

Mblem

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The Games People Play David Skaar

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Well, the last few weeks were much more Mensa-centric than usual for me, enough so to inspire me to write about them for the Mblem (thus, once again, bending my rule about not making these verbal meanderings relevant). First, there was Mensa Mind Games in Pittsburgh, April 20-22, and the next week had Culture Quest on the 29th. It turns out that I've spent all my time on Mind Games, as there's much more to talk about, there are more interesting stories, and it's less depressing.

For those who don't know, Mind Games is the event at which the official "Mensa Select" seal is awarded to new games, thus vastly improving their appeal, and sales (well, it worked for Apples to Apples). Approximately 200 Mensans attend to play test about 60 games from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning. Mercifully, no one has to play all 60, each person is assigned 30 games to play, with games and players distributed so that each game has about the same number of testers. Still, getting through that many games without forgetting which game you're playing, and how you felt about specific games can be pretty daunting, especially around 1:30AM Sunday.

For a game to be eligible for entry, it must be new to the market in the last year, and must be currently available for purchase in the US. Mind Games organizers apparently can't stress this enough to game manufacturers, that we are not in the business of play-testing a prototype game and telling the maker how to fix it. Now, we will cheerfully suggest changes to the games we test (Mensans are a helpful lot, after all, whether you want them to be or not), but playing a game that still has major problems is not in the job description.

There is no typical kind of game submitted to Mind Games, all genres are represented, but there tend to be a few commonalities, as the game makers have gotten a pretty good idea of how to improve their chances. I've decided the key thing is that the winners are chosen after playing the game just a few times. Different games might win if the reviewers had a year to play games and really get to know them, but a

Mind Game has to make an immediate impact. One of the first ever Mind Games winners was Magic: The Gathering (M:TG), in the days when the selections were made by more of a gaming SIG, from games that the members played a lot. Magic would never win now; it's tremendously fun, but takes a long time to learn. This year, Herocard (a game with elements quite similar to M:TG) was submitted to Mind Games, and generally despised for its complexity. I have made up the following generalized criteria for successful games, which may not be true for every single game, but will be for nearly all. 1) They tend to not take very long to learn or play (remember, M:TG and Herocard). Remember, immediate impact, the game has to be fun the first time it's played, which means that if it's too much work to learn, it takes too much time to be fun. 2) The games are not very complex (again, M:TG and Herocard). For the same reasons as (1). If the game has rules within rules within rules, some aspects may never come into play, or worse, be forgotten when appropriate, which can really ruin a game. 3) The games tend to be more abstract, not requiring much background knowledge. Trivia games tend not to have a strong showing, as the division between trivia buffs and trivia haters is very strong. Word games are relatively common, but they tend to be constructed in a way to not favor those with large vocabularies of arcane words, like the Scrabble nuts that know all the four letter words with three vowels in the English language (apologies to the nuts, but you know it's true). Word games of that type are generally held in low regard. 4) They are highly participatory. Games in which one person can dominate play, getting more turns than anyone else (like Trivial Pursuit), or games in which the turn events are so complex that everyone is left twiddling their thumbs waiting for their turn to come around again (like San Juan) can be aggravating, particularly when people are still learning the game, or the group is unbalanced in ability.

(Conti. To P. 2, Games)

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- *Games, Games, Games, Mensans like games*
- *You really should not miss this party. It is like a mini festival, complete with a joker, chain saw, poetry, sculpture, and fire hoops—Page 3*
- *Who would miss an opportunity? You? —Page 4*
- *Haven't heard from RVC for a while, "later is better then never". —P. 4*
- *Greensboro is still part of MENC. —P. 5*
- *See the conversation between the reader and the editor. —P. 6*

Important Notice

Roberta Clayton would like to coordinate a small group around Holly Springs and get something going. Contact her. (See contact info on P. 7.)

