**Podcast #99.9: My Hungry, Sleepy Civilization**

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## Intro [00:00:00]

**Quinns**: Hallo everybody! And welcome to the Shut Up & Sit Down podcast, a podcast all about board games, card games, tabletop games, roleplaying games, mind games… uhhhhhhhhh… I don’t know why, but I almost said, “Prison games” there.

**Ben**: Well, there may be some games that feature prisons or are based in prisons. I want to be clear, we’re not talking about games that are played *in* prisons. Necessarily! Maybe they have access to a large board game library. I’ve never been to prison.

**Quinns**: That’s a future that I wanna live in! It also makes me feel better about employing you, intern Ben Winterton!

**Ben**: Hello!

**Quinns**: It’s just Ben and me, Quintin Smith, today, in what I think we’re gonna be calling podcast #99¾ Appendix A, because we realized we have a lot of games to talk about, [Ben laughing] but we’re still saving that hundredth episode for SHUX. Ben has to dash off and get a train, so we’re going to rattle through this game list.

**Ben**: Full steam ahead!

**Quinns**: Welcome aboard! I’m the conductor! What’s on the train? It’s board games. Today we’re gonna be talking about Western Empires, a preposterously vast… What was described to us as a twelve-hour game. I’m gonna go one further and say it’s a two-day game, spanning eight thousand years of human history. We’re gonna be talking about a big Kickstarter release called Cloudspire, from the people who brought you the lovely gremlin-y RPG Too Many Bones. We’re gonna be talking about Skulk Hollow, which is a board game that asks, “What if Shadow of the Colossus happened on your table?” One player was a colossus, one player was...

**Ben**: Many foxes.

**Quinns**: Many foxes, yeah! Not a shadow. We’re going to be talking about Teotihuacan, a eurogame about trying to build a temple in South America in history. We’re gonna be talking about Yokai, which as I understand it is a sort of mystery puzzle game involving Japanese spirits?

**Ben**: Yeah, it’s cooperative pairs of Japanese spirits.

**Quinns**: Hot dog. We’re gonna be talking about Detective Club, which is a game involving neither detectives nor clubs.

**Ben**: [laughing] No, that’s very true.

**Quinns**: And finally we’re gonna be talking about Combo Fighter, which Ben and I just did a video on last week, and, uh, it’s good!

**Ben**: It is good! See the video but we’ll talk about it a bit more.

**Quinns**: We will.

[funky sting]

## Western Empires [00:02:32]

**Quinns**: So, we’ll begin at the beginning with the biggest game that- Not only the biggest game that Shut Up & Sit Down has played in a long time; possibly the biggest game we’ve ever played outside of megagames. The biggest dedicated board game we’ve ever experienced, and I called Ben up, I said, “Ben, do you want to come and play a nine-player game of Western Empires?” and you said, “Yes.” Do you regret that decision?

**Ben**: It’s strange when you’re playing through a game that takes place over the course of the history of Europe and at times it feels like you’re playing it in real time. [Quinns laughing]

**Quinns**: We’ve got a piece on Western Empires going up on the site on shutupandsitdown.com in which I very much enjoyed the joke you made, Ben, about- I mean, someone literally has to take a census of Europe every round.

**Ben**: Yeah, and you may think, “Oh, they’re being flippant there.” That’s literally- It’s called the census, it’s a vital part-

**Quinns**: It takes place in the census phase.

**Ben**: It does. How many games have had a census phase? So it’s a nine-player… There’s an element of territory control. I’d say the bigger focus is on resource management and trading?

**Quinns**: Yes. So this is a game- Western Empires is exactly one half of a game called MegaCivilization, which came out a while back and had a limited printing. MegaCivilization was in turn a supersized version of a game from 1980 called Civilization, none of which has any relation to the Civilization video games. These are games that model civilization, but unlike the Civilization video games, it’s gonna take you from the stone age up to about the birth of Jesus Christ. But that’s eight thousand years. That’s a lot of time. I played the Egyptians in our game. You played the Minoans, and we should stress, this takes the western half of MegaCiv, which is this preposterously long eighteen-player game that spans from… It’s an unusual board, right? Because with an eighteen-player game, it’s not like it’s the globe, it’s actually a narrow rectangular strip. You’ve got England, and then that runs east through the Mediterranean, and then you’ve got a bit of Russia and then the Middle East, and then it keeps going east to India. But it also means that every player along that strip is only really bordering about four or five other players.

**Ben**: It’s very strange to think -- whether it’s a thematic decision or not -- that you can be trading with people who your people have had no contact with at all. As the Minoans, I very much literally had to travel across the room [Quinns laughing] to meet the Celts and the Iberians just to trade their resources, even though our peoples never met.

**Quinns**: So people who’ve seen pictures of this or are painting their own picture in their mind right now -- [**Ben**: My mind picture.] yes -- might be imagining something like a wargame, and there are bits of that, but really, first off, I would describe it more of a game of panicked population control rather than war, because your people sort of reproduce like cells. That’s the level we’re modeling them here. Any given unit of population on the board will duplicate itself every few hundred years.

**Ben**: And you get into some very scary Stalinist territory where you’ll say to someone, “Look. I don’t mean you any ill harm. I just need to kill some of my people off, so I’m going to attack you.” Which is horrifying!

**Quinns**: Or the Hitleresque thing of, “I don’t mean you any harm. I just need more room.”

**Ben**: Yes.

**Quinns**: “And the only place I can go is right here.”

**Ben**: So the main mechanic of introducing people is so you can support cities, and cities are how you get trade goods. So you need to have your people so you can support your cities, and you don’t really care where those people are, so as long as you’ve got the space, you don’t really care about where you’re expanding to. And the combat is beautifully simple, which stops it being a full-blown territory control dudes-on-a-map game.

**Quinns**: Yeah, do you want to explain combat?

**Ben**: It’s literally, if someone’s got more people, the other side loses someone first, but then they just lose a person alternately until either there’s enough room to go around, and they cohabit and live peacefully, or one side dies. That’s it, it’s just a one-for-one exchange, no dice rolling, no cards, people just die.

**Quinns**: Yeah. And this is one of the peculiar things about Western Empires, because lots of it is actually very, very simple. Very smooth. Which you wouldn’t expect from a huge expensive box that takes twelve hours, you know? Like you say, combat is just removing pieces alternately, and movement is just, “Everything can move a space.” Unless you have a ships, which…

**Ben:** Well, don’t worry about it.

**Quinns**: Definitely not talking about that on the podcast, but yeah. And yet! Despite it having all this simultaneous stuff where, you know, the trade phase or population growth or often movement is simultaneous, because yes there is movement order and order of the census, but mostly the way the game shakes out is a player saying, “I can move now, right? Because I’m not gonna affect everyone,” and then everyone will say, “Oh yeah yeah yeah, move move move.”

**Ben**: Yeah, it’s really nice, and it keeps the pace going. They’re clearly aware that having a nine-player -- potentially eighteen-player game, if you add Eastern Empires onto it -- if you have, “Everyone has to take their turn in turn order,” the game will be interminably long.

**Quinns**: It would take a *week*!

**Ben**: It’s already interminably long. [laughing]

**Quinns**: Well this is what I was gonna say! There’s so many areas where Western Empires cuts corners. It goes, “Okay, players can all do this at the same time,” or, “This is super simple.” And despite the game design is like a car that cuts every possible corner to make things faster, it still takes thirteen hours to finish! Which is… Like how is that even possible?! How is it a game can do everything it can to make itself faster, in a board game industry where now we have all these civilization games that might take half an hour or an hour, and yet Western Empires is still *soooo looooong*!

