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Rolling the dice with their own game

Inventors | A local pair hope their own German-style game catches on with families

BY CATHERINE TREVISON
THE OREGONIAN

Kings, aliens, pirates and tycoons strategize over creamy tablecloths at a hotel ballroom in Vancouver. Some are pale, some a bit paunchy, taking breaks from real lives in software design or physics or engineering. On this warm Saturday night, at the eighth annual GameStorm Convention, almost 200 board gamers are jostling with friends for treasure, power and life.

KC Humphrey sags against one of the banquet tables, his forehead bright with sweat. Fourteen people have signed up for a tournament of his new game, in which players re-fight crucial battles of a medieval European war with decks of brilliantly colored cards. He has been hustling between the tables, his short white ponytail whipping behind him, because it is now, as the battles start, that

players decide if this game is fun. It's a crucial moment for Humphrey, who has spent months convincing people that Havoc: The Hundred Years War, is worth playing and that he and his SunRiver Games partner, Chris Brooks, will deliver more like it in the future.

"People want to make it more difficult than it is," he says, as the players examine hands filled with pitchforks and battle axes, and study rules for scavenging and looting the dead. "Think of it as rummy or canasta."

In the daytime, Humphrey, 50, of Gresham, is a safety advocate for the Oregon Department of Transportation, analyzing crashes and figuring out how to prevent them. In his free time, he's one of the newest American designers of German-style games, also called Euro games or designer games.

German-style games are frequently aimed at families, with themes and easily learned rules that appeal to children and adults at the same time. They are intended to be social, with plenty of in-

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"It's basically grass roots. It's word of mouth."

Scott Aiden, co-founder of boardgamegeek.com, about the German-style board games

KC Humphrey of Gresham (right) designs German-style board games in his free time. This one is called Isla Nova.

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Inside: Three German-style games you must try. | **E8**

Games: Europeans flock to strategic play of board games

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teraction; players often negotiate or bluff, and all stay in until the end. Strategy, more than roll-and-move luck, rules the board.

In Europe, such games are a common part of family life. Newspapers review them, publishers promote the hottest game designers, and a giant annual game festival in Germany creates blockbusters with its awards. Although German-style games started creeping into the U.S. market in the mid-1990s, the genre here remains largely un-advertised and underground, nurtured by a growing number of playing groups that meet in living rooms, restaurants and bookshops.

"It's basically grass roots. It's word of mouth. There's no mainstream media attention," says Scott Alden, one of the founders of a Dallas-based Web site called BoardGameGeek.com.

Geek is a term of endearment, Alden insists, embraced by the analytical minds that populate many American game groups. BoardGameGeek has grown from 100,000 visitors per month a year ago to 500,000 a month now, and has attracted enough advertising for Alden to work on the site full time.

Despite that growth, he's not sure German-style games will find their niche here.

"I think the world would be a better place," Alden says. "You sit around and laugh and talk face-to-face. You get that social connection."

But American families are so hooked in to television and video games, he says, that there may be no time — or no will — to learn new sets of rules.

Getting into the game

Like most gamers, Humphrey grew up with American standards such as Monopoly. They didn't warm his heart.

They're so much a part of the culture "that you probably wouldn't have a proper childhood without them," he says. "Games that reward bullies or incredible luck — they have their own place."

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3 German-style games to get you hooked

When people ask Boardgame News editor Rick Thornquist for his favorite German-style games, he advises them to start with three "great gateway games" that transform regular people into players:

Ticket to Ride won Germany's prestigious Spiel des Jahres (Game of the Year) prize in 2004. Players compete to create train routes across a map of the United States. Ages 8 and up.

Carcassonne won the Spiel des Jahres prize in 2001. Players fill up the medieval French countryside by building things like roads and farms. Ages 8 and up.

The Settlers of Catan, the most popular German-style game, sold millions of copies and won the Spiel des Jahres prize in 1995. It was credited with kindling the German-style game movement in the United States. Ages 10 and up.

To find German-style games, check out local specialty stores, such as Rainy Day Games in Aloha, Bridgetown Hobbies and Games in Portland and Ancient Wonders in Tualatin, or go online to www.funagaingames.com. Rainy Day Games and funagaingames.com carry KC Humphrey's Havoc: The Hundred Years War.



A playing card from KC Humphrey's Havoc: The Hundred Years War.

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He built prototypes by hand, cutting game pieces from recycled state reports and dollar-store floor tiles. He traveled from game group to game group, where frank players told him what worked and what didn't. Brooks, a friend and the chief technology officer for an e-finance software firm, took Humphrey's prototypes on business trips, testing them with game groups across the country.

In 2004, the Humphreys and Brooks decided to launch their own company. Based on reviews from players in two marathon play tests, the card game Havoc would be their first release.

Humphrey wanted it to be as beautiful as other German-style games, which lavish attention on playing pieces, boxes and boards. SunRiver stretched its art budget to license brilliantly illustrated battle scenes from a 13th-century Bible.

enough to cover that cost. "We weren't interested in losing money," Humphrey says.

Instead, they pieced out the work to a card maker, a box maker and a printer, then spent several weekends with their families, popping more than 2,000 together in kitchen-table assembly lines.

In North America, "nobody gets rich in the game business," says Rick Thornquist, editor of the online game-review magazine Boardgame News. "There's a joke: How do you make a small fortune in the game business? Start with a large fortune."

One of the biggest German-style hits, Ticket to Ride, sold 350,000 copies in Germany after winning the game-of-the-year prize in 2004. Although its designer and publisher are American, the game sold just 25,000 copies in the U.S.

Still, Humphrey and Brooks say Havoc is close to selling out its first print run, and they have already moved on to the next set of prototypes.

Finding the market

On a recent weeknight at the Fireside Coffee Lodge on Southeast Powell Boulevard, Humphrey ran members of a new playing group through rules for a game with six-sided tiles, and watched carefully as they worked out strategies.

"It's kind of like love songs," Humphrey says. "Not everybody's going to love it. But if a bunch of people like it enough to buy it, that's OK."

The partners aren't expecting to quit their day jobs, or even to convert the world to German-style gaming, he says.

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He majored in math at Willamette University, graduating with highest honors. His passion was composing folk-rock music, which he still plays with the worship team at Sunnyside Foursquare Church.

Humphrey says he didn't get serious about games until he met his wife, Rita. With her three children, then ages 3, 5, and 7, they were "a ready-made game-playing family," he says.

They married nine years ago, not long after a small American game publisher decided to take a chance by importing the German hit Settlers of Catan. In Settlers, players didn't simply take turns and move. They developed an unexplored island, fought a robber and traded resources such as grain and bricks in an attempt to dominate the board. Because each roll of the dice can affect every contestant, there was little down time.

For American players, it "was just like the British pop invasion," Humphrey says. "Everybody said, 'Wow! A whole new way to play board games!'"

A game from scratch

The couple started spending evenings with some of Portland's dozen or so German-style playing groups, such as the Rip City Gamers. They collected more than 1,200 games; a rented storage unit now functions as their library. A few years ago, Humphrey designed a game for an online contest and felt the familiar thrill of composing.

Soldiers used trained Dogs to retrieve arrows or weapons from the battlefield.



A playing card from KC Humphrey's Havoc: The Hundred Years War.

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But a professional publisher would have charged \$10 for every game made. Americans balk at high-priced games, and the partners knew they couldn't charge

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The partners aren't expecting to quit their day jobs, or even to convert the world to German-style gaming, he says.

"We knew going in that it wasn't going to be a big moneymaker," he says. "We were hoping we might make enough money to make the next game."