

PERSPECTIVES ON PLAY IN 2016

By Raymond Simon

This is a great time to be a fan of games and puzzles! Game cafés are popping up all over the place; anyone with a smartphone can download a gazillion apps to while away a few minutes; and the Internet has enabled game designers and puzzle makers to bring their amusing creations to the public quickly and conveniently.

Considering all the amazing things happening, we here at GAMES WORLD OF PUZZLES thought that you would enjoy hearing directly from some of the men and women involved. So we've polled everyone from top-flight game players to serious scholars who ponder the role of play in our lives to bring you their perspective on the state of games and play in 2016.

Their answers are thoughtful and informative, amusing and provocative. And given the time of year, they may even help you decide on a few gifts to share with fellow game-lovers.

We've divided this highly unscientific survey into four handy sections: Parental Advisory; Classics Corner; Across & Down; and The Game Lab. We think you'll enjoy reading through it. Most of all, have fun!

PARENTAL ADVISORY

Ordinarily, we side with kids, but with the holidays here we think mom and dad really do know what's best. That's why we're beginning our 2016 survey of games and puzzles by talking to four parents who make games and puzzles! We asked them these questions:

1. In the past year, what games or puzzles did your children enjoy the most?
2. What games or puzzles will you be giving as gifts for the holidays this year?
3. What's your favorite game or toy that you got as a gift during the holidays?



TAMMY DONROE INMAN recently released *Twitterati Cryptograms*, a cool collection of puzzles for codebreakers. This mother of two describes herself as a friendly introvert. She's also a writer, cooking instructor, and Math Olympiads coach.

1. My sons have been heavy into Pokémon and Magic cards for years, but they branched out with Castle Panic, a cooperative game where you try to prevent monsters from storming the castle. They also enjoyed the card game Exploding Kittens, which, despite the horrifying name, is pretty funny on account of the comic art and snarky captions.

2. I'll probably be giving out a fair number of my new book *Twitterati Cryptograms* to my adult friends, but I've also be-

come addicted to gryptics. These crossword puzzles don't have any clues, just letter hints extending out past the boundaries of the grid and a few inside. Les Foeldesty wrote a few of these books, including *Next-Generation Crosswords*, which I highly recommend.

3. I have to call out Rush Hour, which I gave the kids for Christmas years ago but it's hard to say who loved it more, them or me. It's a puzzle game where you try to back plastic cars out of various complicated parking scenarios. It combines my love of spatial puzzles with righteous Boston road rage.

Want to try one of Tammy's weekly Wednesday cryptograms? Visit www.codesparrow.com. You can also follow her on Twitter at @codeSparrow.



HELAINA CAPPEL released her first game, Foodfighters, this past March. The cool Canadian is co-owner of Kids Table Board Gaming and the mother of two gamers-in-training, ages 7 and 4.

1. My kids play games daily! But the ones that come back to the table time and time again are: Gulo Gulo, Bomb

Squad Academy, and Laser Maze (puzzle/activity).

2. This year's picks for gift giving are: Karuba, Junk Art, Wok on Fire, and Machi Koro.

3. My favorite gift of the holidays is Pandemic Legacy.

Miss the days when you could play with your food? Then you really ought to check out www.kidstablebg.com and www.facebook.com/kidstableboardgaming.





DARREN KISGEN teaches finance at Boston College and is the father of two young children. Our game reviewer named Kisgen's new board game, *Dragonwood*, the Family Game of the Year. (See the review on page 35.)

1. We own over 200 tabletop games and play a variety of them every week. Some recent favorites include *Camel Up*, *Sushi Go*, *Ticket to Ride*, *Outfoxed*, *Flash Point: Fire Rescue*, *Takenoko*, *Colt Express*, *Love Letter*, *Acquire*, and *Castles of Mad King Ludwig*.
2. Our top choices for gifts might include *Forbidden Island/Desert*, *Going, Going, GONE!*, *Battle Sheep*, *Incan Gold*, *Takenoko*, *Camel Up* and, of course, *Dragonwood*.
3. As a kid, my favorite game I got as a gift was probably *Dark Tower*. I have many wonderful memories of playing that (and I wish I still had my copy!). More recently, it is probably the *Viticulture Collector's Edition*.