(Conti. From P. 1, Games)

“Party” type games, in which multiple people are all active during a turn, or, everyone is doing something, are a lot more fun (assuming that it’s something that everyone can do moderately well). 5) The games are both highly original, and very derivative. I can hear everyone saying, “huh?” This relates to quickness to learn and complexity. If the game is “like Scrabble, but with Risk rules thrown in” people pick up on it more quickly, and have a better time. It’s hard to come up with a new idea for a game, and a neat twist on an existing game can be a lot of fun. However, originality is highly prized, and frequently, there is a winning game that is a novel concept, but with simple rules, so that it can be quickly picked up, but also with enough variability and strategy that it can be played over and over.

The applicable phrase for a Mind Games winner is one that I’ve heard used a lot in regard to old video games (like Pac-Man or Space Invaders), or games like checkers, backgammon, or go, is “easy to learn, difficult to master”. This pretty much sums up most of my criteria, so you didn’t really need to read them. That’s why I waited until now to give the shorter version.

A good example of many of these rules is Quirkle, which was one of the five winning games. It’s a simple game, with only a few rules. There are blocks with colored shapes on them, six shapes and six colors, with all combinations represented. On your turn, you place blocks into the master pattern so that all the blocks you play can go into one straight line that shares either a common shape or color, with no duplication in the line (i.e., no line can be longer than six blocks). The added blocks can each be part of two lines simultaneously, as long as the rules are met, and you score one point for each block in each line added to. One player quickly figured out that paralleling an existing line could easily score 9+ points in a single play, and it got vicious from there. This game is a lot of fun. Turns are quick, the rules are simple, and anyone can play at about the same skill level (unless they’re color blind). It’s not tremendously original (comparisons were made to Scrabble, among others) but it has a style all its own. It’s also simple enough that making one’s own set shouldn’t be that hard (decreasing sales to crazy people). Me and my big mouth, I said I could do it (Danene will probably be waiting a while for it, though).

Another winner was Skullduggery, a much more complicated game. The rules for Skullduggery are also straightforward (but take longer to explain than I want to here). Each player is a pirate trying to collect specific treasures. Along with moving your own pirate, you also move generic pirates out of your way and into your opponents’, and can rearrange the entire board, to put yourself, or the treasure you need, in a different spot, or to completely ruins the plans of your opponents. Another very fun game, which looks very nice, with detailed pirate statues, and original game play that is flexible enough to repeat many times.

Of non-winning games worth mentioning, there is NAQ. NAQ is a trivia game, but instead of one person being asked questions on their turn, they ask everyone else a question, that

they make up themselves. The catch is that you want half the players to get it right for the maximum score, so the questions can’t be too hard or too easy (creating a question that everyone/no one can answer is not much of a challenge, and scores zero points). Answering questions correctly earns points too, stopping keeps players from acting ignorant to hurt their opponents. You have to learn about the other players in NAQ, and fine tuning of questions goes on as the game progresses (I immediately learned that reality TV was a much better subject than chemistry). I would even recommend that the best way to play is with complete strangers to avoid knowing what players are good at. The problem with NAQ? There’s no reason to buy it. The reason to buy a trivia game is for the question cards, but NAQ doesn’t have any. The cards it does have are to affect movement on the scoring track, but you really don’t need that either. Just sit down with 6 people for a few times around the table, and add up the points.

Another game I feel like mentioning is Yamodo. The equipment for this game looks like a daily cartoon calendar, with each tear-off page having a made up word and the start of a doodle on it. Each player adds to the doodle and the definition of the word, until there is a completed picture and definition, such as “A caniforge is a fire-breathing dog with leather wings that eats ice cream while playing checkers with the pope.” There is no scoring, just good fellowship and the hilarity of funny pictures and words. An amusing concept perhaps, but difficult in practice. There is a lot of pressure on each player to come up with something good, which results in four people sitting and staring at the one person, making the pressure worse. We got around this by having several drawings going around at once, so there was less sitting and more drawing. Also, once the last tear off sheet is torn off, there’s no more game (there are a fair number of sheets, but they won’t last long if you keep playing the game). In the end, we decided that this game would be best played over hours, or days, by posting a page on the fridge, bulletin board, or bathroom wall, and having people add to it as they walk by. A well intentioned party game, but not a lot of fun to play as a party game.

