An introduction to print-and-play games

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Print-and-play game is a term one can encounter while browsing the web, but what exactly does it mean, and what is interesting to know about it?

Boardgames as a hobby became part of the mainstream culture a few years ago and have been gaining popularity ever since. There is a huge variety of game genres and game types available, ranging from *ameritrash* to *eurogames*, from optimization to press-your-luck, and from quick 15-minutes party games to huge and long RPG-like experiences. And every now and then another publisher announces a print-and-play game is published.

This phenomenon is an indirect answer to the kickstarter sumptuousness. While many games are marketed through an online crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, most of them are loaded with plastic figures, add-ons, and paid extras in the form of e.g. oversized boards or metal pieces. And the prices range from 50 euros to several hundreds. But this is only the upper market segment. In-between one can find various types of games for families, game enthusiasts, children, or seniors. And then there is the print-and-play revolution.

Technically speaking, print-and-play games have been with us since the beginning. The term means that the player needs to print something on a piece of paper, cut it out (be it the manual, the board, the cards or player's pieces) and the game is ready to play. These games differ in theme, playing time and amount of work needed to make them but they all share one common characteristics – they are available for free. There are some exceptions to this rule. Sometimes a small fee might be asked, usually around a few euros, but it's still just a fraction of the cost of a regular board game. Some of these games need the player to have a pair of dice, maybe chess pawns or simple markers, but most of them need just a few sheets of paper. Or sometimes more than a few, *Bargain Basement Batysphere* is a game of 80+ pages. And every page is a new board that is played in sequence. In contrast, for *Tempus Imperium* all you need to have is just a single sheet of paper and a pencil. The game is fully deterministic using a random setup based on the time and date of your play.

One of the most notable examples of a classic print-and-play game is *Reiner Knizia's Decathlon*. It requires you to get eight regular six-sided dice, print the scoring sheet and you are good to go. But this game has been with us for 17 years now and today there is a myriad of new titles worth printing and playing.

Even big publishers – like *Canadian Days of Wonder* – have jumped on this bandwagon. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, they decided to make one of their regular games available in print-and-play form. *Corinth* is a simple dice game that only requires eleven dice in two colors and the rest (rulebook, scoring sheet and main board) is provided by the publishers in the form of pdf files. It could have been a risky move but, several other game publishers (e.g. *Repos* or *Hans im Glück*) followed in their footsteps and shared full games, trial versions and add-ons to existing titles.

Some companies focus on this market niche alone – *P'n'P Arcade* is a website where you can buy or acquire hundreds of print-and-play games for free, and even publish your own. New additions appear every week and new ideas emerge from new designs. Some of them are solid ideas that regular publishers decide to enhance the design and sell it in a regular box through traditional distribution channels. For example, *Under Falling Skies* is just one of many in this category.

Besides, not only commercial designs are available this way. *Carbon City Zero* is an educational game created to raise awareness around the carbon footprints. It was successfully funded on Kickstarter and now you can download a free version of this game and play it yourself at home. A self-made deck of cards, a printed scoring board and some pawns are enough to fully enjoy the role of a mayor trying to reduce the carbon footprint of their city.

A sub-type of print-and-play games are so-called 'microgames' – they consist of 18 cards and… nothing else. What could you do with just 18 cards? It turns out you can do a lot. There is even a competition in this category with new games designed and released every year. Some of these games find their way to mainstream distribution channels and are published with *Love Letter* being the best example. A game created by a Japanese designer Seiji Kanai has been re-themed (*Witcher*, anyone?), re-packaged, re-published and re-designed numerous times.

There are even publishers specializing in these types of games. *Button Shy Games* publishes them on a regular basis and even offer a type of subscription for their products. *Button Shy Games* uses Kickstarter as one of their distribution and marketing channels, which many other small publishers do nowadays as well. And the story makes a full circle, the thesis (Kickstarter) and antithesis (print-and-play games) creates a synthesis that will be a starting point for new variations and games.

So, whether you are short on cash, ready for a small DIY project, eager to try something new, or curious about this print-and-play concept as a whole, anybody can find something in their taste in this ever-expanding category of games!