To learn more about *Dragonwood*, check out informed reviews by game lovers at websites like Amazon.com and [The Dice Tower](http://TheDiceTower.com).

BLAISE SEWELL went from graphic design to game design. His 2014 card game, *POOP: The Game*, is a blast! He's the proud papa of two, a fourth-grader and a 3-year-old.

1. My kids and I love the game *King of Tokyo*. The game is super-easy to play and a lot of fun. Also, I've never seen another board game board that literally only has one space players move on.
2. Besides giving out copies of my own games (I get a pretty good discount on those!) my kids and I will probably pick

up one of those new mini Nintendo Entertainment Systems. The classic videogames still hold and it's a great way to relive some childhood memories.

3. I still remember opening an old laser tag set back when I was about 6. Those old sets were really clunky but I remember running outside in the snow trying to recruit an uncle or two to play with me.



Curious to see what games Mr. Sewell has in the pipeline? Then wend your way over to www.POOPTheGame.com.



CLASSICS CORNER

Game lovers are living in the midst of a revolution in indie game development, but a handful of games remain perennial favorites—and with good reason! We checked in with a few folks who've mastered some of these beloved classics and ran four questions by them:

1. What was your most exciting game or match this past year?
2. If you had one move, turn, or play to do over again, what would it be and why?
3. What player are you keeping your eyes on in 2017, or, if better, what tournament are you looking forward to in 2017?
4. What development in the game, if any, caught your attention in 2016?



DR. ALEXEY ROOT began learning chess from her father at age 5. Since then, she's been awarded the title "Woman International Master" by the World Chess Federation (FIDE) and written seven thoughtful books on the game.

1. In a simultaneous exhibition I played at the Denton, Texas Public Library in July of 2016, I won 20 games of chess in one-and-a-half hours.
2. As I wrote about in my most recent book, *Prepare With Chess Strategy*, I regret touching a rook and then, following the rules of chess, having to move it. Losing my rook was bad, but my attempting to play a better move (until my opponent claimed "touch-move" and called over the tournament director) was more embarrassing. Especially since this touch-move incident happened in 2015, when I had 40 years of chess tournament experience!
3. I work for the University of Texas at Dallas. One of our students, Grandmaster Gil Popilski, tied for first in the World Open and the U.S. Open in 2016. I'm hoping Gil will help UT Dallas win the Pan-American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship, to be held December 27-30, 2016 in Louisiana.
4. The United States now has three of the top ten chess players in the world and should have an excellent chance to medal at the Olympiad.

Interested in reading more of Dr. Root's thoughts on chess and learning? Visit her author page: www.amazon.com/author/alexeyroot.

DAVID AIKEN is a self-described “cribbage nerd.” He’s the editor of *Cribbage World*, an informative monthly newsletter you should check out. Last year he played in more than 50 tournaments.

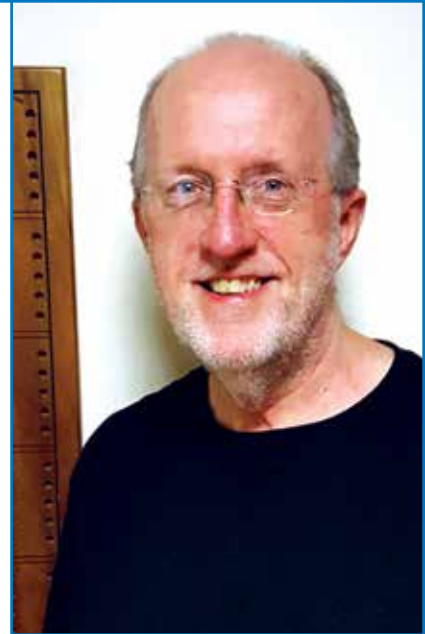
1. My most disappointing match was at the prestigious Tournament of Champions in Reno. In the quarterfinals I was ahead two games to none, yet somehow managed to lose the next three games—and the match. Regrettably, there are no “do-overs” in cribbage.

