

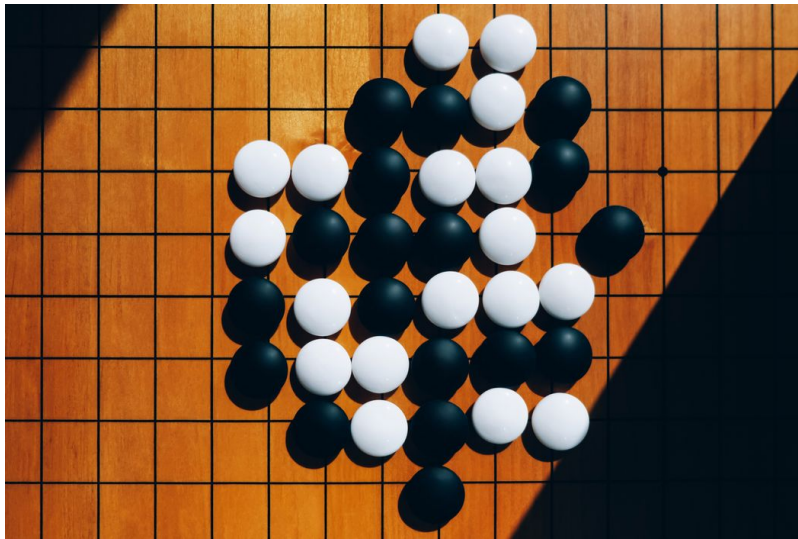
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'Around the World in Eighty Games' Review: Glory of the Board

Plus the role-playing history in 'Monsters, Aliens, and Holes in the Ground.'

By *John J. Miller*

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A game of Go in process. PHOTO: OLENA RUBAN/GETTY IMAGES

As Phileas Fogg circles the planet in "Around the World in Eighty Days," the novelist Jules Verne describes his hero winning at whist aboard a ship on the Red Sea and in a train across the Rocky Mountains. Marcus du Sautoy also combines games with globetrotting: "I love them so much so that on all my travels around the world, I seek out the games that people like to play in the country I'm visiting," he writes in "Around the World in Eighty Games," a Verne-inspired and idiosyncratic tour "of the many crazy, fantastic, addictive games that our species has created."

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Around the World in Eighty Games: From Tarot to Tic-Tac-Toe, Catan to Chutes and Ladders, a Mathematician Unlocks the

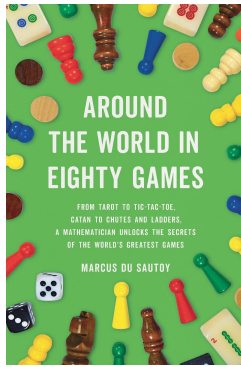
Mr. du Sautoy, a math professor at Oxford, is so enthusiastic about his subject that he follows the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga in suggesting that we Homo sapiens switch our binomial name to Homo

...aders, a mathematician cracks the Secrets of the World's Greatest Games

By Marcus du Sautoy

Basic Books

384 pages



switch out binomial name to homo ludens. “It is the ability to play, not think, that has been crucial in our development,” he writes.

What really attracts Mr. du Sautoy to gaming, however, is the opportunity to think about numbers. “Games for me are a way of playing mathematics.” He enjoys calculating

that bingo’s 5-by-5 grids and 75 balls can produce more than 111 quadrillion ways to fill a card. His book bursts with such data.

Admirers of the late Martin Gardner and his writings on recreational math will enjoy Mr. du Sautoy’s equations, but the most interesting sections of his book blend theories about what makes a good game with examples from his travels. “The best games are those with simple rules that give rise to complex, rich, and varied outcomes,” he writes. He believes that games should involve both brains and luck—enough strategy to encourage smart play but also elements of chance to allow weak players occasionally to defeat strong ones.

The best board game ever, he says, is not a classic such as Monopoly but rather a newer one: Settlers of Catan, which has sold tens of millions of copies since its debut in 1995. It involves the peopling of an island made up of 19 hexagon-shaped tiles. Players roll dice and compete for territory as they build cities and trade resources.

Settlers of Catan was conceived by Klaus Teuber, a dental technician in Germany, a country that Mr. du Sautoy calls “the modern-day Mecca of games.” He credits the city of Nuremberg and its “toymaking tradition” as well as Germany’s post-Nazi ban on the importation of war toys, which “acted as a catalyst for a completely new strand of gaming.” In this creative culture, game designers are celebrated not as “inventors” but as “authors,” whose names appear on the covers of boxes. Germans, writes Mr. du Sautoy, anticipate the latest games from Reiner Knizia or Wolfgang Kramer “like readers seek out the new John Grisham or Stephen King book.”

This observation about a country’s gaming customs and conventions grows

naturally from the organizing principle behind “Around the World in Eighty Games.” Mr. du Sautoy envisions an itinerary that takes him to India (where he considers chess), Japan (Pokémon cards) and the United States (casinos and Wordle), among other places. At times, however, his concept gets the better of him, and parts of his narrative can feel like a forced march led by a demanding tour guide. He discusses the British-born board game Cluedo (known as Clue in North America) while crossing the Pacific Ocean mostly because he doesn’t know how else to fill his fictional travel schedule.

