

CHRIS DEALS WITH IT

episode notes




EP 73 - From Board Games to the Boardroom

Status	Published ✨
Publication Date	@February 20, 2025

 www.ChrisKreuter.com/CDWI

© 2025 by Kreuter Studios - All rights reserved

 *AI Statement: All elements of this episode are products of the author, Chris Kreuter, made without any use of AI tools.*

What are some of the lessons we can take from board games into our professional lives?

- Over the past 25 years, I've played board games pretty seriously. I've also designed, playtested, and published them as co-founder of Masquerade Games.
- I'm deep in preparation for a multi-part series talking about the creative process.
- As part of that, I've been distilling my thoughts on games and the many skills they teach and develop.
- As a parent, I'm seeing board games empower my kid's learning of:

- Social interaction
- Conflict resolution
- Adjusting to & following different rules
- Storytelling
- Strategy & tactics
- Reading
- Math
- Logical reasoning
- Planning
- Cause & effect
- Exploring different worlds, mindsets & perspectives
- And they enable cross-generational conversations about what things were like & what I enjoyed when I was a kid.
- On a personal level, playing and designing games has shaped my thinking and skills in many additional ways:
 - Improved my ability to quickly parse systems and processes
 - Pattern recognition
 - Keeps math & reasoning skills sharp
 - Time & resource management
 - Strategic planning
 - Programming logic
 - Graphic design
 - Intuitive information flow
 - Storytelling
 - Distilling, contextualizing & selling complex ideas & systems to non-subject-matter experts

- Broadening of my network, friendships, experiences, perspective
- and more.
- On today's episode, I want to specifically explore some takeaways on how board games can help us in our professional lives:
 1. Play the hands you're dealt
 2. Time at the table is more important than reveling in your wins & losses
 3. Think ahead
 4. It's not enough to understand a game: You need to understand how others are playing it.

1. Play the hands you're dealt

- Games have varying degrees of randomness: Cards, dice, tile placement, spinners, bags of tokens, and player decisions.
- These random elements impact the choices available to you, or the degree to which those different tactics might positively or negatively impact your overall strategy.
- At times in your professional life, you'll find yourself in situations that are out of your control: Where you're dealt the equivalent of a bad hand.
 - You're still expected to play that hand to the best your ability.
 - Bemoaning bad situations doesn't help you make any progress.
 - Learning from these situations so you can better position yourself to handle future bad deals, or make their occurrence and/or impact more predictable.
- It's also a valuable skill to recognize what makes a hand, or a situation, less than ideal.
 - It requires deeper knowledge of the rules, and experience with the game.

- Gaining domain knowledge is critical: Provides a strong understanding of all the options and variables that exist within the game.
- The degree to which those options impact success in the game - which elements of randomness have the greatest impact?
- Understand the likely distribution of those options among all the players - does the randomness affect all players equally?
- Or in game terms: Is the game state symmetrical or asymmetrical? In what ways?
- Games can help us practice playing through these bad situations:
 - How well and how fast can you pivot your strategy with what's now available to you?
 - Are you able to reposition yourself differently, or keep your current position stable, biding time until the game state improves?
 - Or is it prudent to negotiate, to join forces with other players in a similarly weak positions to counteract another player's strength?
- Three examples of real world systems that mimic those in business:
 - **Currency exchanges:** Many of the variables that impact these rates are out of our control, but they remain critical elements of managing supply chains and sales pricing
 - **Legal requirements:** Laws and regulations are complex and shift. They also tend to be inconsistently enforced in various industries. The better you understand the rules governing the game you're playing, the better you'll be able to work within them.
 - **Quality control:** Results often vary when multiple people interact with a system or work on elements of a product. Same in a game with multiple random elements out of your control. That's why it's important to properly analyze results, and develop systems & employ tactics (Six Sigma is a popular example) to control the impact those variables have on your organization's performance.

