2GB now, and you can even get dual video cards (that's twice the power!). The graphics card does the hard work in presenting all the cool 3D stuff, layering the sexy landscape terrain and keeping up with visual action and special effects - it's what makes you feel like you're actually in another world.

A good processor is useful as well, and does the more manual work in the background. As a good rule of thumb, a 2.0 GHz processor (or 2000 for AMD language) is a good basic level processor, with anything over 3.2 GHz making the experience very smooth - again the dual/ quad options make things faster.

Memory is next, and these days with Vista you should have at least 2GB anyway - although Windows 7 suggests that you get more for your memory buck. As long as you don't have too many other applications running, 2GB will be fine.

The nature of MMOs means that much of the data is held somewhere else on big servers connected by the internet, whilst you have a local 'client' installation on your PC. This means that you don't need too much hard drive space, 20GB is probably fine for most MMOs.

Next, you'll want a nice monitor to watch all this on. Any display monitor over 21 inches is going to do the job, and again, the bigger the better. A good

headphone/ mic set and Skype or some other communication software makes it great for chatting with others while you play.

Finally - internet connectivity. You are connected to a virtual world that can be hosted on servers tens of thousands of miles away from you, but the magic of the internet means that it might as well be in the next room. A lot of data is going to get transferred during your play time, so budget for at least a couple of GB transfer per month - more if you are the sort who gets addicted to playing games.

And that's it! Those are the key components for the PC. There is however so much more to consider when getting into MMO gaming. Most games are paid for on a monthly basis or via prepaid time, so watch those costs and make sure you can afford it. MMOs are also a great time thief, and it can be challenging to balance virtual life with real life when you really get into the game. Unlike table top games, there is always someone else online to play with and the world is there waiting for you even when you want to just spend some 'alone time'.

Back to the PC - Alienware (a Dell company) is a good place to get an idea of specification for high end gaming, whether or not you buy from them.

Happy gaming!



Mobile Application:

## World of Warcraft Armory

This free-to-download iPhone application is great for feeding your World of Warcraft hunger whilst away from your computer. After downloading it from the Apple iPhone store (\*\*rant about Apple's download monopoly\*\*) you log in with your Battlenet account details to view your characters. This gives you access to character statistics, character equipment, calendar and more.

The interface is intuitive and attractive. You do need to have real-time access to the internet to download data as no details are store on the device.

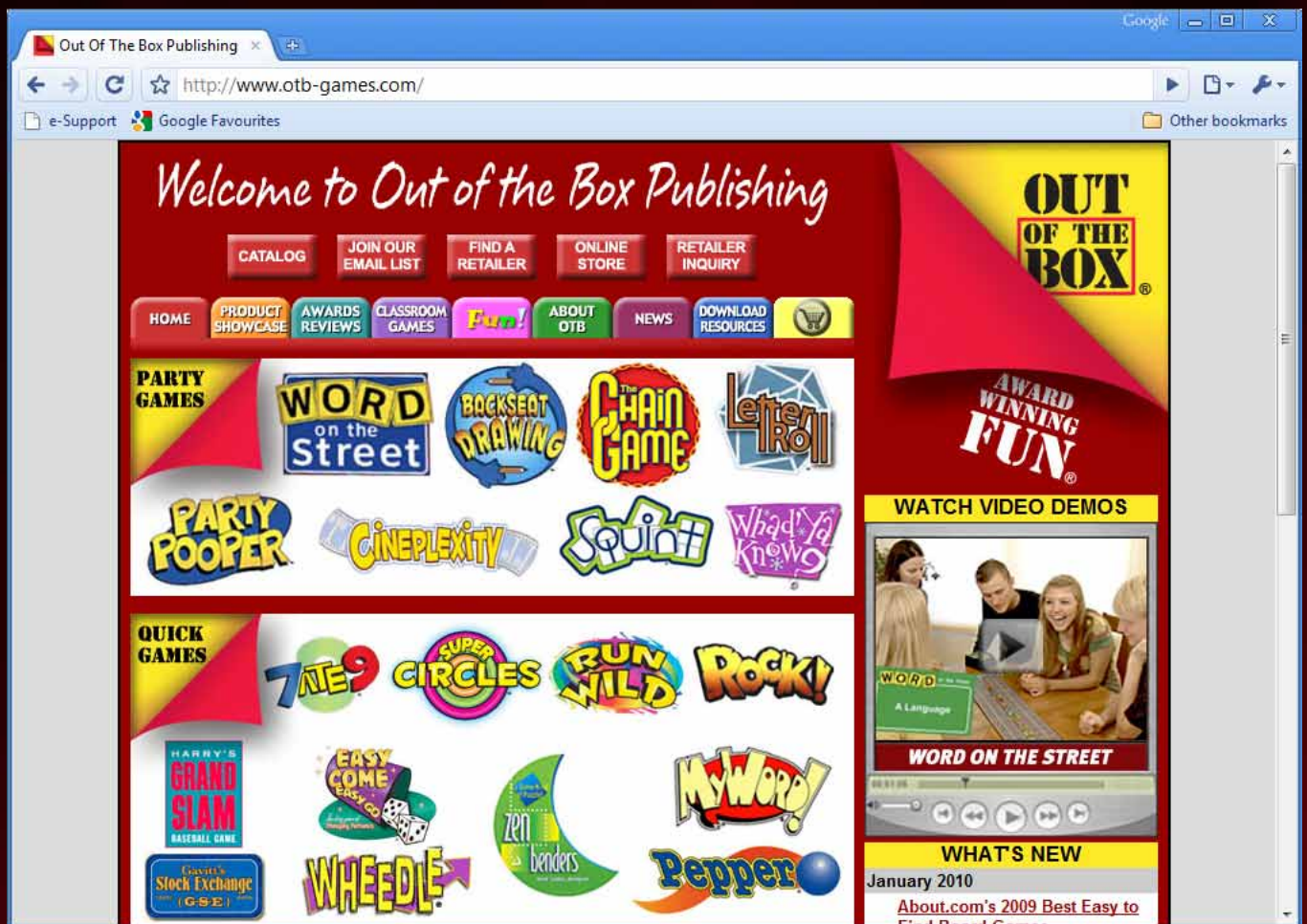


Although this probably goes without saying, if you have any interest in the various **Battlestar Galactica** gaming products (RPG, boardgame or card game) you simply must watch this.

