



BASTARD CAFÉ

Boardgames, coffee and hygge!



TEN YEARS CELEBRATION



Photos by Austin Fossey

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EDITORIAL

CHARLES BO NIELSEN

**Biggest Swiftie
in the office**

We want to welcome you, first of all, to this written testament to our unique community at Bastard Café.

As part of the celebration of the Café's first decade, we are bringing you the shocking history you were always too afraid to ask about, plus the stories you didn't know you needed to hear (and probably don't).

Now we set the record straight in print, with the official, bastardous account of what the flip has been going on.

First up for you readers, we have 'Bastard Prime', Bo Thomassen's recollections of how he came to be interested in running a boardgame café and what it was like to give birth to his first one on the corner of Rådhusstræde and Magstræde in Copenhagen.

CEO Bo is notoriously hard to pin down for a lengthy session, so we had to put Kristoffer Apollo on the job and it's quite a tale.

Beyond Bo you will hear from artists, volunteers, boardgame designers, and a real life hero in a varied set of listicles, interviews and guides.

We started this venture with grand ambitions of producing a weighty tome, that not only chronicled Bastard's rise to glory, but was full to bursting point with quizzes, games and the latest lifestyle tips.

This did not come to fruition, but of course we had to hold some juicy details back for when it comes to celebrating our next big anniversaries in the future. We look forward to the growing legacy of the Café being explored by our successors a decade or more down the line.

Until then, we hope you enjoy digging through the photos, tales, and questionable advice we've assembled in this special 10th anniversary publication for Bastard Café!

THE TEAM

Austin Fossey

Editing and writing quite a few of the articles, Austin is the closest we get to a Hunter S. Thompson, bringing photos and stories from all over the world!



Charles Bo Nielsen

Editor-in-chief, layout and writing, putting it all together into one big beautiful mess in InDesign and adding cheeky ideas and fixing things last minute.

Kristoffer Apollo

The experienced newspaper guy, who is an actual journalist and put together our big opening piece "The Story of Bastard Café".



Peter Hardy

Dedicated proof reader, prolific writer. Peter has really been the force behind so much of the written content.



Photo from Bastard Archive

THE STORY OF BASTARD CAFÉ

KRISTOFFER APOLLO

**Journalist and Bastard
Coffee Enjoyer**

A nerdy style of subversion

From the dorm's common room over quitting his job on drunken impulse, the Bastard Café founder has always been motivated by spreading the joy of boardgaming.

Despite currently looking ahead to opening the third café flying the Bastard brand, Bo Thomassen probably does not match most people's idea of a successful social entrepreneur. Even though he went through the motions ten years ago in the lead-up to the original Bastard Café launch – starting to draft a business plan, defining a mission and vision for the concept – Bo emphasizes that traditional business goals never were the point.

“We have never really done this to expand and earn more money. Obviously we need to generate earnings to be able to do what we want to do with the café, but at its core Bastard Café is simply a group of enthusiasts who want to spread the joy of boardgaming. And we want to do it in an open space where anyone can enter and feel welcome. Hence a café.”

The importance of community, of people coming together around games and gaming, is something Bo emphasizes again and again as we talk. Bastard Café is and has always been the result of collective effort, of volunteers and friendly faces contributing alongside formally employed staff. Among other things, this is evident in the whole tone and culture of the place – despite the fact that Bastard Café will soon reach its third location, everything remains quite informal. In a more corporate setting, Bo would certainly have been known to everyone as the CEO. Here, he is just Bo.

Yet the name and person of Bo Thomasen are inextricably linked to the inception and success of Copenhagen's premier boardgame hangout. No Bo, no Bastard Café. And it all started back at the dorm.

Opening up the nerd space

Bastard Café traces its roots back to the early 2000s and the common rooms of “ØresundsKollegiet”, Copenhagen and Scandinavia’s largest student residency that houses around 1,500 people. Shortly after the turn of the millennium, Bo relocated from his home town of Aarhus to Copenhagen, where he eventually moved in with his wife to be, Dorete, at ØresundsKollegioet. Like her husband, Dorete was to become a key player in the birth of Bastard Café. However, at this time – around 2003 – the café as it exists today was still about a decade away, but Bo’s focus on community was evident as he started to explore opportunities at the college. Common room activities were organized through a number of student committees, and as Bo says – “I’m a nerd, so I immediately went down to check it out,

see what the place had to offer.”

One thing on offer was the volunteer-run gaming “café space” where college residents on Thursdays met over board games and beers in the residency’s common hall. Just like similar gamer’s hangouts in many other places, with beer sales funding the student residency’s collection of games. And like typical boardgaming communities of that era, attracting a predominantly male audience and mostly “hobby gamers”.

Bo had already gotten hooked on board games back in Aarhus, so he quickly got involved, volunteering to help out. He fondly recounts how this was the foundation of some of his closest friendships to this day, meeting people whose interests span from board games to roleplay-



Photo from Bastard Archive

ing games in the general gaming community that Bastard Café now has strong connections to. But equally important, this volunteer run café space at the student residency provided some key insights into the potential of boardgames, as Bo explains: “Back then I was studying marketing and planned to pursue a career in culture, marketing theater and the like. But I was fascinated by what I saw happening at the student residency these Thursdays and when we tried to position games differently, for example by bringing board games to parties in the student community. All of a sudden you had people sitting around a table enjoying games in a new setting, engaging an entirely different crowd than the nerdier types who hung out with us on Thursdays. This was the start of quietly subverting assumptions about games and gamers.”

In other words, it looked like the initiative had potential to expand and introduce a new audience to the joy of boardgaming. And for a mission like that, marketing studies came in handy.

“I thought OK, this is great yet we’re still only attracting the same crowd on Thursdays. But that had to do with the physical layout of the place - and the framing. We were sitting in the common room with lots of lights on, because you want to be able to see what happens on the board. And it’s super quiet, because people are concentrating on the games. There’s cheap beer, which everyone thinks is nice, but still - if you’re not a dedicated gamer, if you’re a ‘normal’ person for lack of a better word, you’ll just see some people playing games and think it’s not for you.”

So Bo and the rest of the volunteer crew in the student café set about changing that. A couple of friends drove out to the local recycling station

operated by the Red Cross and returned with a handful of second hand sofas. The lights were dimmed, and background music was put on. Bo brought down the espresso machine he and Dorete had bought with wedding gift money. Candles were added to the tables. And a campaign of notices and posters was organized at the college, now promoting the weekly events as “Thursday Cafés” rather than specifically gaming cafés. These Thursday cafés just had a lot of games as well.

It worked right away.

“It took off within maybe two weeks,” Bo recalls. “In that timeframe we had quadrupled the number of students who turned up. I remember counting heads, making sure we had data on what happened when we did this and did that. We were really just trying stuff out, but it’s back to the marketing approach - you need to make sure you measure effect, so you can correct if needed.”

Word of the new initiative evidently spread. People were turning up not for board games, but for having a good time and hanging out with friends. However, once they had entered the student café, many started looking curiously at the stacks of games, and here you find the first inkling of the guru concept that’s now a feature at Bastard Café.

“We were observing what people looked at and trying to guide them. You know, simply asking if they had tried the games and helping them get started. And this was also where I first saw an all-woman group playing Risk, and I thought OK, we’re onto something here. Back then we always saw a gender gap in gaming, but it evidently



wasn't only for the boys (obviously - but not so obvious at that time). So I was like, let's try and throw everything up in the air and just rethink the whole thing."

The glory days of the student boardgaming café lasted until around 2008, which coincidentally was the year Bo and Dorete moved out of ØresundsKolleget. New volunteers were ready to take over, albeit with a reduced focus on gaming, but the last lesson of the college café turned out to be about compliance. In the preceding years, the crew had successfully negotiated many of the less exciting aspects of organizing, like figuring out how to pay for music licenses when you want to have background music. But in the end, it was the fire authorities who tripped everything up. At least the "couches" part.

"It turned out you can't just throw a bunch of sofas in a room with no space planning and no designated escape routes in case of fire," Bo dryly recounts. "Well, those are the kind of things you learn the hard way. What is OK and what is not."

ØresundsKolleget is still Scandinavia's largest student residency, housing a student community that organizes all kinds of social activities. But Bo had relocated to a new neighborhood across the city after leaving the Thursday cafés behind. And this is where the Bastard brand was officially born.

The Bastard in the living room

The 2008 move across town to the Nørrebro neighborhood sounds like the typical story of a couple that were about to complete their studies and entering the next phase of adulthood. Bo had landed an internship at Roskilde Festival – the longstanding event that is Denmark's largest music festival and a well-reputed fixture on the European summer festival circuit.

But even with a new place and new job, Bo still wanted to play boardgames on Thursdays. And his wife had no reservations against opening up their home for gaming every single week.

"Dorete has been really supportive all the way through. And she dedicated Thursdays to creative pursuits in the company of close friends. So I started inviting friends and acquaintances to come play in our living room. And it quickly developed into a weekly board game café. An open space for everyone who liked to roll dice and wasn't afraid to try out new games."

Again, the affinity for marketing plays a key role. Once their living room started to draw in people, Bo organized drinks sales, which contributed funds to buy new games on an ongoing basis. And he picked up tricks at work that benefited the concept.

“It was 2008 and the early days of social media. I had only just joined Facebook and happened to be the intern at Roskilde Festival who was told, ‘can’t you do something with this Facebook thing?’. It ended up being my job, and I learned how to build and manage Facebook groups and pages. So naturally, I also set up a Facebook group for the Thursday game nights. I named it Bastard Café, because it was the bastard child of the old board game café at Øresundskollegiet.”

In other words, when you step into a Bastard Café today, you are stepping into a concept that was literally built out of Bo and Dorete’s living room. At first fueled by friends, but because its Facebook home was set up as an open group, it did not take long before people started to join off the street – which as Bo recounts requires a special kind of openness.

“Well, it escalated. Soon more and more people were joining, and we were inviting complete strangers into our home. I thought it was cool, and thankfully Dorete is a wonderful and very welcoming person. I remember one episode where I was late (again) returning home, not getting home before the event started, and this new guy, Kasper, who had never participated before, arrived as the first guest while Dorete was lying on the living room floor meditating. She thought it was Nis, one of the regulars who was always early, so just buzzed him in and went back to meditating. So after being buzzed in Kasper finds a half-open apartment door and doesn’t know what to do with himself and ends up politely just sitting there while Dorete finishes her meditation, opens her eyes and sees it’s not Nis. We have laughed a lot about that over the years and Kasper became a regular and a good friend.”

Like at the student residency, Bastard cafe, was a



Photo by Mikkel Bækgaard

place with a sense of community via socializing through games as key. All who came felt welcome and free to enjoy games and have fun, and they knew it was every Thursday evening in the living room of Bo and Dorete.

“I imagine everyone with an interest in gaming has experienced the challenge of organizing game days if you have to accommodate everyone’s calendar. If you instead establish that it’s “Thursdays”, every Thursday, there’s always going to be people who can come. So I faithfully set up a Facebook event every week, and if I couldn’t attend myself, someone else would get the key and let people into the apartment. Always continuity. We ended up hosting 20-40 people every week, so we even had to set up a table in our bedroom. It became a tight fit in the end, also because in the end the group had 150 members and some we did not know in advance” Bo recalls with a laugh.

Taking the Bastards on the road

2008 was a landmark year. In addition to being the year the name Bastard Café was coined, it was the year of the first small trip to SPIEL – the world’s largest boardgame fair, held annually in Essen, Germany. A land of plenty for gaming



enthusiasts, SPIEL's reputation goes far beyond Germany's borders, and in 2008 Bo joined forces with two friends and drove down to the Ruhr valley.

The trip turned out to be easily managed and worth recommending – so in 2009 Bastard Tours came into operation. Of the 16 people who joined that tour group, nearly all were Thursday regulars at Bo and Dorete's.

“The biggest hurdle was really just to realize how easy it is to go to SPIEL,” says Bo. “It seemed complex to me because there was no place to source information, no Danish social media group or anything. So I created it myself instead. I guess that's just how I am.”

In 2010, 32 people joined the Bastard Tour, doubling the number from the year before. It has continued to grow after the Bastard Café was registered as an official business – in 2023, the SPIEL tour attracted 130 participants. More in 2024. The café has kept the concept simple, mainly helping people organize travel and accommodations. Post-arrival, the participants have free range

of the mammoth game fair, with an option to socialize with fellow travelers over a game in the evening.

“We try to avoid bureaucracy, simply helping people acquire the right tickets and so on. Once we are there, we focus on establishing a loose community and offering opportunities for meet-ups. We set up a chat group on Signal and establish regular meeting points, which allows people to engage as much as they want. The participants tend to be quite different types with different priorities – spanning from well-known Danish board game designers to enthusiasts visiting Essen for the first time.”

For Bo himself, SPIEL is mainly an occasion to discover new games and compare notes with travel companions on what they intend to bring home. And to talk to board game professionals from around the globe.

“I love buying new board games. I was soon nicknamed ‘The Hoover’ because I buy lots of stuff on impulse and maybe I should have tried out certain games before acquiring them, but discovering new games and exploring new themes and



Photo by Mikkel Bækgaard

mechanics is simply an important part of what excites me about gaming. I've been asked a thousand times what my favorite game is – and honestly, my favorite game is the one I haven't tried yet."

To this day, Bastard Tours remains a central part of the community-building around Bastard Café and the open-minded approach the café has to engaging with other enthusiasts, budding game designers, and various cultural institutions. And initially, like the weekly sessions in Bo and Dorete's living room, the trips to Essen were key to shoring up the Bastard community and leading the way to the launch of an actual, proper board game café.

Hi boss, I quit!

It took five years of Bastard Café at home and tours to Essen for Bo to take the leap. Not that it was in any way planned, in fact Copenhagen's premier board game café was started on an impulse.

At this point, Bo had worked at Roskilde Festival for five years, still residing in the intersection between marketing and social media with responsibility



Photo by Bo Iørgensen

for the festival app and Facebook profile. By 2013, he'd spent a year and a half involved in a project to develop the traditional music festival wristband to be much more than your ticket of admission. The vision was to take it online and build capacity to register things like discounts and special event tickets on your wrist – much like festivals around the world do nowadays, only Roskilde was apparently too far ahead of the curve. The board of directors scrapped the idea.

"That was a blow. We had spent a lot of time and effort on that project, talking to vendors and negotiating what we thought was an attractive price to implement it. And I don't mean to be critical, I understand that a non-profit entity has to act carefully, and I'm still a big Roskilde fanboy. But at that moment I started to feel that I needed to be my own boss and only answer to myself. I realized that I'm not good at handling long-running projects that get put to rest. It's demotivating, you know?"

Loose thoughts started to take a firmer shape in Bo's head while vacationing in Spain that summer. Old ideas about converting the lessons learned in the college board game café to a permanent business came bubbling to the surface again. And things came to a head at a friend's wedding party in the fall of 2013.

"I was at a wedding and had enough to drink to think, now I've talked enough about this. So I pulled out my phone and wrote an email – 'Hi boss, I have to quit my job'. And then I passed out."

The dice had been cast. And even if Bo was acting on drunken impulse, there was no going back.



Photo By Morten Skovgaard

“I woke up with a serious hangover and started to feel deep anxiety about what I’d done. But I thought the situation through and said to myself, OK, you’ve chosen to walk down this path. Let’s continue. So I wrote a supplementary, more sober email to my boss, confirming that I was indeed quitting my job, but not because I was grumpy, or did not like working at Roskilde or anything. I wanted to start a café.”