2. Time at the table is more important than reveling in your wins & losses

- We get better at games and in business when we put in the work:
 - Preparing ourselves: Watching reviews & tutorials, reading trade press, or having discussions with other like-minded players.
 - Increasing our understanding of the systems and skills required of the game, its mechanics, our employers, competitors & industry.
 - Performing post-game analyses: Both individually and as a group. What went right? What went wrong? How could I have prevented X from happening?
- Winning is awesome: Victories, awards, promotions, congratulatory handshakes from your peers.
 - It's a sign things have gone well.
 - Repeated victories and winning key events are demonstrations of your skill and expertise
 - Analyses of these successes are also important: What strategies & tactics worked that I can utilize in future games? In different, perhaps similar games?
 - Leveraging those wins, we can potentially climb the ranks - Playing for higher stakes, bigger rewards, and ultimately bigger paychecks.
- But don't rest on your laurels
 - Talking about my runner-up plaque in Carcassone at the 2013 World Boardgaming Championships won't help me win my next game night with friends. Or a WBC championship if and when I ever get back for future events: What would help is playing games of Carcassone, studying it, and keeping my skills sharp.
 - Similarly, there's a danger in becoming the person who feels like they're achieved success: Developing a mindset that they know how to win and don't need to keep learning. And keep putting in the work.

- This mindset often leads to stagnation: The atrophy of their skills and abilities.
- It's important to continue to develop your skillset throughout your career:
 - Understand that the rules of the game can still change. And likely will.
 - New technologies, like board game expansions, can disrupt the status quo: Enabling new strategies and change the effectiveness of tactics that worked previously.
 - You can also work towards broadening skills across multiple domains: A broader vocabulary from other industries and games can help you gain deeper insights and skills for the one you're actively playing. Potentially making unique connections and inventing new strategies that your competitors just can't see.
- The laurels of victory aren't always important:
 - They do provide acknowledgement: You have achieved success. This is wonderful, but fleeting.
 - Like any good financial advisor will warn you: Past performance isn't a guarantee of future success.
 - Few careers and industries are like tic-tac-toe, a solved game. Games where it's possible for you to understand all that needs to be known and develop a perfect system for never losing again.
 - Sometimes laurels get rewarded by lucky chance: Random elements that are out of any player's control (Or seemingly so).
 - You're allowed to play the game simply for love of playing it: There's no requirement that you must move up and play it at the highest levels.
 - It's possible to have as fun, learn a ton, and gain the benefits I mentioned earlier by finishing in last place as you would by winning. What's important is playing the game with a positive spirit and an open mind.
 - I don't play beer league hockey because I have dreams some scout will see me and sign me to an NHL contract: That's unachievable. I play simply because I love the game, and all the good that comes of that

- Check out Episode 60 where I talked about this approach in more detail.

3. Think ahead

- Games, like markets, are strategic battlefields.
- To succeed consistently in many games, it's not enough to go around willy-nilly, making hasty decisions in the moment.
 - Although there are games (and markets) that are predicated on speed: Where quick reactions, attentiveness, and getting a quick read on your opponents leads to victory.
- In general, you achieve far more success by thinking ahead. Developing proven strategies and employing them with keenly honed tactics.
 - Even in the speedy games I just mentioned, thinking ahead can mean training skills like reaction time, honing your ability to concentrate, and improving your social deduction skills.
- Before making a decision, it's helpful to consider its potential impacts:
 - Is this move legal and within the spirit of play?
 - Am I creating a weakness in my position?
 - Will this make me more susceptible to risks from elements out of my control?
 - Might I inadvertently make other player's positions weaker or stronger?
 - Will this move have a positive or negative impact on alliances I've forged with other players?
 - Are these decisions making my future participation in the game a miserable or fun experience? How about for my opponents?
- Be wary of analysis paralysis: Where you distract yourself with too much data - overanalyzing a single decision in an attempt to ensure perfection. This can both exhaust you and your opponents. And there's a risk that being too far in the weeds means you miss out on seeing the bigger picture or an immediate opportunity.

- Avoid overplaying your hand when you have an advantage: The short-term gain might leave you with fewer resources to take advantage of bigger windfall opportunities later, some hiccup that occurs in your plans, or reacting to an opponent's clever play.
- Games are rarely won in the early turns.
- Likewise, avoid revealing your hand inadvertently to other players. You're giving them free information that can be used against you, and possibly ruining the experience for all involved.
- Yet there are times when strategic reveals can work to your advantage. Or perhaps a bluff at the right time to put your opponent off balance, setting up a future where you can take better advantage of the situation.

