

Gamers Hope to Break Monopoly

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY that fishing boat captains and global bankers join forces to create a business, especially one that eschews international marketing to focus on playtime.

But **Dominic Crapuchettes** and **Satish Pillalamarri**, both M.B.A '04, started their unlikely partnership by doing just that and ended up perfecting a new kind of board game.

Today, the North Star Games co-owners are tearing up the toy store aisles as they break into an industry long monopolized by big-name game companies.

“People want new games, and there’s a growing trend here,” says Crapuchettes, who sailed the Alaskan seas to pay for his undergraduate studies. “It’s trying to break into the shelf-space lock that’s so hard.”

North Star’s first game, Cluzzle, is already available at more than 50 retailers nationwide and online, and iParenting Media named it one of the best toy products of 2005. Cluzzle players create clay sculptures, then make their opponents guess what the creations are in a short version of 20 Questions.

Crapuchettes came up with a prototype for Cluzzle before he won a scholarship to the Robert H. Smith School of Business, but he knew he’d need a partner to help turn a lifelong passion for gaming into a business.

With a polished business plan and the support of Smith School professor J. Robert Baum, he teamed up with Pillalamarri. A trivia buff who once appeared on “Jeopardy,” Pillalamarri calls himself the “inartistic” part of the North Star team. Despite his expertise in Asian markets, he admits there’s been a learning curve when it comes to breaking into toy markets.

North Star is currently preparing to launch a second game, capitalizing on the U.S. obsession with all things gambling in Wits and Wagers. Players guess answers to numerical trivia—“How many crayon colors did Crayola produce in 2004”—then bet on each other’s answers to win chips. An infusion of roughly \$400,000 from a new partner should put the game into production and onto shelves in time for the holiday shopping season. —**KM**



Dominic Crapuchettes, left, and Satish Pillalamarri show off Cluzzle, a board game combining hands-on clay action with a 20 Questions-like guessing game. Co-owners of North Star Games, the men began their business while classmates in the university’s M.B.A. program.