**Ben**: I think it’s because even with all the corner-cutting, you still want to make good decisions? I think you talked about -- when we were playing -- the pressure of saying, “Well, okay, yeah, other people *can* do things when I’m going,” but mid to late game, you don’t want to be impulsive, so you need to take your time, because if you mess up- Like, a couple of us built cities too early, and that affected us for the next few hours.

**Quinns**: Well, the next few thousand years, yeah.

**Ben**: Yeah! Which was a massive deal, so you have to take your time with your decisions, because otherwise you’re gonna have a miserable time playing the rest of the game. But then if you *do* take your time, the game takes longer, which means you might end up being miserable because you’re bored?

**Quinns**: Mmm. Mmm. God bless this game for having mechanics for if players leave.

**Ben** [laughing]: Yeah.

**Quinns**: Which is implemented in a really funny way as well. If a player ever decides, “I’m done, I would like to leave-” And I’ll say now, out of the nine players in our game, for a straw poll, I wanna say, oh, I would say six of us would’ve played it again, myself included.

**Ben**: Yeah, I’d play it again.

**Quinns**: Maybe one or two people further would say, “Ah, well I’ve experienced it, and now I’m done,” and *definitely* there was one player who just wanted it to end with every fiber of their being.

**Ben**: Yes.

**Quinns**: But if that player had decided they wanted to leave, it’s so funny, you essentially string police tape around their empire, because you replace every single piece they’ve got on the board, and put in an “out of play” token? Which means all that territory can just not be touched ever. Like it’s frozen in amber. But also that means you’ve essentially created Europe’s most impassable mountain range? Which would have potentially interesting ramifications for strategy?

**Ben**: It’s maybe a good sign that someone leaving the game midway through doesn't ruin the game, but changes the dynamic and makes it interesting. The best thematic explanation I’ve got is some horrible disease ravaged it, [Quinns laughing] and everyone in Europe said, “I’m not going there!”

**Quinns**: It becomes Pandemic Legacy, yeah.

**Ben**: Yeah.

**Quinns**: We should talk about trading a little bit as well, because this I did not realize. Speaking as someone who’d been ogling MegaCiv and wanting to try it for years -- and huge thanks to the publishers of Western Empires for sending us an early copy -- but I didn’t realize how trading is... Not the heart- Well no, I’ll call it the heart of the game, in that it’s one of several vital internal organs, and it’s the one that’s the juiciest.

**Ben**: It’s the pancreas of the game.

**Quinns**: Sure.

**Ben**: So unlike a lot of trading games where you can cut different kinds of deals, you have to trade at least three cards at once, so it has to be a three-for-three trade, or a four-for-four trade, et cetera, which in itself is good because you can’t drive up bargains by saying, “Ah, I’ll give you two of these for one of these.” There’s none of that. The absolute juiciest part of it is that to trade, you have to tell the truth about the first two things you’re trading, but the last thing you can lie about? So, first and foremost, you can just give them a less useful resource. There’s water, which is considered worthless, [Quinns laughing] which is kind of strange in stone age Europe, but okay, we’ll go for it. And also there are calamities, which are cards that get randomly drawn from the resource deck that -- as the name suggests -- will mess up your empire in some way. And there’s a glorious mechanic that you can say, “Yeah, I’ll give you the things you want, and hey, let’s throw in some clay as well,” [Quinns laughing] and then they get a calamity and you say, “Well, you can’t spell calamity without clay, so [equivocating “ehhh”] it wasn’t entirely a lie!”

**Quinns**: I like that. I also like that the thing with calamities is that it’s fine if someone gives them to you. It’s like, oh, I asked you for two paper and two clay and you give me two paper and two calamities, and I’m like, [quiet desperation] “Oh my god.” But what that then means is I have to keep a completely straight face, and then give it to somebody else. It is in fact exactly the same mechanic found in classic trading card game -- by which I mean, a card game that is about trading -- Pit, which has been around for decades, but that game has a card which is just terrible to receive, and then you want to hide that you have it. So it’s this bizarre thing of, you know, let’s say you’re playing the Romans, and someone hands you a card that is Volcano, and you look at the map, and you realize, yeah, you did build in a volcano, a little volcano called Vesuvius, that, you know, might just destroy one of your biggest cities. But that’s fine, Vesuvius will not erupt so long as you can trade this card away. So then I -- because on more than one occasion I was given an awful calamity and went, “Oh god” -- and then promptly stood up from my chair, walked *around* the table to the Celts, which is the biggest red flag ever, and gone, [anxious] “Hey!” -- like you know, quasi-breathless and sort of panicked-looking -- “do you wanna just trade? Just trade anything? Maybe you have some bones, some fruit? You want some bones and fruit? I’ve got marble as well. What do you want?” and then trying not to give away with my desperation -- because the trade phase is timed [**Ben**: Yes.] -- that I desperately want to conduct trade because that would get me off the hook.

**Ben**: And what will happen is, if someone draws six or seven resources, and there’s no calamities in there, everyone’s saying, “What do you want to trade?” and they say, “Nothing. [Quinns laughing] I don’t want any of your horrible calamities please.” I love the idea of, you think you’ve got a crate of fruit from Eastern Europe coming your way, and you open it and a barbarian horde leaps out and destroys your nearest five cities.

**Quinns**: I mean, I don’t mind what’s happening thematically there, because it’s just really entertaining. But again, you’ve got this dichotomy here, that is probably one of the reasons that even though I don’t know when I’ll play Western Empires again, I’m definitely keeping it in my collection, because like we said, it’s fast and slow, but then also it’s this weird, long, very strategic thing that also has utter stupidity and a lot of randomness in the calamity phase. It’s clearly designed so that players with more cities that get more trade goods end up with more calamities, which resets their board state. But when I taught that rule, you said to me, “Well, isn’t that a bit random?” Or you were wondering about the randomness of it, and I was like, [vastly overconfident voice] “No! This game’s been around for thirty years! That wouldn’t happen!” But yeah, in the game of this we played, one person got whomped by calamities at a time which was very unfair and very unfortunate, because it was also the time that a couple of people had invaded her?

**Ben**: It was pretty punishing. It’s telling in the rules that it says, “If you have more than three calamities when calamities resolve, you discard down to three,” which suggests they know that someone could end up with five or six and get absolutely crushed.

**Quinns**: Yeah, but they don’t know that even if you end up with that maximum of three calamities, you might not be in first place, so it’s peculiar to have a catch-up mechanic where, you know, let’s say I’m in second place, and everyone is looking at the player in first place, going, “Oh, we need to do something about them.” And then the player in second or *third* place gets stomped by three calamities. You know, I get that it’s part of the skill of the game, because you want to trade calamities away, but also, A) sometimes you can’t, and B) lots of the calamities have “Non-tradeable” printed on them, so you just get them and then you’re stuck with them. Yeah, it’s… [Sigh] *What* an unusual game, but really, I mean, just such an experience.

**Ben**: I think the best thing I can say about it is after playing it for eight hours sat… Not even round the board, because the board is too small to accommodate nine people, I was sat at the end of a table, glancing at the Minoan empire, [Quinns laughing] but even in that situation, after eight hours, I wasn’t bored. I was still enjoying it, and there’s not a lot of games I can say that about.

**Quinns**: There’s so much class in- I said this in the written article we wrote, but in terms of the strategic game I was playing, it could have been a four- or five-player game. It could have just been Egypt, which I was playing, and then Carthage to the west, and Assyria to the north, and your Minoans across the sea, but the fact that it was a nine-player game, even though I didn’t interact or even so much as share a border with half of the players, made it so much better. I was having so much fun sort of, you know, joking with Annie about where our border would be between Assyria and Egypt, but knowing Annie’s decisions were based on what she was doing to the north with the Hatti empire, and then noticing that the Hatti were touching the Celts to the corn (?), so there was- It’s like dominoes, you know?