Finally, I would like to mention Banagrams and Mimic. Those who have played games with me may know that Scrabble is just about my least favorite game of all time. Banagrams looks almost exactly like Scrabble, but I liked it. Why? Everyone gets their own big pile of tiles (which makes finding words a lot easier), and there are no turns. Everyone just tries to make their own Scrabble type crossword grid at once. And you get to shout “peel”, which is fun too (right, Ken?) Mimic was not well liked at Mind Games, but for easily correctable reasons. Mimic was probably the most original game there, and is played by trying to get lines of four animal cards that make two pairs. The play mechanisms, the scoring system, and the fluidity that altered how the lines of four could be traced were all clever and worked well. The problem was that the rules were written terribly. What seemed to be the core rules were never stated clearly, but rather, implied in the description of a special case to the rules.

(Conti. to P. 3. Games)

(Conti. from P. 3. Games)

There was no organizational structure to the rules, important things that should have been listed sequentially were scattered around, and unimportant things were repeated two or three times in different places. We decided that the game was designed by an engineer, who came up with a very good mechanism. He (or she) then taught the game to friends, and played it with them. When something odd happened, it was written into the rules. I would venture that the designer of Mimic had never just handed the game to people, let them learn it by reading those rules, and then gotten feedback. It would have been a contender for Mensa Select in that case.

I'd better stop, after mentioning only seven of the sixty games. Come to the next games night to play some of the games we brought back, or to hear about the ones we didn't. I'm sure that I, or the other local attendees (Ken and Danene)

could talk you into a coma about all the horrible games that we wouldn't want to wish on anyone, or the games that we kept giving another chance, because we really felt that underneath it all was something special, if only the right change could be made (Aussie Rules Subsistence Farmer really could work, if they just changed the entire deck of cards). There's also a few stories about trying to buy beer in Pittsburgh, finding the Heinz headquarters - complete with giant ketchup bottle, getting on the wrong road in Pennsylvania, getting on the Pennsylvania turnpike to nowhere, getting on the wrong road in West Virginia, and discussing the air quality of the areas we were in. The main thing that I've learned from this experience is that I'd be very hesitant to create and submit a game, knowing that it would be tested by people like (and worse than) me.

Special Notice, RG News

Who: You!

When: Saturday, June 17, 2006, 6 pm

Where: (See Printed Mblem)

What: The 7th Annual Black and White Penguin Party!!

Wear black and white in honor of the birds and all things black and white, and come prepared for a good time! We'll have balloon hats for the uninhibited. Bring an instrument if you care to play and a hoop if you have one of your own; I'll have borrow hoops for hoop dancing in the driveway, a fire hoop, and an LED hoop for after dark fun!

There will be food. I'll provide a main dish and soft drinks; If you would, please bring Potluck dinner or dessert food

BYOB

As in prior years, I'll try to have plenty of seating but it wouldn't hurt to put a lawn chair in the trunk.

Also, please park in the

Children are welcome. The backyard is fenced but the house is not child-proof. This is a dog / cat / no smoking inside house.

Need a head count so I'll know how much bird to buy.

RSVP: Email (for e-mail address and phone number see printed Mblem)

AN OPPORTUNITY AWAITS

Ellen Muratori

Recently I got an email from a new member who wrote, "I read in Mensa's Bulletin that the best way to enjoy membership is to volunteer. Therefore, how can I get involved?"

What a great attitude! His expertise lay in a field for which we (in the Triad area) had an immediate need. A win-win situation!

In that spirit, you are being informed that such an opportunity awaits YOU. Having accomplished what I set out to do three years ago, I am now ready to pass this opportunity on to a new Testing Coordinator.

MENC's testing program is now in place. We have proctors in Wilmington, Jacksonville, Fayetteville, Greenville, Durham and Chapel Hill. Raleigh is serviced at Apex.

The names of testing prospects are sent to the Testing Coordinator in a monthly report.

