
5 Takeaways from Today's Board Game Revival

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A few years back Knowledge@Wharton High School interviewed several high school students about their love of chess and how they could apply that passion and skill to the world of business. The consensus: chess is so much more than a board game. “I definitely feel as though the problem solving and decision making skills that I developed as a chess player will help me in my business career,” said Aaron DeGagne, then a high school senior at St. Andrew’s College in Aurora, Ontario. DeGagne was an active member of his school’s chess club and president of the investment club, hoping to pursue a career in finance. “I feel as though business is similar to chess in the sense that you have to carefully analyze each move that you make in the business world in order to ensure that your business is successful and that you have an advantage over your competition. One wrong move can be extremely costly.”

Fast forward to a summer afternoon in 2017 on the campus of the Wharton School in Philadelphia. A group of high school students attending the Wharton Sports Business Academy – clearly lovers of competition – debate the best players on different sports teams, but agree on one thing: Monopoly is their favorite board game, hands down.

Whether it’s classics like chess and Monopoly or newcomers like Pandemic, board games are making a comeback as a decidedly non-digital way to learn skills like strategy and money management, while also having face-to-face fun with friends and family.

Author Tristan Donovan has delved into the history of these pastimes in his new book *It’s All a Game: The History of Board Games from Monopoly to Settlers of Catan*. He recently joined the [Knowledge@Wharton Show on Sirius XM channel 111](#) to talk about the earliest known board games, what makes the most popular new games so appealing, and the real origin stories behind some of your old favorites.

An edited version of the interview was published in our sister publication, Knowledge@Wharton. Click [here](#) to read that transcript and listen to the Sirius XM podcast. In the meantime, check out a few of the playful interview highlights.

1. **Even in a world of mobile games, VR and 3D graphics, board games are making a big revival.** “At the moment, there is a new wave of games coming through like Settlers of Catan, Ticket to Ride and Pandemic,” said author Donovan. “These have really grown out of a slightly different design philosophy for board games that originated in Germany. But it’s led to much bigger sales of board games. Board game cafes are opening in cities all across the world. It’s really bringing in that new generation to board games after a few years where it looked like they were going to be cast aside in favor of video games...And the Internet has also helped board games. There’s more funding for board games on Kickstarter than there is video games.”
2. **Monopoly tops the list for play time.** “It’s the most successful branded game of all time,” said Donovan. “Probably chess or Go would be the most popular ever. But in terms of branded, commercial games where we can measure the sales, definitely Monopoly... The actual origin for the game, which was called Landlord’s Game, is that it was invented in 1902 by a woman named Elizabeth Magie. And it was a protest game. It was basically against people profiting just from owning land. It was there to show the injustice in the fact that if someone owned all the property, everyone else would end up destitute. So it was actually a criticism of property ownership, and people being allowed to profit just from renting out their land.”
3. **Chess originated in India during the early part of A.D. as a four-person dice game.** “It’s so far removed from chess as we know it today, but that’s what it evolved from. It is one of those games that, because it’s not branded, still has an unbelievable life,” said Donovan. “I think chess is here to stay. It’s one of those games that has just survived centuries and centuries. I mean, these rules are fixed now. It went through many centuries of revisions, but I can’t imagine that chess is going to change much in 100 years’ time from what it is today. But I

think because of its pure skill, it's easy to pick up, it's easy to play, it's quite mentally challenging, and it's quite satisfying to win. There's so much room for improvement and to develop skill, I think it's always going to hang on."

4. **Board game development is still somewhat of a viable business model for big companies like Hasbro.**

"Parker Brothers is part of Hasbro now. Hasbro pretty much owns most of the iconic family games that were big like Monopoly and Game of Life, and Battleship and the rest of them," noted Donovan. "They are looking to develop new games, but when you're working on the scale of Hasbro, those games have to sell very large sums. A recent game they've come out with is Pie Face. It's not really a board game. It's a plastic action type of game. But it had to be a big hit. They recently did a Magic The Gathering board game. Again, it's likely to be a big hit. But they can't really be bothered to compete in the type of games where the question is, "Can we sell 50,000 copies of this?" Those are just too small for a company the size of Hasbro these days. So a lot of it is about extracting extra value out of the Game of Life or Monopoly and these strong established brands that they already have."

5. **The rebirth of board games – especially new ones — has important implications for the skills we need in life and the workplace.**

"I think there are two big lessons that the new board games are teaching," said Donovan. "One is cooperation. Games like Pandemic are purely cooperative. There are no winners. It's either everyone around the table wins or everyone loses. And even in a game like Settlers of Catan, where you do have one winner, everyone has to work with the other players somewhat as they are trying to win. So I think that board games are teaching the lesson that there is a need for people to work together; you can't be the individualistic lone wolf and just tread on everyone else to succeed. Even winners are standing on the shoulders of others. I also think it's a positive thing that board games offer a chance for people to act socially together face to face."