**Ben**: People would come up to me and say, “Hey what’s going on with this territory?” and you’re so busy looking at another part of the board you go, “What? We share a border now?” [Quinns laughing] It’s bizarre.

**Quinns**: Yeah. No, it’s absolutely fascinating. I would say, if you get the chance to play Western Empires, I think you should. However, I would stress, maybe don’t feel pressured to finish the game. We persevered a fair bit, but you know, I worry that a perfectly fun eight-hour day of Western Empires could turn into a horrible thirteen- or fourteen-hour day of Western Empires if you don’t acknowledge, “Hey, this would be a good time to stop,” you know?

**Ben**: Yeah, and I think it probably does need to be played- Certainly with nine-players, you need two days to play it properly, and you can come back refreshed, but then how many adults do you know who can put aside two days to play a board game?

**Quinns**: Who do you know who has a table in their home [Ben laughing] that could- We played in a pub, not because I didn’t want nine people at my house, but because it- [sighs] The logistics of that *enormous* board, and then all the side boards, and then just *nine chairs*?!

**Ben**: Yeah.

**Quinns**: Like, yeah, this is a game across two days for community centers and conventions, I guess.

**Ben**: Yeah.

**Quinns**: Which puts it in an unusual one-of-a-kind category, but in that category: Best in class!

**Ben**: Absolutely.

[funky sting]

## Cloudspire [00:18:05]

**Quinns**: We’ve only had a tentative first exploratory play of this, but let’s talk a little bit about Cloudspire. This was a *big* Kickstarter game from one of the weirdest -- and I say that with a lot of love -- publishers around: Chip Theory Games, whose thing is that their games are -- I’m not joking -- functionally waterproof, because they’re made of plastic, or sort of plastic-reinforced sheeting. The cards are plastic, the units are chips, the board is like mousemat material.

**Ben**: That’s the best description I’ve got, yeah.

**Quinns**: Yeah. So, whereas I reviewed Too Many Bones, which I really liked quite a lot. That was their game of forming an adventuring party and running off and fighting monsters. This is their next game. The manual says this was actually created by Too Many Bones designers Josh Carlson and Adam Carlson- oh, they’re brothers, I just made that… I’m reading this… But that… How nice! Two bros making games in the big ol’ world. They are joined by Josh Wielgus to make Cloudspire, and I can see why they put this design on hold for a while, because it’s got a lot going on.

**Ben**: So, the best way I can describe it is if you’ve ever played any kind of tower defense game, preferably competitive tower defense games? So you each are gonna set up a fort in the Cloudspire I guess is the name of the world?

**Quinns**: Some kind of floating island, yes.

**Ben**: The floating island. And you’re fighting over source -- S-O-U-R-C-E, not-

**Ben and Quinns**: S-A-U-C-E.

**Quinns**: Although if you did want to retheme it as a sort of sauce-

**Ben**: A condiment-based territory control.

**Quinns**: Yeah. Again, the board game police won’t find you.

**Ben**: So, you each build a fortress, and there’s gonna be a semi-randomized map, and you’re gonna build defenses for your fortress, and you’re gonna send out minions and heroes to try and take down the other players’ fort...tri? No, fortresses. I don’t know where I got that plural from. And as you go, you’re exploring the map. You can build little turrets elsewhere on the map. And one thing that’s very good about it is it’s very pacey, so it only takes place over four rounds. So if you don’t manage to smash each other’s gates to pieces, you can then just say, “Hey, who’s got the nicest fortress? They’re the ones that win.”

**Quinns**: Mmm. It’s very unusual, and hews very close to the video games that clearly inspire it, right down to having this phase where you can buy upgrades for your town, and then level everything up by putting in these lovely plastic pegs. And then you design a wave that’s gonna march out from your fortress, so you *can* spend your command points putting out heroes that you can then run around the board in the style of a MOBA, like League of Legends if you’ve played that, but then also those same points are what you’re using to put together the army, and the army of chips that then march out of your gate march straight towards your opponent’s gate on a strict line. And if you’ve played tower defense games, again, some of these troops will just walk down a path, which are printed on the randomized map, but if you have -- for example -- flying troops, or troops that can make it through forests, they’re gonna take a different path, because the rule is they have to take the shorted path possible.

**Ben**: Yes. If you’ve ever played League of Legends or Heroes of the Storm... They’re the ones that I know of, I know there’s a big-

**Quinns**: There are nine nine [**Ben**: E-sports.] nine nine nine MOBA games, yeah.

**Ben**: Yeah, there’s a whole number of E-sports games that play this sort of thing. This is a at times painfully faithful recreation of that. They’re literally called minions, the units you go out and send. As you kill stuff you unlock more resources, so you’re constantly upgrading things. Your heroes can get promoted. Each side is totally different and asymmetrical.

**Quinns**: Yes, this was a lovely thing. Oh, when you were learning the game, you asked me, what was it, “What do you feel the strongest about? Electricity?” Uhhhh...

**Ben**: Vines.

**Quinns**: Vines.

**Ben**: Bones, or feathers.

**Quinns**: And that wasn’t you being silly, right? That’s actually printed- I saw those four nouns printed somewhere.

**Ben**: Yeah, so each faction, the name of the faction is printed, and then just next to it, you get a word like “Bones,” so it’s like, look don’t worry about reading all the flavor text just yet. Do you like bones, yes or no?

**Quinns**: I love that! I love that. I mean, how many games have you played where it’s like- I mean, you know, in a weird way Gloomhaven solves this, because it doesn't say, you know, “Do you want to be a mind thief? Do you want to be a cragheart?” Because don’t you initially pick your character in Gloomhaven based on just a symbol on the box?

**Ben**: Yeah, yeah.

**Quinns**: So yeah, this is the same thing. It’s like, “We’ve got lore. We’ve got backstory. We’ve got all these beautiful art assets. But do you care more about bones or vines?” And I said, you know, “Feathers!” And then I got my birds! And it worked out great for everybody. This is exactly the same sort of overambitious and wonky but inarguably kind of witty and wry design that I enjoyed in Too Many Bones, and I think Cloudspire is more ambitious and not always more successful, but I found myself wanting to dislike it when you started teaching me the rules and I just thought, [exhausted] “Oh god, there’s so much of this, and I’m not sure it’s very elegant,” but then by the end I was won over by so many clever decisions the designers had made along the way.

**Ben**: There’s clearly a hump in learning it, and in continuing to learn it. Even once you and I had got the rules down, which took quite a while, we were three rounds in before I think we’d properly wrapped our head around just the basic rules. And then each faction has a huge list of keywords, of what “flying” means, what “summoning” means, what, you know, “brave” means. There’s one that just says “Back to the future” in there (?). [Quinns laughing] I’m not even exaggerating.

**Quinns**: I had, you know… Oh god, I think the first unit I looked at building had three keywords, which was like, “roost 2,” “hummingbird 1,” you know, “relentless” something. One thing they have done that is like *merciful* consid- So, if you’re not aware, what we’re talking about with “keywords” is this idea that, you know, when you build a unit, or you encounter a monster out in the wild, rather than having a whole load of text -- because, hey, it’s a Chip Theory Games game, there’s no room on a chip to write everything [**Ben**: No.] -- on that chip you’ll just get one word, like “relentless,” and then you will look that up. One thing they have done that smoothes out the number of reference sheets they needed to print is that every faction has a bunch of keywords, but those keywords don’t tend to cross over, which means if you’re looking at a monster, you know their keyword will be on the monster keyword sheet. Which is weird, because every other game would have just a master list of keywords so that a keyword that my birds have, your weird plant creatures might also have. They haven’t done that. Instead, it’s just- I mean, maybe they have a tiny bit, but basically they’ve come up with a whole new keyword and keyword reference sheet for everybody, which makes everything feel weirdly unique?

