



Entrepreneur plans to go public with game of clay

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UM MBA student sculpts his future with clay in the creation of new board game Cluzzle

On Friday and Saturday nights, you are more likely to find Dominic Crapuchettes at home playing a board game than you are to find him at a local bar.

"I love board games," says the 34-year-old graduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park. "I'm an avid believer in it as a great form of entertainment."

His passion for games, which started when Crapuchettes' father taught him how to play chess at the age of 4, led him to where he is today: an entrepreneur hoping to launch his flagship game and company to the public this summer.

His game, called Cluzzle, combines the words clay and puzzle. It's about \$30 and only available at www.cluzzle.com right now.

The premise is for players, aka Cluzzers, to sculpt objects just right — not too obvious, not too obscure — so they earn the most points when fellow gamers correctly guess the identity of the object. Players ask yes-or-no questions to make sense of the sculpture.

Thus far, Crapuchettes has play-tested the game with about 300 people, and says the game is not only plain fun, but there's nothing like it in the board-game marketplace.

He very well might know, considering his love of the pastime. Plus, Crapuchettes held the title of Pasadena, Calif., junior chess champion for two consecutive



Cluzzle players build clay figures in somewhat abstract ways so the identities can't easily be guessed. Check out the various pieces on this Cluzzle board. When you are finished trying to guess what they are, check the answers at the end of the story.

years in seventh and eighth grades.

"I've been designing games since I was a little kid," he says. "This is what I'm going to do when I graduate."

If it works out, it'll be the first career of Crapuchettes' life.

After graduating from St. John's College in Annapolis in 1997 with an undergraduate degree in liberal arts, the current Master's of Business Administration student wasn't exactly career-minded.

"I wrote classical music, worked at coffee houses," Crapuchettes says.

And that was after spending some time in Alaska as the captain of a commercial fishing boat.

Still, Crapuchettes was always interested in board games and running his own company, which is part of the reason why he's willing to live off of about \$12,000 a year in order to make his venture work.

"I've been working on this idea for a long time," he says. "I really think there's a good market right now. ... I think I'm positioned really well in terms of how to work within the industry."

He's right.

Games sales have increased about 40 percent, says Richard C. Levy, an independent inventor of 27 years who co-developed the popular 1990s toy Furby.



Dominic Crapuchettes, a graduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park, loves board games — a passion that spills over to his recent invention Cluzzle.

The trick is getting noticed in a world dominated by Rhode Island-based Hasbro, who not only owns Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley, but 80 percent of the world's board-game market.

"Monopoly, Risk, Clue, Candyland, Parcheesi. They've got 'em," Levy says. "Nobody's big compared to Hasbro."

Of the 100,600 ideas independent inventors send Hasbro each year, the company only licenses 30, said Levy, co-author of last year's "The Toy & Game Inventor's Handbook; Everything You Need To Know To Pitch, License and Cash-In On Your Ideas."

Still, there's money to be had.

The U.S. toy industry was valued at \$20.3 billion in 2002. The video game industry, which was not included in the figure, was valued at \$10 billion, according to the New York-based Toy Industry Association. Games and puzzles were valued at \$2.09 billion.

Crapuchettes, whose goal is to raise \$300,000 for his company, got the attention of one of his professors who loaned him \$10,000 after reading his business plan.

J. Robert Baum, professor of entrepreneurship at Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business, said Crapuchettes' plan stood out from the beginning.

"Dominic himself is very knowledgeable about the field, about the domain — games, in short. And he is obviously energetic and had very specific ideas about how to attract famous people to the game, which is a very important part of his value proposition," said Baum, referring to one of Cluzzle's clue cards being penned by singer-songwriter Alanis Morissette.

"We see hundreds of really great business plans and we're involved with a lot of them, too," he said. "But Dominic is among those that I've chosen to support because I think he's really outstanding."

Satish Pillalamarri, who has been working with Crapuchettes since last summer after meeting him in class, also noted his friend's creativity and knowledge.

"I really feel that I've learned more trying to start this company up from late May, early June until now ... than all of my corporate-related jobs — really," said the 25-year-old.

Already, Crapuchettes has trademarked six items and phrases related to his flagship game. He plans to try building a relationship with a national retail store during the first year of launching North Star Games LLC.

Even though he's months away from presenting himself to the public, Crapuchettes detects the sweet smell of success.

"I kind of feel like it's a no-lose situation," he says. "We've done too many things right for it to go wrong."

Check your answers to the identities of the clay Cluzzle pieces. Green French fries, white block of ice, brown parking lot, yellow roller coaster, red dinosaur representing Jurassic Park and blue moon
