

BOARD GAME REVOLUTION

Words by Collins Maina
Photos by Christina Varvis



A man strolls into the newly opened Hexagon Board Game Café and asks for a single-player game. Little does he know, he'll be walking out those same doors, hours later, with a new friend by his side.

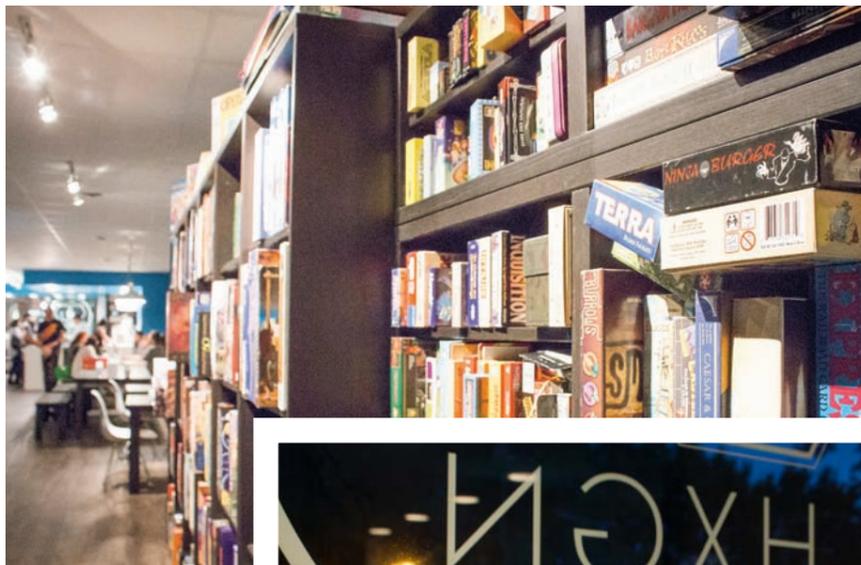
Café owner Randy Wong finds the man a game, and his solo quest sets off. Just moments later, another man walks in on his own with a similar predicament: none of his friends like playing board games.

Wong rapidly transforms into a board game matchmaker as he pairs the two up with a game to play together, and the two strangers are soon actively engaged in a blooming culture that's quietly inching its way into North American society. As board game cafés are gradually becoming a thing of the past in parts of Europe and Asia, they are gaining popularity in North America — bringing with them the promise of a fresh social activity to Edmontonians.

This uptake of board gaming marks a similar journey for Wong and Kellie Ho, who together recently opened The Hexagon on Whyte Avenue after a year in Korea teaching English sparked their interest in starting a board game café. After many late nights playing Settlers of Catan with people from all over the world, they soon realized one thing they all had in common: their love of playing board games.

These personal interactions forged them new social connections without the need of any swipes, posts or tweets. Meanwhile, in an age of widespread technology, people flaunt unbreakable fixations to their lit screens and relate with a sense of digital belonging. But, as people often forget to go back to basics, is the board game comeback a much needed wake-up call?

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NOT JUST FOR KIDS

"You stole from me! Again! Who do you think you are!" Wong exclaims, imitating the emotional player.

Ho says some people still think that board games are childish, noting she has received a few confused reactions from some people when speaking about their new business.

"When I introduce people to our business...they will look at me like 'What? That sounds so lame, do you just play Monopoly and Scrabble?'" she says.

That perception, however, is becoming more and more untrue as many re-connect with the activity.

"There's always that stigma attached," she says. "Not so much these days because it's sort of a board game revolution...board gaming is becoming sort of the cool thing to do now and I attribute that a lot to the games that are out there now."

Ho says the rise of board game cafés and the development of more difficult games are challenging the stigma of board games being seen as something that's just for kids. In fact, they're now more dynamic than just a mere rolling of the dice, Wong explains. Carefully reading your fellow counterpart's suspicious facial expressions or nervous demeanor could give you an edge and, maybe, a surprising lead.

"Sometimes you have to read people," Wong says. "Sometimes you have to play the game like poker."

What may seem to be a new social experience at face value is actually rooted at a more robust and diverse cultural core. Board game conventions are held across the world for the more devoted players, but games like the popular Cards Against Humanity provide options for people who want to have a light-hearted, fun experience.

The illusion that many games are complex and difficult also turn some people away from engaging in this experience.

Brian Flowers, sole owner of Edmonton's successful Table Top Café — Alberta's first board game café — brings the friendly spirit, familiar to those who frequent board game conventions, back to his establishment by teaching and helping customers learn new games. Ho and Wong also follow suit alongside their small staff nicknamed the "Hexperts."