**Ben**: At first it’s good, because you say, “Well, I wanna know what my units do,” so you go, “Great, I can look at this. You can look at that to know what your units are.” But the second you have any combat between your units, you go, “Well, I wanna know what *your* units do as well,” because when your kamikaze hummingbirds just explode in my face, [Quinns laughing] I’m annoyed because I go, “Well, I didn’t know they were gonna do that!” Probably should have guessed by the artwork.

**Quinns**: Well no! The asymmetry was so ferocious that, you know, you and I, for the first couple of rounds, we were assembling our units, and both of us were looking vertically downwards at our reference sheet, our custom dice, our custom chips, which sit in a beautiful display, our tower, the towers we’d built, the upgrades we’d built, and our city, the city itself, which is again a beautiful thing to look at. But all we were doing was try to internalize how our factions worked, which meant when our units actually marched out on their AI and met each other, it was just horrible! You had a tree that kept birthing additional trees that I realized I needed to stop after you’d summoned an awful… What was it, like a tree ogre?

**Ben**: Yeah, a tree ogre and a tree bear.

**Quinns**: Yeah, that was when I knew I had to do something. It was only after getting whomped by a bear [chuckling] made of leaves a couple of times that I realized.

**Ben**: And I marched headlong into combat, expecting to smash your birds to pieces, and they just harmlessly flew over me, because none of my units can hit flying units.

**Quinns**: Yeah, I mean, both because of the complexity of the rules, and because of the wild asymmetry that is… [sighs] It’s absolutely a game that you’re going to need to play at least twice, which usually Shut Up & Sit Down has as a black mark, you know? If we don’t like a game and someone says, “Ah, you just need to play it again,” we don’t have a lot of time for that. The difference here with Cloudspire is that yes our first game was a disaster, but, we both *want* to play it again. We both were able to see all of this magic through the disastrous -- not even disastrous -- wonky and exhausting first game that we played.

**Ben**: Absolutely. And it is a two- to four-player. It’s got a co-op mechanic which we didn’t touch, but we looked at. I think it’s very much a game that will come to life with three or four players, because the way you win is by smashing all the other fortresses, so in a one-on-one, it’s just, “Send your units to smash the other person’s fortress,” but in a three- or four-player you have to choose where your minions are gonna go, so there is a catchup mechanic, because you’re incentivized to target the person who’s doing well, rather than just the other person. But then also your minions just have to fight whatever’s near them. Wherever they end their turn, they will have a fight.

**Quinns**: But what happens if two players choose to send their minions at the third player and then, you know, annihilate him? Or her?

**Ben**: Well, they don’t get knocked out. There’s no elimination mechanic, so even if your fortress gate is destroyed, you can rebuild it and then keep sending your units out, but after you’ve done that, they’ve smashed your gate to pieces, there’s no incentive to keep doing it, because the way you win is by destroying all the other gates.

**Quinns**: Oh, by being the only person with a gate left.

**Ben**: Yes. So there’s no real incentive to keep doing that, so in a three- or four-player game, there’s not exactly elimination, because the person’s still in, but there’s no reason to keep targeting that player once they’ve fallen behind.

**Quinns**: You mentioned the co-op booklet, though, and there’s also a solo booklet. They also sent us a couple of expansion boxes which got, you know, put out with the Kickstarter, but what I wanted to say is -- talking about this being maybe slightly overambitious and also very inspired by video games -- reading the massive ring binder of plastic pages that tell you all the co-op scenarios -- first off, there’s a lot of them, very impressive -- but the way they’ve had to describe them -- because they have to describe all this unique setup and AI for the bad guys you’re fighting and what bad guys will prioritize at different times -- it was exactly like reading a design document for a video game. If the level designer had to create a document that then the programmers were gonna put into the game, this is what it would look like. That’s the level of complexity we’re dealing with here, and while I am so excited to play more Cloudspire, I can already see the sort of conclusion looming in the distance of: Playing with the chips is great, but it is competing with [tight-throated and high-pitched] all of those video games you could be playing instead?

**Ben**: Yeah, and a video game does a lot of stuff automatically for you. You’re not gonna have to read thirty-five pages of rules to play League of Legends or whatever. Yeah, there’s some question marks there. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking recently about: At what point should a board game stop being a board game and be a pen-and-paper RPG or a video game, and I think these big Kickstarter games are looming closer and closer to that, where it’s a great recreation of those tower defense games, for a board game, but is it adding anything to that genre? Is there any benefit to it being a board game versus, as you say, just playing a video game?

**Quinns**: Mmm.

**Ben**: I don’t know the answer to that.

**Quinns**: I don’t know the answer to any of these questions we’re asking, but you just *try* and keep me away from that Cloudspire box, Ben! I’m gonna play it again.

**Ben**: Okay. That’s… okay.

## Skulk Hollow [00:29:38]

**Quinns**: Speaking of board games that are Kickstarters inspired by video games, we were sent a little box called Skulk Hollow recently. This is a delightful and potentially Root-inspired board game where one player is going to play an *enormous* hulking craggy golem, you know? Something that has trees growing out of its back, absolutely huge, and you’re given a delightful, *massive* wooden miniature, that is different as well, depending on which of the four monsters in the box you play. Your opponent is going to be playing… Mmm, I was gonna say the poor township of foxes that this monster is marching towards, but they’re not poor, really. It’s like… Playing as the foxes is controlling about a dozen awesome heroes, all of whom, if the monster gives them a moment, will scamper up the monster’s legs and start shanking it in its head. Because! The monsters will win if they manage to kill the king fox, or the monsters actually all have unique objectives. The foxes need to kill the monster, but the game actually has two boards, and this is a lovely mechanic. It’s got a three-by-three board showing the landscape, you know, with the city at one end and the monster’s cave at the other. But the second board is the monster itself. And most of the fox units -- unless they’re, you know, archers -- if they move into the space with the monster, they can then move onto its legs, and then follow these little dotted lines, from climbing up the legs to the belly, or down the belly to the arm, and by doing damage to the foxes, the foxes are killed, but by doing damage to the monster, you can damage its arm or its head or its legs, and every bit of the monster you fully wreck, it can then no longer do that action, because all of the monsters… The simplest one, which is a big sort of Kaiju bear type thing, can *stomp* and *throw* and *gaze*! But if you’ve, you know, put its eyes out, then it’s not doing any more gazing, and that means, from a ranged attack -- *range*! Using *ranged* weapons -- you’ve got the edge, Ben.

**Ben**: The comparison you made at the top of this podcast was to the video game Shadow of the Colossus, and I think that influence rings very heavily-

**Quinns**: Oh, absolutely.

**Ben**: -on this game. If you don’t know Shadow of the Colossus, it’s a video game with not a lot of direct narrative. A lot of it’s implied, where you have to go around, killing big monsters by climbing on them and stabbing them up. And this mechanic is done very well. It’s very fun to get this huge cardboard cutout of the monster and climb on it. It’s asymmetrical, but interesting in it? Initially you think that the foxes are pretty weak and pretty powerless, but once you’ve got three or four on the monster, the monster doesn't feel that powerful. You feel like you’re being overrun by a swarm- It’d be like trying to fight a hundred puppies in that yeah, you can probably take a puppy, but a hundred puppies are gonna overwhelm you.