From popping up to testing at Huset

Now the only problem was actually starting the café, and preferably quite soon, since Bo would only get one more month’s wages from the festival. So he reached for the community again. And they came through – a quick post in the Thursday café Facebook group collected plenty of likes and comments, with many people offering advice and assistance. But still, opening a café is no small thing with the necessary logistics and permits and everything. “This was the time we established the core group

of Bastard Café helpers. I had no money and no idea how the hell you actually start a business. I could get people and started to write a business plan, thinking you need to be able to present such a thing. But it turned out the banks didn’t care. They didn’t want to extend credit unless I had sureties or private investor backing. Only that wasn’t what I was looking for, because then it becomes all about financial results.”

The alternative was to just press start. Do what could be done. The community offering advice may not have been full of business types, but it was rich in helpers with experience in event-making and social entrepreneurship. Including people with connections in Huset, the Copenhagen Culture House in that has been in operation since 1970.

Huset had excellent facilities and an unbeatable location in a busy and easily accessible part of the city center. Bo and the Bastard community

had accumulated hundreds of board games from trips to Essen, with great enthusiasm on top. So the idea that formed was to do a pop-up as proof of concept.

So for three Saturdays in a row in late 2013, the team packed all their board games into boxes, drove in and set them up in the basement rooms now known as Bastard Café Downstairs. And once again the concept took off quickly. 40 participants on the first Saturday became 60 or 70 on the second, and third time the event ran out of room in the Downstairs facilities.

More pop-ups followed in various locations around Copenhagen. A small stream of revenue flowed in, enough that Bo was able to formalize the café as an official business, properly registered according to Danish law. The money was also able to cover the cost of an accountant – ‘I’ve told a thousand people over the years, if you can’t afford an accountant, you can’t afford to open a business’. But it was only sporadic pop-ups, and Bo started to grow disillusioned. The dream still seemed far away. Securing a permanent location still seemed far away.

The turning point was a deceptively simple piece of advice. Change the perspective.

“I had a chat with a friend who said well, one thing is to do a pop-up, but regular operations are different. Maybe you need to do an operational test,” Bo recounts. “So we talked to Huset, which at the time was closed during summer. Nothing happened here, and they have this big place. And we asked if we could try to set up a café and keep it open for Huset’s entire three-week summer break. They said yes, why not?, and handed over the keys.”

This was the summer of 2014, and for the first time Bastard Café opened in what is now its primary location on the ground floor of the main building at Huset.

It turned out to be a chore, because nobody in the Bastard team had really thought through what it takes to operate a café day-in, day-out through long opening hours.

“We tried to put a schedule together, and a lot of people helped, but man, it was work. I believe I worked 380 hours in total over those three weeks. I was very much not good at delegating or making an actual shift plan. I only took a day off for my wedding anniversary and in general nearly fucked up my marriage those weeks (and the following years) by not being present at all at home. That took a toll. I was not a good husband, that’s for sure.

In the café we saw that we actually attracted guests. People came, even though we were placed in a courtyard rather than a place with a visible storefront, which we originally assumed we needed. So I thought OK, it works.”

Bo was not the only one with that thought. The Huset organization also realized that the board game café drew in a lot of people. Which is important for Huset as a culture and community center.

“This is why Huset has been such a great collaboration partner from the very start. They have more bottom lines than the standard financial bottom line. Their goal is to offer culture to people, and we bring the people. In fact I believe the number of annual visitors to Huset has increased fivefold since we opened here.”

New expansions of joy

More opening days at Huset soon followed. The enduring Bastard Café concept started to form as early lessons were converted to permanent fixtures. For example the menu offering deluxe toasted sandwiches and quality French fries –

things that don't take up too much room next to your game.

Initially the café had to share the physical space with other cultural activities, but less than half a year later the schedule had been cleared as all co-inhabitants had chosen to relocate.

November 7, 2014 is the café's official birthday. On that day, Bastard Café opened as the sole proprietor on the property – on a temporary contract which was later made permanent.

Ten years later it's easy to understand the pride of the Bastard crew in what they have achieved. The number of annual visitors at the Huset café has continued to grow every year, except during COVID-19 times with the extended lockdowns. The Bastard Café library now holds more than 6000 games.

The success has resonated in other parts of the city. The second café was established when the Valby neighborhood's culture house was looking for a new tenant and proposed that the board game café could move in. This is now where you go if you want to combine the gaming experience with a finely curated selection of craft beer and cider. And the opening of the third Bastard Café is imminent, in the outskirts of the Nørrebro neighborhood bordering Northwestern Copenhagen.

As mentioned in the beginning, Bo is adamant that expansion is not a goal in itself. He sees the additional locations as a more natural progression while the core mission of Bastard Café remains the same. It is still about that quiet kind of subversion that emerges when nerds manage to introduce the 'normals' to the exciting universe of games:

"Our first mission is to spread boardgames to as many as possible. That's the most important thing. And it doesn't have to be at a Bastard Café, we engage with many other activities and events

from the Copenhell metal and rock festival to boardgames on board the mini-cruises from Copenhagen to Oslo. It doesn't even have to be under the "Bastard brand". This is also why I'm happy to help others with advice on how to start up a board game café. To me that's not competition, it's fundamentally expanding the market, and their presence will help us achieve our core mission: To spread the love of boardgaming to as many as possible."

"The second part of the mission concerns 'La Famiglia' – everyone who is part of the community around Bastard Café. The self-chosen Bastard Family. We need to ensure a positive atmosphere, that we have each other's back, that the café is a nice place to work where people get proper treatment and feel they're part of a community. And the final part of the mission is to earn enough money to afford the first two parts."

So far it has worked well as Bastard Café has grown to employ 60+ people and welcomed a huge number of guests. In the café, you will meet hardcore enthusiasts and tourist gamers who have read about the place before they arrive in Denmark. But you'll also encounter groups of retirees who simply stop by for a coffee, or Tinder dates who need games that won't get in the way of their real purpose for being there. They all contribute to the success of Bastard Café as it quietly continues to grow and introduce more and more people to the joy of boardgames. And that business plan Bo was working on back in 2013? The draft has still not been completed.



Photo by Mikkel Bækgaard

A CULTURE OF DO-OCRACY

BY CHARLES
BO NIELSEN

**Biggest Swiftie
in the office**

Learning by doing:

At Bastards we encourage each other to try out finding a solution by engaging with the challenge. This creates a learning environment, where we embrace failure as a way to learn and find solutions independently. This comes from a background of volunteering.

Motivated by influence:

At Bastard we have a low ceiling for entry to do tasks and if someone has an idea or sees a problem, we encourage the person to come up with a solution and we help implement it together. Instead of a rigid hierarchy where everything has to be approved, if someone feels motivated to find a solution, they are encouraged right away to get started. This means we sometimes stum-

ble a bit and repeat mistakes done in the past, but our volunteers and employees also get a sense of having a clear influence on their workplace, as they take charge and engage themselves with improving the place.

The effect of monetary reward:

A great barrier of working closely together volunteers with paid staff, is that money can easily get in the way. When people get paid, they usually stop working when they stop getting paid. Meanwhile people who volunteer at Bastard as boardgame gurus put in a lot hours and might feel they are less appreciated, not because they are not having fun doing what they love, but because their "colleagues behind the bar" gets paid, while they don't. This is an important point of tension that we keep working on, to keep very clearly separated lines between the

paid staff and the volunteers and volunteers also get several benefits for volunteering at Bastards.

Some CEO work is still unavoidable:

Ironically no matter how much Bo tries to encourage people around to just act, there is always a ton of things and decisions that needs to be handled by Bo. A more rare incident was when Bo, introduced me to "The Machine", a drain cleaning monstrosity, which unleashes a giant iron chain down the drain to clean it, with quite the smell to follow. Here I see Bo trying to not getting completely covered in drain slug, as some problems needs its CEO to get down and dirty. While some might have paid for such a service, Bo shows up and takes part in the literally most shitty work.

Photo By Austin from Bastards at Copenhell





Photo from Bastard Archive

GURUS AND OUR PHILOSOPHY

PETER HARDY

Game Guru

One of the cafe's regular guests, a woman named Mink, shares: "The café means a lot to me. It's bringing people together, no matter who you are or where you are from. I used to play boardgames with friends in Thailand. But coming alone, starting from zero in Denmark, I still get that kind of joy here at Bastard."

What is it that makes the cafe such a happy and friendly place? In part, it's the awesomeness of the games library, the coziness of the physical environment, and the cool guests who fill it with laughter. But there is also a certain spirit to the cafe, which the people behind it have intended and have cultivated over time. This spirit also applies to, and is amplified by the gurus, Bastard's team of over a hundred volunteer helpers, who are often available at a special table in each cafe.

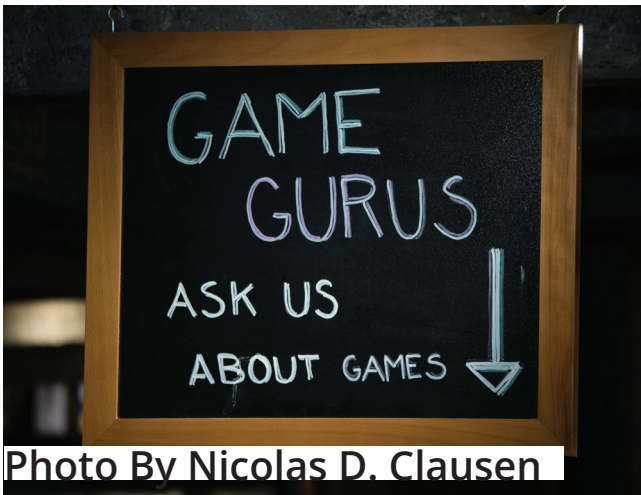


Photo By Nicolas D. Clausen

Guru and game designer Jacob Jaskov says the cafe is naturally somewhere you can hang out in order to be around other people, but it is so much more than an escape from loneliness, it actually feels like home. You are at home because you feel that the people here are just like you, and they put you at ease, even if they aren't all your friends yet. It's a safe space, in the sense that everyone is welcoming and no one is putting each other down emotionally. Jacob notes that other geek spaces, particularly the Danish convention Fastaval, are also very embracing of people regardless of ways in which they are different- or whether they are different. And in that way Bastard is "like Fastaval every day." This makes the cafe an especially valuable place for people who are vulnerable or suffering in some way. Jacob continues, "the ethic Bo [the owner] has for the cafe is very kind, and means a lot to me. I have been through some personal crises and the community here has really supported me through them." Jacob gives the example of how liberating the expectations in the guru system are, meaning that people can help out in different ways, according to their interests, and also to their ability. So even if your problems mean that you don't feel like you're helping the cafe very much, you still feel equally included and appreciated as everyone else.

But even for the guests who aren't volunteers, who perhaps only come here on one occasion, the excitement of being in this place is an icebreaker and you can find yourself having long conversations with

strangers. Playing a game with someone can be quite an intimate experience, but even if you just bump into someone and don't play anything with them, the subtle emotional cues and the coziness of the atmosphere here mean you might end up hugging them.

For Jacob, a big factor in this is that when you enter Bastard, in contrast to many other public spaces –including many other board game cafes– you are not met with rules of what to do and what not to do. This is disarming, and it is welcoming in a way which makes it a happy escape from the outside world. Of course it is still transactional, you still buy things, including use of the games, but it is trust, a sense of trust, which is in the foreground, and rules are very much secondary to that. Bastard's business culture assumes that people are ok as default. Of course people can get guidance, but we don't tell people how the transactional side of things works unless people ask. Whether people notice it or not, this minimal policing –including minimal self-policing– of your behavior, makes Bastard a very welcoming and liberating place.

The manager with responsibility for the guru, Ole P. Andersen, confirms that Bastard takes "quite a laissez-faire attitude," and this is certainly a key part of the philosophy behind the cafe's success. For some, however, perhaps especially among the many of us who are internationals not used to Danish informal work arrangements, this



Photo By Nicolas D. Clausen

casual atmosphere can sometimes lead to confusions. For example, it does happen that people think someone is a guru when they're not, or that they're not a guru when they are. And this isn't necessarily limited to personnel. Earlier in the cafe's history, Ole tells me, it was unclear whether the games which had come from Bo's own collection were assets of the cafe as a company, or whether they were still Bo's but on more or less permanent loan to the cafe. And more recently, the cafe realized that a number of games were not theirs but on loan from Fastaval. But before they gave them back, gurus had gone through the process of assimilating the games into the Bastard library complete with stickers and ink stamps!

Ole

I sat down for a longer conversation with Ole about the role played by gurus and the workings of the cafe.

Peter: Can you give a brief presentation of who you

are and the areas you manage at the cafe?

I'm Ole. I try to keep the guru group entertained enough to keep guring, and I poke people a little to take shifts. I also find new recruits, which is mostly a case of waiting for people to ask to become gurus, and then telling them 'sure'. This is the process: if you can do the beginning things [i.e. a trial shift], then you'll probably get through it.

There's that, and then there's buying games for the cafe, and writing the newsletter.

Finally, whenever people ask me for opinions on how we should do things, I try to provide answers.

Peter: It must be a big responsibility getting hold of the masses of games the cafe wants, but also a massive perk that you presumably have a big say in which games those are?

Ole: Yes, especially as, if I buy a game for myself and decide I don't want to keep it, I can just say I've bought it for the cafe instead.

Peter: How deliciously fiendish! Do people also



Photo by Bo Thomasen

donate a lot of games?

Ole: Yes, all sorts of people: publishers, designers, distributors and stores like Faraos Cigarer, as well as lots from individual people. And at least once, I have donated a game anonymously so that it just appeared in the library without people knowing where it had come from.

Peter: And that's the game we're playing now! No, not really. But can we have an exclusive reveal of what it was?

Ole: I am now in a position to confirm that it was One Direction, the board game of the boy band.

Peter: It's a mystery why you didn't want to be on record as having bought that for the cafe. I'm similarly embarrassed (not because of the theme, but because it is so badly designed) that I got Walk to Jesus included in the list of gurus' favorite games on the cafe website, because I had picked it as my game to be photographed with when I started as a guru. Which was only because my actual favorite game had been stolen. But I've since learned that Walk to Jesus' unpopularity had an unexpected benefit. In the first month of the cafe's existence, the game was used as a safe place to hide the keys for the opening crew.

But we need to get back to One Direction, was it actually an ok game?

Ole: There were some trivia elements to it, but there were so few cards that half way through playing, we had cycled through all of them. So we got to the point where we like 'we didn't know the answer before, but now we do'.

Peter: It sounds almost like a deck-building game, you reshuffle the cards and now you're more powerful. Only, the very least you could expect from a trivia game is for it to have enough questions, without you having to buy the Niall Horan solo expansion!

Ole: It wasn't just a trivia game, there were various silly tasks you had to complete.

We note that forcing players into outward displays of silliness in order to make a game seem fun is no replacement for designing a game properly. That is to say, gameplay should provide a social space in which players are gently nudged towards fun mo-



Photo of Ole P. Andersen

ments that 'bubble up' naturally from their own initiative, and in the comfort of their relationships with each other. A group of people who can make their own fun just by socializing don't need or want a game to tell them when they can joke or be silly. [Note to editor, insert One Direction-based pun here.]

Gurus

Peter: How important are the volunteers to the cafe?

Ole: Our team of guru volunteers are totally integral to the concept of the cafe, they are much more than a convenient add-on. That said, the work that gurus do is not strictly necessary to keeping the business afloat. Our business model is not based on games, it is based on being a bar. Other businesses might say, 'but you need to make money off the games in order to justify having them.' But we don't see it that way, we make money off the bar stuff: beer and nachos. Yes, we also have pay-to-play games and memberships, but they do not bring in enough money to pay for the games.

