

'It's not a game, it's a commitment'

Boardgaming players enjoy face-to-face competition

By KEVIN PARKS

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Bruce Reiff held aloft -- not without some difficulty -- a spiral ring binder, its covers straining to contain a stack of papers at least three inches thick.

The dozens of pages represent the rules for a single board game, "Advanced Squad Leader," which is produced by a Maryland-based outfit partly owned by Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling.

Learning to hit his fastball might not take as long as mastering this particular game.

Hefting the bulky affair, Reiff said: "It's not a game, it's a commitment."

Many residents of the Columbus area, along with people from other parts of Ohio and even surrounding states, have a deep and abiding commitment to board games.

These people demonstrate that commitment on odd-numbered Fridays every month by converging on the offices of the Mid-Ohio Select Soccer League off Busch Boulevard in North Columbus. Their goal is to play, but not soccer. These folks get their kicks out of board games and the Columbus Area Boardgaming Society (CABS) exists to help feed this benign little addiction.

CABS -- the logo is, indeed, a taxi -- was formed by a dozen diehard gamers in September 1997 and achieved nonprofit



By Darrin Bryan/ThisWeek
Above, Joe Miller of Reynoldsburg contemplates a move as Gary Christiansen of Hilliard looks over his coordinates in a game of 'Field Command' the two were playing during a recent meeting of the Central Ohio Boardgaming Society. Below, George Sauer studies his available options in the game 'Age of Renaissance.'



corporation status in December 2003.

It is not an organization whose leaders take themselves too seriously.

For example, Gahanna resident Todd Surgoine's lone qualification to serve as president is that he looks good in a tie. Other members of the board of directors hold such lofty-sounding titles as "censor" and "minister of internal security."

These designations are actually part of the group's charter, which was devised by Hilliard resident Gary B. Christiansen, current minister of internal security.

"Somebody had to write one and I got drafted into doing it," he said.

For the titles of officeholders, Christiansen turned to the board game Junta, which he described as pretty silly. It is set in a fictional banana republic and the sole goal is for players to amass wealth in Swiss bank accounts.

For all the nonsense the officers so obviously enjoy, they are very much in earnest about promoting the pastime of playing board games.

"The club CABS is recognized as one of the largest and most successful gaming clubs in the country, if not the world," according to George "Bud" Sauer III of Circleville.

Of course, that's what you'd expect from a fellow who calls himself "minister of propaganda."

"We don't go to a party and someone says, 'Let's play Trivial Pursuit and a board game breaks out,'" Sauer said in an interview. "We go to play board games and a party breaks out."

Only board games will do for this bunch.

Gaming 'grognards' got group going
The Columbus Area Boardgaming Society, according to current Minister of Propaganda George "Bud" Sauer III, "was officially formed in September 1997 when 12 gaming grognards each paid \$12 and formed the club."

Grognards?

Ever an efficient propagandist, Sauer is quick to offer up from the Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, the following definition:

"Grognard: a soldier of Napoleon's Old Guard; a veteran soldier; grumbler."

"'Grognard' is also slang for someone who likes playing war games," Sauer added.

Oh.

"A lot of us are not computer gamers," Sauer said. "It's more of a social aspect, facing off against a human."

"The preference is to have a human in front of them they can play with," Christiansen said.

CABS dues are \$12 a year for a family. Membership currently stands at 100, according to Sauer.

In excess of 50 people gather at the MOSSL offices on the odd-numbered Fridays of each month. The gaming generally lasts into the wee hours of Saturday morning.

"We've come to find that Friday nights are good nights for dads and moms to come, to get away for a night," Sauer said. "You've got all day Saturday to do your chores and be with your family."

Guests from as far away as Japan, Norway, Texas and Oregon have dropped in, according to Sauer, who works for athletic apparel manufacturer Betlin Inc. on the South Side. Foreign visitors didn't travel to Ohio just to attend an evening with the CABS folks, Sauer added; they were in town on other business or staying with friends who are members.

Many members have decades of dedication to board games under their belts.

"I've been doing this 30 years, almost 30 years," said Bruce Reiff, the "prime minister" for CABS and a resident of Lewis Center. "The scary thing is my daughter, who's 7, is playing these games.

"It's a lot of mental gymnastics."

Between 15 and 20 percent of the society's members are avid players of war games, of which Advanced Squad Leader is perhaps the most complex example. These board games can take as much as six hours to play, and sometimes considerably longer.

"I like solving the puzzles and I like the history," said Christiansen, who first began playing war games in 1969 as a 13-year-old. "I'm really fascinated with history and this marries my interest in history with my hobby. I like to compete without being backstabbing and cutthroat and bloodthirsty."

"War gamers, us old traditionalists, look down upon simple games," admitted Sauer, who had been a confirmed player of board games for 35 years, ever since his mom

bought home a military conflict simulation game with 16 pages of rules when he was about 10.

"Any game with four pages of rules can't be any good," Sauer added.

Still, they seek to pitch a big tent at Columbus Area Boardgaming Society events, trying to be as inclusive as possible.