**Quinns**: Yeah, it’s actually maybe- Mmm, I don’t know if it’s my biggest criticism of the game? I don’t really have any huge criticisms of Skulk Hollow, you know? I was honestly pretty impressed. We’re probably not gonna go into the complex hand management that actually powers the game, because basically a faction draws a hand of five cards and then can play two or three of them? And potentially bank future actions? But it also means that your actions are limited by the cards you’ve got, so it’s: When do you spend one of your actions discarding a card to draw two more? You know, when should you just draw a bunch of cards in preparation for what will happen later? There’s a lot of important movement-related decisions in Skulk Hollow, so as the foxes, if the monster isn’t close, maybe you bide your time until the monster gets *just close enough*, and then you dive and you swarm up its legs. And it’s horrible! Yeah, so, anyway, I got a little lost there, but what I was gonna say is, my biggest criticism of Skulk Hollow is also maybe the most thematically interesting bit, because as you say, as the monster, you feel all-powerful! You can run into a group of foxes and stomp, and then they all scatter, or you can, you know, lash out with your big long tentacle arms, or you can scream if you’re the big bird, and then that scares all the foxes. But as they get on you, as they start knocking out your ability to do certain things, there’s a sense of a tide turning. I think it would be a game that would benefit from a mechanic we talked about a couple of podcasts ago in Air Land & Sea of a player going, “I think I’m done.” Because there’s this peculiar sad thing of the foxes slowly wearing a monster down, and I think losing as the monster… I mean even if you can claw it back, it feels weirdly like, you know, brow-beating, you know?

**Ben**: Yeah, as the foxes, you’ve constantly got new options coming, so new troops coming through, new ways of attacking. And yeah, your options are always changing, but they’re never reduced. But as the monster, that is what’s happening, and as the foxes, you’re incentivized to go, “Well, this part of the monster produces the most dangerous attack or ability, so all my guys need to get on that and stab its face off,” or whatever. But that means, as the monster, you’re constantly going, “Great, well my most fun and useful ability I never get to use, because they’re just gonna eliminate it straightaway,” and there is some recovery mechanics, but it’s quite limited, so realistically, if you spend your turn recovering to get an ability back, it’ll just get knocked out the next turn. So yeah, playing the monster is just a series of reduced options. The way the cards work is similar to Gloomhaven in that each one has two possible actions, and you choose one of the two. So you always do have *some* options, but again, those options aren’t always exactly what you want. Some of them will be movement options, where it says, “Okay, you can move back diagonally.” But if you want to charge, or you want to attack, and you don’t have those, it can feel kind of frustrating?

**Quinns**: Yeah, a little bit. But also, you know, it’s such a pretty box? It’s full of so many sweet ideas. It takes its theme and it executes that theme and to hell with whether it works one hundred percent?

**Ben**: I mean you do get four big behemoths in the box. They all play differently, they all have- I mean the word miniature might be pushing it now, [Quinns laughing] because they are massive. But they all look different, they all play differently.

**Quinns**: They all have different objectives. The weird plant thing with loads of arms that you played just wanted to collect a bunch of runestones.

**Ben**: Yeah, it was just collecting runes! Just leave it alone, Quinns!

**Quinns**: Yeah, yeah, whereas the beginner monster just wants to crush foxes. Yeah, I would say that Skulk Hollow is- It’s not great, but if you really love the look of it, I would not stop you from buying it. And the thing is, I would imagine a lot of people are gonna love the look and theme of this.

**Ben**: I’m someone who is always looking for a good one-on-one game, because for me personally -- and for a lot of people I suspect -- it’s generally easier to play a game with one other person than it is to get five or six people sat around a table. So any game that does that is interesting. It’s asymmetrical, so you’re always wanting to swap sides and try what the other person’s doing.

**Quinns** [talking over Ben]: Try what the other person was struggling with, yeah.

**Ben**: Yeah, so even if you played each monster once, either playing with it and then against it, you’re playing through eight times, and saying, “Okay, well, to get the full experience of this, you’ll play through eight times and get eight different experiences of it,” that’s pretty good.

**Quinns**: Yeah, that is really good. You know, I’m reminded of a line that Matt wrote for our Bargain Quest review, which was, if you play lots and lots and lots of board games, this might not necessarily be that exciting. But if you don’t play many board games at all? This might be the most exciting thing you do all week? I think that rings pretty true for Skulk Hollow, so certainly one to try if you get the opportunity.

[funky sting]

## Teotihuacan [00:37:05]

**Quinns**: Alright, well I played a game that *is* very much a gamer’s game this week. I played Teotihuacan: City of Gods by Italian designer Daniele Tascini, who also produced Marco Polo-

**Ben**: Okay!

**Quinns**: -a very strong eurogame that the site reviewed a while back. Let me paint a picture in your mind, Ben, of Teotihuacan.

**Ben**: Okay, my mind is blank.

**Quinns**: Imagine South America.

**Ben**: Imagining it.

**Quinns**: Now imagine a South American city in history times.

**Ben**: Okay. That’s very specific.

**Quinns**: Which city you ask? The city of Teotihuacan.

**Ben**: Okay, I’ll picture all the associations I have with [**Quinns**: Please do!] Teotihuacan.

**Quinns**: If you at home, unlike Ben, have trouble with associating things with Teotihuacan, this game will not necessarily help you. It doesn't tell you -- I believe -- which civilization this city was part of. I don’t even know if the game’s big on telling you what year it is. What I will say, though, is that the board is lovely, and I wish it wasn’t covered with so many of the charts and tables and accoutrements that is usually -- [stuttering] is that is that… That’s not the word, is it? [**Ben**: It’s *a* word.] Okay. -- that this eurogame drapes the board in. So this is a game in which players are going to be moving dice, which represent their workers, sort of clockwise around the board. I’m now going to say a bunch of words that will not make sense to you unless you play a lot of eurogames. It’s basically a giant rondel with a lot of tracks involved. So, what you do on your turn, really, is you’re gonna take one of your dice, which is in one of the eight positions around the city of Teotihuacan, and you’re gonna move it one, two, or three spaces. Then, you are going to either- If you want to do the action on that space, and there’s other dice already there… So let’s say you arrive at the space which lets you build the temple, so you can, you know, take wood and stone that you might have in your supply, and then you can use it to take one of these lovely wooden blocks and place it in the middle of the board, because this is the unique selling point probably of Teotihuacan, if you’ve seen pictures of it: It’s got a lovely white temple that gets built as players layer up all these lovely thick wooden tiles. And the game ends when the temple is finished.

So let’s say you arrive at that space that lets you pay and wood and stone and add a new tile to the temple and get some points for that. If there’s already dice there, then you have to pay cocoa. But if some of those dice are yours, then you still have to pay cocoa for them, but additionally you get a better action from your dice being there. So, the game then becomes a hellish yet intriguing logistics puzzle where…Okay, for example, let’s say you need stone, because you need a lot of stone to build the temple, right? Then if you move one dice to the stone space, then you get a bit of stone. If you manage to get a second dice to land on the same space, you’re gonna get a bunch of stone. A third dice landing there? You get so much stone! But because you’re going to quite a popular board space that already has your dice on it anyway, you’re probably gonna need a lot of cocoa, so before you even do that, you need cocoa. Where do you get cocoa from? That’s another decision you should have made a while back. So it’s the push-and-pull of putting all your dice on one space to do a really efficient action, versus just more like moving the dice to get whatever you need at a good moment. Like, “Oh, the space where I collect wood is free, actually. I don’t need to pay any cocoa to use that. I’m gonna quickly run a dice down there to use it.”

It’s a really intriguing puzzle. It is being called by some people one of the best eurogames that came out last year. I can’t disagree with that. Daniele Tascini is extremely good at what he does. There are so many many and varied systems going on in Teotihuacan that I feel bad for saying that ultimately, I came to the same conclusion that Matt and I landed when we played Voyages of Marco Polo, a eurogame that we reviewed a few years ago. You see, Marco Polo was great. Like Teotihuacan, it was great! It’s a really rich and engaging puzzle… that for me, just doesn't go the extra mile. We’re in my office right now. You can see behind me a selection of eurogames. I have maybe ten, fifteen dedicated eurogames in my collection. A eurogame -- if you’re new to the podcast -- is a game which doesn't feature direct conflict between players, and has a lot of management, so they tend to get very very very very complicated.