Peter: But isn't the reason that Bastard can afford to not make profit out of the games that you have all this unpaid labor looking after the games? (Unpaid, I mean, other than in food, drinks and myriad other perks gurus get when we help out.)



Photo by Austin Fossey

Ole: Not really. One way in which the gurus are very helpful is in fixing games so we don't need to buy so many copies as replacements or for spare parts.

That's especially useful because with our pay-to-play games, we try to avoid having multiple copies of the same game in the same cafe if reasonable. Limiting the number of games we buy doesn't only save money on the games themselves, but also saves on storage and on having to keep track of all of them. Of course our model means we can't buy every game in the world -though it often seems like we do- and certainly not every expansion, but it works.

But the business doesn't strictly depend on volunteer work to keep the library in good condition, both because we have paid staff who can help with that, and because it's mostly the free-to-play games that get played enough to need serious fixing, and they get worn out

quickly enough that we have to replace them regularly.

Peter: I suppose that's also a good thing because the amount of such volunteer work you receive fluctuates and can't be predicted.

Ole: Yes, especially now it's spread out between 3 cafes. But of course we are very grateful for the continued support of gurus in keeping the library nicer than it would have been otherwise.

Peter: So what would you say is the primary role of the gurus?

Ole: To make guests feel welcome in the cafe and help them find and play games that they enjoy. And this is really essential to the spirit of the cafe, and gives people the unique experience of discovering a game they wouldn't have known about otherwise. Although again, we cannot promise guests that they will get the help they want at any particular time, because gurus choose themselves when they want to take a shift.

Peter: Yes, even though guests can also pay to book a designated guru, that is similarly subject to a guru choosing to do it, and naturally different gurus also have different sets of knowledge, and like to help in different ways. But there are so many of us that when we put our heads together we can almost always give guests what they want.

Ole: Yes, and that success is part of what has led to us having the problem of being full, and having to open new cafes so people have space to sit down.

Games

Peter: I think one of the main problems I have to deal with is people who are so enthusiastic about playing a certain game at that moment -I'm guilty of this myself at times- that they try to force it into a situation where it isn't

really suited.

Ole: One of the things we see time and time again is people playing Catan as two players.

Peter: Absolutely, I see that at least twice in every shift I take, and I never know whether I should interrupt them and suggest something else (there is a two-player card game, Rivals for Catan). I tend not to, unless I notice them obviously struggling.

Ole: For those who don't know, Catan works on trading resources with other players. And because playing it as just a two makes it a zero-sum game, it no longer makes sense to make mutually beneficial trades. Which turns it into a very different game, where if you trade at all, it's because you think you are tricking the other player.

Peter: Which makes it a bit nasty to play on a first date, which I think lots of people are doing in the cafe, because Catan is a game people know. But seeing as we gurus might not want to butt in and spoil people's hygge by telling them they've chosen poorly (in the choice of game, not necessarily the person they're seeing), we'll just have to hope that in future they'll bring extra players along with them on their dates. Perhaps that's a new function people could hire gurus for.

Ole: Of course we still have opinions on games, and why would I want to spend my time on Monopoly or Cards Against Humanity? But deciding what game to play is a negotiation, and if I really want to play



Photo by Bo Thomsen



Photo from Bastard Archive

games with a certain group of people, then we have to find games that are acceptable to everyone, and if those are the aforementioned games, then in that context they are good games to play. Different people get different things out of games.

Peter: And enjoy different games at different times. I think we can find it crazy that people come to the cafe and choose Uno out of all the games, but that is because we lose sight of how much work it is for non-gamers to find and learn new games. But with that in mind, Uno can actually be a fair option. I guess that's also why, when during the full Covid lockdown, people broke into the Café, they played Monopoly in here. It's what everybody knows.

Ole: And different types of games are easier or harder for different demographics to understand. Older people will more readily grasp mechanics familiar from traditional playing card games, like trick taking. People with better spatial imagination might find pattern-based games easier, etc. And these differences are part of the reason you cannot simply transfer being good at one game into another.

Peter: Which is a good thing, because it makes for the wonderful diversity of game experiences.

Ole: And means you don't always lose to the same people again and again.

Peter: Oh, I do that anyway.

Ole: Sometimes that's how it goes.

Peter: Before the cafe opened, when it was more in Bo's apartment, were there people helping out and doing things that were precursors to what gurus do?

Ole: Not really. It was like any other board game event hosted by someone. The collection was owned and maintained by Bo. There were certain people who were like gurus in so far as they taught games to other people. Though often, this was one person reading the rules for the first time at the table, and realizing that they got various parts of them wrong only after we'd played. But that will happen sometimes, it is unavoidable.

Peter: So realizing that you have taught parts wrong only after you've taught the game to numerous people, who in many cases have then taught other people with the same mistakes, was not something new that you Ole have introduced to the cafe?

Ole: No, it is a venerable tradition, handed down by bastards through generations.

Peter: Well, I hope you relish this opportunity to correct the record and restore your reputation. I suppose we should be happy that you teach so many of us so many games, rather than focusing on the false teachings you have propagated through us.

But yes, it sounds like the gurus were a new idea created for the cafe?

Ole: No, like all the best ideas, it was stolen, in this case from some Canadian cafes, Randolph and Snakes & Lattes, who had teams of experts to recommend games. But the guru system was first and foremost inspired by the work which Bo had done with Roskilde Festival and continues to do with Festival, both of which are heavily supported by teams of volunteers.

Bo chips in that when Bastard was starting, they met in Copenhagen with people from Snakes & Lattes and then visited them in Canada. But it was actually another cafe, Moi j'm'en fous je triche in Lyon, France, where a volunteer named Mael gave Bastard the most helpful advice on having a volunteer group. For example, he warned them to be aware of the tendency for a volunteer group to gradually turn into an inward-facing group of



From the Bastard Photo Archive



friends, rather than an outward-facing team of helpers. And of course, it's natural that as gurus make friends with each other, they will meet up with each other more outside of the cafe, and we perhaps lose some volunteer power that way. And that's one reason why Ole works on recruiting and integrating new gurus through the various fun events, both public and private, he helps to organize in Bastard. Ole: The part played by volunteers in different cafes or festivals is very context dependent, and what we do at Bastard has been refined through years of seeing what works. This also means that now that the tables have turned, and it is more other cafes taking inspiration from Bastard, any advice we give them has to come with a tremendous amount of salt, because what works for us may not work for them. Just like with things we do inside the cafe, there are some things here and there where I do know best practices, others where I'm more like 'it feels right, so it's probably good', or 'it doesn't feel quite right, but if you are doing it and it feels right for you, give it a try and see what happens.' It might be something that's been tried before, but other people tried it, and they were different circumstances, it may be different if you try, or maybe not.

Gurus and Bartenders

Peter: I hear that in the early days of the cafe, the distinction between gurus and bartenders was much more blurred.

Ole: Yes, the bartender side of the business has been professionalized quite a bit. These days you would not expect the average bartender to give you any kind of advice or opinions on games, though they

cannot hate games so much that it hurts them to work here. That's not what we pay them to do. But to start with, we needed people and we took people we already knew and were invested in the board game cafe concept [which also seems to be how Ole ended up here], or their friends who wanted to serve drinks. Gradually we realized we needed people who do it for the bartending and not for being part of the gaming community.

Peter: Were there lots of mishaps?

Ole: Oh yes!

Peter: Can you tell me about them?

Ole: No

Peter: So, as the bartenders became a more distinct group has there been much friction between them and the gurus? Or have the volunteer gurus had much trouble working alongside the paid staff?

Ole: Thankfully not, we have been able to listen to each other's concerns. So we haven't had problems above what you usually get with large numbers of human beings working together.

Peter: That could be seen as something of an achievement. When I started at the cafe, it seemed to me that many of the bartenders were young attractive women and many of the gurus were somewhat older, very nerdy guys, and that sounds more like a recipe for disaster than it does for the two groups getting on well.

Ole: Well, some social situations are better to be in than others, and getting them right is an art form that some people are better at than others. But we have rules and procedures to set appropriate boundaries. There is the fact that the

bartenders are a captive audience, they can't just go away when they don't want to interact with you. So as a volunteer you have to respect that you can leave, they cannot. So we recommend people ask if the other person is busy, before presuming that they want to talk. And if they say they are busy, don't chat them up.

Diversity

Peter: How have the demographics of the team changed over time? It's only my own anecdotal experience, but it seems to me that especially since the pandemic, more of the new and active gurus have been women. Has the team become more diverse?

Ole: I don't know when trends changed, and again it's only anecdotal, but I have also seen a growth in diversity. There were female gurus when we started, and many of them are still active in the community, but we definitely have a much more gender equal balance than we had 10 years ago, and it's been generally, but slowly going in that direction.

It is also a factor of the broadening of what are considered 'real' board games, compared to earlier, more exclusive conceptions that being in the hobby was all about the very most complicated games.

Peter: Yeah, but it's not simply the case that prettier and more casual games being taken more seriously is attracting more women to be gurus. Because not only have there been female gurus from the beginning, but quite a number, both from back then and the newer recruits, are into the more complex games. They're certainly playing more heavy games than I do.

Ole: The hobby is becoming more inclusive, and in the cafe we're seeing all shapes and genders playing more games, which is nice. A lot of the stereotypes that we had floating around have shown themselves to not be true, and we're learning not to think so much in terms of 'real boardgames' because that leads to gatekeeping and making some people feel unwelcome.

Peter: Yeah if we're talking about the hobby more generally, I can try to impress you with some trivia (Ole is also Bastard's resident quizmaster and a ma-

JOR contributor to Danish Wikipedia). Booth (2021) and Cross et al. (2023) have board gamers as 75% or 70% male, according to their respective surveys. And if those figures are to be believed, then the cafe is doing very well, because much more than 30% of active gurus and people playing in the cafe are women. Indeed, I've been struck recently by how often women are in the majority at the Let's Play and Match-up events.

Ole: Yes, there's lots of all-female groups of guests. So it's far from just men inviting women here on dates. Although we have a lot of that too.

Peter: Yes, the first time I ever came to the cafe was when my now-wife brought me here on our second date. I think Bastard (and some other cafes) being such cozy places is part of what attracts more women and all sorts of couples on dates, when you might not stereotypically think of nerdy bars as doing that. I visited Our Place, the new games cafe in Roskilde (30km west of Copenhagen), and it's interesting to see how it functions as a place that is open primarily in the daytime, unlike Bastard which is also a bar that's open at night. Its female founder and owner, Maja, has regular daytime events for women on maternity leave and their young children. Which is an awesome example of cafes with different contexts being able to do things in different ways.

Ole: Another example of how the demographics are changing in Bastard, is that right now we also have more bartenders than ever wanting to become gurus.

Peter: And that's great for us, because we are friends with many of them already.

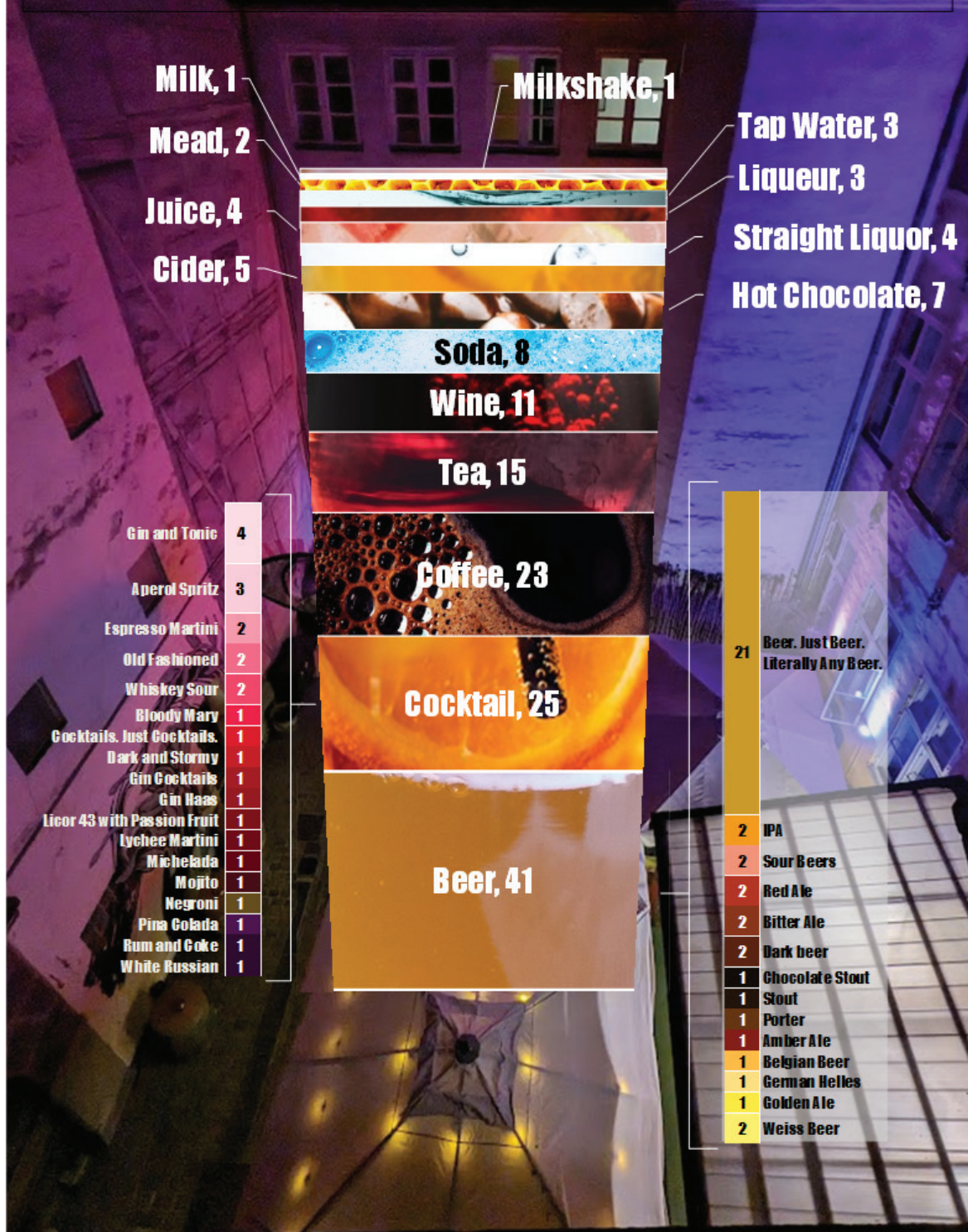
Ole: Yes, and that's the best thing about the guru system, that it's also a large, long-lasting friendship group. And we have lots of social events with the bartenders too. Of course not everyone is close friends with each other, but we all know each other enough to be friendly and play games with each other, and through doing that we become closer friends.

Peter: You can leave now.

Ole: Ok

THE BASTARDS MAKE A DRINK

We took a poll of all the bartenders' and gurus' favorite drinks. If you pour them all into a bucket, you get this refreshing cocktail, which is quintessentially Bastard.



Infographic by Austin Fossey

HOW TO CHOOSE AND HOW TO TEACH GAMES

PETER HARDY & AUSTIN FOSSEY

Game Gurus

How to Choose Games

The golden rule is to find a game that suits the players in that moment, and not to force a specific game or type of game if it won't be enjoyable for everyone. It is worth disappointing some players who are insisting on some specific game, if it ensures everyone at the table will enjoy the game and want to do more board gaming in the future. It also spares the player who's pushing that game from being disappointed when it doesn't work out so well in that context.