The revised version of this old classic has been wonderfully handled, with care and depth, whilst providing big screen special effects and action. The production team have ensured that the new series respects the work done before it.

Over the course of the 4 seasons we get to know about each of the crew that keep the huge space ship Galactica going. Suspicion grows as we discover that cylons (the robot baddies) can take on the form of humans, some of which are characters we know and care about in the crew and fleet that the Battlestar is protecting.

And just when we finally know who the baddies are, they go and change the rules! Gripping stuff and highly recommended watching.



## Ahhh! No Miniatures covered in this issue!?

Sorry... we asked a couple of people to help with articles however they didnt' get back to us... If you have something to offer (about miniatures or for some other part of gaming) please do get in touch!  
scout@thru-the-portal.com

# Head scratching & time wasting

## Across

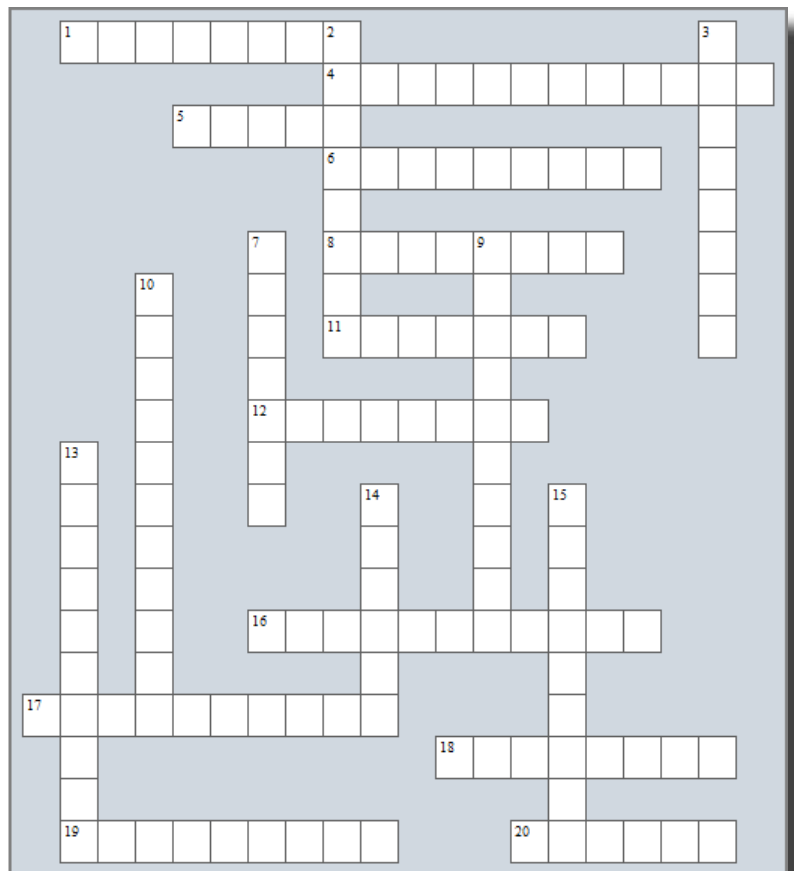
1. Games \_\_\_\_\_ is one of the largest wargames companies in the world.
4. "Ashcan" Pete wakes from another nightmare to the sound of barking.
5. Often called \_\_\_\_\_ after the German city where it is held, is an annual four-day game trade fair.
6. It has been hundreds of years since the last Blight ravaged the world of The-  
das.
8. The most commercially-successful board game in United States history, with 485 million players worldwide
11. \_\_\_\_\_ is a four-in-a-row game with depth—three depths to be exact.
12. Running a farm has never been this exciting
16. Feel what it's like on the other side of the dungeon
17. The Alliance LARP is a medieval fantasy \_\_\_\_\_ role playing game.
18. Each player plays with a 30-card deck, representing one of the factions vying for control of the three elemental dragons.
19. Players take control of high-tech armies and battle for dominance in an ever-changing galaxy.
20. WoW, is a \_\_\_\_\_ by Blizzard Entertainment

## Down

2. A co-op game where you fight diseases
3. You are a monarch, like your parents before you, a ruler of a small pleasant kingdom of

rivers and evergreens.

7. Two wizards duel on a crumbling bridge for the right of way
9. Welcome to \_\_\_\_\_, covering games played around the world by billions of people every day.
10. The players develop the area around \_\_\_\_\_ and deploy their followers on the roads, in the cities, in the cloisters, and in the fields.
13. The most famous artifact of them all comes to life with Green Ronin's Deck of \_\_\_\_\_.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ is one of the two official magazines for source material for the D&D role-playing game and associated products.
15. In \_\_\_\_\_ you are a Roman impresario





How many social activities/ support tools can you identify in the above image?

*Scratch pad...*

up to 5: Noob!  
 6 -12: Dabbler  
 13 - 20: Collector  
 21+: Geek

*Got a challenge, puzzle or riddle to share  
 with us?  
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