2. Winning a cribbage game is a series of small victories, so every time I lose a game by just a few points, I ask myself: Where could I have found those one or two points to secure the victory? In that sense, every tournament offers many occasions to replay the tape.

3. Playing tournament cribbage requires disposable income and free time. These are more normally the prerogative of retired folks, who make up the majority of our membership. It is exciting to see millennials

taking up the game, and there are some even younger players on the horizon: Trevor Poole (Crescent City, CA) finished third at the world’s biggest cribbage tournament in Reno this year, and two brothers from Antioch, CA, Austin and Zack Gregson, are acquitting themselves well in youth tourneys and are ready to make the leap to adult tourneys.

4. Cribbage has been around for nearly 400 years, and the only major change to the game came with the switch from 61 to 121 holes in the 1870s. Any developments we see nowadays relate more to tournament structure. For example, several tournaments now start midafternoon in order to save players an extra hotel night. It is important to hold down player expenses as much as possible.



If it’s been a while since you played cribbage, David encourages you to visit www.cribbage.org. You’ll be glad you did!



BEN LOCKHART has been playing Go for 15 years now and even moved to South Korea to train. He refers to himself, half-jokingly, as a “Go player, dissident, philosopher.”

1. I won the World division of the Samsung Cup, which is a world championship in which different countries have tournaments to seed their players, and the Western world gets one spot in the final 32. In other words, I had the honor to get crushed by the best players in the world.

2. There is a famous proverb, “there is no losing in Go,” which refers to the feeling that you play your best and any mistakes you made you now have the privilege of being able to think about and correct, thus improving. In this way I would have to say I really don’t regret any moves I’ve made. Any games I lost, I lost from my own weakness.

3. Japan dominated the Go world from c1500—1990, during which time the game had not become the more competitive modern version that we see today. When Korea and China began to train more in the sport, scientific training methods and a ruthless attitude of putting winning above

all else prevailed.

Now Korean Go is shrinking. Corporate sponsorships are dwindling and there isn’t so much new talent. China, on the other hand, has a booming Go scene which is growing, so over the next ten years the depth of the Chinese professional roster will overwhelm the rest of the world.

A shorter answer is 17-year-old Li Qincheng, who is a rising star in China.

My goal for this year is to win the U.S. Professional tournament in January 2017. I have made the top 3 before but only 1st place gets the title of professional.

4. Well, AlphaGo, of course. For your readers: If you haven’t heard of AlphaGo, you are going to want to look it up. A Google-acquired company, DeepMind, created an AI that finally defeated the best human beings at Go. It was a shocking, beautiful, and haunting event that I had the privilege of attending in Seoul.

According to Ben, www.gogameguru.com and www.USGO.org are excellent resources for Americans interested in learning more about Go.

ACROSS & DOWN

Do you begin your day by doing a daily crossword? Then this section will surely appeal to you! We talked to two awesome crossword solvers and two talented crossword constructors to get their thoughts about the year in crosswords. We begin with our solvers. We asked them both these questions:

1. What was your favorite crossword puzzle of the year and why?
2. Can you recall a memorable clue from the past year and, if so, what is it?
3. What’s your daily crossword habit?
4. What games and puzzles did you enjoy this past year when you weren’t solving crosswords?



HOWARD BARKIN claims that he's klutzy, but we know better. The current champ of the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is actually quirky, intellectually curious, and stubbornly tenacious.

1. There was a cool puzzle by Patrick Berry ("Weird Attractions") with a song title theme, where you had to figure out that each song was parodied by Weird Al Yankovic. Some of the Down answers had two clues, depending on whether you entered the real title or the Weird Al title (I LOVE ROCK N ROLL? I LOVE ROCKY ROAD). I'm partial to Weird Al though. There were a ton of great crosswords, so picking one is tough.

2. Usually, one clue doesn't stick for that long, but a great example is "Jordan, to worshippers" for "HIS AIRNESS." Here Jordan is Michael, and not the city. (Kameron Austin Collins was the constructor.)

