

The Board Game Café Snakes & Lattes in Toronto

From 1 to 2207 in Three Years

Three years ago Ben Castanié (picture right) owned exactly one board game: ZUG UM ZUG. "I do not even recall where I got it from," he wonders in retrospect, "we did not play a lot at the time." Today the Frenchman, who lives in Canada, calls 2208 board games his own and their numbers are still increasing meaning Castanié's collection may well be the biggest publicly accessible collection in North America.

This enormous "library" is the main attraction of the board game café Snakes & Lattes Castanié and his partner Aurelia Peynet opened September 2010 at 600 Bloor Street West in Toronto. On entering the premises, you find yourself in front of a wall of games. A little further at the back, below the advertising for the "Game of the Week", dozens of new publications from Europe and the U.S. are stacked. Anything from a new MONOPOLY version and an explicit party game to the alien adventure from a small-scale publishing house can be found here.

Castanié explains his motto: "We don't mind what the customers play, as long as they are well entertained. I'm also not fussed about how they treat the games". He claims to replace only 3 games per month due to missing parts. Not bad when you consider that some copies have to survive several gaming rounds per day.

The Snakes & Lattes has been popular from the beginning in a city where everyone seems constantly on the lookout for the next big thing, the next trend. In the café, you will see students in-between lec-

tures as well as suit-wearing patrons after a day in the financial district. Shaggy nerds are working through hours of war games, while couples meet for their first date. Castanié is even able to boast: "Believe it or not, 60 percent of our visitors are women!" During the weekend, you have to brace yourself for long lines at the entrance of the Snakes & Latte before signing up with your cell phone number on a list, leaving you with another one or two hours to get a drink until you are assigned a table. Castanié and Peynet have obviously hit a nerve with their board game café. "Our timing was perfect, even though we did not realize it at the beginning," says Castanié.

Mostly a niche

Except for some cases such as TRIVIAL PURSUIT or CRANIUM, board games are still somewhat a niche market in North America, however Scott Nicholson, who produced the video podcast "Board Games with Scott" from 2005 to 2010, explains that in the last 10 to 15 years the hobby has gained many new fans. Nicholson has



achieved more than a million views, making him one of the leading faces of the board game boom. The reasons for the increasing popularity are the internet, which allowed players for the first time to exchange views with other like-minded people around the globe, as well as entrepreneurs, who have imported European top games such as ADEL VERPFLICHTET and THE SETTLERS OF CATAN since the 1990s as English versions of the mostly German originals have been published. Since then, modern board games have been called German or Euro games in North America. "These games are characterized by the fact that they often appear to be friendlier and convey a superior communal gaming experience, compared to American board games of the same time. Something is being built, not destroyed," states Nicholson, now a professor at Syracuse (NY) University doing research in Gamification Theory and exploring how elements of games can be employed commercially and pedagogically. He adds, that interest in his work has markedly increased in the last years.

This general trend for board games is more than welcome to Castanié and Peynet, but the great success of Snakes & Lattes is nonetheless justified by the special concept of the café. Castanié thinks it is "more of a social meeting point with many games" than a "mere board game café". Occasionally, one can actually see guests sitting at a table without a game. The owner is particularly proud of the name of his place: Snakes & Lattes alludes to SNAKES & LADDERS, the classic game of steps. This is a name nobody is likely to forget as everyone remembers the kids' game.

Castanié, who claims to have received hundreds of e-mails from people who



want to open a board game establishment themselves, has one further explanation for the fact that his café has so far caught on as the only one of its kind in North America: "We do not want to convert anyone and let everyone play what they like." Many guests only know MONOPOLY or JENGA. "When people like to play these, we leave them be. Most visitors will sooner or later become intrigued by the many games on the shelves and like to try something new." Then the "game gurus" come into their own. The 'gurus' are the games consultants at Snakes & Lattes, who explain the rules to the guests and recommend new games to them according to their interests, the group size, and their previous knowledge. Not an easy

gigantic games collection within a period of three years. The story of Snakes & Lattes begins with a visit to Chicago. The pair, upon entering a board game shop, were reminded of toy libraries that exist in their native Paris. Why don't we open a toy library for kids in Toronto, was their first thought. And the second: Why not one for adults? And the third: Why not a board game café right away?

Combing garage sales

For twelve months, Castanié and Peynet daily combed garage sales, and second hand stores for used games. After one year, they had collected 1000. "Among these there were maybe ten good ones, but at least we had an eye-catcher,"

says Castanié. Then several hundred quality games were added, and two years after the trip to Chicago the Snakes & Lattes was opened, initially with 46 seats. After little more than one year, it was possible to expand it to 120, and a further expansion to 230 seats is imminent. At the moment, 30 people are working for Snakes & Lattes, and there is also a small games shop attached.

Once a month a prototype evening takes place, where game designers can test their own creations.

"What are we actually doing here? – we only asked ourselves this question once," recounts Castanié, "that was at the day of the opening, when we were tearing the newspapers from the windows." Seeing that the first players were already queuing up in front of the door, the young entrepreneurs knew they had not given up their jobs for nothing. "Right from the very beginning the café was fairing really well," says the 30-year old, and, for a moment, he actually looks like he still cannot believe it. Then he is up again, to quickly explain GEISTESBLITZ to the four girls at the next table. *En passant*, he has turned into a game guru himself in the last three years.

Hendrik Breuer/cs



job. Game guru Jean Paul says that they have to explain games around thirty times per shift, among them more complicated ones such as AGRICOLA or CAYLUS. A game guru should be able to explain 300 games, and at team meetings new games are introduced and trends discussed. "There is probably nobody quite as close to the gaming scene at the moment as we are," says Castanié. Finding good game gurus is extremely tricky, as they not only need to be obsessed with games, but also to be friendly and patient, in order to continually encourage strangers to try out new games. Most game gurus are former regulars. "Game guru," says Jean Paul, "is a dream job."

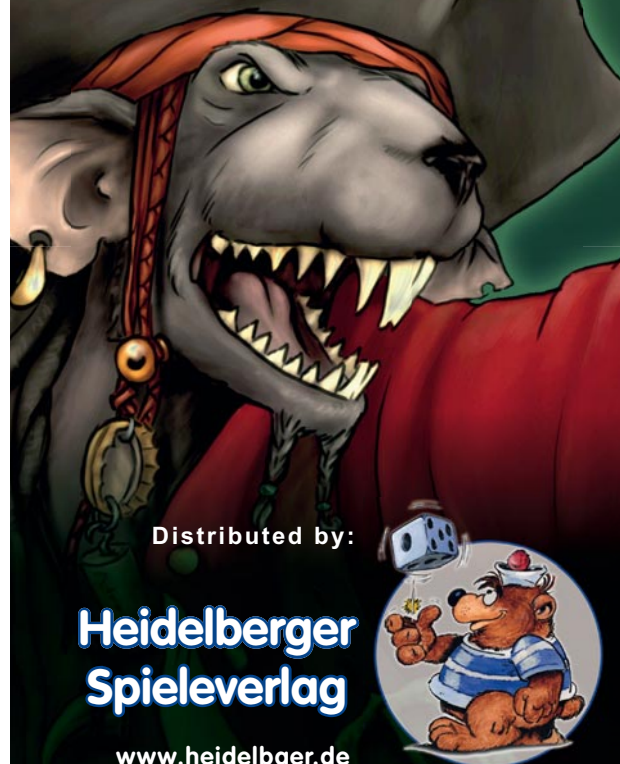
What remains is only to find out how Castanié and Peynet acquired their

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