"We really encourage any kind of gaming," Christiansen said. "The more people that you cross-pollinate with and get into the group, the more people you're going to find who are into your game. This is where people can meet people, socialize and get to find competitors."

"There is no way that someone could come into this club and not be playing a game in 15 minutes," said Short North resident and CABS member Paul Schmucker. "It's about the play. What we're excited about doing here is getting more people into playing."

"War games, the list of rules is very, very long," said CABS member Meg Gandy. "The learning curve is very high."

Gandy, who lives in the Linden area, much prefers what are called "Euro games," a relatively new generation of board games coming out of Germany in which cooperation and harvesting of resources are more important than besting an opponent.

"These games offered so much more than the usual roll-the-die-and-move mindless drivel found on the shelves of Wal-Mart (and) Target," according to Minister of Propaganda Sauer. "As more and more people have become exposed to these games, adults began to realize that boardgaming was not simply a pastime for children. On the contrary, board games are the perfect vehicle for sharing an afternoon or stimulating, challenging fun with family and friends."

Along with playing at the Friday evening gatherings two and sometimes three times a month, Meg Gandy hosts a weekly gaming event at her home and occasionally attends large-scale game conventions.

"I'm very committed," she said.

War gamers tend to be almost exclusively male, but Gandy pointed out that the Euro games have a broader appeal and are bringing more people to the table, so to speak.

"The gaming communities are more female than they used to be," she said. "I have

found, for me it's sometimes hard to introduce women friends to gaming because of preconceived ideas they have about it."

The Short North's Schmucker is also into the Euro games.

"On a given night, I'll play eight or nine or 10 different games and they're all wildly different," he said. "Where the charm is in this is the wide variety of ways it makes you think. You like to win, but what you really like to do is the best you can with what you've got."

Schmucker's personal collection of board games includes 600 titles.

Christiansen owns 300-plus titles, some dating back to the 1960s.

"Despite a certain military stigma some people attach to war gaming, the hobby is not about being violent but about history," Christiansen writes on his own Web site.

"This is an enjoyable activity that I do for fun," he said in an interview. "To me, fun means getting to be good at it without doing it to slash somebody to pieces."

Christiansen encourages his children to play the same games he enjoys.

"This kind of activity gets those gears in the head working right, heading toward solving problems and learning," he said.

In addition to the Friday evening events, CABS sponsors a convention for board game enthusiasts. The fifth annual edition of Buckeye Game Fest will take place Sept. 23-25 at the Radisson Hotel Columbus-Worthington.

Finally, the Columbus Area Boardgaming Society has its own Web site, www.buckeyebordgamers.org, which Christiansen indicated has been very helpful in making more and more people aware of the organization's existence.

"Our presence on the Web has made us a little more noticeable," Christiansen said.

He and other officers also credited the tireless efforts of Minister of Propaganda Sauer to spread the message.

"Bud's the motor, I'm the mouth," Prime Minister Reiff commented.

"He's gone out and found every source he can," Christiansen said.

Among those attending a recent Friday evening gathering at the soccer league offices was Richard Arnold, a 22-year-old Englishman. He is a graduate student at Ohio State University studying political science. As a child, he played "lots and lots of board games," and so was delighted when a friend told him of the existence of CABS.

Arnold's favorite game, fittingly enough, is Britannia, which deals with England from the time of the Roman invasion up through the Norman conquest.

The perfect game for a native Brit, right?

Well ...

"I lost last time," Arnold admitted sheepishly.

What a board game is gets in the way of when board games came into being

Determining the history of board games is not so much a problem of derivation -- where and how did they originate? -- as it is one of definition -- what the heck are they? -- according to scholars who have explored the subject in depth.

In 1999's "The Oxford History of Board Games," British author David Parlett admits at the outset to stumbling over the term about which he was writing:

" ... A learned journal devoted to the subject has more or less agreed that the word is used for so many different activities that it is not worth insisting on any proposed definition. All in all, it is a slippery lexicological customer, with many friends and relations in a wide variety of fields."

Still, Parlett, inventor of the board game Hare and Tortoise, gives it the old college try:

"'Board' derives from a word originally meaning 'plank,' and secondarily 'table,' as in the phrase 'bed and board.' So, in a broad sense, a board game is any that can be played on a flat surface such as a table or floor. In practice, the term usually excludes card and dice games; unfortunately, there is less unanimity as to exactly what it includes."

Something very much like board games has been unearthed in archeological explorations of virtually every ancient society, according to Harold James Ruthren Murray in his classic 1952 work, "A History of Board Games Other Than Chess." Murray wrote that all board games fall into five categories:

- 1) Games of alignment and configuration
- 2) War games
- 3) Hunt games
- 4) Race games
- 5) Games "in which the aim is to capture a majority of neutral pieces"

"Board games have been invented and played in nearly all parts of the world, although the games played by the Indians of South America seem to be entirely of European or African origin," R.C. Bell tells us in 1983's "The Boardgame Book."

"Only among the Eskimos and Australian Aborigines have no board games been found," Bell added.

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