3. I range from zero to five puzzles in a day, depending on when the kids get to bed. I solve mostly online nowadays, but I prefer to solve unrushed on paper, with a cup of coffee.

4. The occasional sudoku, various Scrabble-like mobile apps (Wordfeud and GrabbyWord, for two), and well, a few Candy Land variants with my 4-year old.

To keep up with Howard and be notified about the crossword puzzles he's begun creating, follow him on Twitter @howardb42.



STELLA ZAWISTOWSKI, a perennial contender at the ACPT, has solved a Sunday *NYT* crossword in four minutes, 33 seconds. This self-professed "brainy meathead" can also do a 250-pound back squat!

1. Without question, "Getting Duped" by Francis Heaney. It's a pair of puzzles that, put together, are a simply brilliant satire of *USA Today's* crossword plagiarism scandal. I don't want to spoil the puzzle, because everyone who reads this magazine should go solve it. But I will say that the design of the grid, the theme, and especially the clues were all carefully chosen to make witty, delicious fun of the scandal.

2. "Getting Duped," as I mentioned above, is full of hilariously satiric clues. My favorite

is "Prefix with f Boyardee" for CHE. Obviously, this is a terrible clue. That's the idea—Francis and his editor, Ben, basically took every trope of bad puzzle-making and exaggerated it to the point that I could not solve the puzzle without breaking into helpless laughter.

3. I solve 5 to 6 puzzles a day, mostly online, but since I have a dead-tree subscription to the *Wall Street Journal*, I do solve that one on paper.

4. I stick to word puzzles. I am no good with logic. So Rows Gardens and Acrostics are my favorites. I also love me some bar trivia, even though I stink at movies and television.

Curious to keep up with this crazy-good cruciverbalist? Then we suggest that you follow Stella's exploits on Twitter @stellaphone.

Of course, crossword lovers depend on the imagination and smarts of the folks who create these amusing diversions. We caught up with two accomplished cruciverbalists and asked them both the following questions:

- 1. Which one of your puzzles from 2016 is your favorite and why?**
- 2. Can you briefly sketch your constructing process?**
- 3. What crossword constructor's work inspires you? Alternately, was there a colleague's puzzle from 2016 that you particularly admired and if so, why?**
- 4. What games and puzzles did you enjoy this past year when you weren't working on crosswords?**

KAMERON AUSTIN COLLINS'S crosswords appear in *The New York Times* and the *American Values Crossword Club*. Blogger Rex Parker wrote that Collins's November 14, 2015 *NYT* puzzle, "might be perfect."

1. My favorite of my puzzles is a January 23 themeless in the *NYT*. It's my favorite for being the puzzle that forced me to revamp my approach to writing themeless puzzles. Basically, I decided that if I could make a 60-worder this clean and this sparkly, there really were no excuses. I constructed it about 2 years ago, and every puzzle I've made since then has benefitted, I think, from learning to be a bit more of a stickler.

2. I cheat, probably. I am very picky about how themeless grids (my specialty) look on the page—I'm a little too into making novel patterns with black squares. But they're so distinctive! So I start with a grid concept. I'll have a visual idea, make maybe 10 variations

on that idea, and add it to a gallery of blank grids in my phone. Meanwhile, I use the phone app Evernote to keep a running list of seed entries handy. Starting a new puzzle is, for me, a simple matter of scrolling through seeds and seeing what I'm in the mood for. From there, it's honestly whatever happens in the weird fugue state known as puzzle construction. Basically, though, I do every corner 30 to 50 times, until I'm out of new options, and save them all as screenshots in Dropbox. From there, I just Dr. Frankenstein the best composite puzzle out of those stacks of options.

3. My biggest puzzle crush is Byron Walden. His puzzles are what mine aspire to be—very



clean, very difficult to pull off grid-wise and very distinctively his. They're nerdy in a way particular to his taste and interests, and that appeals to me.

4. I am, secretly, the worst game person—I have no competitive instincts. I do like mysteries and also lame iPhone games, though.