All that is needed is for someone to link the prospects to the proctors - namely, the Testing Coordinator. One does not have to be a proctor. One does not have to be a seasoned Mensa member.

This person's task takes place in the home, at the computer, connecting prospects with proctors twice a year, in the spring and in October (Mensa Testing Day).

What are the benefits of taking on this volunteer position? You will have the satisfaction of knowing that you've given someone the chance to take a test that may qualify them for membership in Mensa. Remember when it happened to YOU?

If you have the slightest curiosity as to what actually happens from the Testing Coordinator's viewpoint, contact me at summerellen@mymailstation.com and I'll send you a detailed job description. No obligation, merely information.

(However, do not ask for info if you reside in the Triad area, zipcodes beginning 272, 273, 274. That opportunity has already been filled.)

View from a Southern Porch

RVC Column
Mike Seigler

This is just a brief note to let you how good it is to be in the Southeast. It may seem a little strange to say about the most laid-back region in Mensa, but Region 5 is a center of activity.

The good news is Mensa has been showing slow and steady growth for the past few years. At the end of March Mensa's membership had increased to 54,503. That's a 3.9% increase in membership. The great news is Region 5 did even better. Membership in the Region grew from 4,619 members to 4,846 for an increase of 4.9%.

Thirteen of our nineteen local groups increased in membership. Three groups deserve special recognition and they're all in the Carolinas. Local Group 280 - Charlotte-Blue Ridge Mensa passed a milestone by having 400 members is now the 40th largest group. Local Group 275 - Mensa of Eastern North Carolina increased its membership by 11.9% to 671 members and is the 27th largest group. Piedmont Area Mensa's membership grew by a region high 20%

to 208 members (another milestone). These local groups passed a lot of others on the way up and aren't looking back.

Two great parties are coming up and you won't want to miss either one.

Piedmont Area Mensa will be hosting the Carolina RG "License to Thrill" in Spartanburg the weekend of May 4th. There will be a masked ball with a great band. PAM knows how to throw a party and you're guaranteed to have a great time.

I know you haven't forgotten, but the AG in Birmingham is just around the corner and starts on July 4. Central Alabama Mensa has been working hard and everything looks great. Registration has consistently run ahead of the Las Vegas AG and well over one thousand of your closest friends will be there. If you haven't registered, now would be a good time to do it. If you have registered, check the website for information on banquet tickets.

Finally, it's election time again. Three good candidates are running for RVC5. They need your input and support. Please vote. It really does make a difference.

(Editor's note: This article came in the e-mail on April 18, missed the May issue deadline, laid-back it is.)

Coordinator's Corner Ellen Muratori

Alas, we've had to cancel Videos from the Vault! The Recreation Center has had a budget crunch, requiring that we leave early. Thus no discussion afterwards. Besides, those cold, hard chairs were not conducive to comfy viewing. We'll resume again in the fall. Tom Tyson has zillions of videos to show us, and he travels with complete equipment that can be easily installed (That's what he did at the Center.) We'll be looking for a viewing location starting in September.

April's games night was held at Melinda Kite's home. In Melinda's words, "Ellen, you missed a good time. It was a small group, but Pat and Clark Craig from Winston-Salem tried us out—they are true gamers, really a lot of fun. Tom Zavist, Brian Stumpf, and Jim Martinez were there with my friends Cindy and Elise. We started with Carcassonne and then played Mexican Train Dominoes from 13 to 1. Whew! what a train ride! By that time (midnight) only Tom, Jim and Brian were left. Then came games of Hearts and Spades. In

Spades, Brian and I beat Tom and Jim 539 to 537, could not be closer. At 3:35am we decided to call it a morning. Wonder what my neighbors thought (if they were awake) at three men leaving my house at that time in the morning!"

Wednesday lunches in Greensboro: All four Wednesdays are now in the calendar. In April, those of you, whose email addresses I have, knew where to find us, because you had an early notice. We enjoyed different participants in all locations. Great way to get the Mensa Experience. Now we'll need suggestions for that Fifth Wednesday. Maybe we'll go ethnic: Mexican, Thai, Lithuanian, Chinese, Peruvian (yes!), American Seafood? You name it, we'll go!