■ **"Board gaming allows you to be more social. You can communicate in ways other than speech or writing."**

KELLIE HO

DIVERSE GAMES FOR DIVERSE CROWDS

When Wong and Ho think of board games they played growing up, the classics Monopoly, Scrabble and Clue come to mind. But a lot has changed since then with the rise of strategic games, as well as a wide variety of games that span across countless of individual interests. Farming, war, intergalactic domination, resource management and trade are just a few examples of the ample palette to choose from.

"Board games are for everyone. You can find a game for people of all ages," Ho says, attributing the success of the growing culture to the diverse set of games being produced now.

The differences and unique nature of current board games has led to their perception as less boring, Ho explains. In a game such as Monopoly, playing it several times significantly reduces that beginner's thrill as common patterns and predictability start to prevail. But, with ever-changing games such as Settlers of Catan — which arguably jump-started the current board game culture — there's



still a challenge retained even after countless times playing it, she continues.

Wong and Ho estimate they've each played around 1,000 games of Settlers of Catan in the past ten years with their friends.

"There's a little bit of everything in that game," Ho reflects, "It's got probability, it's got strategy, people always say there's luck in it but I'd probably say there's only one per cent luck based on your dice rolling."

With the development of more "sophisticated and dynamic" games, Ho says, there is evidently not much of a generational divide in terms of board game players.

Even though Wong, Ho and Flowers have large amounts of twenty-somethings and university students for customers, they have also had families, children and elderly couples visit their establishments repeatedly.

Ho and Wong's initial aim was to create a laid-back space for university students and young professionals who have moved past the bar or club scene and are looking to interact in a more relaxed social setting. They encourage being social and meeting new people.

As the culture of board gaming transcends generations, it's also providing an alternative for video game enthusiasts. Flowers says many video game testers from BioWare Corp., an Edmonton-based video game developer, retreat to his café looking for games they can play without a computer. He claims the space he has created is a place where people can escape from the hustle and bustle of life and interact with the people in front of them.

But is technology really an outcast in the world of board gaming? Flowers doesn't fully agree.

Innovation and persistence exist at the core of human ingenuity and so is our inability to fully let go of our digital life-supports, he says. Technology doesn't necessarily play the villain in this scenario, as it has taken on a more complementary nature.

"I think, if anything, that it is helping more than anything else," Flowers says, noting how tech streamlines many things and gets people interested. Social media plays a key part in his "word of mouth" promotion strategy, he says.

Android and iPhone application stores host numerous board game apps. With digital versions of favourite games just a swipe away, it's easy to assume that people may play less physical board games. But a closer look may reveal the opposite. "Although you can buy the app, it is never going to be the same as playing it in person," Flowers says.

"It is blurring the lines."

A NEW SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

The mood in the room resembles the teeter of a grandfather clock's pendulum, unable to decide which side to take. Within the fun and friendly atmosphere, jokes and laughter abruptly turn into minimal conversation and tension without a moment's notice. The noise of everyone's mental strategizing pervades the silent room as winning tactics from the past are dredged up and dusted off for social combat.

For both Ho and Wong, board gaming is all about face-to-face social interaction. With large tables, a clean design and a heap of enthusiasm for what they call their "labour of love," the two hope to create a space where friends can sit and interact in a low-key setting.

"Board gaming allows you to be more social," Ho says. "You can communicate in ways other than speech or writing."

Body language, the collateral damage of the 21st century's technological rampage, has rebuilt itself within this low-tech arena. Body language brings back that physicality lost in video games' isolation between human and screen. The presence of physicality, or the temporary withdrawal from our digital worlds, marks the return of social interpersonal competition, Ho remarks.

"It brings out a competitive edge that you might not normally have in a day-to-day setting," she says.

Flowers, whose intimate home-themed business will reach the one year mark in October, shares similar views on this third medium of communication that board gaming gauges. Drawing from his own experiences, Flowers says he isn't the best conversationalist — and neither are his friends. Rambling on for hours happens from time to time, but there are many moments when discussions fail to take a life of their own. But any time they are playing a game there is always something to break the ice and get the conversation flowing, he reminisces.

At the core of it all, it seems it's all about social interaction and sharing moments with friends.

"Board games let everyone bring their friends in on it," Flowers says. "There's all these different ways of reaching people who were not reachable before."

For Wong, it helped create friendships. "It was the one commonality we had in a group with people from all over the world," he says. "We are so connected in this world... we just want people to get out and meet new people."

With the latest addition of a second board game café in Edmonton, a promising — and possibly unexpected — series of events lie ahead for those friends, or strangers, willing to share a table.