

Outside The Box

By Bruce Whitehill

Game inventors and other creative people are always trying to “think outside the box.” Game players are most concerned with what’s *inside* the box. But what the public sees *is* the box. It’s that piece of covered cardboard packaging that holds the key to the treasures inside. The box art and creative copy are often the main—sometimes *only*—elements promoting the sale of a game. Maybe you can’t judge a book by its cover, but you won’t buy it if you don’t like the title or don’t like the look of it.

Some major game companies seem more concerned with what the box looks like than what’s inside. When I worked at a well-known game publisher in the mid-1980s, I had to present a product to the head of the company’s England branch, who was in the United States looking for products to take back to the United Kingdom. I was two sentences into the description of the game when he interrupted and asked to see the cover. I explained that I was not involved in doing the cover art, only the gameplay, whereupon he abruptly got up and left the room. The demonstration was over.

At that time, most game boxes had the same information on all four sides of the box. When I suggested putting different data on each side in order to provide the consumer with more information, I was told that the store clerks wouldn’t know in which direction to stack the games and consumers wouldn’t know they were looking at the same game from different sides. Now, some enlightened companies put lots of different information all over the box sides and even on the inner box.

Certain information should be on every game box, and this is where American companies need to adopt the European standards. Besides the obvious—the title and “second line copy” (that one-line sales pitch under the title)—the first piece

of information should be the name of the inventors. Major U.S. companies have been reluctant to list the inventor because the company feels the games are collaborative efforts of artists, designers, copy-righters and so on. Certainly a lot of people are involved in the final effort, but the idea and development of a game is usually a result of the inspiration and proficiency of one person or team. That person should receive credit for the

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work. The late acclaimed prolific American inventor Sid Sackson (see page 40) is probably better known in Europe than in the United States simply because the European manufacturers put his name on the box. How would the game manufacturer feel if the company name were not on the box? The public is more likely to recognize the name of a known inventor than they are able to remember what companies produce certain titles; a study years ago showed that many or most Americans didn’t know which company made Monopoly.

Three things that appear in a small area on almost every game box in Europe tell you the number of players the game is designed for, the suitable age range of players and the duration of play. Most



American companies indicate the number of players and age range, but they all should. (I get a kick out of companies that list their game as being for ages 9 to 99. My father is 96 and still plays bridge; I’ve been tempted to buy him a 9-99 game and let him know I’ll replace it when he outgrows it.)

What’s missing on most American game boxes is the approximate length of time the game should take to play. Is it 12 minutes or 120 minutes? It doesn’t matter if a game marked “20 minutes” takes you 35, but it certainly does matter if a game that is not marked winds up taking an hour and a half. If a game is properly play-tested, the average duration of play should be well known.

What’s missing on all game boxes? Well, maybe it shouldn’t be on the box (or instructions) because it sounds limiting, but at least every game reviewer should cover it in a critique: in a multi-player game, what is the optimum number of players? Some games marked for two to six players, for example, are pretty boring for two or too tedious for six (you wait a long time between moves); the manufacturer is trying to extend the market, since the game can be played by different numbers, even though it is best with a certain number. And some games listed as being for two to four players are great fun for five or six, but the game comes equipped with only enough score pads or pawns to accommodate four.

Game boxes also shouldn’t be any

bigger than they have to be. Once again, the Europeans outbox the Americans by packing smaller containers with more materials. Some packaging is downright clever! On the other hand, putting some sheets of paper and a few dice in a box and then expanding it to 2 inches deep because a dice cup has been included leaves some buyers feeling cheated.

The side panels (the “aprons”) of the bottom part of the box should be designed as well. Obviously this is not something prospective buyers will see until after they’ve made the purchase (which is why the bottom of the box should be used to show a picture of the gameboard and information about how to play), yet it is another opportunity to provide additional information to the consumer or, through illustrations, set the tone of the game. But I have an ulterior motive as well for wanting to see illustrated box bottom aprons. As a photographer, I take lots of pictures of people playing games, with the box lid turned upside down on the table. Hence, in the picture, the title of the game being photographed (as well as other text and illustrations) is always upside down, since when a lid is removed, it is invariably turned over. (Check it out next time you’re in a roomful of game players.) If the aprons on the box cover were printed *upside down*, then the game title and company and other information would be right-side up when the lid is upside down.

Game boxes (should) give you the information about what’s to be found inside, who the inventor is and for whom the game is suitable. And, as the boxes showcase the talents of some very gifted illustrators, these artists should also be given named credit on the packaging or, at the very least, should be allowed to sign their work.

The game box is the opening to what may be amazing or amusing, stimulating entertainment for one or more players, ages six and up, for ten minutes or for hours and hours.

Bruce Whitehill, “The Big Game Hunter,” is a games collector, inventor and writer. As a games historian he is dedicated to uncovering the histories of games, the companies that manufactured them and the people who invented them.



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