McAlister's saw a boisterous group of us at last night's supper (May 5). Kay Bishop came dressed in her clan's tartan, accompanied by Rick Tolley. They had enjoyed the vigors of some Highland games during the afternoon. I couldn't catch Brian Stumpf's conversation, but it was an enthusiastic one. Clark Craig, and spouse Pat, joined us from Winston-Salem. Rosemary and Tom Tyson had joyous news—their house in Virginia

sold, and they'll soon be settled in Gso. Sarah Maenle slipped in, although her job at Replacements occupies her week-ends. And, in the words of Tom, "Methinks I seeth a ghost!". Yes, it was a notable figure from Triad Mensa's past: Bruce Ellington! Bruce came with companion Wendy, a Mensa member from USA (on the continent of Africa). At an earlier suggestion from the Craigs, Melinda Kite left McAlister's a few minutes earlier to prepare for a session at her house to play, you guessed it, Games! It had been such fun the previous weekend that we did a repeat.

Rick brought along a wooden chest which had belonged to his Grandfather bearing exquisite tiles of a MahJong set. Because of the uniqueness of the situation (none of us know how to play!), we plan to hold a session for learning. Then we settled down to a game of double Hearts at one table, and Sequence at another. Tom Zavist also joined us for the die-hards who played Spades and Hearts till 12:30am. The scores just kept seeing-sawing.

For a relaxing evening loaded with laughs, quick thinking, and kind consideration, y'all come try us out sometime!

American Dance Festival and Jamestown At Large Column Shiangtai Tuan

American Dance Festival (ADF) and Jamestown each celebrated a big anniversary, 30 for ADF and 400 for Jamestown. I think they have striking similarities. The most trivial one is in costuming: Costuming is always important in dances. Last month, the news media had many field days reporting the hats and dresses worn by the Queen of England who came to the US to help the celebration. She even wore a real diamond tiara in the white tie event, the State Dinner at the White House.

Of course, the parallel did not stop there. Let's look at the past 30 years for one and 400 years for the other. History is not my strong suit. Most of the facts I am referring to or quoting about Jamestown came from the May 2007 issue of National Geographic. Please take a look if you are interested.

First of all, both started as some struggling entrepreneurs doing their best to strive for survival. I don't have to tell you how hard life was in the pioneering colonial time. When the ADF first moved to Durham, it was rather doubtful it could survive either. Then both endured competition while enjoyed the fertile environment. The American Indians "were alternately cordial and hostile" but did not terminate them. "A well-coordinate attack might have ended it all. But

Pawhatan Indians believed the English would make useful trade partners and allies." Back then, the Indians had quite an established nation. I don't have to repeat the achievement in agriculture, in arts, in crafts by the Indians. You can find it in National Geographic or the many books on Indians in any book stores. I would like to quote some of the changes stated in National Geographic: In the 1500's, there were 1,002,000 Indians. In the 1800's, there were only 178,000 Indians, 4,763,000 Europeans, and 1,002,000 Africans. No matter how you look at it, the welfare of the Indians nowadays can only be viewed as in a grave condition. The beginning of a life in the new world 400 years ago might as well be considered the beginning of the end for the Indians. The Europeans came and tried to survive on a fertile ground but probably hostile environment. After 400 years, the Indian culture was wiped out either by epidemics or by the weapon both brought in by the Europeans. The history merely records what had happened. It was probably inevitable.

One score and ten years ago, I remember we had many ballet companies, many other dance companies, and an Opera Festival. National Opera Company (Based at WRAL in Raleigh) used to travel all over North Carolina to give performances through out the year and finish the season by doing their repertoire at the Opera Festival.

(Conti. to P. 6, ADF)

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,
The April/May 2007 Bulletin has MY picture on page 75. John Vorhaus showed an episode of the British "Couples" and discussed how humor can be written. It was funny and educational. I am in back to the right of the photo. Well, I can tell it's me by my hat.

