

Designing the perfect game: the process behind board game design

Aryan Singla, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



photo: Charley Hu

Doug Levandowski talks about his board game career.

The rattle of dice rolling across a table meets the shuffle of hand-drawn cards. A lucky roll sparks cheers in one corner, while a frustrated player rethinks their entire strategy in another.

Board games have existed for thousands of years, and they still remain a popular pastime across the globe.

"I think [board games] give a good, structured way for people to have fun together," said Doug Levandowski, an English teacher and co-advisor of the Tower. "[Playing a] competitive game with friends is always fun, so they encourage that."

Besides teaching English at PHS, Levandowski also is the only teacher of the former Game Design class, which he created to help students see the bigger picture behind a set of rules.

"I want people to start thinking about how games impact people," said Levandowski. "Once you break it down, it's really just playing around with pieces that are already there."

He believes the best first step for any aspiring designer is to explore a wide range of existing games, then ask "What game doesn't exist that you wish did?"

After developing an idea, designers go through multiple testing stages. The process starts with "alpha testing," which is a phase of trial and error.

"There usually isn't any expectation that it's going to be good yet," Levandowski said.

Once the basic design structure is nailed down, "beta testing" allows others to try the game with fewer changes as they play.

"If there's one strategy that's far and away the best way to win, [you] need to tweak [something] in the rules to make that less optimal so [the player] has more meaningful choices," said Levandowski.

He also described how the final step — called "unguided testing" — can expose issues the designer never anticipated.

"Usually the creator of the game isn't there, or if [they] are, [they're] not saying anything," Levandowski said. "They're just watching ... and then you have people try to teach themselves based on the rules, play the game, and you're really just watching as the designer to see where they run into trouble."

He compared this process to revising an essay: each test reveals what works, what doesn't, and how to refine the overall experience. Another key element is understanding the balance between fun and challenge.

"Fun is important, a sense of control over what you're doing, but random chance [is also] important," said Levandowski. "They all fit together ... it depends on what you want [the game] to do."

Furthermore, if the game is too complicated, it will become so inaccessible that no one will play the game, even if it is great.

"I'm keeping in mind the experience players [have] with that game. How are they finding fun with this?" said Levandowski.

Over the years, Levandowski has published role-playing games and created multiple board games of his own, such as "Gothic Doctor," "Kids on Bikes," and "Kids on Brooms." However, one of his favorite creations has been "Home."

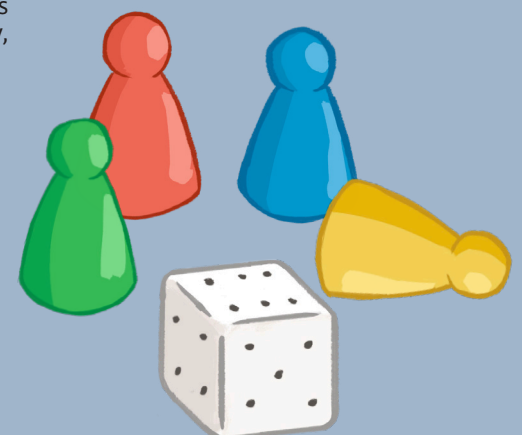
"'Home' is a game about trying to survive the night in a haunted house, and each player is playing a character who's decided for their own reasons to explore this house," said Levandowski. "As you go, you're drawing out a map of the house, and you draw cards out of a deck that give you questions that help you tell your story for the night."

Currently, he's juggling new ideas, such as a project with his seven-year-old daughter that revolves around balancing scoops of ice cream. For anyone aiming to join the board game making community, Levandowski suggests checking out resources like Cardboard Edison or The Meeple Syrup Show podcast.

"['Cardboard Edison'] aggregates good advice about board games, [while 'The Meeple Syrup Show'] does a lot of interviews so you can hear different perspectives," Levandowski said.

He hopes to bring back the Game Design class in the future. In his view, teaching mirrors the design process of a good game.

