

The History of Board Games

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Board games predate recorded history. Sheep knucklebones carved into dice, discovered by archeologists date back to 5000 BCE, and games of chance are alluded to in the Iliad and the Odyssey. Most American's modern conception of board games comes from the 20th century (the major exceptions being Checkers and Chess), yet few have so many versions are so widely played as Monopoly. Monopoly is a cultural institution in the US, a tabletop experience responsible for family feuds and lengthy vendettas. While I've met gamers that do still love Monopoly, most folks turn their nose up at it. Interestingly, most of the mechanics of Parker Brothers' famous creation are taken from an earlier board game. Called "The Landlord's Game," and brought to life in 1906 by feminist philosopher Elizabeth Magie, it was intended to educate about the misery caused by enriching property owners and impoverishing tenants. It was never truly intended to be "fun," according to its creator, but to educate about the social ills of late-stage capitalism. Make of that what you will, anyone who's ever flipped the board at the end of the night, shouting "Fine! I guess you win, Grandma!"

The mid-90s brought a renaissance of board games that were very different from what we grew up accustomed to, called a Eurogame, which tend to involve less drama and direct player conflict. While there's still a winner, one doesn't win by slowly destroying their opponents with economic violence. Many of them feature history and geography, and lead players to cultural experiences through play. These are the types of game that I still take home to play with my parents, and so I was particularly excited to discover several games that reflected the culture and history of where I grew up, on a farm just outside of Salina, Kansas. There are a number of games that reflect Kansas (and the greater portion of rural America), but one in particular, called Fields of Green, stood out to me as reflective of my father's story, the story of a man who grew tired of the city and moved his family to a farm in Kansas (where he grew up) and made a successful life. In this particular game, players take a small farm and build it up into a financial success over the course of a few "years," or game rounds, with the most successful farmer as the winner. While only one player wins, games of this sort allow the whole table to appreciate the time spent together building something, engaging with both the game and each other; a shared cultural experience.

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