1. Find out how many people are playing

Many games don't work as well when played at the full player count printed on the box. The information on the box is marketing material to sell the game, and hence should be read with healthy skepticism. If you look up a game on boardgamegeek.com (BGG) there is a poll under the printed player count where users have voted on what they'd recommend for that game.

For more than two players, try to find a game that can accommodate at least one more person than is actually playing. For example, if there are five play-

ers, look for a game that is designed to have a maximum of six or more players. Why? Because maxing out the player count can make some games drag. For example, many popular complex strategy games can be rather long and slow moving with more players. With such complex games, it's normally best for five or more players to split into different groups and play separately. There are, however, many classic four player games that do work best with four, and some, particularly fighting games, that work less well with three due to 'the kingmaker problem,' in which the losing player's actions contribute more to which of the other two players win, than those other players' own actions do.



Photo by Nicolas Delgado

If it's just two players, you open up lots of options, because there are many games that are designed for just two. Conversely, some popular strategy games get clunky with only two players, even if the box says that they can be played with just two players. Sometimes the rules for these games have to change quite a bit, which means more set-up to learn, or makes the game worse, so watch out for that. Again, you can check on BGG. With six or more players you are usually looking at 'party games', though these can still involve some thinking and strategy. With larger groups, be aware of how much 'downtime' there will be. Will players remain engaged in the game between their turns? If they are eliminated from the game,

will it end reasonably soon so they aren't bored? Larger groups should only play games with player elimination or longer downtime if they are happy with that. Keep this in mind if the group has young children (or adults) with short attention spans.

2. Find out what the group is here for

The social dynamics of the group can also inform which games you recommend. People on dates may enjoy a game designed for two players or a game that helps them get to know each other. Colleagues may enjoy a fun party game or teamwork game, but they may want to avoid anything that is not work appropriate. A family will want something that is age-appropriate for their children, but also not mind-numbingly boring for the parents. If there are people who hate competition or losing, a cooperative game can be a great fit. A group of people who all have different native languages may prefer a game that is not too text-heavy. People already in an advanced stage of inebriation may enjoy Uno. Learn why these people came in to play a game, and find a game that complements the experience they want to have.

3. Agree how long the game should last

Like the player count, the duration of the game printed on the box is there for marketing purposes—it is not a reliable measure of how long it will take to play! I generally allow double the printed time, and often more if there is a lot for players to learn first. Factor in learning time, and avoid games that will take a long time to learn, unless the group would really rather spend their time just learning a game than they would enjoying a full game of something else.

4. Ask what games they know which they would like something similar to

When getting a sense of how complex a game they would like, remember that words like 'complex' mean very different things to different people. Learning which games they already love helps get



Photo by Nicolas Delgado

a concrete sense of the appropriate level of complexity and also helps narrow down options. If they are still very open, you can ask if there are any particular interests or hobbies they share as a group, if there are games on those themes. Do they like cats? We have 60 cat-themed games. Do they like racing? Heck yes, we have racing games. Do they like Kenny G? Then we have good news for them.



Photo by Nicolas Delgado

5. Offer a limited choice

Once you know the player count, the length, and complexity you're aiming for, give yourself some time to find a few games that you think might work for the group. These should be games which offer different types of experiences, such as competitive vs. cooperative, building up your own individual score vs. a more interactive fight over a winner-takes-all victory, etc. Limit the choice to two or three games, so it is not overwhelming, but give them options so they still get to make the decision about what to play

6. Keep learning about classic and popular games in different genres and styles

You don't have to do it all yourself! Draw on other people's recommendations. And don't be afraid to suggest a game you don't know, or maybe don't even like yourself, if it is a good fit for that group. Even if it isn't to your taste, other people can still get a lot of fun out of it.

How to Teach Games

1. Learn in advance the game you are teaching

You can't teach something you don't know! If possible, play the game yourself before you have to teach it to others, and if it has been a while, take the time to review the game first. If you don't have time to learn the game in advance, warn the group so they have the chance to choose a different game. Most people learn games best from YouTube videos, though rule books are useful for looking up details like quantities of starting cards, etc. If you are certain the group is playing a specific game, you could also set it up in advance, but don't be shy about deputizing shuffling and other set-up tasks to players while you are teaching.

2. Gauge how long a pre-game explanation would be appropriate

If the group could use some more enthusiasm and engagement, draw them in by outlining the story



Photo by Nicolas Delgado

or theme of the game, and what is fun about it. Explain the game's inherent dilemmas or points of tension- for example, what do players need to have enough of, and what do you need to avoid having too much of?

On the other hand, if they don't have much time or are eager to start playing, just outline the most essential rules. One way of starting more quickly is with a 'rolling teach', which is to start and then explain the rules as they are playing. You can outline which options players have as they are making their move, and explain other parts of the game -different cards, for example- as they first appear in hand or on the table.

The disadvantage of this rolling teach is that players might later be frustrated because they would have played differently earlier if they'd had a full understanding of the rules. So if players want a serious and fair competition, a more comprehensive teach before starting is preferable. A compromise is to play a practice round and then restart the game. Learning by doing is so much more effective than passive listening that it will often shorten the combined length of learning and playing, even if restarting the game.

It's also ok if you accidentally get one or two rules a bit wrong, especially if time or player engagement is running out and you just need to start the game. If you later discover something players have been doing wrong throughout the game, you can either start doing it right, or carry on the way you had been doing it for the sake of consist-

ency, which might be more fair. Whatever the players prefer to do, as long as people have fun.

3. Explain for the point of view of a new player

Order your explanation from the most important down to the less important information. Many of the less important details can be explained once the game has started. Start with the goal of the game, how the game ends, and what actions you can take on your turn. Emphasize anything unusual that works differently in this game to many other games. Then give an overview of the structure of a round, and take the various other mechanics in turn, one by one.

4. Periodically check for understanding

Keep asking if people follow what you've said. If people ask questions which are better addressed in a later part of the explanation, don't feel you have to answer them immediately. It is better just to reassure them, and keep the flow of your teach. In the worst case they can remind you at the end if you forget. For the same reason, it's generally best to have one person in charge of teaching and doing most of the explanation. But equally, if you aren't as confident, teaming up can be a big help!



Photo by Nicolas Delgado



Photo by Nicolas Delgado

5. Make use of examples

Examples can be very illustrative, especially if you're not sure everyone understood an element of the game: Take the time to run through an example before moving on. This includes making analogies with other games that they are familiar with, i.e. when the games have similar mechanisms. These analogies save time, but it is good to follow up with examples of how that element works in the game being taught, as there are often subtle variations on similar mechanisms.

6. Praise players as the game starts to click

When a new player does something that shows they are really starting to get the game, call it out so that the other players learn from it too— just make sure you don't accidentally say something about a secret strategy that you see them implementing. This works as positive reinforcement, which builds the players' confidence while also using their own gameplay as a teachable moment for the other new players. Similarly, you may need to gently guide a new player if you see them making a really poor move, but only if they want help and only if it will help them enjoy their first time playing the game.



Photo By Austin Fossey

OUR HOUSE ARTIST, KIM HOLM

AUSTIN FOSSEY

Game Guru

Kim Holm is a Danish multidisciplinary visual artist, illustrator, and wizard, and he is Bastard Café's house artist responsible for the café's murals and iconic gateway at Valby.

He is mostly known for his monsters and strange characters, but he also works with mandalas, textures and mosaic style paintings. I sat down with Kim to ask about what it's like to make his art, his use of "nonsense," and how people like to have their fantasy sparked. You can learn more about Kim at his website, www.kimhrholm.com and follow his work at www.instagram.com/kimhrholm. Bastard Café has many different rooms, each with their own character.

How did you choose what to paint in each room, and was there a certain feeling or mood you wanted guests to have when they visited?

It was new for me to paint in a café—and also a gaming café—but it was something I really wanted to do. A lot of what I am inspired by is games—not just boardgames per se—but also mysteries, folklore monsters, fantasy, and science fiction, and that really goes into games as well. The first mural I painted in Bastard Café is in The Winter Room, and I called the characters in it "The Four Wizards" because they are very magical creatures.

When I paint in a private home and am looking for inspiration for a mural, I incorporate things from the home and talk with the people who live there, so I did the same thing with games at Bas-

tard Café. The inspiration was actually the game Ludo. I wanted to create a gaming world that you are actually in while you are playing the game. For example, if you are playing Ludo, you are actually a strange creature jumping around this weird world as you play. And so I made these wizards for the Winter Room mural, and I made them into high-fantasy characters.

In the Lounge, there is this character inspired by a gentleman's lounge, or games like Monopoly or like a casino. It has more of a smoker's lounge feeling. Then, in the downstairs room, I was told it was a place for a gin bar, and I was like, "who comes into a gin bar?" For a gin bar, I was thinking English style, but very anthropomorphic, like Wind in the Willows. So it became this game with a walrus, a weasel, and a penguin: it's this gang that, when they walk into the room, you all pay attention.

All my characters have a side of darkness and a side of lightness—something silly. I want them to jump out of the games. I have noticed that whenever there are three or more characters, people start mirroring themselves after them, like, "you're the rat" or "I am that walrus." I feel like it makes the room more atmospheric.

Why do you think people naturally assign themselves to characters?

We do it when we are kids, like when you watch cartoons or manga as a kid, you start to think, which kind of character are you? Are you the vil-

lain, the good guy, the henchmen? We all have characters that are close to ourselves, and we are all characters too. Maybe it makes us feel good and comfortable to see ourselves in other characters, like, “Oh! I am present here in the room.” And even more than that, I think most people like to have their fantasy sparked a little bit.

[Speaking of characters, you designed Igor: Bastard Café’s mascot. Where did Igor come from, and can he ever be stopped?](#)

It’s been funny to see Igor on so much merchandise in all his different versions, and Igor is starting to get his own life. On some of the new signs, I am giving Igor different expressions—people know Igor well enough that they will still recognize him, even as he becomes animated.

At first, I designed Igor to be the logo, but it kind of got rejected because Bastard Café needed something simpler that could just be black and white. But I already had Igor on a bunch of stickers, so I just put them in the bar, and Igor kind of got his own life and became a plushy.

Then I got some input from Bastard Café that they wanted something for the logo with dice and coffee instead. I hadn’t done many logos yet, so I made a big mistake and made, like, twenty logos instead of making three, and then that sparked even more ideas.

[In your opinion, how does large-format artwork change or enhance guests’ experience in a place like Bastard Café? In other words, board game cafes do not need artwork to function, but Bastard Café would not feel the same without it—why do you think that is?](#)

I have painted a lot of murals, both publicly, like in Bastard Café and in libraries, but also in a lot of homes, and I think a mural makes people feel very much at home. There’s something about the permanence of having it straight on the wall. You can’t take it with you. You can only destroy it or paint over it.

If people like the mural to begin with, and they continuously come back to that place, that’s one of the things they remember. The mural goes together with the whole room, and that room just makes you feel comfortable.

When I paint it, it’s usually weird, sweet, colorful, and strange. I would say some of my paintings have a little bit of nonsense, which strangely enough makes a lot of people feel very comfortable. That is not something I knew before—it is something I learned through experience over the years.



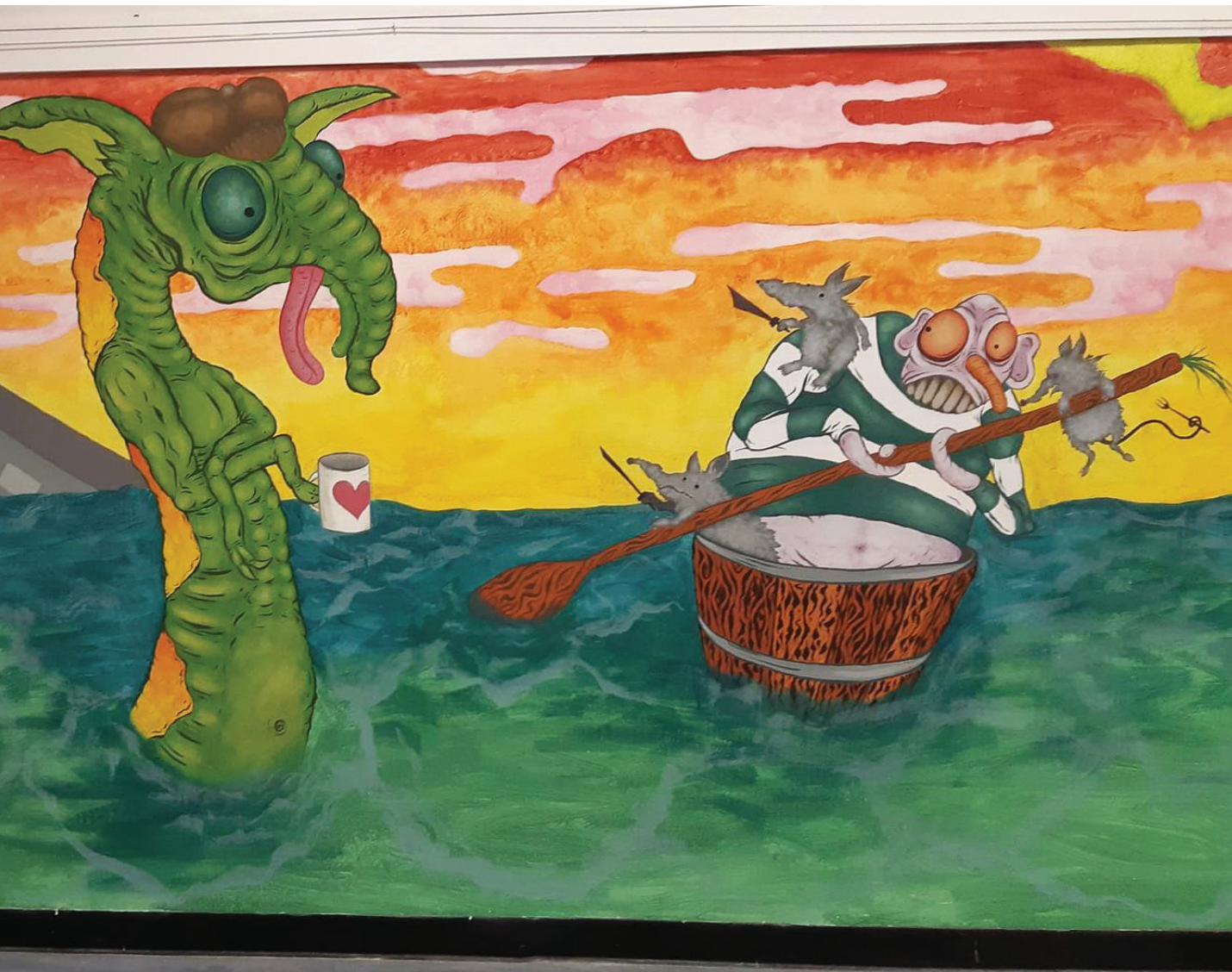
Photo By Kim Holm

[What are some examples of nonsense in your art at Bastard Café?](#)

There is not as much nonsense as you might think because I have worked in a lot of references, but there is a lot of strangeness and weirdness. For example, the four wizards have a druid and a necromancer, but they are still very silly. It makes Bastard Café a good place to go and feel like, “oh, there are good, strange people here. I can be here.” The strangeness has to fit both the theme of the café and the people.

[What was your favorite part about working on the murals at Bastard Café?](#)

I had quite a lot of freedom in the paint-



ings, which I really enjoyed. But I also liked the fact that it was a task to be solved. I liked the challenge that there is a clear theme here at Bastard Café, and it got easier the more I painted.

