Modern Board Games: It's not a Monopoly any more

For some time, libraries have provided forms of leisure other than recreational reading. Many would be surprised to learn about British libraries supplying recreational activities as far back as at least 1824 as a safer alternative to public houses and other forms of inexpensive entertainment (Snape, 1992). Libraries have continued to provide forms of entertainment, and board games have been one traditional form of non-book entertainment.

Many libraries have a shelf of old board games sitting in the children's section. Boxes of Candy Land, Monopoly, Stratego, and Risk sit waiting to entertain players, immersing them in a different world. Many adults in the United States no longer turn to these games for entertainment, feeling they have grown out of these childhood pastimes. Board games have fallen to the wayside as family entertainment as members of the family each turn to their separate screens for enjoyment.

This isn't true around the world. Germans have embraced a variety of games as family and adult activities for decades. In the mid-1990's, games from Germany began to make their way over to the U.S. shores and have made a significant impact on game design and the number of interesting board games currently available for play. At the same time, the games focused on combat that have been developed in the U.S. have traveled elsewhere. The result is that a growing number of game companies are producing games either imported from overseas or developing new games inspired by both an American and a European perspective.

How Modern Board Games are Different

What are some of the aspects that many of these modern games that make them different from American classics like Monopoly or Risk?
- The focus is not on Player Elimination, but rather the game ends at some point and each player's performance is measured. Player Elimination creates games that can go on and on, only providing fun for the people who are still playing. A good social activity should allow everyone to be involved for the duration of the activity and not force some people to sit out of the game after they have been knocked out. Most of these modern board games have some type of an ending condition, and once that has been met, players have some way of calculating how successful they were in achieving the goals of the game. Some games have a specific goal the players are driving for, while others have a scoretrack tracking the performance of players throughout the game.

- There is not as much Down Time. Down Time is a term used for periods in a game where players are not involved and are simply waiting for their turn. Many modern board games use techniques that involve players frequently with the game. Some games employ regular trading or auctions between players. Other games break up a game turn into small actions, which sometimes are simultaneous, that engage players frequently.

- There are more Interesting Decisions. Many of these games provide players with the chance to make many interesting decisions. These bring in the chance to employ different strategies or tactics. Dice, if used, tend to be used in a way that players can make decisions based upon the probability of different combinations coming up. Luck tends to be employed through the drawing of cards, which provides a more controlled random selection experience upon which to base decisions than dice allow. The "roll-and-move" mechanic commonly employed in games produced in America over the last several decades is rarely seen in a Modern board game.

- There are Multiple Paths to Victory. Another common feature to many of these games is that there are several different (and valid) ways to achieve the goals needed to win the game. This can occur when a game uses a point system that rewards different types of decisions. This makes for a very replayable game as players can explore different paths each play.

Specific Game Recommendations
The following games are good examples of Modern board games that are relatively simple to learn that would be good additions to a library. Not all of these games have all of the aspects listed above, but they are all more immersive gaming experiences than traditional games. Some of these games are card games or dice games, but they are grouped into the larger concept of board games. The first seven games are samples of the variety of "family strategy" board games, and the final three are other types of games.

No Thanks! (Z-Man Games, 3-5 players, 8 and up, $10.00)
    No Thanks! is an easy-to-learn card game for 3-5 players. Cards have the numbers 3 through 35, and nine of them are randomly removed before play begins. Each player starts with 11 chips, and each chip he/she has at the end of the game is worth 1 point. The top card is revealed and each player will take a turn to either give up 1 chip or take the card along with all of the chips other players have given up, so players have to balance the good points from chips with the bad points from cards. Cards are worth negative points equal to the value of the card, but if a player gets cards that are in sequence, only the lowest number of the sequence counts against the player. At the end of the game, the players count their chips and subtract their cards and the player with the best score wins.

Incan Gold (Sunriver Games, 3-8 players, 8 and up, $19.95)
    In Incan Gold, 2-8 players delve into caves to bring back treasures, but many hazards lie in wait to end a player's adventure. There are 15 treasure cards and 15 hazard cards of 5 different types. A card is flipped and if it is treasure, players divide the

treasure evenly, leaving any remainder on the card. Players can then choose to continue their journey or to go back to the camp, picking up the leftovers and banking their winnings. The remaining players reveal the next card and divide the spoils. If two matching hazard cards are revealed, then the adventure ends and all players not safely at camp lose their treasures. Cards are then reshuffled after removing the card that ended the mission and a new adventure continues. After five journeys, the player with the most treasure wins.

Blokus (Educational Insights, 2-4 players, 5 and up, $29.99)

This colorful game is best for 2 or 4 players. Players have pieces that are combinations of 1 to 5 square tiles in various configurations. On a turn, the player puts a piece on a grid starting from one corner. Future pieces much touch a player's previous pieces by a corner, but cannot share an entire side with their previous pieces. Players continue to play pieces until no player has any moves remaining, and the player who has gotten rid of the most of their tiles is the winner. (Note – this is a game with Player Elimination, but since a typical game lasts less then 20 minutes, an eliminated player doesn't have long to wait.)

10 Days in the U.S.A. (Out of the Box Games, 2-4 players, 10 and up, $24.99)

This is one of a series of geographical games (with other games in Africa, Asia, and Europe) that were not designed as educational experiences, but certainly will teach players about the layout of states and countries along the way. Players have a rack with 10 cards, each showing a state, country, or transport. Players will take one of three face-up cards and replace one of the cards from their rack with the drawn card with the goal of putting states or countries that share a border next to each other in the rack. Transports like airplanes can allow a route to jump across the board before continuing. The winner is the first player to make a route such that they can start with their first card and can trace a connected path using each of their ten cards.