Margaret

Editor's note: This came from Ms. Margaret E. Fowler of New Bern on a post card with a picture of a beautiful ocelot cub.

Dear Editor,
You said you want submissions for MENC Newsletter. I've sent some good stuff to you & the previous editor. I especially (sig) remember sending "---" (name withheld for privacy reason, editor). Perhaps it is languishing in a pile of articles. Perhaps it was not published because I neglected to include my

Mensa #. It is ---
By the way, judging by some recent newsletters, it seems to be your personal journal, almost.
Respectfully submitted,

Editors note: for the sensitive nature of the letter, the name and other information are withheld.

Perhaps you are right. The submission is perhaps languishing in a pile of material from the previous editor. Please submit again.

Yes, some of the recent issues of this newsletter do seem to be my personal journal, almost. I worked hard to achieve that. When people use such expressions, it usually means someone works hard to please the superior in some good, juicy way to get a better job. This time I actually mean I really worked hard. This is how: On the sixth of the month, I will check all e-mail messages I accumulated for Mblem editing. Sometimes, I also go through the pile of unread US mail letters, hoping to dig up some entries from the tons of junk mail, ads, and commercials. I would then move or type all the material into the skeleton I prepared for that month's issue in an MSPublisher file. Between the sixth and the twelfth

I started to pace the floor of my cluttered little house hoping there are more things coming my way so I can fill the pages. Why twelfth? It is because our Publications Chair told me that the news letter should go to the printer by the twelfth so as all members may receive by the first of the coming month. (Well, bulk mail does not go as fast as first class mail, you know.) Usually, starting the tenth, I would feverishly type away, trying to fill the still empty pages. It was said, if you have a million monkeys typing at a million typewriters for a million years non-stop, one of them might come out with the full set of Shakespeare. Well, we are not aiming that high, no Shakespeare. Just one monkey, this one, at one computer keyboard can usually fill the pages of Mblem in two or three or four days. In the meantime, our MENC publishing staff (the Publishing Chair, proof reader, folder, stapler, labeler, and others, all volunteers like me) would be pacing their floors and hold their sweat waiting for me to send the "final product" to them.

By the way, if any of you members wants to send a thank you note to the publication staff, I will be more than glad to print it.

(Conti. from P. 5, ADF)

There was a professor at Duke who would train a chorus ahead of time. During the Festival, principle singers of National Opera Company, the above mentioned chorus, and a live orchestra would get together to produce this repertoire in a week or so. (In their traveling performances, National Opera would use only a piano for accompaniment. The members who are not singing in any given opera would fill in as chorus.) Enough people were eager to go for cultural events, be it an opera or a dance concert. That was the fertile environment then. The cultural atmosphere in Triangle area was probably the best in both Carolinas. That was why the organizers of the dwindling ADF chose to move out of New York and came to Durham. It was the best strategic point between the north (New York, Boston, etc.) and Miami. It was rosy and well accepted by the "locals" right away. A few years later, the organizers of the Opera Festival found it hard to fill the halls and decided that there were just not enough people to come to all the events in the same few weeks in the summer. So they decided to cancel the Opera Festival. It

might be the first victim but not the only one. Because of the competition, small ballet and other dance companies were driven out of business. "Local" audience had been "spoiled" by the high standard of the Dance Festival. No one cared to go to the "local" performances any more. ADF came because of the dance atmosphere created by the many small dance companies. However, its mere appearance in turn killed them. After it had eliminated the opposition, ADF started to raise its ticket price to the "New York standard". At beginning, as I remembered (my memory may have failed me), they would still give discounts to "locals". A few years later, they started to cater only to those who were "traveling between New York and Miami" or the rich locals and eliminated the local-discount. Overall it is a win for ADF and a loss for the locals, just like what happened after Jamestown.

So, the two anniversaries celebrated the success of two struggling existences which eventually grew strong and eventually bullied their way to great success. I wonder if the Queen would care to go step on the chest of a dead Indian and do a Tarzan yell.