**Ben**: Yeahhhhhhh.

**Quinns**: Yeah. But I think now we’re in an era of games like Brass: Birmingham or Gùgōng which are able to do something interesting and thematic and bright and colorful. Or in Brass, dark and colorful. Really colorful, just sort of dark and evocative, let’s say.

**Ben**: Yeah.

**Quinns**: And Daniele Tascini just- Like Stefan Feld, another great designer who doesn't have much of an interest in theme, and I feel like, at a time when the market is just getting more and more competitive, that makes it easier to say, “Well, this game probably isn’t one of the fifteen eurogames in my collection.”

**Ben**: It’s not a case anymore of choosing between a game that plays like this and a game that does theme well. If there’s games that do both, why should you settle for one that does one?

**Quinns**: Yeah, it just feels like a designer is leaving some of their tools on the table. If you’re not like me, and you think that, you know, theme isn’t really something you’re looking for, if you looked at the Shut Up & Sit Down review of Food Chain Magnate and didn’t care about the absurd marketing and panickedly trying to sell burgers and all the stuff that brings Food Chain Magnate to life, Teotihuacan might well be for you! I played it with a friend, and then we had to walk somewhere, and we spent pretty much the entire forty-five minute walk talking about the complexities of the tracks, and when and where you might want to get your dice killed off, because hey! There’s a thing that happens in this game. As your dice move around the board and do an action, they’ll become smarter and wiser, and you’ll change the digit on them one higher, which means they get better and better at doing stuff, until they’re at six and they do another job, and that’s their one last job, and then they’re moved to the path of the dead. But because it’s a eurogame, you get a bonus for that!

**Ben**: So your die can die.

**Quinns**: Your die can die. That’s right!

**Ben**: Thank you. Thank you.

**Quinns**: Do you have any more of that kind of…

**Ben**: Look. I just... roll ‘em how I see ‘em. [both laughing]

## Yokai [00:43:06]

**Ben**: So I’ve recently played the Japanese spirit-themed pair-’em-up Yokai, which is basically the game Pairs, which you can play with any deck of cards, where you deal out all the cards and then you have to flip them and try and remember where things are, and try and take pairs. Right? You’re familiar with this concept.

**Quinns**: I’m familiar with the designer’s work, yes.

**Ben**: Yes, the designer being… [**Quinns**: Mr. Pairs.] time?! [Laughing] Well, Mr. Pairs is back with Yokai. So it’s basically cooperative Pairs. So you’re gonna deal out sixteen cards, and there’s four sets of four of these Japanese spirits. So you’ve got… I can’t remember the Japanese names to them, but you’ve got the fox spirit, you’ve got kappa which are the ones that hold water in their heads.

**Quinns** [very gently]: Ah.

**Ben**: You’ve got… I can’t remember the Japanese term for it, but it literally is long-necked women. [Quinns laughing] And then there’s another one. And what you’re gonna do on your turn is you’re gonna look at two of them, move one of them -- doesn't have to be one of the ones you looked at -- and then you’re going to either reveal a clue, or place a clue on top of a card. The clues have one, two, or three colors on them, so if you place a clue on top of a card, it has to match at least one of the colors on that clue. So the game ends when you’ve run out of clues and they’ve all been placed on cards, and what you want at the end of the game is all four of those spirits to be grouped together. They don’t have to be in any particular pattern necessarily, but all the purple spirits are touching each other, all the red spirits are touching each other, et cetera. That’s the basic premise, right? It’s kind of like Pairs meets… Tetris I guess? There’s some interesting mechanics there. So you’re not allowed to communicate with each other at all is the idea, so you might look at a card they looked at their last turn and go, “Okay, we both know this is a purple. I’m putting this over here because that’s a purple as well.” And you’re trying to communicate subtly, so it’s got an element of The Mind, which Shut Up & Sit Down have previously reviewed as well. There’s a fun element to a degree of the satisfaction of getting things right. It’s strange to sit in absolute silence when you’re playing a cooperative game, [Quinns laughing] because one of the best things about playing cooperative games is that you get to share in that experience. You get to say, “Oh, I can’t believe that happened! That’s so frustrating!” or “We absolutely smashed it!” Whereas in this, you just sit there, and if something goes well, you just sort of placidly stare at each other, and you share a psychic moment and go, “Yes, that was good.”

**Quinns** [laughing]: You just make eye contact and nod.

**Ben**: And nod. You’re not even allowed to nod.

**Quinns**: Oh wow!

**Ben**: And you can go- I think it’s two to four, maybe it goes up to five. And the interesting variants you can do on it, you can say, “Okay, they have to be in certain patterns,” you can change the way the clues work, but that’s basically it. My experience of it was, there was an element of fun? I think it would work for -- and I don’t mean this in a disparaging way at all -- I think it would work for children. My friend who I played it with is a primary school teacher and I honestly think it would be good in a primary school for children of that age. It’s got enough of a spice to keep people engaged, or young children engaged, but at the same time, it’s not too complex. There’s not lots of rules. And also, if you want your children to be quiet, it’s a game that requires them [Quinns laughing] to sit in silence.

**Quinns**: I taught The Mind to my nieces and nephew recently, and their mum was looking at me in shock, because I’d managed to get all of her kids to sit silently and work together, which felt like a real victory until we screwed up and then everyone just exploded. All the kids started blaming each other and screaming, [**Ben**: Ahh.] at which point I disengaged. I said, “Hey, this isn’t my problem.” The kids started just clubbin’ the hell out of each other.

**Ben**: And that’s why you will be the best parent, [Quinns laughing] Quintin Smith.

**Quinns**: That’s my plan. My plan is to -- whenever the kid makes a loud noise -- leave. Because they just gotta get that out of their system.

## Detective Club [00:46:57]

**Quinns**: Okay, so let’s talk about a puzzle game that we both like a little more than Yokai. Let’s talk about the competitive hidden role game Detective Club.

**Ben**: So if you’ve ever played Mysterium, it kind of plays like a competitive version of that. Basically, each round, someone is going to be the... head detective? It doesn't really say what they are. They’re the chosen player. The chosen one. [Quinns laughing] The chosen one is going to choose a word, and they’re gonna write it on all but one of a set of notebooks. So let’s say that word is “tambourine.”

**Quinns** [laughing]: Okay.

**Ben**: You were playing Bob Dylan when I came in. It’s in my head. So, you will then randomly deal out all those notebooks to the other players, so all but one of the players will get a notebook that says “tambourine” on. The other person has a blank notebook, and basically, what everyone’s gonna do is they’re gonna play out two cards from their hand. All these cards have abstract dream-like images on, as in Mysterium.

**Quinns**: Yup.

**Ben**: And basically, what you have to do is you have to pick two cards that you think match that word. Now you’ve probably noticed that one of the people doesn't know what the word is, which means they’re going to have to look at other people’s cards, and seamlessly put their cards down as if to say, “Hey! I know what we’re talking about. I’m cool. Let me be in your gang.”

**Quinns**: Yup! So after doing that twice, then the players will enter a negotiation phase, which is similar to A Fake Artist Goes to New York, if you’ve played that superb game. Players are going to try and discuss, say, “[stammering] Wh-wh-what were you thinking playing this card!” And they’ll say, “Well look, the sun is a circle. The circle is like a, you know, a tambourine is also a circle, of course.” Because the word is revealed, right?

**Ben**: Yeah, the word is revealed after everyone’s played two cards, and then the chosen one will say, “Look, the word is tambourine. Here’s my two cards very clearly linked to tambourine.” Then everyone goes in a circle and says why *their* cards are linked to it. Which is fantastic when the person who doesn't know what the word is, they have to make it up on the spot. And there’s also a beautiful moment of turning to someone and saying, [belligerent] “Well go on then, why did you pick these? Explain your nonsense to the group!”