Zooloretto (Rio Grande Games, 2-5 players, 8 and up, $44.95)

In this game, 2-5 players are collecting and breeding animals for their zoos. Players start with three pens, each of which can hold a single type of animal. Players draw a random tile which will be an animal, money, or a food stand. After drawing, the player will place the tile on one of several trucks. Instead of drawing a tile, the player may take a truck and the tiles on the truck. Tiles that a player cannot accommodate in their pens will go into the player's barn for later use or sale to others. At the end of the game, players get points for their animals with bonuses for full pens and lose points for animals still in their barns.

Ticket to Ride (Days of Wonder, 2-5 players, 8 and up, $40.00)

Ticket to Ride is commonly recognized as one of the best Gateway Games for players new to modern board games. Players have secret missions to connect pairs of cities on a map of North America. Cities on the board are connected by paths of a single color of varying lengths. Players select cards making sets of the same color and can play a set of cards to claim a route for their exclusive use. As the game develops, players get

more secret routes to complete, but as more routes are claimed, it becomes more challenging for players to connect their cities.

Settlers of Catan (Mayfair, 2-4 players, 12 and up, $42.00)
  The *Settlers of Catan* was the first game from Germany that became popular in the U.S. in the 1990's. Players are settling a new island by collecting resources, trading with each other, and building roads, towns, cities, and developments. Players get victory points for buildings and some developments and are trying to be the first person to reach 10 victory points.

Heroscape (Milton Bradley, 2+ players, 8 and up, $44.95)
  Heroscape is different from the other games on the list, as it is more of a pure American game, but would be a great addition for a library program. Players take control of a set of troops from various time periods and fight over objectives. The miniatures that represent troops are colorful and detailed, and the game comes with many customizable three-dimensional stacking terrain tiles. Once the game is set up, it is eye-catching and is also not a complex game to play. A *Heroscape* set up in the middle of a library would certainly draw attention and excitement to a gaming program.

Wits and Wagers (North Star Games, 3-21 players, 10 and up, $29.99)
  Party games have also evolved over the last decade. The "roll-and-move and answer questions" game format established by *Trivial Pursuit* has been replaced with more dynamic ways of interacting. In *Wits and Wagers*, players are given a question with a numerical answer. All players write down a guess and the guesses are then ranked from low to high. Players are then allowed to wager on which guess is the closest without going over, and wagers placed on the more extreme guesses pay out at a higher rate. Players can do well by either knowing the answer, knowing who at the table should know the answer, or playing the numerical spread between guesses and the odds.

Tumblin' Dice (Nash Games, 2-4 players, 8 and up, $59.99)
  This admittedly noisy game would be a fun addition to a library, and is a great example of a game that draws in players of many ages. In this game, players flick dice off of a platform. The dice rattle down several stepped board areas and hopefully come to a stop before going off the board. The dice are worth the number showing times a multiplier, based upon how far down they went before stopping. *Tumblin' Dice* looks simple but is a lot of fun.

Challenges and Suggestions
Some of the difficulties with modern games are complexity and cost. The rulebooks can be complex and overwhelming so that some games can't be easily learned by a quick reading of the rules just before play. Many of the boards and components for these games are much more detailed than classic American games and the print runs are much smaller; therefore, the games are much more expensive than the games at the large department store. Replacement pieces can be more difficult to come by, but as producers of these games become aware of the library market for modern board games, it

is hoped that they will offer replacement pieces or commonly supply extra pieces with games.

A number of online resources have been developed over the last few years to support the board game hobby. The best resource is a community-based site called Board Game Geek, located at http://boardgamegeek.com . This site combines a giant user-submitted database of boardgames with metadata, images, reviews, and discussions for each game (and could be used as a model for a more interactive library catalog) with forums on many subtopics of the hobby.

While the reviews and player aids on "the Geek" may be helpful, the real resource at BoardGameGeek is the community. Librarians looking to improve their board game offerings can turn to the Geek to find local gamers. Many communities have some type of regular game group, and if they do not, there are probably several boardgamers whom would love to start one.

Librarians could visit the Geek and search user profiles for boardgamers in their area, and invite them into the library. These individuals are typically happy to teach others their games and would love being the organizer for a library program on board games. This would allow the library and board gaming groups to join forces to expose people to the variety of board games. The group would grow in membership and draw people to the library.

Conclusion
This brief article just touches the surface of the depth of tabletop games that have come out in the last decade. Some say that we are in a new golden age of board games, as the variety of designs and experiences continues to grow at a rapid pace. Once players try some of these newer, more interactive, game designs, they will be less likely to be interested in some of the older classics. These new games encourage interaction, involvement, strategy, communication, and allow players to make interesting decisions more frequently than older games.

The key to a successful board gaming event is to match the game to the players. Just like matching a reader to a series of books, the next task of libraries is serve in the role of Gamers Advisory, being aware of the variety of gaming experiences and matching the game to the player. Modern board games are one type of game to add to the repertoire of a Gamers Advisory Librarian.

Snape, R. (1992). "Betting, billiards and smoking: leisure in public libraries." *Leisure Studies 11*. 187-199.