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## Getting back in the game

### Experts: Monopoly matters, especially in a tough economy

By Janet Kidd Stewart special to Tribune Newspapers

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If your financial life were a board game, would it be Monopoly or Settlers of Catan?

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Americans are still buying old-fashioned board games, despite a troubled economy and stiff competition from video games.

They're a cheap form of entertainment during tough times, to be sure, and some, like Monopoly, have become collectibles.

"When you have a troublesome economy, people have more time to play games than when we're at full employment," said Phil Orbanes, a former toy industry executive who has written several books on Monopoly.

Yet, there could be a deeper explanation as to why at least some board games continue to generate significant sales.

The category logged \$1.2 billion in sales last year, according to data from NPD Group, a market research firm. That number was down from \$1.3 billion in 2009, the company said.

Games like Monopoly and The Game of Life and upstarts such as Settlers of Catan come with powerful lessons about personal finance, experts say. Just don't expect the experts to agree on which lessons are best.

University of Texas at Austin professor Daniel Hamermesh said he demonstrates in his introductory economics class the concept of diminishing returns through a Monopoly property deed.

"The marginal impact of building on properties rises until the third house, then falls off thereafter," said Hamermesh, a 68-year-old grandfather who grew up playing the game.

To Orbanes, the game is about numbers and negotiation.

"There are odds and relative values and other math concepts that need to be mastered, but the real art of the game is in negotiations as you try to assemble a winning group of properties," he

said, referring to trading strategies among players.

"There's also more fundamental lessons. A lot of people know that the most desirable properties are the orange cards because of where they are in relation to jail.

"But if you put all your eggs in one basket to go with only the orange properties, there is an enormous risk of being wrong" if the game doesn't unfold in typical fashion, Orbanes said.

Did someone say small-cap stocks?

Other game aficionados turn up their noses at the ruthless, luck-bound nature of Monopoly and the ultimate goal of The Game of Life (to die with the biggest pile of money).

Modern games imported from Europe — Settlers of Catan, for one — have taken off because they incorporate more strategy and skill, take less time to play and don't involve the total annihilation of the family and friends sitting around the game table, said Scott Alden, co-founder of BoardGameGeek, (boardgame

geek.com), a website for enthusiasts.

"With Monopoly, the theme is to crush your opponent into the dust," he said. "With Catan, the theme is about building and flourishing."

The game involves a bit of nation-building. Players are settlers of a new land and trade for commodities like sheep and lumber as they build roads and towns, but no one is eliminated during play.

The whole idea irks Orbanes, who believes that the lessons of the traditional games — there is one and only one winner in the jungle — are being lost.

In fact, Hasbro briefly tried a new version of The Game of Life where the object was no longer to amass the most money but to collect a rich mix of life experiences. It's no longer being published.

Some say the activity is more important than the theme.

Encouraging family game play is part of therapy for children with attention problems and emotional issues, said Pam Dyson, a counselor in Ballwin, Mo., who said she grew up on a farm, frequently playing Monopoly with her two younger brothers.

Today, she sees children and their parents playing Angry Birds on their mobile phones while waiting for their appointments, but she finds herself having to remind families they have a stack of games somewhere at home that could help rebuild family ties.

Dyson doesn't get too concerned about the economic or life lessons embedded in any particular game, but she does say the conflict that arises between players in a game can be a relatively safe outlet for learning to deal with emotions in a competitive environment.

"The big trend at our most recent Toy Fair (an industry trade show) was the concept of 'all play,'" said Adrienne Appell, a spokeswoman for the Toy Industry Association.

Consumers are shifting away from competitive games to ones that encourage teamwork, she said. Richard Gottlieb, a toy industry consultant, said Euro-style games like Settlers of Catan are gaining

more traction than infinite line extensions of old games like Monopoly, which has been published in more than 200 versions in the U.S. alone.

"It used to be that Europeans thought Americans wouldn't play more involved strategy games, but they are up (in sales) today," he said, while the overall category tends to bounce around in a relatively tight range.

"The toy industry overall is in a slight downward trend over the last 10 years, but it's just not a volatile category," Gottlieb said.

Within the category, though, myriad extensions of older games (Simpsons edition, anyone?) have diluted the experience and are losing market share to the upstarts with "more inspired" game play, he said.

To Orbanes, that kind of thinking is a shame.

"The lessons in Monopoly are so fundamental," he said. "And it takes your mind off your real-world problems."

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