**Quinns**: Yeah, it’s the lovely thing of… It feels like a very level playing field, because everyone is laughing at one player because those two cards do not reflect the word “tambourine” or “feminism” or “potato” or whatever. The word “whatever” could be a word that you actually write down, my god! But, you know, you might do a crap job of explaining it and people won’t believe you, but then it’s very much, “Yeah! Well you, why did you pick it?! You know, what was your grand thinking?” We had a word which was like… What was it, “cornucopia”?

**Ben**: Yes.

**Quinns**: And I put down a- I got *rinsed* for this, because I put down a card which was like a forest grove with a deer and a parrot and they’re all looking at a hole in a tree which has a candle in. It looked like a scene out of a fantasy novel. And I played it instinctively, and then when players were like, “Well, why is that a cornucopia?” I was like, “Oh, well, fantasy novels are kind of my safe place, so this seemed like a rich cornucopia of fantasy imagery,” and then everyone laughed! But I was being sincere! I didn’t have the blank notebook, and that’s one of the reasons the game works so well, I think, is that it’s not like everyone knows and will do well. Depending on the cards in your hand, even if you know the word, you might look guilty as heck.

**Ben**: If you want to recreate the experience right now, type into Google “obscure abstract art”, look at the first six images, and say, “Right, I have to pick two that represent irony.” [Quinns laughing] And that’s the situation, because you get six cards, and you have to pick two of them, so no matter- Even if you know the word and have a perfect understanding of the word, and you’re fantastic at interpreting images, you have very limited choices, which means, it’s not immediately obvious who the person is. When I was the person with the blank notebook, I’d just play the first two cards in my hand confidently, [Quinns laughing] because I thought, “Well, if I delay [**Quinns**: Wooowww.] it looks suspicious, and I can probably just make it up.”

**Quinns**: Yeah. So I’m worried that Detective Club is gonna get a little lost within the board game scene, because it has elements of Mysterium, in that, you know, you’re putting out these cards that represent things. But it’s much shorter and simpler than Mysterium. You know, it’s a party game. It has elements of A Fake Artist Goes to New York, but, you know… [sighs] But it came along a little later, and it’s very different, it’s much prettier. It’s also not as panic-inducing as A Fake Artist Goes to New York or Spyfall. So it’s like a lot of games. And yet, what it does isn’t- While not being unique, in some ways I think it’s like the purest distillation of… Because everyone *kind of* likes Dixit, everyone *kind of* likes Mysterium, everyone *kind of* likes Spyfall, but all those games have some problems in. Detective Club, while not being as ambitious, is a very smooth-playing thing.

**Ben**: These games are always going to have an element of no one likes to be laughed at or forced to improvise. Certain people don’t-

**Quinns**: -want to be wrong!

**Ben**: Yeah. Certain people won’t like to be put in that situation of, “You’ve played these. Please explain your terrible decisions.” But, out of all these games that we’ve talked about -- Spyfall, Dixit, et cetera -- I think it’s the one that’s the most welcoming, because as you say, everyone’s in that situation. You don’t *really* feel that bad. I played with someone who, their logic was so mad, *every* round, [Quinns laughing] they got away with nonsense, because even when they were right, we couldn’t understand how they were seeing these things in these images. It’s one of the games I’ve played recently, over the last couple of months, it’s the one that the most people have said to me, “Can we play this game again?”

**Quinns**: Yes. Yeah.

**Ben**: People really like it.

**Quinns**: I got that vibe from Detective Club as well, you know? I think, as people who collect board games, you end up looking for the most. You end up looking for, “What’s the hottest new thing this year? What’s the most ambitious, or the prettiest, the most complicated, the longest.” You know, we spent fifteen minutes at the top of this talking about Western Empires, which, you know, we were all exhausted at by the end. Lots of that day was not fun! Detective Club is just fun. From like start to finish, people just enjoy the heck out of it. And yet, I don’t feel the need to collect it, because I have so many games that do similar things already, but if you don’t own Mysterium, if you don’t own A Fake Artist Goes to New York, if you don’t own Spyfall… And Spyfall I don’t think has aged very well, because of the sheer quantities of anxiety that that game induces. But yeah, Detective Club is just a fantastic game!

## Combo Fighter [00:53:06]

**Quinns**: Finally, Ben and I put up a video last week. That’s right, your boy Ben Winterton with a starring role in a Shut Up & Sit Down review, talking about a game called Combo Fighter, which I had under my hat, because I found this about a month ago, and I didn’t wanna reveal it. I wanted it to be a Shut Up & Sit Down scoop, that this game is really good!

**Ben**: He has a very big hat.

**Quinns**: I do.

**Ben**: It’s scary.

**Quinns**: I stored the game and the two smaller stand-alone mini-expansions that it comes with, yeah. So Combo Fighter is a one-on-one card game that is expandable, that is modeled on arcade fighting games. So each player picks a character. The two smaller fifteen-dollars sets just come with two characters in. You can buy one of them and see if you like it. Or you can spend thirty bucks on a bigger set that has four characters. But you’ve got your two characters. Each of those is gonna be a deck and a special ability, and a reference card showing how much of your deck is attack, movement, and defense. Because the whole game is just Rock Paper Scissors. You have a hand of five cards. Let’s say I play a punch, and Ben plays a block. Within the Rock Paper Scissors of Combo Fighter, blocks always beat attacks, so Ben would win that round. But if he’d played a movement, attacks beat movement, and movement beats blocking. So it is Rock Paper Scissors, as we say in the video, you know, there’s no getting away from that, but it’s Rock Paper Scissors that’s A) iterated, B) winning with an attack is always better, C) some decks have just way more attacks than others, so it’s like, imagine if it’s Rock Paper Scissors that you were gonna play twelve times, but your opponent’s sort of deck was mostly scissors.

**Ben**: And sometimes you don’t have any rock.

**Quinns**: Yeah, exactly.

**Ben**: You might just draw a hand of paper, so even if you know you need to be playing scissors, you’re playing paper because paper’s all you’ve got.

**Quinns**: Yeah, or what if- I mean, the character who really summarizes the game, because he’s the most extreme -- Gakere Baako? I forget his name -- but he’s a wrestler, and if he wins with a wrestling card, which is a defense card -- so you know Gakere really wants to win with wrestling -- he just gets you on the ground, and then the whole game- You add all these extra rules that mean you can’t hurt him, he can choke you out. It’s horrible! It’s exactly as terrifying as an enormous wrestler walking towards you should be. But then what’s Rock Paper Scissors if -- within the fiction of Rock Paper Scissors -- if Gakere *must* play rock to get his game off the ground? It’s like, well then you’ll just play paper, right? It’s like, but he knows that, so he’ll play scissors. Oh it’s pretty good! It’s pretty good!

**Ben**: If you’ve ever played any fighting games at all- I mean my main experience is Smash Brothers, which isn’t *really* a proper fighting game-

**Quinns**: Oh it totally is.

**Ben**: -but it still has the same mechanic of trying to second-guess your opponent, so it’s like, “They want to be in this space, so I need to occupy this space, because that’s the optimum way to counter that.”

**Quinns**: Yeah, exactly.

**Ben**: And I’ve had minutes of Smash Brothers games where you’re just flipping around and dodging, and someone looking at it is going, “Why aren’t you hitting each other?” and your answer is, “Because that’s not the right thing to do.”

**Quinns**: Exactly, yeah.

**Ben**: And you’re maneuvering around each other constantly, waiting for that opening. And Combo Fighter has the exact same thing. The other mechanic we haven’t really talked about, which is where the name comes from, is comboing. So yeah, you can open with your rock or whatever, but then you can link a paper, and then another paper, and then another rock, and you’re building up damage as you play your cards. Cards have different amounts of damage depending on whether they’re played first or part of a combo, so that can mean some interesting mechanics where a card is terrible to open with, but great to play later on. And also, your character has signature combos, which will be specific combinations of cards that you can chain together to do extra bits of damage with.