Follow Kameron at @melvillmatic, where he tweets about crosswords, movies, and more. He also writes about pop culture at www.theringer.com.

EVAN BIRNHOLZ is a hard-working, fun-loving puzzle writer. He fell in love with crosswords just a few years ago and now writes the weekly Sunday puzzle for the *Washington Post Magazine*.

1. There are two *Post Magazine* puzzles that I'm particularly proud of. The first one was called "Connection Problem." It had several phrases in the Across direction with a -URL- string (like ZIP YOUR LIP), but you had to skip over those -URL- letters in the Down direction for the crossing Down clues to make sense. The second puzzle was called "The Word Is Out." That puzzle had some answers which didn't fit their clues.

I liked both of these puzzles because they each featured a difficult theme trick but had what I thought could be a good a-ha moment for solvers if they could figure it out.

2. I start with a theme idea, or maybe a phrase that could be an apt title for the puzzle, and then see how I can build on it. My first *Post Magazine* puzzle had a simple theme of adding MAN or WOMAN into phrases to create puns based on superheroes, like CATWOMAN ON A HOT TIN

ROOF and THE ITSY-BITSY SPIDERMAN. Once I get a set of theme answers that I like, I put them in the grid and start populating it with black squares, taking care to make sure I don't set myself up with impossible crossings. After that, it's mostly a matter of filling the grid, but I'm fairly obsessive about keeping my grids smooth and clean, without things like random Roman numerals and "crosswordese." Then it's onto cluing, which often takes me just as long as filling the grid. When that's done, I send it off to colleagues to test-solve and proofread.

3. I'm always learning new things from many different constructors. Erik Agard and Patrick Blindauer have a really creative knack for coming up with original themes. Matt Gaffney does a great weekly contest which features a metapuzzle. Ian Livengood and Josh Knapp make some of the smoothest themeless grids. But if I had to pick one



constructor whose work I've tried to emulate the most closely, it would be Patrick Berry. His puzzles are always fun and they have basically no junky answers in them.

4. When I'm not doing puzzles, I enjoy playing board games with my wife and friends. We've been on a kick playing *Boss Monster*, *7 Wonders*, and *Betrayal at House on the Hill* for several months now.

Evan's weekly crossword appears in the Washington Post Magazine. You can also find examples of his edgier puzzles for free at www.devilcross.com.

THE GAME LAB

Games and puzzles are a hekuva lotta fun, but they shouldn't be dismissed as frivolous. The three professors polled in this section take play quite seriously, but they're also game lovers themselves. To see what's on their minds, we asked them the following questions:

1. How would you characterize the state of games and puzzles in 2016?
2. What facet of games or gamers most interests you at the moment?
3. Is there any particular game or puzzle you especially enjoyed playing in the past year?
4. What are you looking forward to in 2017?



DR. PAUL BOOTH is Associate Professor in the Media and Cinema Studies program at DePaul University. He studies fandom, games, and popular culture. His most recent book is *Game Play*.

playing and buying games opening around the country. I'm particularly interested to see how board gaming communities are becoming more inclusive.

2. I love watching online tutorials and reviews of board games, and I'm interested in learning more about the communities of players and fans that view these videos. It's easy to go to BoardGameGeek, a website devoted to cataloging and developing an understanding of board games, but I also like to go to YouTube and watch things like *The Dice Tower* or *Rahdo Runs Through*, or (my favorite) *Watch It Played*.

3. I really got hooked on a couple of games last year. My favorite is *Dead of Winter* and I love the new expansion, *The Long Night*. I've also enjoyed playing new games like *Euphoria* and *Above and Below*. But hands

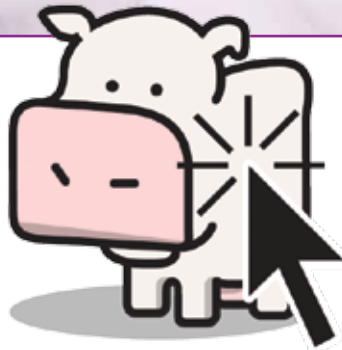
down the game I've enjoyed the most this year has been *T.I.M.E. Stories*—we've played through three sets now and can't wait to get into the fourth!