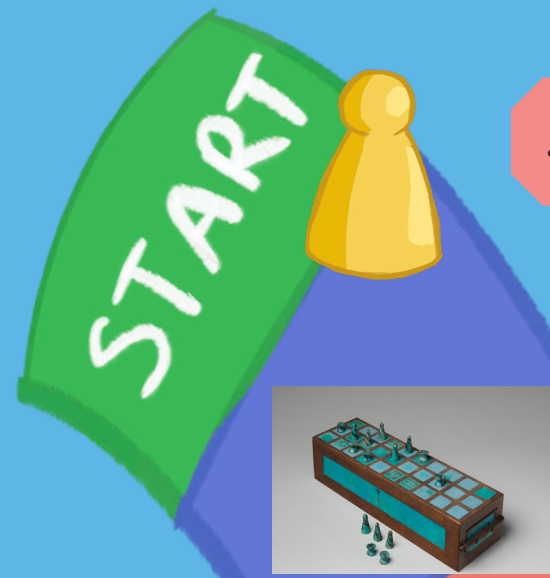
"Educating is a lot about motivating people and making the expectations clear," said Levandowski. "That's a lot of game design, too."



The History of Board Games

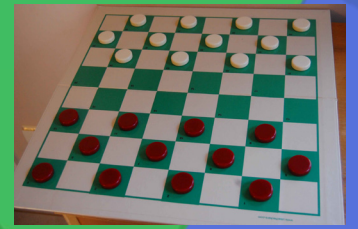
Vanessa He and Aarna Vachhrajani, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

graphics: Katherine Chen



3100 B.C., Egypt: Senet
Senet is the oldest known board game, mentioned in the Book of the Dead and played on a 3x10 square board with pawns, throw-sticks, and counters. Historians believe that wealthy Egyptians played Senet in hopes of winning and earning the protection of the gods Ra, Thoth, and Osiris. Although the rules of the game are unknown, it is believed that Senet is similar to an Arab game called Hyena, where players race to the center of the board and capture their opponents (an early form of Pac-Man).

600 A.D., India: Chess and checkers
Chess is thought to be a version of the Indian game, Shatranj, played on a 64-square board with the objective of either eliminating all of the opponents pieces or killing their king. The game was spread globally through the Silk Road as traders carried it with them. To make the game easier to play while traveling, traders tweaked the game to have discs instead of pawns that sit on the lines instead of squares, becoming an early form of checkers.



Evolution of Rich Uncle Pennybags

Maxime DeVico, STAFF WRITER

Monopoly is one of the most popular board games in the United States and around the world. Not only that, but it also has one of the most recognizable mascots of all time: Monopoly Man, also known as Rich Uncle Pennybags. Always found sporting a black waistcoat, top hat, and cane, the Monopoly Man is printed on Monopoly game boxes all around the world. Nowadays, it is impossible to find a Monopoly game without him, but this wasn't always the case.

Monopoly was invented in 1904 by Elizabeth Magie, but under a different name: the Landlord's Game. A left-wing feminist and Quaker activist, Magie wanted to teach people about the theories of the Progressive Era economist Henry George. George's theory advocated for land value taxes, and stated that private ownership of land created vast economic inequality.

Through its gameplay based on buying and renting out properties, the Landlord's Game demonstrated how monopolies and income disparities can arise. The game quickly became a huge success across the country.