**Quinns**: Yes, but usually… Well, for a start, the signature combos are printed on a sheet that your opponent can see, and usually, a character’s signature combos will all start with the same color. So, you know, if you’re the sort of bouncy, kicky lady, then all of her combos might start with movement, which means you know your opponent really wants to win with movement, et cetera et cetera et cetera, you know. But also, these cards, which are larger than they could have been -- in a design decision I absolutely love, they’ve got about a centimeter and a half extra length -- are just beautiful, full art illustrations. Illustrations that don’t even have backgrounds, because they were quite affordably done, but the artist has been able to imbue each illustration with momentum in a way that means when you play these cards in a combo -- showing your character jump, and then duck, and then close distance and punch, you know -- it just plays out in your head like a comic strip.

**Ben**: There’s a lot of character to the art as well. The… is he Haitian?

**Quinns**: Oh, which guy?

**Ben**: The sumo wrestler?

**Quinns**: Oh, I… Oooh, I wanna say he’s… Maori?

**Ben**: Polynesian?

**Quinns**: Oh, Polyn- yeah, sure.

**Ben**: He’s from that part of the world. Apologies for any insensitivity there. But there’s a lot of character in the way he’s communicated, in that all his blocks and movements, he’s just basically standing there laughing at you [Quinns laughing] as you fruitlessly beat on his huge chest. So as you play these characters, you feel like you’re getting into their head as to how they play, so his strategy is very much: Let your opponent wear themselves out, and then suddenly do a massive counterattack. Likewise, the bouncy kicky lady, I’d say you wanna play quickly, so you might be getting lots of little combos in, but they’re not gonna be doing that much damage, but you’re chipping away at your opponent in much the same way a small Danish girl kicking a big sumo wrestler would do.

**Quinns**: Or would in our heads, in the sort of… I just imagine a sumo wrestler just grabbing a tiny lady and then… pushing her away.

**Ben**: I’ve never seen- They call it- MMA is mixed martial arts, but I’ve never seen sumo wrestler vs. kickboxer.

**Quinns**: Yeah, no, I’m very much bringing my own prejudices as to how well a Norwegian kickboxer would do against a sumo wrestler.

**Ben**: If you know of any Norwegian kickboxers-

**Quinns**: Or better yet, if you *are* either a sumo wrestler or a Norwegian kickboxer, get in touch! We can make this happen! SHUX two thousand twenty! [Ben laughing]

## Mailbag [00:58:38]

*Mailbag jingle: Ohhh, put your hand in my mailbag. Find me a letter!*

**Quinns**: Ben, before you shoot off, I have got a question for us. I have removed it, prior to the podcast, from the wet, leathery sheath of the mailbag. I’ve had it sterilized, and I believe it’s now safe for human consumption. So this comes from Ron. And Ron writes, “Dear Shut Up & Sit Down, do you feel like you play games differently depending on the time of day? I mean this generally, whether it be thought processes, energy level, comprehension, et cetera. As for myself, I tend to reach my peak skill level, regardless of game, in the early evening [five to six PM]. Love the show and thank you, Ron.” Thank *you*, Ron! And if you want to email Shut Up & Sit Down with a question for the podcast, you can do that by emailing contact at shut up and sit down dot com.

**Ben**: So most of my gaming is done on an evening, so normally I’ll start sort of around, I don’t know, six, seven’o’clock, which means, that first period, I’m always a bit cautious, a bit tentative, but also nervously excited. So generally that’s when I’ll play more cautiously. Then, I’ll get into my full flow at sort of eight, nine’o’clock, and that’s when I’m making all the aggressive big plays [Quinns laughing] before I sort of slump. I think for me, the answer that immediately jumps out to me is my friend -- I’m gonna give you his full name because it’s relevant -- he’s called Tom Dransfield.

**Quinns**: Okay?

**Ben**: And we’d do a thing where we would be working on other stuff, on our other projects, until probably like midnight, one’o’clock, and it was definitely time to go to bed, but he’d give me what I called the Dransfield Shrug of, he’d jokingly say, “Ha! We could play this.” And then do a shrug? [Quinns laughing] And then it was the shrug of, “I’m joking, but also, I’m not joking if you don’t think I’m joking,” and then we’d end up playing something. And that’s when we’d just play like idiots. So yeah, I think my graph is tentatively focus and energy gradually goes up, then it hits its peak, then it plummets, and then there’s just a little bump at the end following the Dransfield Shrug.

**Quinns**: In terms of my seasonal gaming -- I love this question by the way -- in terms of my skill level, Ben you’ve had the misfortune of playing a fair few games with me over the last couple of months. I’ve now entered what I’m going to call my sort of “tragic” phase, and now I don’t even notice when I win, Ben. I only notice when I lose. So there’s no joy to be had in the victory.

**Ben**: I mean when we played a game we’ve not talked about -- Hats -- I made a play that Quinns thought was so good, he physically left the table. [Quinns laughing] He still won, by the way, he still won the game, but he actually left the table and had to go for a short walk.

**Quinns**: Yeah, so, in terms of skill level, I can’t answer the question. But what I can say is my two favorite times to game, which is, first off, the sexy late-night hour. So this only emerges when I have people over for a game night that then just kinda doesn't end. And this happens infrequently, maybe once every six months or so, but there’ll be that game night where the group is just popping, the energy’s great, and no one wants to go home. And then, at about maybe one thirty, two AM, that is like the golden hour for… I just start losing my mind. I just pull out games that are funny, or just regular fifty-two-card deck card games. That’s when I played Bourré for the first time? [Ben laughing] Which I believe will be going up on the site very shortly, which is just the most insane gambling game of all time. But yeah, that’s when I just end up being really giggly and energetic, and I just love this hobby more than any other time. Except! For the opposite of late nights, super early mornings. One of my favorite times to play board games, on a Sunday, where I happen to have nothing to do, very early on a Sunday... Like imagine, if you will, setting up A Feast For Odin at about eleven AM. That, for me, is like... When just the whole Sunday is sprawling out in front of you, you’re the king or queen of the world, you’ve got games… What games are you gonna play? You’re gonna play all of them. Ben’s ordering an Uber right now, [chuckling] he’s been very good in staying longer while I talk absolute nonsense about times of day.

## Outro [1:02:31]

**Quinns**: Ben, it’s been a pleasure having you on the podcast.

**Ben**: I was gonna do that surreptitiously, but thank you for-

**Quinns**: No, I felt- I’ve… It’s usually a sign that I need to stop talking when someone gets out their phone and I can see Uber [chuckling] loaded on the phone.

**Ben**: I’m literally calling a cab. But no, thank you so much for having me once again. It’s been a lot of fun, as always.

**Quinns**: Ben, it’s been great! Do you have any kind of internet presence, if people wanted to find you?

**Ben**: Not anymore, it’s been expunged for… I don’t want to say “for reasons involving the police,” but what…

**Quinns**: But that is true.

**Ben**: Not in a legal sense. In that one of us is applying to work with the police, so they had to clean their record and just make sure there was nothing bad, so yeah.

**Quinns**: What a fabulous, enigmatic exit that is.

**Ben**: Yes.

**Quinns**: Thank you, Ben Winterton. And thank you for listening to the Shut Up & Sit Down podcast. SHUX remains just around the corner, just a couple of weeks away. In fact, after recording this podcast, I’m gonna start thinking about when I should start thinking about packing my bags to go to Canada. Thank you so much, Ben, you’ve been a star. And thank you for listening everybody. I’ve been Quintin Smith, this has been the Shut Up & Sit Down podcast! *BYE*!

**Ben**: Bye!

[funky outro music]