4. It's not enough to understand a game: You need to understand how others are playing it.

- The map is not the territory: Similarly the boardroom is not the company like the board is not the game - A game, like a company, exists between the players playing it.
 - Keeping a keen eye on your opponents is the key to victory in many games.
 - Tracking the resources and options available to them - understanding how your choices impact them.
 - A lot of information can be gained through reading body language, facial expressions, and changes in their positions as events unfold.
 - Evaluate their actual moves on the board: Are they changing their strategies and/or tactics? Making a desperate play? Could they be bluffing their strength? Or their weakness?
- Of course, the challenge lies in striking a balance between monitoring what they're doing and considering your own decisions.
- This is extremely prevalent in trading card games, or TCG's.

- Quick side note: There's also a category called limited card games, where the entire pool of cards exist in a defined package, rather than collected through randomized packs - but both are applicable to what I'm about to say.
- These styles of games involve decks built out of a common pool of cards. Popular ones include Magic: The Gathering, Pokemon, Yu-Gi-Oh and Disney's Lorcan.
- In these games, there typically exists an ever-evolving **metagame**.
 - A **metagame** is defined as using real-world knowledge to gain an advantage in the playing of the game itself.
 - Examples of this knowledge includes: Statistics, past results, deck lists & guides from experienced players found online, and much more.
 - The most powerful decks & strategies rise and fall in popularity.
 - In TCG's, new sets get released regularly, injecting new cards and options into the format, ensuring it consistently evolves.
 - When one particular strategy works really well, it has a tendency to become a template that others tend to follow.
 - The metagame then reacts to this flood of copycats, and strategies develop to counteract that strategy.
 - In rare cases where this isn't possible, those in charge of the game have the ability to change rules, restrict particular cards, or in rare cases ban them entirely to ensure the continued success and competitive nature of the game.
 - These types of reinforcement loops occur in businesses all the time as companies vie for competitive advantages and market share.
- Players of TCGs gain a lot of benefits and skill development from this type of metagame analysis:
 - Analyzing trends in the 'meta': A metagame breakdown chart looks similar to an analysis of corporate market share.

- Players hone strategies to maximize their success within the current metagame.
- You'll hear gamers discussing 'broken' cards, or those with low expected value. They'll debate the top tiers of deck strategies, especially leading into important events & doing post-event analyses.
- Players tend to have preferences for a style of deck, or meta-defining tactics that can sometimes feel a little like rock-paper-scissors:
 - **Lightning-quick aggro decks:** These are designed to work very fast, winning before their opponents have a chance to develop their own strategy to stop them. But they risk burning through resources too quickly, running out of steam, or finding themselves incapable of handling slower, more powerful cards that get out in time.
 - **Mid-range decks:** These act like Swiss-army knives: Solid and versatile, reliable, consistent, and built to handle a wide range of opposing strategies while still advancing their own position.
 - **Control decks:** Focus on stopping opponents of all kinds dead in their tracks. Whittling away their resources with high-value, carefully considered choices, until they can take control of the game and win on their terms.
 - **Combo decks:** These embrace more randomness in the hopes of regularly combining multiple cards that will overwhelm any opponent with incredibly powerful effects.
- To be successful, a player of any type needs to understand the metagame balance of the current format, ensuring they keep enough options in their decks to keep the dominant strategies at bay.
 - Or make entirely different deck choices based on their perception of what the rest of the field will likely bring to an event.
- Likewise companies and their employees can evaluate their tactics along similar lines:
 - Do your firm work with speed: Moving as quickly and nimbly as possible to seize opportunities the moment they arise, before any competitors develop the opportunity to react effectively?

- Or does the organization rely on stability, strong processes, and consistent performance to win at a steady, but rarely flashy, rate.
- Is it a risk-averse organization? Built upon a culture of control, ensuring success through well-honed processes and strict permissions. There are definitely environments, industries, and metagames that rely on control-heavy tactics to ensure all of our safety.
- Or is your organization cooking up something wild & crazy? Rolling the dice with it's resources and possibly investment capital on all-or-nothing experiments. Success means enormous, exciting results, but with what consistency?
- And don't forget about those fun, home-brew decks. The ones that aren't popular by any means, that come out of left field, but may still win the day by taking powerful companies by surprise with an innovative tactic or unexpected, alternative strategies. They're often unique, under the radar, and might win the day even though they took advantage of a unique opportunity or timing that's unlikely to be repeated in the future.

Episode 73 Quote:

I'll bring this episode home with a nice quote from legendary investor Charlie Munger:

"It's good to learn from your mistakes. It's better to learn from other people's mistakes."