

Club Tackles Board Games from Around the World

By WENDI WINTERS, For The Capital

It was a cheery group of 22 adults and kids that gathered at the Bay Ridge Christian Church on Bay Ridge Road on a recent Saturday night. They weren't there to pray, but to play.

Specifically, they were there to play board games, and not your rainy-day-at-the-beach-house variety like Monopoly or Trouble, either. No, these games are more complex, more engaging, more grown-up.

Nearly oblivious to their surroundings, they dove into heaps of tantalizing games that Pierce Ostrander and his wife, Ruth, lugged into the room.

It was the first meeting of the Annapolis chapter of the Games Club of Maryland, and, by any standard, it was a success.



Photo: Intriguing stacks of games await club members and guests at the Annapolis area's first Games Club of Maryland play night recently at Bay Ridge Christian Church. Photo by: Wendi Winters for The Capital

The Maryland gamers have clubs all over the state, including in Silver Spring and Rockville, both of which are hosted by Steve Quade, who showed up in Annapolis to offer his gaming guidance.

"We have a network of nearly two dozen locations where players across the state can meet. We even have one in 'cyberspace.' Personally, I prefer to play face-to-face," said Mr. Ostrander.

Club events are open to the public. Membership is free. A prospective member only has to attend any three meetings within a single year to sign up. The club's Web site, www.gamesclubofmd.org, provides club locations and answers frequently asked questions.

The next three meetings for the Annapolis club are set for Nov. 12, Dec. 17 and Jan. 21.

Mr. Ostrander, a tall 44-year-old project manager for Pacific Northwest, has been a game player all his life. Not chess, checkers or Battle Ship - he plays what he calls "designer games."

He spent his teens playing battle games published by a now-defunct Baltimore firm called Avalon Hill War Games. A few years ago, he stumbled across European games online - and discovered a culture he wasn't aware existed.

Germans, he's learned, are fanatical board game players. German families own an average of 30 games. The biggest game fair in the world used to take place at the Milwaukee Gen Con. It's primacy has been superseded by a convention in Essen, Germany.

The German Spiel des Jahres, or Game of the Year, is the most prestigious award a game can receive. It's like hitting the jackpot for the lucky designer, who can anticipate sales of 500,000 copies or more.

Almost all the games at the club's meeting were "designer" efforts from Europe, Mr. Ostrander said.

At this inaugural club meeting there were games that, in gaming parlance, involved trading, bidding, pattern recognition, building, area control and strategy.

Hundreds of games are released every year, Mr. Ostrander said. A typical "Eurogame" can sell about 3,000 copies in the United States, and maybe 30,000 in Europe before going out of print. Once that happens, games enter the collectors' market, where prices can jump exponentially on eBay.

Despite the runaway success of electronic games, board game sales have exploded over the last decade, zooming from \$700 million in 1995 to more than \$4 billion in 2004, according to the Game Manufacturers Association.

At one table, Josh Payne of Cokeysville, Crownsville resident Chad Wilson and Doug Mules of Arnold were absorbed in a game of "Puerto Rico," a German import in which up to five players can compete.



Photo: Cockeysville resident Josh Payne, a Games Club of Maryland member, brought friends Chad Wilson of Crownsville and Arnold resident Doug Mules to the first game night for the new Annapolis chapter of GCOM. Mr. Payne ponders his next move in the game "Puerto Rico," designed and imported from Germany. It's a sophisticated game that involves besting competitors at growing, processing and shipping crops more efficiently. Photo by: Wendi Winters for The Capital

"I brought Chad and Doug," said Mr. Payne. "I've been involved with GCOM for about a year."

"I'm a novice," confessed Mr. Wilson, who appeared to be winning.

Mr. Quade, 36, a computer programmer for the Computer Science Corp., held court at another table. He meticulously set up a series of octagonal tiles in a serpentine pattern, forming the unusual game board for "That's Life!"

"It's a brand new game," he enthused.

Hillsmere resident Bob Emmet liked it right away.

"It's very dynamic. Your emotions get stirred, but it's simple enough," he said.



Photo: Steve Quade, 36, of Silver Spring meticulously lays out tiles in a serpentine fashion for the new Eurogame produced in Germany called "That's Life!" Each tile has a separate, wordless yet hysterically funny one-panel cartoon printed on it, just to keep game-players giggling throughout the fast-paced game. He was preparing for an evening of play at the first meeting of the Annapolis chapter of the Games Club of Maryland at the Bay Ridge Christian Church on Bay Ridge Road in Annapolis. Admission is free and meetings are open to the public. Photo by: Wendi Winters for The Capital

Game designer Kevin McPartland drove in from Jessup to show off his latest creation, called "Conquest of Paradise." He needs 500 presales before a game board manufacturer will agree to print and ship the game. So far, 361 people have visited his Web site (www.gmtgames.com) to preview it and plunk down \$40 on their credit card.

Jim Lineham, a member of the church, had dropped by early in the evening to check the building's audio-visual systems. Mr. Ostrander talked him into returning for the games and he brought along neighbor Danny Leydorf, a senior at Annapolis Area Christian School. They played "Shadows Over Camelot."



Photo: A close look at “Shadows Over Camelot,” a game played the inaugural evening of the Annapolis chapter of Games Club of Maryland by participants Annapolis residents Jim Lineham, Danny Leydorf, Richard Strub and Kelly Strub; plus Ginna Baker of Harrisonburg and Pierce Ostrander of Tracey’s Landing. Photo by: Wendi Winters for The Capital

“Each character is on a quest, like fighting a dragon,” Mr. Lineham said matter-of-factly.

Mrs. Ostrander, whose works are exhibited at the West River Gallery in Galesville, jokingly calls herself a “Game Widow.”



Photo: Pierce Ostrander, 44, founder of the new Annapolis chapter of Games Club of Maryland makes a dramatic move in the game, “Shadows Over Camelot,” as Harrisonburg resident Ginna Baker looks on ruefully. Photo by: Wendi Winters for The Capital

Still, she said, "I enjoy games and we use it as a social outlet with friends."

She was busy playing "Drachen-Land," a game that involved hiding various colored "jewels" behind cardboard castle walls.

The game meisters noted that many of the games they play aren't available in the mass-market, big-box stores. They find them in specialty stores, comic book shops and tucked into the corners of Barnes & Noble or Borders. Mostly, they buy online at sites like www.fairplaygames.com, www.thoughthammer.com, www.funagain.com, www.gamesurplus.com and www.gamefest.com.

Suddenly, there was a yelp from the "Shadows Over Camelot" table. A dragon had just eaten a player. Well, that's life.

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