

Bloomberg Businessweek®

January 30 – February 5, 2017

SAN FRAN'S NEW
EXURB

THE RISE AND RISE OF STEVE COHEN

**RED
HOT SAUNAS**

**ALL ABOUT
BRASS**

FFTC



Game on!

Jacobe Chrisman's Wonder Forge has perfected the not-boring board game

By David Sax
Photograph by Meron Menghistab

GOLD LABEL
PRIME 0814C

Etc.

On a large, reclaimed-metal conference table in the lofty, brightly painted Seattle offices of Wonder Forge—among roaming dogs, treadmill desks, a surfboard, and Snoopy and Darth Vader figurines—the company’s latest board game is ready for play. *Flight of the Jaquins*, which is scheduled to be released in May, is based on the Disney Channel’s *Elena of Avalor*; Elena, as anyone with young kids knows, is a Latina princess with magic powers. The game’s cardboard playing surface and other components will look familiar to adults who grew up with Monopoly, Sorry!, and the Game of Life: illustrated instructions in English (and Spanish); colored dice that correspond to treasure cards; a stack of spell-casting cards; and four plastic Jaquins, which are mythical flying jungle cats. The centerpiece is a pop-up Mission-style castle where Elena and her friends live, and it presents Wonder Forge Chief Executive Officer Jacobe Chrisman, 43, with a challenge. “How do we do something big and real but also make it safe for kids and resilient enough that it won’t break if your brother steps on it?” he asks, examining the prototype. “All of which has to fit into a \$15 package.”

It’s not the first time Chrisman has had to ask this question. Potential smushings by rambunctious siblings are a habitual concern for the company, which, since its founding a decade ago, has become the dominant maker of licensed children’s board games. Many in the toy industry assume that the way to win a kid’s heart is via apps and other technological gewgaws, but Wonder Forge has carved out a lucrative niche in the board game market. You might not recognize the name, but chances are you’ve come across a Wonder Forge invention: The company sells 8 million games annually, for age 3 and up, at retailers such as Walmart, Target, and Toys “R” Us. Its 120 titles feature characters including Peppa Pig, Curious George, and Mickey Mouse, as well as those from the *Frozen* film and the Marvel universe.



Spurred by hits such as *Settlers of Catan* and *Cards Against Humanity*, the overall U.S. board game market grew from \$794 million in 2008 to \$1.6 billion in 2015, or more than 100 percent, according to NPD Group’s retail tracking service. The service doesn’t break out figures for preschool and children’s sales. But in a separate report from November, NPD found that in the first three quarters of 2016, children’s and preschool game sales took in \$400 million, a 20 percent increase over the same period in 2015.

“Wonder Forge is able to reach beyond that niche of progressive parents” who worry about the havoc wreaked on their toddlers’ brains by too much screen time, says Jon-Paul Dyson, a director of the International Center for the History of Electronic Games at the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, N.Y. Like smoothies blended with spinach, Wonder Forge games are designed to sneak healthy stuff into something kids enjoy. None of it’s something a boy or girl would notice while playing *Disney Princess Enchanted Cupcake Party*, but it’s the velvet rope separating Wonder Forge’s games from its competitors’. Its licensing deals allow beloved characters such as, say, *Frozen*’s Elsa, to teach skills both social (negotiation, empathy, cooperation) and cognitive (pattern recognition, strategy, balance). “Playing a game, you learn simple things like how to take turns, how to be part of a team, how to bluff, how to win or lose without being a jerk,” says Stephen Conway, a board game designer who runs the blog Major Fun. “But you also get to know the people you’re playing with. You learn about them, and they learn about you by how you play.”

Ironically, Chrisman turned cardboard evangelist during the late-’90s dot-com boom. In 1999, after selling for an undisclosed amount a data-mining software company he founded, he intended to go into the video game business. Instead, Chrisman was recruited to work at a new board game company two former Microsoft employees had started the previous year. It was called Cranium. The *Trivial Pursuit*-*Pictionary*-charades hybrid game of the same name that it designed for age 12 and up sold 15 million copies before Hasbro bought it and the rest of Cranium’s catalog in 2008 for \$77.5 million.

Although Chrisman left Cranium in 2004, he remained, he says, a “significant shareholder.” (He won’t disclose his take-away from the sale.) After returning from a 2005 surfing sabbatical, he realized there was a gap in the board game market, which skewed toward innovative adult strategy games or uninspired games for children. “What people were used to 10 or



