

SUCCESS IS IN THE CARDS



SHARI SPIRO ON GAMES
By Raymond Simon

If you keep up with the latest tabletop games, you've probably played Exploding Kittens or Secret Hitler. Both are examples of the clever, hip games that have been produced recently.

Here's something you may not know: One thing these games have in common is Shari Spiro, a successful businesswoman from New Jersey who's played a unique role in the blossoming of indie gaming culture.

Spiro owns three small but growing game companies: Ad Magic, Breaking Games, and Print & Play. Taken together, the three companies shepherd games from the prototype stage to the shelves of your local game shop. As Spiro admits, it's not a bad way to earn a living. "I'm very fortunate to do what I do," she says.

Spiro's mini game empire began with Ad Magic, which was founded in 1998. The company created customized playing cards and chips and benefited from the most recent poker boom. But things really took off in 2011, when Spiro was approached by a group of budding game designers. They were looking for a company that could create cards for their game, Cards Against Humanity.

Spiro still works with the Cards Against Humanity team, and thanks to that game's success, she's been able to expand her business so that she's involved in each stage of the game designing process. Today, Print & Play is where game designers go for prototypes, Ad Magic handles the large-scale manufacturing and logistics, and Breaking Games is the publishing arm. In other words, Spiro offers a full-service game company. In addition to her big clients, Breaking Games publishes roughly 35 games, including Hogger Logger, Poop, and Zombie Shuffle.

Spiro's wide-ranging experience has given her an interesting perspective on games. She's worked on poker, a gambling game traditionally associated with adults, as well as the kind of family-friendly fare played around the kitchen table. Despite what some may believe, Spiro



doesn't see a rigid divide between these two spheres of gaming. For one thing, Ad Magic manufactures poker-sized cards and chips for all sorts of games now. But there's more to it, according to Spiro. "I also see overlap in players, who, you know, they love tabletop games, but once in a while, they'll throw a poker game in there for a little bit of fun," she says. "I think there's a perception that there are two different completely unique audiences, and I don't think that's necessarily the case."

So why don't today's game lovers sit down and play cribbage or pinochle? The sheer abundance of interesting new games is one explanation. "The regular tabletop gamer audience has plenty of other filler games to try out," Spiro says. "They don't need to go back to the old conventional games, because if they want to fill a half-hour, there are plenty of tabletop short games to test out."

An equally important reason is the open-minded attitude that many younger game lovers exhibit. According to Spiro, "There's more willingness to try new things in the tabletop gamer, in the true tabletop gamer, versus the old-school gin rummy or poker player." (For players curious to try a game that blends elements of old-school and indie games, she recommends Jack Attack by prolific game designer Joe Andrews.) Still, whether you're a casual player or a hardcore gamer,



that's not quite the same thing as being in the game business. While Spiro enjoys playing games with family and friends, she's got to manage a team of employees, keep track of the bottom line, and be on the lookout for the next big thing. Her typical workday is a mixture of answering emails, brainstorming PR ideas, monitoring projects, overseeing meetings, and taking phone calls.

Spiro also attends cons and trade shows like the Boston Festival of Indie Games and Spiel, which takes place in Essen, Germany. For the past three years, she's averaged 8 to 10 major events annually. "This year, I slowed down a little," she says, "because my daughter entered high school and I want to spend more time with her."

Spiro has learned quite a bit about the game business since Ad Magic was founded almost two decades ago, so she has some good advice for wannabe game designers. The first step is to take your idea and turn it into something concrete. Games may provide an imaginative escape from the real world, but there's no way to know whether they'll work if you don't create a prototype first. And at this stage, Spiro says, it's perfectly fine to keep your expenses low. "They can make it at home on pieces of paper."



The crucial thing is to test your prototype as thoroughly as possible. This step of the development process, Spiro notes, requires a combination of humility and realism. When you play-test with family and friends, they're likely to offer encouragement. What you really want to see is how strangers react. Do the rules make sense to them? Do they grasp the game mechanics? Most important, do they want to play it again?

Those are all tough questions but there's an even tougher one, according to Spiro. "You have to be honest with yourself: Is this special or is it just special to me? And the only way to determine that is to play-test." That's what Spiro and her team do. They take games to various trade shows and observe players' reactions. "If over and over again people are getting excited and really into the game and they want to play again, the odds are that game is going to be very successful," she says.

That's the reaction Spiro and her team got to one of their latest games, Sparkle*Kitty, a card game about princesses and magic spells. It's got adorable artwork, simple rules, and can be played quickly. Unsurprisingly, it's a hit. "Little girls like it, big girls like it, grown men like it, strategy players like it, people who play Uno like it," she says.

Spiro sees a trend toward amusing, accessible games like Sparkle*Kitty. "They're called gateway games," she says. "But what it really means is that they're easy to learn, they target people who already like puzzles and word games and maybe traditional card games, and those games are becoming more prevalent."

There are probably hundreds of new games being proposed, manufactured, and sold every year, but the majority languish on the shelf. What makes a game good? Why do some games succeed and others disappear? Spiro has a theory. Consider music, she suggests. "I believe that games work in the same way as a hit song works," she says. "Once a game catches on and it becomes a hit, people want to play it over and over and it just spreads by word of mouth."

If that comparison sounds surprising, it helps to know that Spiro is a musician, too. She's written everything from reggae jams to ukulele ditties and plays bass in a blues band, the Hounds of Love.

After all, even gamers need a break from the game business—at least once in a while.

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