At first, I was wondering if Bastard Cafe would like it and if customers would like it, or would they be like, “hmmm, yeah, I don’t know about this . . .” But as I worked, I thought mostly about what would fit the theme, because in the beginning, things were still getting created at Bastard Café. So it was like simultaneous creation with the café being built and these tapestries going up. There was a good synergy there. I like the process of being in this flow, with several people building something at the same time. It’s a really nice feeling, especially when it works, even though there is no textbook to follow—there’s nothing telling you how it is supposed to work. And it has worked out really good at Bastard Café.

I was excited because you don’t see a lot of cafes making this decision to have big paintings right on the wall. I think it’s because of the permanence. I think people can be scared about making that choice, without knowing how it will turn out. When I do sketches, they don’t look 100% the way they will on the final wall, and I always tell people that. You also don’t see many places like Bastard Café that have this much art because the games have so much art. There is already so much visual art for people to unpack.

[How long does it take you to make a mural, and did you have any challenges during these projects?](#)

There’s always challenges putting up a mural. I am always a little nervous painting on a wall because I

want to do it well and it's always a new design, but I like to challenge myself to try something I haven't done before. That could be doing a new way of drawing things, or it might be a new animal or monster. I rarely do the same character twice. It's the challenge of doing something small with a pen and then going big with it afterwards. It always turns out well in the end though.

The Bastard Café mural in the Lounge was challenging because all the stripes were there on the wall and there's a hole in the wall, so there is perspective to work around. If you look at some of my characters, you will see that some are two-dimensional, and some are three-dimensional. I call this, "two-and-a-half-dimensional." When you do that, it pops up questions like, "if smoke pops up and has volume and then interacts with something flat, how will they interact?"

It can get quite weird (in a bad way) if you play too much with perspective and things that are flat. Like a tree in a room, where does it start? Does it start where the floor starts, or does it go through to the other side, or is it floating in the air? It's the same with characters. I usually have them floating, not standing where I am standing. That way, they have their own space, and it doesn't have to interact with the wall, which is flat. That is our wall, but it is their universe.

You used to work at the Valby Kulturhus, and now you have built a whimsical gateway inviting guests into Bastard Café's new location there. What was it like to get to add your own piece to the Kulturhus's exterior?

It was fun! It has been many years since I worked there, so I was quite happy and excited about returning



Photo By Kim Holm

and doing artwork with Bastard Café. Compared to any other café I have seen in that space previously, I think Bastard Cafe is the most creative one, which is why I think it is going to work well there. It was nice to see that whole café change so much and become a gaming café.

The Bastard Café arch across the patio at the Valby Kulturhus was super interesting to build. I had never done anything like that before. I worked with my friend, Martin Bollerup, who is a carpenter, because I needed something sturdy and functioning. We were both a little bit—I wouldn't say worried, but surprised as it came together. We were thinking, "This is big. We are building this really big."

I remember one time while we were building it, and it was almost up. Usually people walk in the main entrance of the Kulturhus to get to the café, but that day, while we were building the archway, so many people started walking in through the archway. I was joking with my old colleagues at the Kulturhus that they have a new entrance now! That was instant gratification.

[As Bastard Cafe Huset navigates through the building renovation and plans for its future decor, what are your hopes for the murals? Should they be saved or recreated, or should Bastard start with a blank canvas and make some new murals?](#)

I am always a little bit torn with this. There is something about me wanting people to value my artwork and wanting



Photo provided by Kim Holm

to see the murals stay. In the past, I have sometimes walked past bars to see if my mural is still there, and sometimes it can be like, "woah, it's not there, and no one told me!" But I am also not very nostalgic, and that is the thing about murals: you can't take them with you.

I have one mural I painted in an apartment, and the renters got permission that they don't have to paint it over when they move. I kind of like that. It's a big praise. But then again, when renovations happen, or when someone decides to change a room, you can't move it, so what do you do?

No matter what, I always love doing new stuff, and murals are one of my favorite things to do in art. I have already thought about ideas about taking some of the elements from Bastard Café in Huset to inspire their new spaces in Nørrebro.



THE CRISIS OF ESSEN!

BY CHARLES BO NIELSEN

Biggest Swiftie in the office



Martin is always a bit nervous whenever October comes around. Time for 'Boardgame Christmas', that is, Essen Spiel convention. This year when I told him that the car rental company mentioned some troubles with the van we rented, he wrote me: "You turn around now! Stay Home! Or at least go now and book a backup car in Germany!". His worry was founded on good reasons. In 2017 the rental van broke down. That year had generally been cursed for Spiel transport, a hurricane had smashed the railroad in Germany and many planes was cancelled as well. Bo, Jost and Ole didn't made it

far out of Essen. They were stuck at a highway stop somewhere in Germany with a broken van and hundreds of boardgames. They tried to get it to a mechanic with a crane truck, but everything was closed down due to Spiel -Nerd Christmas- also being a normal German holiday. The entire escapade is well documented in several Facebook posts, where the desperation and despair becomes more and more clear. "UPDATE: We are stranded. For Real. Finding a hotel." In the beginning it was with optimism as at least they had a truck full of boardgames to play. Then the updates became more and more bleak, until sud-

denly a glimmer of light, dare I say: A New Hope: "UPDATE AND POTENTIAL SOLUTION" Bo explains how to get a new van in Essen and drive it with the games to Flensburg on the Danish border and leave the new rental there. At the same time, a new player in this adventure Martin Horn Pedersen, rents a car in Copenhagen and drives it to meet the boardgames (and the Bastard crew) at the border. Martin is one of Bo's old friends with no prior connection to the café. Moving boardgames from car to car, a total of four different rental cars were involved in this mad rescue mission.

In the end operation to save Bastard and their cardboard was successful and this is why we still salute Martin Horn and keep his picture on our walls for eternal fame and glory.



BASTARD AND GAME DESIGN

Interviews with boardgame designers

PETER HARDY

Game Guru



Photo by Austin Fossey

The Danish board games scene is thriving and innovative. At the time of writing, the upcoming game *Revenant* by Danish designer Allan Kirkeby has just spent its first week in the number 1 spot on the hotness list of the international go-to site, Board Game Geek. Denmark is indeed a hotspot for top talent in the field, with as we shall see, a supporting role often played by a certain Café beloved by these designers.



Alongside massive growth in the hobby, board game design has also changed quite drastically over the last 30 years. Most would agree that games have become a lot more visually appealing, though in these articles we'll be talking about design of rules, rather than artistic design. Today there is a lot more emphasis on the freedom of the player to make decisions, in stark contrast to many traditional games where so much was determined by dice rolls.

Of course, chance is still welcome when it adds variation and excitement, but in a game of any length, players need to feel ownership of their fate, and not feel more like it's the game that's playing them. And once players have freedom to act, the 'decision space' needs to be animated by a number of dilemmas about how they achieve their goals, so that choosing one action over another becomes an experience of tension.

A simple example is *Ticket to Ride*, where you decide whether to use your turn by playing cards, or by taking cards- which can be especially risky in some cases. The same basic principle applies to games featuring much more complex economies: how and when are you going to spend your resources? What trade-offs will you make, based on the information you have now?

At a higher level, a game's design might include extra mechanisms (gameplay features) for the specific purpose of making the process of choosing actions interesting in itself. For example, there are 'action points' mechanisms like in *Pandemic* where you have a certain number of actions to take from a menu

of options. Or there is 'action drafting', where, rather than the actions always being available, they instead become more expensive or blocked off once one player has taken them (often through 'worker placement', i.e. putting a token on an 'action space').

Our Danish design experts are keenly aware of how different mechanisms like these shape players' feelings and experiences in different ways throughout the course of a game. I interviewed several of them at Bastard Café after joining their playtesting sessions. With Asger Harding Granerud and Daniel Skjold Pedersen, designers of *Heat* (2022), I tested their new game *Hutan* (2025). With Bastard volunteer and designer of *Fog of Love* (2017), Jacob Jaskov, I played his new game, *The Vibe* (2025). And with designer and volunteer Bastian Borup, I took part in some of the Testing Tuesday events he has been co-running in the Café for 5 years. Here's what the designers had to say.



What is Bastard Café to you?

Jacob says that his favorite memories of the café are playing here with his children, and that doing so in the Valby café has now imbued that location with more meaning for him. He hopes the same will be the case for the new Nørrebro location. He says that Bastard is not only his favorite place in Copenhagen but also one of his favorite places in the world. It is where he started designing, and it is also something more personal. Jacob is most known for his success with *Fog of Love*, which is described as “romantic comedy as a board game.” Yet he says it was going to social events at Bastard which first gave him the confidence to start dating after his divorce.



For Daniel, Bastard is an “inspiring” place which “pulls a diverse crowd of people together”. He says the Café helps designers to see the different types of games people are playing.

Asger helped start the Café’s monthly event for the popular Danish game *Klask*, and in 2023 he won the Danish national championship held here. For Asger, Bastard Café is like going a little bit out into town but still feeling like you’re at home. It’s a bar, and you can have a few drinks, but “I’ve never experienced people being angry when they’re out playing board games.”

Maybe that’s because you were the one who was drunk Asger? “Haha, I have had heavy drinking sessions with old friends that turned partially rowdy, but in a good way. But there is always such a pleasant atmosphere

there, which I love.”

I (Peter) did once have someone drunkenly come up and interrupt me while I was trying to teach a game to a group of people, but that game was *Heat* and I later learned that that person was Asger. And to be fair, he was correcting part of it which he’d heard me teach wrong!

What’s the significance of Bastard in the Danish board game design scene?

Asger and Daniel have collaborated on many games, and they were designing before Bastard opened. At that time, a number of the designers in Copenhagen would go out to other cafés in the morning to test games, but that shifted to waiting close outside Bastard so that they could start testing inside as soon as it opened for the day. Their group was called *Nordic Games Artisans*, and it also included Jeppe Norkser, creator of the *50 Clues* series, *Match Madness* and many other games. From those years Daniel recalls testing a dexterity game where you were meant to gently toss and catch pieces, but Jeppe threw meeples up into the ceiling, and pieces were lost all over the Café.

"Bastard draws in a much wider group of playtesters," Daniel says, whereas the earlier testing community was a relatively closed group. "Then once the Café allowed us to hold playtesting events [in 2015], it was much easier to draw in a crowd, and then expand from there."



Asger Harding Graderud

Asger explains that "Bastard Café has become the anchor point, without a doubt, for board games in Copenhagen and also for board game designers." Once it opened, he says he stopped testing in other cafés, and even when 'Bastard' was just in Bo's apartment, it was the best place because many in the community are so passionate about board games. Asger will always treasure the memory of the warm response he received for *Flamme Rouge* when he first showed it to them. He says that it's great that the Café has casual gamers, but what is special is that it also has "the dedicat-

ed hobbyists who want to dive into the weird stuff we throw at them!"

Jacob was totally new to design when he started testing at the Café, so he benefited a lot from learning from this ready-built community of designers, which also included Kasper Lapp, whom Jacob is collaborating with today.

According to Jacob, Danish board games culture is largely based on social media and revolves around *Fastaval* as an annual physical event, but that culture manifests on a day-to-day basis in *Bastard*. Jacob claims that *Fastaval*, with its 40-year history, is the world's best convention, and that it's because of this pedigree, and now also 10 years of *Bastard*, that Denmark has the richest games design culture in the world.

Playtesting in the Café

I'd heard that successful games are tested a lot more than most gamers realize, sometimes hundreds and hundreds of times, so I asked Daniel and Asger how many playtests their games go through before they publish them:

Daniel: It's hard to say.

Asger: Eleven.

Daniel: We couldn't really keep count.

Asger: (still joking) Eleven!

Jacob likes to use social media to find people to test his games in the Café, but he also sometimes asks random people while they are here. He points out that the advantage of testing with strangers is that their feedback may be more honest. Jacob believes it's a beautiful thing that you can approach strangers and connect with them. But he adds that this can be hard when the Café is very full. Most guests are busy with plans they've made in advance, so you have to find different ways of getting your games tested. For example, on the day we spoke, Jacob ran a gaming event for a friend's colleagues, teaching them different games in exchange for them testing and giving feedback on his latest design. "It's rewarding for me to test like that, because I can feel them having a good experience, and the enjoyment is reciprocal."

Bastard's Testing Tuesday events were started by volunteers Jakob Givskud and Max Møller in 2017. Once the events

in the Café became a regular fixture, the older Games Artisans group quickly merged into Bastard's own group.

Jakob G. explains that Nordic Games Artisans were characterized by their definite focus on commercial publication of games, in contradistinction to Fastaval, which has a decidedly non-commercial ethos, especially in its game design com-



petition, where it is forbidden for the games entered to have been sold to publishers. Fastaval's commitment to its artistic ideals is admirable, but the Artisans found these too strict, and hence sought to develop a more business-orientated and pragmatic design environment. This aspect, and much of the Artisans' original DNA has carried over to Testing Tuesday, which might be a surprise because Jakob G. started the events as a kind of extension to Fastaval, where he'd been a head judge of the competition.

But the Artisans didn't make

Testing Tuesday into something just for professionals. Indeed, as Jacob J. indicates, holding it in the Café makes the event, and by extension the design community itself, very inclusive.

Asger explains, "we have all different types of designers at Bastard. Daniel and I are full-time designers and have been doing this for years, and we have steps we go through where we compartmentalize a lot of different aspects of a game in order to test them. There are other designers who come to Testing Tuesday who are brand new,

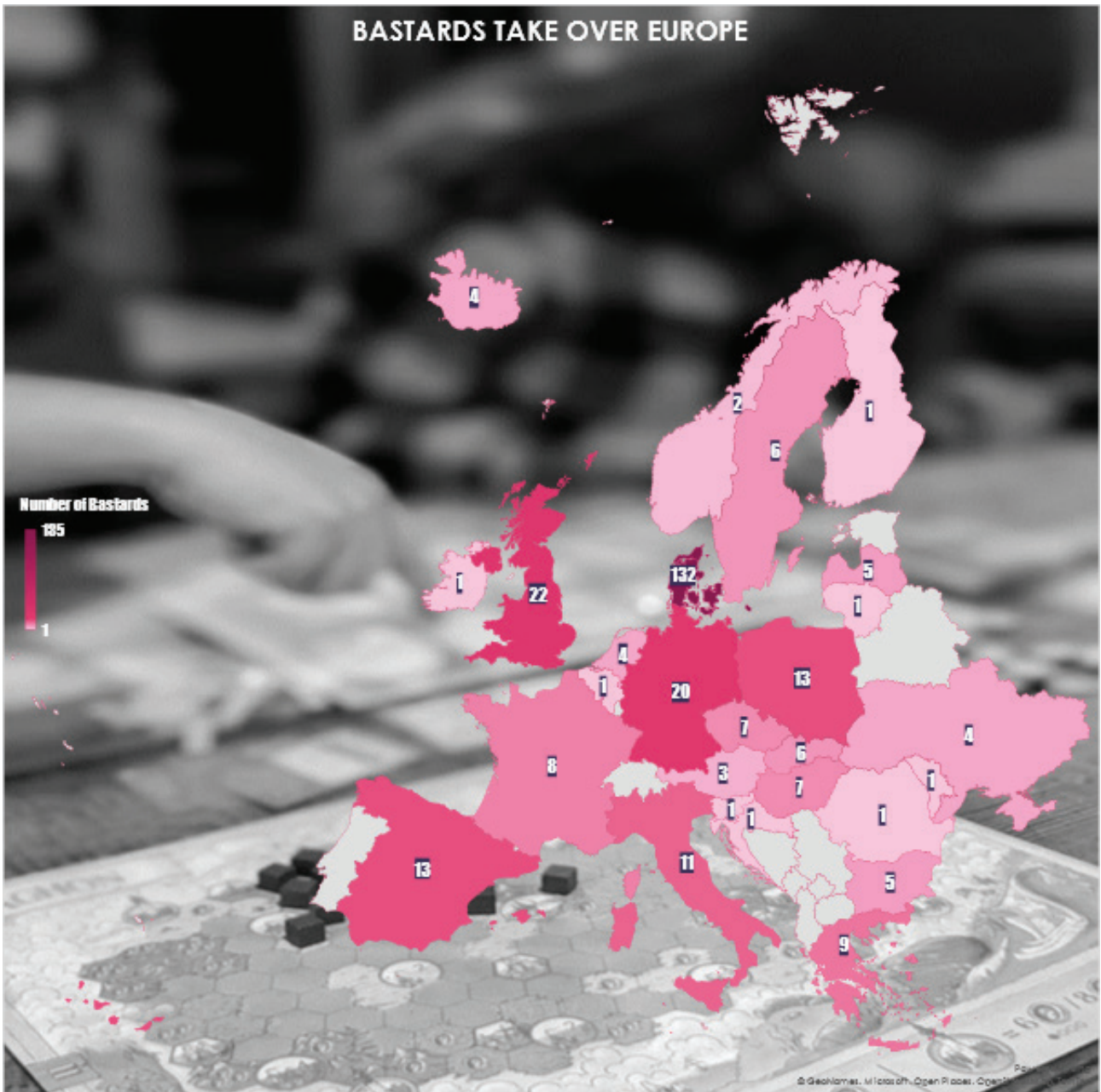
and it's the first time they've been to any kind of designer meet-up and the first time they show their game to anyone who is not their immediate family. And all of it is good and all of it can be included into the format of this event."

