



arts/life

## They're game

*But is the marketplace? These designers are betting they've created the next rainy-day classic.*

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 Maybe it was the crinkly feel of that first multicolored Monopoly wad, but somehow Dominic Crapuchettes always knew that he would make his fortune in board games.

For now, though, he deals in clay dough.

That's the currency of Cluzzle, the clay-sculpting party game that Crapuchettes invented in 2003, and subsequently sank his life savings into. The 35-year-old Greenbelt resident is one of dozens of area game designers trying to break into the \$1 billion board game industry with self-published wares this Christmas.

Crapuchettes, a 2004 graduate of the University of Maryland's business school, labors partly for the love of Cluzzle, which he believes to be an enchanting pastime.

But he also feels the market is ripe. In fact, the board game sector is one of the most robust parts of the languishing traditional toy business, growing by nearly 5 percent this year, according to the NPD Group, which tracks the industry.

The trouble is that four of the five top selling games have been around in some form or another for 20 years or longer and are controlled by the same company, Hasbro.

That's about to change, say independent designers, who believe that the growing Internet market and a new interest in imported strategy games can topple the "Monopoly" monopoly.

Others in the industry aren't so sure. Chris Byrne, a New York City-based toy consultant who helped pilot the original Pictionary campaign in the 1980s, compared producing a viable board game with writing a hit screenplay.

"Please don't say you took another mortgage out," he thinks while meeting countless small-time designers at national game fairs each year.

Crapuchettes doesn't have a second mortgage. Of course, he doesn't have a house. He relies on friends to give him their old clothes and buys nothing but "food, beer, and every now and then a game," he says.

Other Maryland designers have also sacrificed for their passion, moving across the country, ditching high-paying jobs and spending in the neighborhood of \$40,000 to produce games.

In a way, Byrne said, "you have to admire somebody who's willing to roll the dice like that." Luckily, Crapuchettes has been in training since he first passed Go.

The sad truth is this: Most self-published board games, in a word, "stink," said 34-year-old Jacob Davenport, a Bethesda computer programmer who also designs games.

His own maiden game was based on a space travel concept he developed in sixth grade. Players stopped on various planets to perform complicated math problems, using the indigenous arithmetic systems.

"It stank," Davenport said.

To identify lemons, Davenport attends weekly design sessions where inventors exchange ideas before investing the tens of thousands of dollars and countless man hours needed to privately produce an original game.

Last week, at a design session in a College Park house known to Maryland designers as Wunderland, people were playing Glotz. Again.

Glotz is the Wunderland designers' generic word for any nameless game.

This version was excruciating.

"If you have the green three and the green four in your hands, and you have five green cards, you can only score the four," said the inventor, Dave Chalker of Westminster, presiding over the chaos of a recycled Uno deck.

The players - most of them other inventors - sighed. But even as a rousing round of Are You A Werewolf? was going on one table over, they resolved to stick with Glotz, to tease out the raw concept and develop a more elegant set of rules.

They stayed until the wee hours of Friday morning, but it will take months or even years of Thursday sessions to sculpt this particular Glotz into a marketable game, if it ever gets that far.

Seeing Glotzes go global is the deep hope of Andy and Kristin Looney, the owners of Wunderland, which doubles as their home and the office of Looney Labs, the board games business they quit their NASA computer programming jobs about five years ago to run.

Four thousand lines of Andy Looney-authored code once orbited the Earth in the computer system of the Hubble Telescope, but the 41-year-old is much happier since he became an "architect of fun." He loves watching abstract colors and shapes become story lines and strategies in his home, which is decorated to inspire: piles of puzzles and board games line the walls, and solved Rubik's Cubes are stacked over one window for an effect that approximates stained glass.

Looney's own trademark game also evolved here in the late 1980s, with the help of friends.

Called Icehouse, it involves pyramids, and a vision as grand as any pharaoh's.

The original game was based on "The Empty City," a short novel that Looney wrote about "a time in my life when me and my friends couldn't get dates so we sat around and played cards."

Only instead of cards, the characters played with pyramid pieces. Looney wasn't sure exactly how. "I was stymied," he admitted.

Fellow inventors helped him unravel how such a game might be played - the pyramids could serve as pieces of ice, spaceships, volcanoes. Together they struggled for the perfect construction material, experimenting with

fishing sinkers, origami and - most successfully - poured plastic.

Finally, the Looneys decided to offer it up to the public. Through the Internet and other media, it has sold about 7,000 copies since 1987.

That, of course, isn't nearly enough.

To claim shelf space in a major store, a designer needs to virtually guarantee the sale of many thousands of copies each year. To gain that kind of momentum, inventors must finance the initial production of the game, and often physically package it themselves.

Small-scale, private manufacturing explodes the price. The average store-bought board game sells for \$10 or \$20, but many privately marketed games cost far more than that just to make.

Independent designers hope that Internet sales will help them out of this bind, by reaching an unlimited audience without huge marketing budgets. Smaller operations are also joining forces to split publicity and production costs.

But above all, the gamers believe that salvation lies in their games, which they consider unique in the American market.

Many locally produced games are based on emerging theories that are gaining popularity in Europe, particularly Germany. They are, as a rule, much shorter than the classics like Trivial Pursuit and Scrabble, with sessions lasting about 45 minutes. The concepts emphasize intellectual strategy and constant group participation.

In short, Monopoly would probably not pass muster at Looney Labs.

And yet, Monopoly remains the most popular board game of all time, having sold about 200 million copies, according to Mark Morris, director of public relations for Hasbro Games.

"We don't mess with Monopoly," he said.

Not surprisingly, many of the few dozen new products appearing on chain store shelves more closely resemble Monopoly than the new theory-inspired games. Many are thinly veiled classics, with a fresh theme from a sitcom or Hollywood - the Lord of the Rings edition of Risk, for instance.

To be sure, each year brings some true innovations. This holiday season, Morris said, Hasbro is confident in the sales potential of a new DVD-based board game called Shout About Movies.

This game, one presumes, also owes little to the German school.

Legend has it that Parker Brothers, now part of Hasbro, rejected the initial Monopoly game plan, pointing to more than 50 fundamental design flaws. Charles Darrow was forced to take his product to the people in 1935, selling the first 5,000 handmade copies himself.

Stories like this help keep designers going through the grueling development process, as they explain and play their own games for the zillionth time at exhibitions large and small. At a recent game fair held at a Silver Spring health club, Crapuchettes revealed the complexities of Cluzzle to a gaggle of Girl Scouts.

The basic rules are as follows, he said: Sculpt a piece of clay into a shape that your opponent recognizes, but not immediately. The longer she takes, the more money you get - up to a certain point. After that, you get nothing.

"Weird," said one Girl Scout.

"Cool," said another. The inventor's face lit up, as though he'd brokered a sweet deal on Boardwalk.

That's the great thing about the board game market, said David Riley, a senior manager for the NPD group who studies the game industry. Whether or not Wal-Mart has room, the American closet will always accommodate a great board game.

"Ultimately, consumers have all the cards," he said.

Or, as the case may be, the pyramids.