

Entry: **Board Games**

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The first board game manufactured in the US is thought to be *The Traveller's Tour Through the United States*, produced in 1822. Before that, Native Americans played board games, drawing the board on the ground and using objects such as stones as pieces, and early settlers imported games from Europe, including *Chess* and *Checkers*, for trade or entertainment. There are no other records of board games manufactured in America until 1843, when *The Mansion of Happiness* was published. Like most American board games of the past and present, this is a race game. In this case, the goal is to reach "eternal happiness"; landing on squares associated with vice leads to punishments, and landing on those associated with virtue leads to rewards. As the use of dice was frowned upon because of their association with gambling, a spinning device known as a "teetotum" was used instead. Board games were hand-colored until about 1860, when novel lithography techniques enabled mass production. One of the first games to benefit from these new techniques was *The Checkered Game of Life* (1860), which again provided entertainment by rewarding good deeds and punishing bad ones. Board games were a popular pastime during the American Civil War, not the least because the *Games for Soldiers* put together nine games (including *Chess*, *Checkers*, *Backgammon*, and *The Checkered Game of Life*) in a package that could be easily carried by soldiers in their knapsack.

Early games were designed to educate and teach religious and moral values, while later games were more focused on success and entertainment. Particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, board games reflected recent political or sporting events. Some American board games enjoyed huge commercial success. *Monopoly* (1935), a successor of *The Landlord's Game* (1904), sold more than one

million sets in its first year, and over 250 million copies have since been sold worldwide. Another success story is *Scrabble*: since 1948, it has sold more than one hundred million sets worldwide. For most of its history, the board-game industry was dominated by four companies: McLoughlin Brothers, Milton Bradley, Parker Brothers, and Selchow & Righter.

Technological advances – first, television, then video games, and finally the Internet – have affected the kind of board games played. Board-game producers reacted against competition posed by television by producing games based on popular TV shows. Video games constituted a more serious threat in the 1970s and 1980s, but the creation of imaginative games such as *Trivial Pursuit* (1985) maintained their popularity. Paradoxically, the development of the Internet has led to a resurgence of interest in board games, with many of them now being played on-line.

Board-game collecting is a relatively late phenomenon, and was a rare activity before the mid-1980s. Collectors acquire board games for their aesthetic qualities, their historic and cultural importance, for playing them, but also for investment (in 1988, an original Monopoly set fetched \$31,000).

Beyond American board games, the US has played an important role in the history of classic strategy games. Americans have dominated *Checkers* (the version played on 8x8 board, also known as *English Draughts*); notably Dr Marion Tinsley was world champion from 1955 to 1962, and from 1975 to 1991. In *Chess*, Paul Morphy was unofficial world champion from 1858 to 1862, and Robert James Fischer was official world champion from 1972 to 1975. Board games have also played a significant role in science, with, for example, the victory of IBM's Deep Blue over *Chess* world champion Gary Kasparov on 11 May 1997 in New York City being considered a milestone in the history of Artificial Intelligence.

## **Bibliography**

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