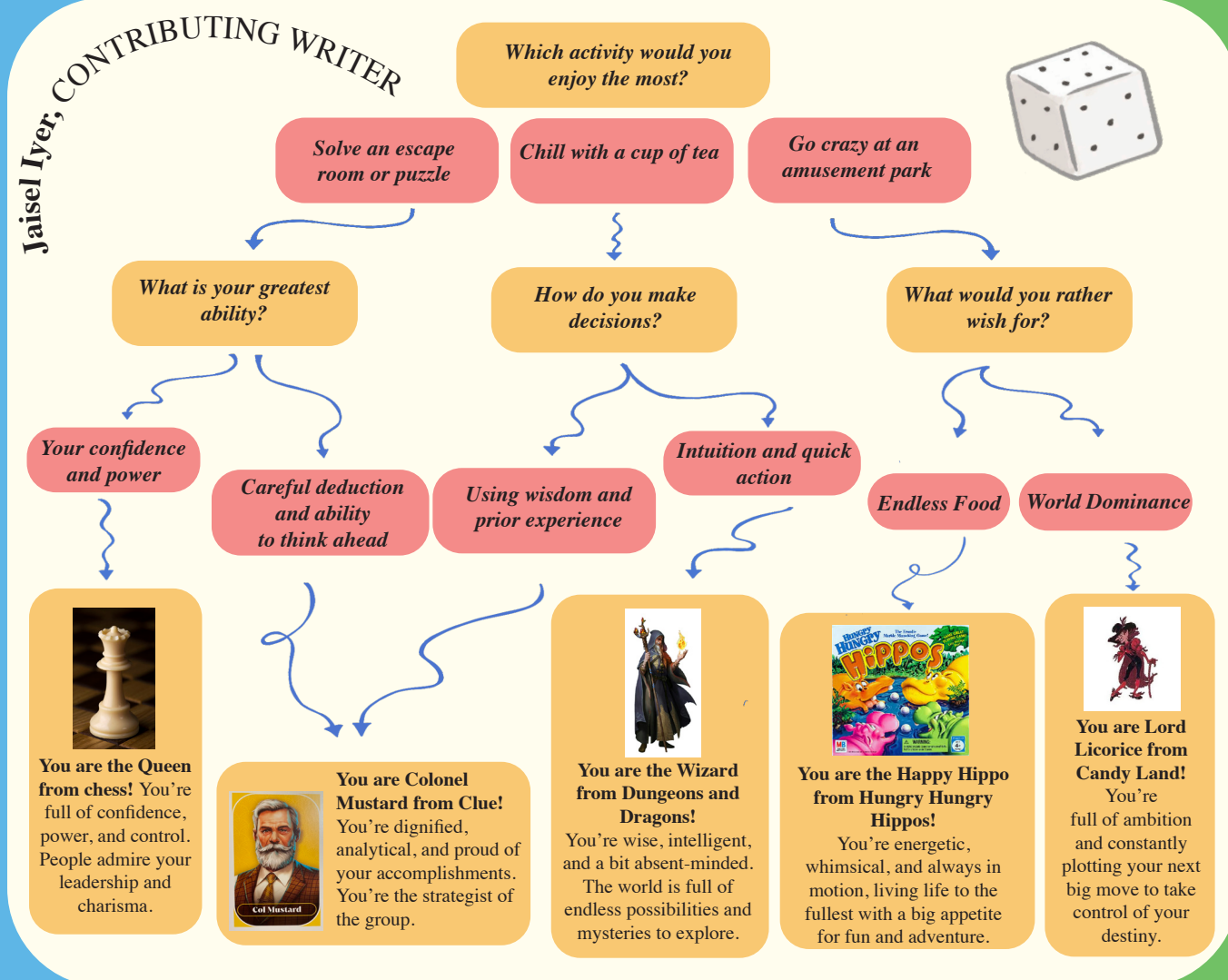
In 1935, the iconic name "Monopoly" was coined and patented by board game designer Charles B. Darrow. At this point, the game still didn't have its mascot, but only months later in 1936, the Monopoly Man would start making his way onto chance cards. He would later become the official mascot and was named Rich Uncle Pennybags in 1946. In 1999, he was renamed Mr. Monopoly. Not until 2013, however, was it discovered that the Monopoly Man was created by Charles Darrow himself. Darrow took inspiration from businessman J.P. Morgan when designing the posh character. In fact, the mascot hasn't undergone any major design changes, other than having been drawn in 3-D as well as some iterations without his famous money bag.

Besides his money bag, the Monopoly Man's monocle is another item that the community has considered crucial to the character's design. However, there has been debate over whether the monocle ever existed on him. Despite popular belief, the mascot has never officially worn a monocle. This means the mascot falls into a category of phenomena called the Mandela Effect, observed when a large group of people misremember the same thing.

Now something larger than a board game mascot, the Monopoly Man has become synonymous with the benefits and follies of capitalism that are experienced in our daily lives, not only when playing a tabletop game.