It might be surprising that big name designers are willing to spend their time testing random games by random people, and maybe they're sometimes surprised about it themselves, but that happens in Bastard. Of course, this doesn't mean that they necessarily enjoy playing every game, but that's not the point with works in progress. The designers find it rewarding to help others with their exper-

tise, and everyone enjoys the opportunity to air their opinions about games.

Testing Tuesday currently attracts fewer female guests than other public events at Bastard, and one could speculate over whether analyzing and critiquing other attendees' creations appeals more to a 'traditional masculine psyche'. But I think it is a case of testing simply being attractive to a narrower crowd of people compared to general gaming. The organizers are keen for more women to take part, and I'm sure they will, since it is a fun and cozy evening exploring the designers' creations. There's also diversity in the Testing Tuesday crowd already. The Café has been breaking down any barriers there might be between amateur designers and the professionals, and Jacob J. observes that this 'openness' helps the Danish game design community to grow and improve.

Continued in Part 2.



Bastards come from all over the world. Here's how many came from each country in Europe. Infographic by Austin Fossey

TEN YEARS OF FAVOURITE BOARDGAMES!

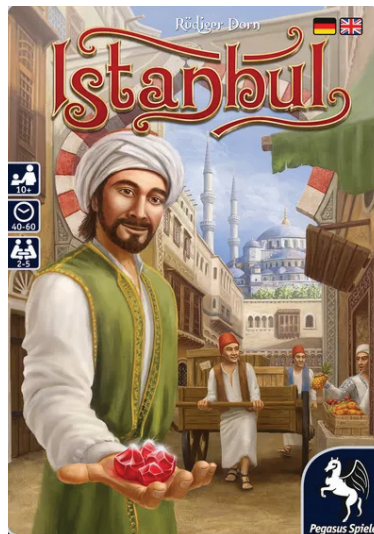
After an internal polling we bring to you the favourite boardgames of Bastard Café

2014

Runner-up: Camel Up

Winner: Istanbul

2-4 player worker placement where you compete to acquire rubies while navigating restricted movement between action spaces.



2017

Runner-up: Spirit Island

Winner: Azul

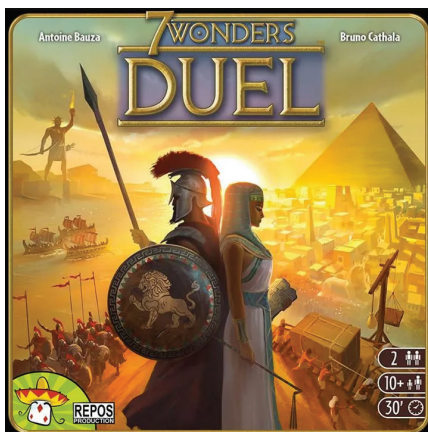
The instantly iconic tile drafting and pattern laying game for 2-4 players.

2015

Runner-up: Blood Rage

Winner: 7 Wonders Duel

Compact head-to-head civilization builder where you have to keep an eye on 3 different ways to win which you and your opponent could exploit.



2016

Runner-up: Scythe

Winner: Great Western Trail

Complex strategy game for 1-4 players about cattle farming and transport across the Old West.



2018

Runner-up: Brass: Birmingham

Winner: Everdell

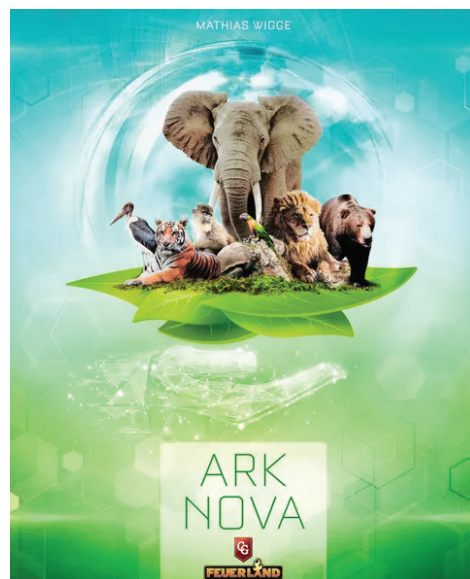
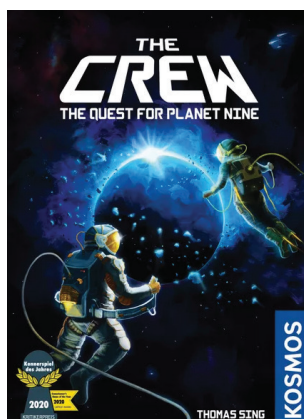
1-4 player worker placement game about cute woodland creatures.

2019

Runner-up: Scout

Winner: The Crew: The Quest for Planet Nine

2-5 player co-op trick-taking game with loads of missions to challenge you.



2021

Runner-up: Cascadia

Winner: Ark Nova

Complex 1-4 player strategy game about expanding your scientifically-managed zoo, where different actions become more powerful the longer you wait before taking them.

2020

Runner-up: MicroMacro: Crime City

Winner: Dune: Imperium

Enjoy a tight blend of worker placement, deck building and combat in this complex 1-4 player game in the Dune universe.



2023

Runner-up: The White Castle

Winner: Earth

Well-balanced tableau building strategy game for 1-5 players about exploring synergies between different plants and habitats.



2022

Runner-up: Flamecraft

Winner: Splendor Duel

Compact head-to-head resource management game where you have to keep an eye on 3 different win conditions you or your opponent could exploit.

INTERVIEWS WITH DESIGNERS: BASTARD & GAME DESIGN, PART 2

PETER HARDY

Game Guru

Testing Tuesday Today

In 2019 Jakob G. and Max handed over the reins for Testing Tuesday to Bastian Borup and Marek Zitnansky. Like many of Bastard Cafe's game gurus, Marek works in computer programming, and he takes an approach to testing games similar to how he would debug some code, which he felt made him a little less popular with some designers to start with. He 'debugs' designers' games by making choices they weren't expecting players to make, and in doing so, he finds flaws where the games break down.



Marek Zitnansky



Photo by Bastian Borup at Testing Tuesday

With time, however, this approach has earned Marek respect, and a major designer who wasn't originally a fan of this approach, now goes to Marek first for an opinion. Bastian is keen to point out that there are other testing groups across Denmark, like Spil på Sporet, which is also in Copenhagen. But what makes Bastard super helpful is that it gives the design community a physical base and the opportunity to reach a wider audience through the Café's popularity.

Something Bastian enjoys in facilitating the event is when he faces something like a first-time designer's labor of love, a project that's seeing daylight for the first time after being worked on for years in a basement. Sometimes the designer has played their game with

friends and family many times, other times they have only played the game by themselves, but either way, Testing Tuesday often marks the first time they have shared the project with other board game designers. These games can be huge, and if the author is not familiar with modern design or testing, they can also be messy. But Bastian enjoys how unexpected and different the ideas with these projects can be.

His stand-out memory was when a new designer brought a game to test with 2 metal suitcases full of materials, which he started setting up on a table. And when he unfolded his game's board, it was almost 2 meters wide as well as 2 meters long, so even on the long tables it couldn't fit, and the group struggled to find a way to support it. What's more, the

massive board was entirely hand painted! In such cases, it's clear new designers have been working without contact with existing designers, and are oblivious to the norms of board game design and demands from publishers. And that's fine, and it's welcome at Testing Tuesday, Bastian says, but the design community's norms for making marketable games are still used as the standard frame of reference for giving feedback, regardless of where the game is coming from.

It strikes me that in addition to the analytical skills involved in picking apart the prototypes and pointing out new possible directions, the event also demands skills in management and a certain level of emotional intelligence, particularly from its facilitators. By moving through 5-10 games each evening, including time for feedback, they need to be very disciplined with keeping the pace and being firm with the other participants, both on the time-keeping and on being honest in their feedback about the projects. Equally important is that people are respectful of

each other's designs, opinions and each other's time. Which naturally is not the case 100% of the time, when dealing with human beings.

One challenge Bastian recalls is, when testers give feedback on part of a game that needs to change, and the designer brings it back without changing anything, and expects players to play it again. Sometimes this is just because of radical design choices which must be respected, and maybe the game is more or less done and hence requires multiple playthroughs in its final state. But sometimes, you have to tell designers they are wasting people's time, if they are not willing to change anything. But thankfully this is rare.

Bastian tries to be both polite and blunt when giving feedback and, in the events I observed, he was clearly in charge of controlling the pace. Not only of the event, but of the gameplay itself. I know I would find it hard to stop a game that was nearly but not quite finished in order to move on to another (especially if I were winning), but Bastian does this consistently, ensuring of course that enough of the game has been played to generate valuable feedback. He adds they prioritize playing games brought by first-time attendees. And if the games take under an hour or if there are more testers in attendance, they can get through more whole games. Bastian emphasizes that the event is not just about helping to improve games, but also





Photo from Bastard Archive

about helping the participants as designers. And because established designers are in a position of power over newer designers they have to be especially careful when giving suggestions and directions, and be encouraging of their future design careers (professional or amateur). As the description for Testing Tuesday on Facebook says: "As a game designer, you are welcome to bring your own ideas, only to see them go down in flames. Flames of love and care, naturally." I ask Bastian if he finds it difficult to 'break bad news', as it were, to designers, and he says that it can of course be hard, but it becomes easier when the tester is more conscious of how important that help could be to the designer. The designer might be saying they are just about to commission art or mass produce components, for example. And the

more the designer thinks their game is finished or the bigger investment they are putting into that version of the game, the more direct or honest Bastian is about the problems he observes, to try to spare the designer from wasting resources, or trying to release the game prematurely. Speaking from my background in teaching, I was really impressed at how well Bastian facilitates the group and the self-discipline he exercises in managing these challenges. I was also quite stunned by how analytically sharp and quick the group -not me- were at pointing out issues with, and making suggestions for the designs. There is a lot of thought, a lot of effort going into this. But the regulars obviously find it

worthwhile. Bastian explains that when a game you've play-tested is published, you don't always get to see the physical mark your feedback has left on the product, but the effect of all that feedback can be felt implicitly running through it, and is still something playtesters can be proud of. Like the other designers I spoke with, Bastian also emphasizes how inclusive the event is. He makes the point that even if you can't come up with a recommended improvement or a more analytical explanation of why you had the reaction that you did, you can always say which parts of the game you enjoyed or didn't, which parts you found hard or easy to understand, and how the experience felt. And these general answers are still invaluable to designers.



Photo from Bastard Archive

So participation doesn't require dazzling analytical skills or any deep understanding of game mechanics.

Moreover, even the experts often contradict each other in their advice, so it is up to the designer to decide which direction to take the game in. And even the more seasoned participants need to remain humble because they don't always get it right. Marek gives the example of *Living Forest* by Aske Christensen, one of the best known games that received a lot of its core testing at the events in Bastard. Marek was still saying that "the fire is just weird and should be cut out" even after playing the final version, which went on to win a number of the industry's biggest design awards, including the *Kenner Spiel des Jahres* or 'Connoisseur's Game of the Year'.

Asger and Daniel's Process

Asger says "there's no rhyme or reason to the way we start a project. Daniel and I have made more than 20 games by now. Sometimes it starts with a mechanism, occasionally with a theme, maybe a stupid



Photo by Mikkel Bækgaard

idea for a title. It could also be an idea for a product, like with *13 Days* it started with a strong idea of making a Cold War game that felt like *Twilight Struggle* but in a 30-minute game time. Games begin from all different directions."

Daniel adds, "and once you've begun development that all becomes a blur anyway."

Daniel emphasizes that "it is crucial to keep playtesting at every single step of the design." Asger clarifies that testing isn't just about checking that the game (still) works, but that listening to player's feedback also informs an ongoing design process. It provides, for example, "a way forward from problems that you can't solve by just having clever ideas on your own."

Daniel points out that "in the early stages of a design what you have is very raw. We make prototypes with handwritten cards [this also means that they can be adjusted as

they go]. There's no graphics to draw people in, it's just to see if it works mechanically and to find the core idea. So at that stage it's very important to play with other designers."

Asger explains that "Testing Tuesday is very useful for this. While some designers prefer to stick to Testing Tuesdays, we come to that event for the early stages of a design to test with other designers, and then we move on to testing with other groups."

Daniel adds that "At some point



Photo from Bastard Archive

it starts to materialize as a game and we begin inserting more and more graphic design, and once it looks appealing there will be a wider crowd of gamers willing to test it.”

At these later playtests, Asger and Daniel make use of iterative prototyping, they go through lots of different versions or iterations of the game to gradually refine their product. One of the techniques they use to complement this is coming up with a variety of versions of different elements, alterations of a card, for example, and invite players to choose their favorite of each. I notice they are careful to give each player time to think and to answer separately, so that it doesn't happen that everyone just echoes the first person's answer.

They also test with different crowds, different types of players. “We do things like what we just did before this interview,” Daniel adds, “which was to see which version of the iconography you prefer. And for that we need players who haven't tested this game before, who don't

know what the icons stand for.”

I ask them if they get enough tests done in Copenhagen or do they send prototypes out to testing groups around the world? Daniel says he and Asger have done that a bit in the past, but they don't like that it removes them from the equation. “We always write an objective for each specific test and then sit there and watch, we try not to interfere (even if players have misunderstood something, because that is also useful to see), actually we are observing and taking notes. If we send prototypes out that might get lots of tests in, but without having been there we won't know the significance of them.”

Launch Events

Not only have many games had a lot of their initial plays and design taking place at Bastard, but the café has also hosted a number of game launches.