4. I'm excited to see what new genres of games are coming out. I particularly like heavy themed games, but I've been getting more into abstract and Euro-style games in my academic life. As a player I'm excited about a new board game café opening near me, the *Bonus Round Café*, and my friends' new board game company, *Rattlebox Games*, will be releasing their first game (*Cromlech*, which I play-tested) so I'm excited to get my copy of it!

1. Board games have become more popular than ever, with conventions like Gen Con reaching record numbers, crowdfunding sites helping thousands of new games get off the ground, and new locations for

Keep tabs on Dr. Booth's research, and the games he's playing, by visiting www.mcsdepaul.com/paul-booth or following him on Twitter @pbooth81.





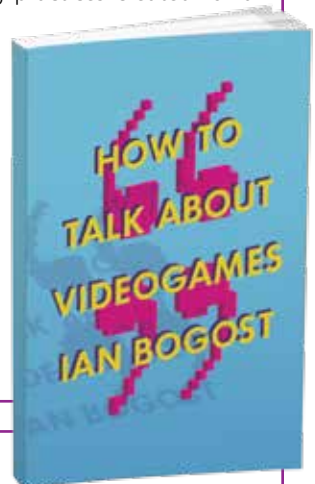
DR. IAN BOGOST is a game maker and professor at Georgia Tech. His most recent book, *Play Anything*, came out this fall. He's also a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*.

1. Mass hypocrisy. There's never been a time when more people have played more varieties of games and puzzles—from crosswords to competitive video-games, from spelling bees to Candy Crush, and yet, at the cultural level, we still seem to think that games are these weird diversions played by someone else.
2. I'm interested in play as a principle abstracted from games and puzzles—and sports and music and all the other areas where we use the verb "play." Play as a property of things—of anything, from games to lawnmowers to land use politics to boring jobs to marriage—and how we can make use of the spirit of play to find novelty in the familiar.
3. Backgammon. Hardly a new game to history, nor a new game to me. But an old favorite, which I rekindled interest in after buying a new set. Its unholy union of chance and strategy is even more pal-

pable when you play on a board whose materials you chose deliberately (and perhaps spent too much on). My new board is tournament size, 21 inches, which is just preposterously big. The stones feel like English muffins. It makes the whole game new.

4. This is going to sound selfish, but it's been a while since I created and released a new game of my own. My last project was an online game about sustainable building practices created for a government agency. So I'm looking forward—I hope—to shipping a new title of my own.

To stay abreast of Dr. Bogost's thoughts about the interesting ways that games and culture intersect, visit his website: www.bogost.com.



DR. SCOTT NICHOLSON, Professor of Game Design and Development at Wilfrid Laurier University, created the auction game *Going, Going, GONE!* He recently published the first scholarly paper on escape rooms.

1. I'm thrilled to see the rapid spread of escape rooms across North America. These live action team-based games are raising awareness of the fun of doing puzzles in groups. It's exciting to see escape rooms on mainstream television and continued innovation in the combination of themed entertainment, puzzles, live-action gaming, and theater!
2. I'm taking design concepts from escape rooms and bringing them to classrooms, libraries, museums, and corporate training facilities. The Break-out EDU platform is a tool for bringing escape rooms into classrooms, and teachers can share the games they have made at www.breakoutedu.com.
3. I had a great experience with the print-and-play role-playing game *The Cloud Dungeon*. It's a game where everyone cuts out and colors a character and works together through a choose-your-own-adventure style series of challenges. While it's designed for families, it was a joy bringing 10 serious board game players and designers around crayons, paste, and scissors and creating a ridiculous world together.
4. I've spent the summer with students creating the challenges for a reality television show based upon design

concepts of escape rooms. I'm looking forward to seeing the puzzle prototypes we created using paper, string, K'NEX, and Minecraft brought to life on a soundstage and on TV!

Follow all of the fun stuff Dr. Nicholson is doing at www.scottnicholson.com and at www.bgnlab.ca. He also tweets @snicholson.