Which Board Game Character Are You?



Interview with D&D Club's Khalil White '26

Aarna Dharmavarapu, STAFF WRITER

Among PHS's wide variety of clubs is the D&D Club, led by Khalil White. Dungeons & Dragons is a tabletop role-playing game with storytelling at its core. Differing from traditional strategy games, D&D calls for players to create their own characters that they can then lead on custom adventures in the game's fantasy setting. For many players, particularly high school students, the game can be a unique creative outlet.

What do club meetings look like and how are they run?

"Well, we [don't usually] have full club meetings because in Dungeons & Dragons, you typically play in smaller campaigns, so we usually have our Dungeon Masters assigned near the beginning of the year and they hold meetings on their own time. We have full club meetings like maybe once a month."

What do you think are some benefits of playing D&D, both socially and intellectually?

"Well, I think [playing D&D] has a lot of social benefits, because you're basically coming into a small group with like 2 [to] 5 people, and you're just kind of talking, [hanging out] having fun, making up random stuff. It's kind of just random fun [with others]. But yeah, I think there's also some intellectual benefits, like there's a whole [part of D&D that's about] organizing your stats and managing your equipment, although none of that is as [intimidating] as people make it out to be."

What skills would you say students develop through playing these games?

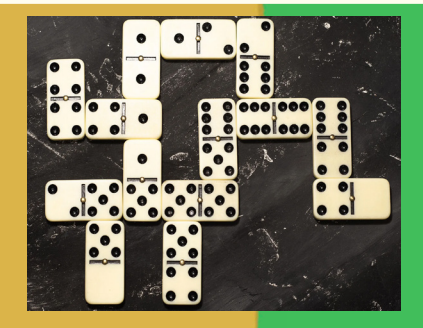
"There's definitely a lot of social and creative skills, because if you're the Dungeon Master, for example, [you're] basically just telling a story and everyone else is ... a character in the story. So it's just a lot of creativity stuff. There's a bit of management stuff [playing as characters also], like making decisions because you have to think about what's best for your character. But yeah, it's a lot of social and creative stuff for the most part."

In what ways would you say playing D&D together has built a community?

"I have a pretty close bond with my players. I'm running a campaign this year and I have five players and [we] have grown pretty close this year. I know a good [amount] about each of them and yeah, we're able to talk a lot. It's very fun."

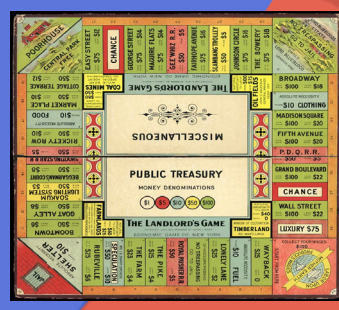
1100 A.D., China and later Europe: Dominoes

While first created in China, the game was not popularized in Europe until the 1700s, when the French created a version in which players used the tiles as puzzle pieces to make certain patterns. Another early version of the game was traced to the Inuits in North America who made domino tiles out of bones.



1903, United States: The Landlord's Game

Created by Lizzie Magie, the objective is to buy properties, railroads, and utilities across the board that has a jail and a "go" corner. Magie's hope was to teach children about the unfair way in which monopolies were created through land grabbing. This game was later sold to the Parker Brothers, who rebranded it as "Monopoly."



2016, United States: GamePigeon

A game developer by the name of Vitalii Zlotksii, created the game that would soon be embedded in all iPhones. Their team had learned about the possibility of creating iMessage apps in iOS 10, giving them the idea of creating a mobile game that would be engaging for all. This revolutionary game that took a few weeks to create would soon create a mass of people addicted. There are many games to choose from, including Cup Pong, Crazy Eights, Knockout, and Word Hunt.

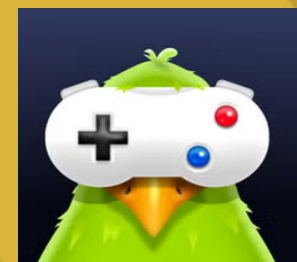


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