

# Game Time

## What Gets Gamers to “Open the Box” and Keep Playing

By Paul Comben

Many years ago, British television ran an advert for *Monopoly*. As I recall, it featured several generations of the same family sitting around on what could easily be imagined as a wet Sunday afternoon – maybe with the planned walk around the park being called off, or just with nothing worth watching on the TV. One of the family then asked: “What about a game of Monopoly?” and in response, there was a ripple of excitement, a succession of images and sounds of the family around the table, the board being laid out, those familiar pieces being chosen, and then, in the concluding moment, granddad moved his token and asked “Can I have the Old Kent Road?” - (cheapest location on a London-themed Monopoly board).

What the ad did was offer up the common notion of this particular game’s “invitation to play” – family game, rainy afternoon game, game of pleasant social interaction and lighthearted fun. But, relatively speaking, *Monopoly* is a recent game, and those most commonly associated with a site like this, far more recent than that. And for me, the interesting thing is where the nature of this invitation remains constant though different designs and eras, and where it happens to differ. Indeed, the invitation can even differ markedly when you are talking of the same game, but in different parts of the world.

In that context, let us think of one of the truly great “world” games – backgammon. How does one construe this beautiful game’s invitation to play? Well, at one end of the spectrum, you can picture a large, plush, exquisitely finished backgammon board sitting in the lounge of some exclusive address in London or Paris or New York, with attractive pieces and an almost hypnotic timbre to the roll of the dice, and you have the allure of the game right there before you – wealth, sophistication, excellent drinks cabinet, engaging company etc. etc. But, go to one of the heartlands of the game, perhaps to a bustling street in some part of Turkey, and see a well-worn board and pieces on a café table, and the air filled with the smell of spiced snacks and the aroma of thick Turkish coffee, and one could hardly say that the allure was any less – very different, but just as strong in its own way.

The great games of world culture tend to have these strong social connections, and belong to vastly different tiers of their home society as well as to places far from their origins. One other thing that does link three of the world’s greatest board games together is their simplicity: Backgammon, Chess, Go – all games with a minimum of rules but with an immediate challenge to the intellect. All

three games also have an aesthetic appeal – the sound of dice, the feel and look of markers and pieces, all of which have been the subject of art in other fields over the years. Alongside the many paintings/drawings that have featured the playing of board games (from Japan to the Islamic world to Europe and the west), one can also cite the presence of games in the work of the cinema. Satyajit's Ray's 1977 film *The Chess Players* is one such example, and a very striking one; whilst at the other end of the spectrum, you have that famous chess game in the 1968 film *The Thomas Crown Affair*.

And I daresay that about the same time as Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway's characters were dallying over a chess board, I would have had a few rainy days at school, with no going into the playground at break, but instead getting the seriously worn chess board and mismatched pieces out to pass the time until the next lesson. And if you ask where the aesthetic appeal lies in that, well, it is a potent memory and something that would make a perfectly valid subject for one of my own, or anyone else's, paintings.

As I think we can see already, the invitation to play can be made up of several different things, including a patina of nostalgia for what we have known and would want to experience again – a good explanation also for why men past a certain age buy train sets. But if we look specifically at the sort of games likely to feature on a site like this, from wargames to swords and sorcery games and everything in between, can we say that the same things apply? Well, in one form or another we are still looking for attraction – for something that invites your interest and then holds it. It can be the subject; it can be the “look” of the thing; it can even be knowing who the designer was. Then again, the games market today is a busy place, with games on all subjects published at a rate of knots. This, having an affinity for a particular game is likely to be superseded by a liking for a particular *type* of game. And in wargaming, where the science of the stuff can get into a bit of a tussle with the art, it is not always the case that the art wins out, or that the art is preferred.

In fantasy games such as *Arkham Horror* or *Mage Knight*, it is not difficult to work the visually attractive into a functioning design, be that with the playing surface, the playing pieces, the cards, the dice, or anything else. But wargamers can be iffy and equivocal about anything that is not a unit counter and anything that is not a functional map. Much that *Clash of Arms* produces is full of art, and there is plenty of science present as well – but to find the science, you often have to flip the art over (the units). Most wargamers, in my experience, love the look of CoA games, which is clearly an invitation to play, but the follow-on from that is the demands this art places on the player in terms of making the game work.

Board wargames with figures (what we might call the “realistic” ones, as opposed to the popular, lighter designs), have rarely been any kind of trend-setter, and if you want to “up” the invitation to play by painting the things, that is a chore you are going to have to embark on yourself – and in my case, that is one ship that has never left port. Likewise, wargames with block pieces have their fans and their critics. One other thing that can be said is that any game will lose appeal if it is packed full of errors – something the grand classics such as

backgammon have largely avoided (though there must have been disputes over different forms of rules) – or if the social experience is wrecked by the prospect of playing someone you do not like that much. And there are some games that only work if the participants are able to “drive” the game competently. In that context, I well recall playing *Dungeons and Dragons* in its “White box plus Greyhawk” early days, with nothing but three figures and some graph paper, and still having a fantastic time because the DM we had could open that little box and really drive the game on. Today, you could have all the extras and books you desire, but if the DM is not on the ball (let alone swinging some destructive sphere at you) it plain will not work as the experience one might hope for.

Perhaps the main problem is that today’s games are like products on a fast moving sushi counter. Such, overall, is the modern pace of life. Things, sometimes very attractive things, whizz by and are rapidly replaced by something else you try once and never get a proper chance to have a go at again. People may well still be playing wargames a couple of hundred years from now, or some roleplaying fantasy game types, but they will not be playing *Mage Knight*, or even, dare I say, *ASL* or *Commands and Colors* – something else will have taken the place of whatever took the place or whatever first replaced them. It is far removed from the timeless world conjured up in *The Chess Players*, or what is likely to endure in some reserved place in Japan or among the coffee cups and baklava of a bustling café premises in Istanbul.

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