Jacob J. [henceforth just Jacob] says he couldn't have made *Fog of Love* without the Café, so of course he had to hold the 'premiere' event here, which ended up being cov-

ered by Danish television, TV2. With the launch party for *Heat*, Daniel remembers he was expecting just a few friends and family to show up, but when he came through the entrance he was met with the sight of a long line of people queuing, and others running up to try to get in. “It was really special to see people respond like that after all the work we'd put in.” Asger adds: “When we hold the premiere for a game there's no question of where we're going to do it, Bastard Café is the centerpoint of everything board game related in Copenhagen, of course it will be here.”

Continued in Part 3.



TOP 10 DANISH BOARD-GAMES ACCORDING TO BASTARD CAFÉ



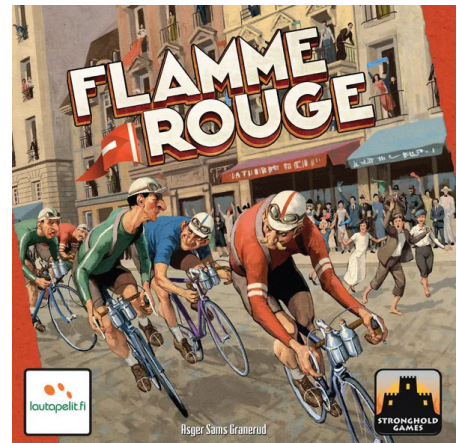
Klask (2014)
Mikkel Bertelsen

2 player dexterity game similar to air hockey, but you control the play via magnets under the board.



Champions of Midgard (2015)
Ole Steiness

Viking-themed worker placement with a splash of fighting and dice for 2-4 players.



Flamme Rouge (2016)
Asger Harding Granerud

1-4 player card-driven game about managing the pace of your pair of cyclists in a race around a modular course.

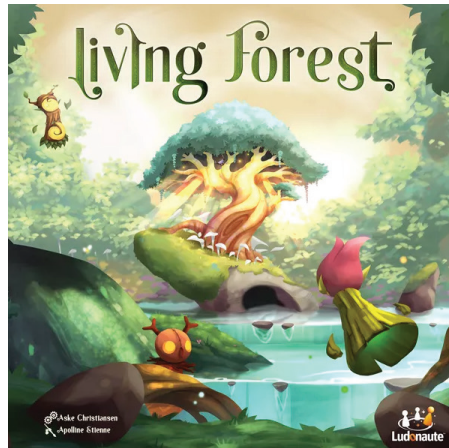
Fog of Love (2017)
Jacob Jaskov

Narrative experience for 2 players where you each develop characters with hidden goals as you role play a dating scenario with an uncertain outcome.



Magic Maze (2017)
Kasper Lapp

Real-time co-op game about a band of thieves, where no player controls a specific character but you each can move all of them in different ways.



Living Forest (2021) ~ Aske Christiansen

1-4 player strategy game which beautifully marries deck-building, tile-placement, and push-your-luck elements.



Heat: Pedal to the Metal (2022) ~ Asger Harding Granerud & Daniel Skjold Pedersen

1-6 player card-driven racing game with a strong push-your-luck element.



Shake That City (2023) ~ Mads Fløe & Kåre Torndahl Kjær

1-4 player city building game where the patterns in which tiles can be placed are randomized each round.

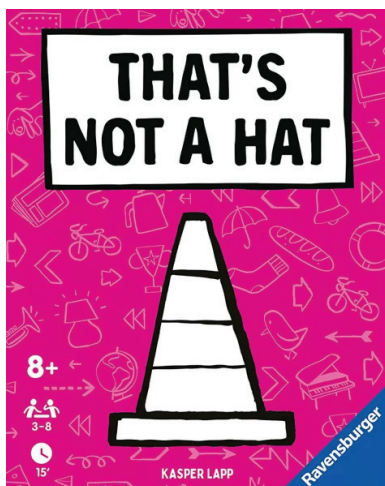
Hard To Get (2023) ~ Mads Emil Christensen

Co-op party word game where one player gives hints based on how the answer relates to an often humorous spectrum between two categories.



That's Not A Hat (2023) ~ Kasper Lapp

Party game about remembering the items on face down cards which you and your opponents are continually passing to each other.



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INTERVIEWS WITH DESIGNERS: BASTARD & GAME DESIGN, PART 3

PETER HARDY

Game Guru

Designers' advice for other Designers

I ask each of the designers what they've learned that's elevated their design process. For Bastian, it's about rapid prototyping, about being able to produce and update prototypes faster for more frequent and precise testing. For graphics he recommends the software Affinity Designer. For designing games with cards, he recommends having the values on the cards in Excel spreadsheets and using Affinity Publisher for data merging. Moments after you adjust the data in Excel, Affinity can update the cards and you can print out the shiny new designs (on paper, typically using plastic card sleeves). This is useful from early in the design process right up to last minute changes. Bastian also points out that AI art can also be used to make attractive prototypes quickly, even if you would not use AI art in the final product.

Asger says "it's easy to get lost in the quest for perfection, but the single most important thing people can learn is not to try to design the whole game at once. That's what most people try to do. A game is usually lots of interlocking complex systems and if you try to get every single one of those right at once, you have an overwhelming task in front of you and you're going to lose focus. I think you can even say 'right now it's not important exactly how you win', for example. Focus on one small thing, try to learn about that and once you know what's good or bad about it, then you can move on to the next part. Trying to do everything at once is the biggest mistake I see people, even experienced designers, make. But that's from my point of view with my own design process, which is not the same as others'."

Daniel remembers being somewhat surprised by how easy it was to start making a game and to start showing it to people and improving it. Of course "There's a long way and a lot of work from just having something ready



Photo by Elisabeth Hardy

to put on the table, to having a game that's ready to be released." But Daniel wants people to hear that getting started and most of the individual steps are not too difficult, it's motivation and persistence which are more of a challenge.

On that point, Jacob says what's most helpful is committing to frequent testing, with the support of the community. Originally he started out designing for Fastaval, but as an annual event, that becomes quite an abstract goal when it is 6 or 9 months away. Testing Tuesday, Jacob says, is fantastic as a source of regular motivation to make progress and create something to show within weeks.

In each of the conversations, we touch on the distinction between the science of designing a well-

balanced set of rules, and creating a game as a work of art. I realized that if games were just mind sports for the purpose of being competitive, then they wouldn't necessarily have to be fun experiences. But according to Jacob, designers today don't just want to make products that succeed in the market, they also want people to enjoy them. "That is why we avoid designing turns that take too long, and experiment instead with other ways of keeping the flow of the game engaging, and why we have been moving away from penalties that punish players in a way that reduces their freedom or feels bad, like the old-fashioned missing a turn. But we are also on the lookout for new spots in which to create novel experiences and new highpoints."

Asger is clear that his and Daniel's games exist primarily to enhance social events. "An illustration of that is that in the early phase of development, if people keep asking if they can do something, then we will make that possible in the game. It's much more about creating a good experi-

ence than creating perfectly competitive rules."

Daniel elaborates that game "development is about finding where the fun is in the experience and amplifying it. Often the fun will be in puzzling things out, which can be more or less of a brain burner, as long as it's engaging. Whether it's a head-to-head battle like 13 Days or more working on your own puzzle like Hutan, the question is how do we create the most fun experience around that activity."



Photo by Austin

Jacob agrees. He says a designer's task is to find the game's key emotional moment and develop everything else around that. While particular mechanics can always be added or removed during design, you need

to stay true to the key emotional moment that the game is aiming to facilitate.

Asger says his and Daniel's approach is generally to 'overdesign' by including too many mechanics and rules to start with, and gradually strip them down to just the essentials this particular game requires. This passion for streamlining is also why the pair make shorter, family-level games: any time they have a longer, more complex design, their development style results in it being simplified down into a more entry-level title. The elements that were removed are used in developing different games instead. So this not only means they have a wider target audience, it also helps them to have plenty of games in the design pipeline. The downside is that, since online attention (particularly the community go-to, Board Game Geek) is heavily skewed towards more complex games, and since they don't support the titles they publish as Sidekick Games with marketing, they have to work harder to get a buzz going about them. Jacob points out that rather than starting with an over-designed game or even a functioning one, you can also just playtest

individual mechanics in the abstract, without them being plugged into the context of a game, and see how they work or feel. He concedes that this is controversial and that many designers -or playtesters!- might not like it.

Design of less complex games is not limited to Asger and Daniel, but is characteristic of the Danish scene more generally. Ole Steiness' Champions of Midgard (2015) and Peter B. Hoffgaard's Starship Captains (2022) are a bit more complex, but it doesn't seem that any very heavy Danish

games have become popular yet. Bastian observes other tendencies in the Danish design scene: that games have little text but are more icon-driven, and that there are fewer highly thematic games, now that designers have learned that publishers will often want to change the original theme. Self-publishing can then be an avenue for a designer who doesn't want their theme or game changed by other parties, but of course that isn't an option open to everyone.

Are games getting better generally and what would you still like to achieve yourselves?

Both the tabletop market and games cafés have recently experienced rapid growth, but does that imply that games are getting better? Asger thinks that games really are getting better, "but with the caveat that the simpler, core ideas of game design naturally have been exploited earlier on. But once you get to middle or higher complexity, the room for creativity and improvement is still very large. It's just like when you have a new genre of music like rock, after 30 years, once the community and industry has grown, you have sub-genres like prog rock and punk rock. Another way of saying that it's improved is to say that there's more that fits better to your exact tastes, without those necessarily being better for everyone. That's how it is with the new sub-genres of games being explored today. A bigger industry also has more room for more niche games." Daniel is a little more cautious. He comments that "tastes have changed as well, and although it is easy to criticize older games now, there are forgotten gems



Photo from Bastard Archive

from every era.” He makes the distinction that whether or not games are actually better today, the process of designing games has become smarter and more refined. I (Peter) agree. As Jacob said above, designers today are even more focused on enjoyment, and especially, I would venture, on the enjoyment of players who aren’t winning. This is the most significant development in modern design. While traditional games seem to have been based on the assumption that play should feel miserable while you’re losing (perhaps to make winning feel that much better), many modern games are fun even when you’re not beating anyone else. Two ways in which they do this are with games where players cooperate to achieve a common goal (probably the only genre of board games to have been decried as ‘woke’ by Fox News) and/or with ‘engine building.’

Engine building is where you can invest in becoming more powerful for actions later in the game, often at a short term cost. These investments are not necessarily worth the



Photo By Bo Jørgensen

cost, which provokes risk-reward decisions about when to focus on ‘building your engine’ and when to focus instead on actions towards achieving of your goals more directly. One extremely popular form of engine building is deck building, introduced by *Dominion* (2008). Many Euro-style strategy games also combine engine building with action drafting, which synergize well because they both promote a soft form of competition, where the focus is more upon ‘the personal puzzle’ each player has in front of them. In these kinds of games most actions will earn you at least some points, so being blocked from one or two actions is not such a punishing setback, and hence action drafting mecha-

nisms with blocking are popular here.

What engine building contributes to this is a narrative arc and an engaging feeling of growth as the players’ economies or powers develop. Crucially, no matter how badly you’re doing, you still have this satisfying sense of making progress. You can puzzle-out the moves that work best for your engine, i.e. for the strategic path you’ve taken, and you keep adding to your score -hopefully beating your own previous scores, if not those of other players. It’s true that some players might prefer an experience where points are hard to win and not playing well enough is rewarded by being left long behind your opponents. But games that aren’t quite so cut-throat attract a wider audi-



Photo from Bastard Archive

ence, and draw more new people into the hobby. And far from ruining the sense of competition, games that are closer scoring make it harder to predict who will win, creating a more tense race for first place.

For Jacob, “designers are getting better at learning how to facilitate experiences and combine those experiences in games. Take legacy games [e.g. Pandemic Legacy, where you play through a campaign of 12 games of Pandemic], there was so much brilliance there, at least initially, with integrating additional storytelling into games and combining that with players taking more ownership of the play, for example by creating or naming elements, which imbues the game with your own narrative which is intertwining both

with the narrative designed in the game, and also with narratives created in-game by how the specifics play out.” This makes for a much more multilayered and engaging experience. “So there is still a lot more that can be explored in game design, and implemented better.”

I suggest to Jacob that his Fog of Love also broke new ground in this more narrative-rich space between board games and role-playing. “Yes, to really innovate we have to learn from and integrate elements from different fields, be that role-playing or something else, if we are going to elevate the experience for the players. But there is also the sense in which games are improving by doing the same things they are doing already, but in more streamlined

forms. For example, I am exploring the concept of games that can be explained in one minute, and there are also recent games which deliver similar experiences to older games but do so more quickly and elegantly. Naturally, there are also games being made today that are worse than older games, but on average the quality is going up.”

“I still want to push the boundaries of narrative experiences in board games, building on Fog of Love with something that is more story-driven and less mechanistic, e.g. with less use of numerical values or points, but more use of images and interpretation. Games need to have plenty of choices with trade-offs, but the question is how to do that with choices which feel less like an economy of resources. One help is to make them life choices, like the romantic ones in Fog of Love.

“I’d like to include and explore more internal conflicts, for example with a game themed around coming of age, or a dysfunctional family. The theme or narrative in most board games is similar to ‘genre fiction’, in that they are focused on fighting external threats. What I am excited about is something closer to

'literary fiction' than to genre fiction, where the risk and the stakes are rooted in personal, internal conflict, rather than in the typical power fantasy of killing enemies.

"I'd also like to design more with the ambiguous element that Fog of Love has, where you don't know if you are competing or cooperating with the other players. We don't know if our goals as players are aligned. That should also be what it feels like in exploration games you encounter someone new. I want to play around with the binary assumption that games should be either always fighting or always collaborating. Focusing on life choices and ambiguity creates an openness for narrative elements and choices to play a larger role in a game."

A fellow guru, Kamilla, asks Daniel and Asger if they have their sights set on creating a game even more popular than Heat? "The odds are", Daniel concedes, "that we won't have another hit as big as Heat, but that won't stop us trying." Asger adds that "from inside the situation it always feels like an impos-

sible hill to conquer, but then one day you might conquer it." He says he wants each game to be loved by someone somewhere, even if it doesn't become a success.

Daniel explains that "now Asger and I have our own publishing company, Sidekick Games, our aim is to hone every aspect of our games to make them really stand out from the crowd and give the best experiences they can." He continues that "this applies equally to games we're publishing from other designers (e.g. Dan & Tristan Halstad's Aqua), and after thousands of hours of work, they feel just as much like our own games as the games we've designed!" Asger dreams of designing an 'evergreen' game that is still selling when he's dead- "even if I have to die slowly so that I'm aware of it! But the goal is to create something that will remain part of the gaming zeitgeist, both as a matter of pride and for financial security, which of course also goes hand in hand with spreading more joy."

Look out for Jacob Jaskov's The Vibe which will be available in January 2025, and

Daniel and Asger's Hutan coming later in 2025. Testing Tuesday takes place at the central Huset Café at 19:00-23:00 on Tuesdays in even numbered weeks. Everyone is welcome, including non-designers who are curious to test projects. And if you plan to show up, check Bastard's calendar or the Facebook event for that week for any alterations. Finally, Asger emphasizes that whether you're coming to the Café for playtesting or not, it's a fantastic space to be in, which people from all over Denmark should visit, as well as international tourists, "it's a marvelous little gem."



Photo from Bastard Archive

Bastard #1 favourite Hot Chocolate with whipped cream and all the toppings!

LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE WITH BOARD GAMES

PETER HARDY

Game Guru

Bastard Café is a diverse international hub at the heart of the Danish capital. When I discovered Bastard, the cafe community quickly became the center of my social world, as it has for many people, interlopers and Danes alike. This cosmopolitan climate is reflected in the use of English as standard among both gurus and bartenders, and our preference for English versions of games for the benefit of the many tourists and international students who flood through our doors.

But for we immigrants planning to stay in the country, spending all your social time in an English-speaking environment is hardly conducive to learning the local language. You might already see all-Danish groups speaking English with each other, and then once you sit down with them as a foreigner, you can forget about trying to get them to speak Danish with you. Danes

are chronically deaf to the difference between being able to speak Danish with an accent and not being able to speak it at all. They're the real bastards.

I started learning Danish in 2020, and as lots of my classes were online, it was difficult to get used to speaking. I don't know why, but it took years before I heard there were conversation clubs you could go to in order to practice with other learners. Perhaps that was because of the great pestilence of the age, but I suspect the teachers I was paying didn't want me to know these free clubs existed!

But with the idea lodged firmly in my brain, I tried in 2021, and again in the less-covidy 2022, as a guru to start such a club in the café. In both cases, no one was interested, and after the second attempt, I was ready to give up. But just like it is easier to play games by going to games clubs than it is to persuade the non-gamers you already know to play them, I discovered that it was easier to find people who wanted to learn Danish first, and then to bring them to the cafe second. Ultimately I met Frida, a social butterfly who was going to different clubs every day, and who, along with her husband Asger, wanted to start volunteering at the cafe and help run a club here. Having a team of volunteers, and contacts in the various clubs and schools to



Traditional Danish cake men for the group's birthday. Photo by Frida.



Easier to learn Danish when you're full of pastry. Photo by Frida.

invite, made it much easier to get started. Third time lucky they say.

For the group's first meeting in March 2023 we had over 20 people, which is larger than most public events at Bastard. We have continued every month since, usually with a more modest 12 attendees, of whom many are volunteers, but we had over 20 again for our first birthday. I came up with the name 'spil og rolig' for the event, a pun on a Danish phrase, but realized it was better to go with the more prosaic 'Let's Play & Practice Danish' so that it's clear what it is.

Some people expect us to play a lot of word games like Scrabble or Codenames in Danish, but these are actually very difficult if you haven't already mastered the language. We throw in the occasional word game like Just One, but it is mostly other simple party games which can be played quickly with larger groups of people. I also like to use games with lots of physical movement like Kluster, because they get people engaged quickly, even if they aren't used to board games.

If the game has text in Danish, that's a plus, but I'm not looking for us to learn Danish directly from the games,

as much as from chatting while we're playing. Sometimes the games are simple enough that we can talk about something else while playing. But the game is also an icebreaker for speaking with strangers, and you can always talk about the game if nothing else. And some games, like Skull, we've played specifically because they get you talking. We try to teach some vocabulary and phrases about gaming to make this easier, here are some examples:

- **Bunke** (noun) - stack or pile e.g. of cards, tiles. Note that tiles are called '*brikker*' like other playing pieces, and that 'discard pile' is one of many gaming terms where Danes typically just use English.

- **Dims** (noun) - a little miscellaneous thingy. Useful to avoid calling everything a 'brik'.
- **Mål** (noun) - goal/s or objective/s. Examples of other words where the plural is the same as the singular are *point* (point/s), *spil* (game/s), *gæt* (guess/es) and *kort* (card/s).
- **Skjult** - hidden, e.g. your cards are hidden.
- **Vende om** (verb) - turn over, e.g. cards.
- **Rykke** (verb) - move, e.g. a piece
- **Når turen/runden/spillet er slut** - when the turn/round/game is over. A handy phrase when explaining rules.
- **Blive liggende** - remain in place, e.g. the tiles remain in place between rounds.
- **Det er x point værd [eller minus x point]** - it is worth x points.

- **Indhente** (verb) - catch up, can also use '*at hale ind på*'. '*At overhale*' is to overtake.

It also helped get the group going that we piggybacked on Bastard's established weekly Let's Play events, where gurus teach a game to whoever shows up. Taking over one of these free events each month for our club gave us a regular structure, and granted us some semblance of respectability. I spoke with a woman named Mink who comes to Let's Play every week, and she enjoys how the Danish group adds to the already diverse range of games and events offered. She says it's uniquely fun because it "combines two of my favorite hobbies which are board games and languages."

Another attendee says she generally only comes to the cafe for our event. She explains, "it's a good opportunity because there aren't many places to learn Danish that are fun." She then adds, "Of course, how much Danish we speak depends on the level the others are at, but it's good

that the group is welcoming and includes different ability levels."

So although playing games can make our event more fun than other conversation clubs, we have to strike a balance between language practice and games. This often means explaining some rules in English to make sure everyone understands before switching to Danish while we play. But Frida has also found games like Durian and That's Not a Hat which have such simple rules that they can be understood even by beginners in Danish.

Sorting people into groups to play games is also complicated, because we have to account for their Danish proficiency as well as their preference of game. Frida and others often bring Danish partners or friends with them, and we try to keep friends together at the tables, even if they are at quite different learning stages. Our emphasis is on creating an enjoyable social event first, and then on learning Danish second.

Mink says it is working well because "other than the joy, I always learn something new from



Danish delicacy “Koldskål” - “Coldbowl”

the event.” And I take the view that it’s worthwhile as long as you hear a few new words or phrases each time. This applies equally to the absolute beginners as well as to those of us who’ve now passed all the exams.

Having passed those exams, I confess I’m finding it harder to motivate myself to work on this project, but that’s why it’s important for volunteer leaders to be part of a team and embedded in a community, because that gives more support and incentive to keep the events going. And even if my only motivation for making these events were selfish, they still improve my post-exam Danish. As luck would have it, other people enjoy them and find them helpful too.

Frida has found the group quite useful because, in her profession as a nurse, she had to learn Danish before she could work in Denmark. She passed the exams in a quarter of the time it took me, and her advice for learning a language quickly is to combine it with something that you find fun or have a talent for, whether that’s board games or something else. Mink says that what is most special about the events is “the safe feeling” in the cafe. She likens the experience to having a “playground” to explore with “no right or wrong.” This means there’s much less pressure on your language performance here than you would find in other clubs or opportunities for speaking Danish. And because of this

low barrier to entry, it’s easier to get into conversation. Frida agrees that this helps make Danish feel less like hard work. With our events, the focus on games means that the attention isn’t all on the conversation, so it doesn’t feel so bad if you make mistakes or can’t really hold a conversation yet. Chatting with fellow non-native speakers makes you feel less self-conscious, and we understand each other’s broken, mispronounced, or heavily accented Danish more readily –and with fewer interruptions– than native speakers can. Yes, we make mistakes that go uncorrected, but that is a price well worth paying for the confidence and practice you build from having more conversations. We also have plenty of Danes able to answer questions, but it’s really this low-stakes, low-pressure space for conversation practice which is the unique opportunity we’re offering with Let’s Play & Practice Danish.



SPREADING THE BOARDGAME REVOLUTION: HOW DOES ONE MAKE A BOARDGAME CAFÉ?

AUSTIN FOSSEY

Game Guru

Starting a boardgame café is like opening a new boardgame. You're excited to get going, but there is a lot you need to set up and prepare before that first dice roll. It's tough. But it's a lot easier if someone else can show you the ropes! That's why we reached out to other bastions of the boardgame community to bring you expert advice about running a boardgame café.

Starting a Board Game Café

"It takes a certain amount of craziness to open a board game cafe," says Felix Goldberg of Paradise Board Game Bar in Vienna, "so the best advice is probably not to." But crazy or not, board game cafes continue to open around the world, driven by increased consumer interest in tabletop

games and the fervor of a thriving subculture. Boardgame cafes are natural evolutions of a vibrant, extant, local boardgame scene.

To get going, you need to leverage that groundswell of community enthusiasm for boardgames. "Find your prospective guests with the aim of attracting as many people as you can, including newcomers [to boardgames]," advises Ági Széll, CEO of Board Game Café in Budapest. But, she adds, it's not just the gamers you want to engage. "Find your local business contacts—other board game places nearby, game publishers, game stores, board game influencers—anyone with whom you might cooperate in the future." Goldberg agrees. "Boardgame fans are a great bunch of people, who want to share their hobby. They might help you getting started, bring people to your place, or might even support you with tasks."



Austin at Board Game Café in Budapest

Also be mindful of how people use your space—it's not like other cafes. "Board game cafes are specifically set up to host community events of all kinds and be safe spaces," explains Greg May, Owner of Hex and Co. in New York. "The biggest challenge for us is always managing and balancing space for the different demands [of our guests] (walk-ins versus reservations versus Meetup groups, trading card games versus roleplaying games, et cetera)."

Board Game Cafes are Better than Regular Cafes, and Everyone Knows It.

"It's a great space to go with friends, but it can be an equally fantastic place to meet new people," says Courtnie Tinneny of Hop & Vine in Stockholm. "Our

team is mostly expats who find it can be difficult meeting new people in a different country. We host a weekly board game evening where people can come and meet other board gamers.” Tinneney hits on one of the advantages of a boardgame cafe: it naturally needs events. Boardgame events attract guests while also adding to the energy and authenticity of the place. It’s a key difference between a café that simply has boardgames and a legitimate boardgame café. “Our regulars are always super welcoming, and there can be a very cooperative feel when it comes to teaching people the rules of a game,” explains Tinneney.

A boardgame event necessitates strangers coming together to learn, compete, cooperate, but mainly to just play. Playing with people you don’t know is an experience you get less and less often as you grow up, but boardgame cafes tap into that childlike, joyful instinct to play with whoever is around. Goldberg explains what happens when you add boardgames into a café environ-

ment: “[When a café carries boardgames], you might enjoy your regular cup of tea, your café latte, but also try out the hottest boardgames, meet new people or just expand your evening program. Tired of losing at pub quizzes? Maybe a boardgame cafe is your alternative.” (Editor’s note: lots of people lose at Bastard Café’s pub quizzes.)

The Rewards of Running a Boardgame Cafe

Some people start a boardgame café to make their hobby into their livelihood. Some do it to get discount prices on games. Some do it to break an ancient curse on



their family and bring vengeance upon their enemies. But for these café managers, it’s all about the people: the new converts and the loyal regulars. Goldberg says that it is particularly rewarding to get new people interested in boardgames. “Some people might think they don’t like boardgames, because they have had bad experiences with Monopoly, Risk, or



Boardgame Café Hop & Vine in Stockholm



Trivial Pursuit, but they can be turned around when we find the right game for the group and show them how fun a shared analog experience can be.”

Széll agrees. “[The most rewarding thing has been] the pleasure to share the passion of playing board games with more and more people and involve them in a quality-time hobby and even form a local core audience,” she explains. That investment of energy to share her passion pays off in increased customer engagement. “[It’s rewarding to get] positive feedback saying people like to spend their time in your place, and to consequently feel that you are gaining popularity . . . [and playing] a central role in your local community.”

Those new converts eventu-

ally become loyal regulars. “We get to see so many people come back week after week (sometimes multiple times per week) and we love the chats we have with them,” says Tinneny. “We have people that have been supporting us from the early days who we have got to know, and we really look forward to seeing them.”

The Three Biggest Challenges of Running a Boardgame Cafe

There are three major challenges to running a boardgame café: setting up the café, turning a profit, and realizing that your passion has suddenly become your work. Get ready for the cold, hard slap of reality.

1. Setting Up the Café –

“You’ll need more money than you think,” says May, “and you should definitely have a team of folks to help. It’s nearly impossible to do it yourself and be successful because there are so many parts to the business. . . every location will have its own unique issues: permitting, licensing, leasing,

taxation rules, sourcing items, marketing.”

Tinneny and Széll also cited the challenges of finding a central location, sourcing games, and marketing the café so that people know about it. “Once people start coming, you then have to start working out how to build up the off-peak sessions,” explains Tinneny. “And figuring out where to get your board games [is a challenge]. We support a local board game store called Dragon’s Lair and buy most of our games through them, and it is really great being able to recommend a local store where someone can buy the game they have been enjoying playing [at our café].”

A good game selection is key, says Goldberg: “A boardgame cafe should provide everything from light party games to the



Bastard Café in Copenhagen



Hex and Co. in New York

heaviest Euro to the hottest Kickstarter-darling. Nevertheless, up to 80-85% of our clients are more casual players. It's probably good to keep that in mind when you're picking your games."

2. Turning a Profit – Once people are there, you still need to make a profit. "It's very different from having a regular cafe, restaurant or bar," says Tinneny. "You don't get the same table turnover. In restaurants people are coming in because they want to eat, drink, spend their money and leave. In board game cafes people want to sit for hours to play their games. Playing the games is the focus, not necessarily spending money on food and drinks." Tinneny explains that there is the added cost of the

wear and tear of the games themselves. "Board games are expensive to buy, maintain and replace," she says. "People spill drinks, games get damaged and worn, pieces get lost, games are stolen." Tinneny recommends investing in elastic bands to keep boxes closed and card sleeves to protect games while people are eating. She also recommends being mindful of your menu: "People often like the type of thing that's easy to eat while playing. Finger foods and snacks. Nothing that can easily make a mess on one of

your lovely board games!" That means no ribs or spaghetti. Tinneny also shared a reminder to think about table sizes. There needs to be enough space for the game and the food and drinks, but larger tables can limit how many paying guests you are able to seat. May agrees and explains that one strategy they use is to have different types of tables. "Couples want smaller, more intimate tables for date nights, whereas Warhammer players need specific, larger tables."



Austin at Paradise Board Game Bar in Vienna



3. Your Passion Suddenly Becomes Work – Once you are open and have a good stream of customers, there is still the mental challenge of work bleeding into what was once just for fun. “At one point your hobby turns into a job,” laments Goldberg, “and what used to be (literally) fun and games, is now taken over by explaining rules over and over, filling seats, and serving drinks. Beyond the usual challenge of running a business, the weight of everything crushes our passion and the reasons why you first started the whole thing.”

Damn, dude. That’s depressing. But fear not, because we asked these boardgame café managers about the secret ingredients that lead to triumph!

The Three Essential Ingredients (Besides Boardgames)

1. Awesome staff and volunteers – “The most important thing is our wonderful team who make the place run and the customers keep coming in,” says Tinneney. “We wouldn’t be what we are without them!” Goldberg agrees and emphasizes the importance of leveraging volunteers or game gurus who help customers pick games and learn the rules. “[For guests], picking a game and working through 30-45 minutes of setup and studying the rules take the fun out of it. We want to minimize this experience.”

2. A sweet atmosphere – “People like to try unique places for spending quality time with their family members, friends, boyfriends-girlfriends, where they can do something together besides eating or drinking,” says Széll. “A place specialized for a given thematic like board games is just this type of unique place.” It’s important to make the

space fun and inviting for people who might not normally play boardgames, adds Goldberg. “Gaming still has somewhat of a nerdy stigma of playing in dark and damp cellars,” he explains. “Try to keep up with trends and design of modern cafes, just adding boardgames for that unique touch.”

3. Those little touches – “Pens and paper are often requested, notes Tinneney. “Spare dice and regular playing cards too.” These little touches make the game-play experience feel that much smoother. Széll also notes the importance of having scheduled, advertised events. These not only attract new guests, but they also add to the sense of legitimacy of the café as the place for boardgames. Boardgame cafes can be challenging ships to steer, but they have the symbiotic benefit of thriving with a local boardgame community. The richness and enthusiasm of that community bolsters the success of a boardgame café, and vice versa. If you are opening your own boardgame café, we hope to visit you someday!



Toilet art at Bastard Café documented by Austin Fossey

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