His approach also pulls him into speculation. Cultures that prefer games of chance to games of strategy, he proposes, may reflect “a fatalistic outlook on life over a belief in agency over one’s destiny.” He muses that a fondness for a “territorial” game like Go, instead of an “aggressive” game like chess, reveals “what a culture values and how it views the world.” Although elsewhere he is keen to show mathematical proofs, here he is content to let provocative ideas remain half-baked assertions. He also asks a question of mancala, a game with deep roots in Africa: “Does a country that enjoys tougher versions of the game have more innovative business communities?” He doesn’t gamble with an answer.

Equally frustrating is the sporadic intrusion of politics, from which games may provide a reprieve. Mr. du Sautoy wants readers to know, for example, that he has “left-wing political leanings.” He refers to “the injustices of the Margaret Thatcher years,” and, in an unfortunate remark given the recent atrocities of Hamas, he deplores “Israel’s rather hard-core stances in the Middle Eastern political arena.”

When Mr. du Sautoy discusses the Royal Game of Ur, which once was played in the shadow of Mesopotamian ziggurats and which he learned about as a boy at the British Museum, he utters a platitude of wokeness: “I am acutely aware that the fascination of earlier generations with collecting artifacts from around the world robbed those cultures of their heritage.” This is an astonishing statement, given that the Royal Game of Ur had vanished from memory until the British archaeologist Leonard Woolley discovered it during an excavation in present-day Iraq. “It is a remarkable thing to be able to play a round of the same game that entertained the Babylonians five thousand years ago,” writes Mr. du Sautoy, who is right to marvel. Yet he seems unable to connect the dots between the relic

who is right to marvel. Yet he seems unable to connect the dots between the relic hunting that he laments and the cultural restoration that he applauds.

When he sticks strictly to games, Mr. du Sautoy is full of engaging opinions. “I regard a pack of cards as one of humanity’s most extraordinary inventions,” he writes, because it is “fantastically portable” and “can be used to play a huge range of games.” He reports that it takes seven good shuffles to randomize a deck of cards.

Mr. du Sautoy also defends games from the “stigma” of frivolousness—as if, as he puts it, “playing Zelda is bad, but reading Zola is good.” Card games and board games, he says, increase longevity and fight dementia. Even violent videogames have benefits: “Nongamers who played a first-person shooting game called Medal of Honor for an hour a day found that they were able to focus on tasks with multiple distractions far better than those who were given a more passive video game like Tetris to play.” And Tetris, by the way, “boosts general cognitive functions,” according to research that he cites.

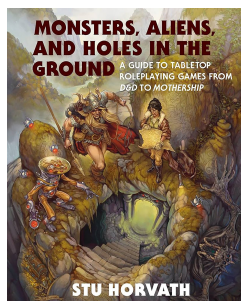
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Monsters, Aliens, and Holes in the Ground: A Guide to Tabletop Roleplaying Games from D & D to Mothership

By Stu Horvath

MIT Press

456 pages



Mr. du Sautoy writes about one game that he plainly doesn’t enjoy:

Dungeons & Dragons. There’s no accounting for taste, and readers who relish role-playing games can turn to an excellent alternative:

“Monsters, Aliens, and Holes in the Ground,” by Stu Horvath, a writer and podcaster. This nicely illustrated book about D&D and its kin offers a series of engaging entries on rule manuals such as the “Players Handbook” and adventure modules

such as “The Keep on the Borderlands.” Gamers who once studied these and similar materials will find themselves on a nostalgic expedition through the history of a hobby.

The role-playing revolution started in the 1970s, when Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson adapted tabletop war games involving miniature figures and Napoleonic battles into a new game about individual characters in a fantasy of

...transformed battles into a new game about individual characters in a fantasy of swords and sorcery. Instead of armchair generals who clashed at Waterloo, players imagined themselves as wizards and warriors who embarked on quests under the guidance of a storytelling referee known as the “dungeon master.” Published by TSR, a Gygax-led company in Wisconsin, D&D became a sensation.

TSR issued a range of major and minor products, which Mr. Horvath describes with both affection and a critical eye. He also covers the wider role-playing industry. After the success of Dungeons & Dragons, he notes, people started to look for new games that resembled it. One early alternative was Tunnels & Trolls, devised by Ken St. Andre, a librarian in Phoenix. Soon after came the space-opera game Traveller and then varieties that drew from the horror writings of H.P. Lovecraft, the espionage of James Bond and the superheroes of comic books. There was even a game based on “Dallas,” the television show.

Mr. Horvath covers them all, through products released as recently as 2020—and reveals a world of play that can keep Homo ludens occupied for a lifetime.

—Mr. Miller is director of the Dow Journalism Program at Hillsdale College and the author of “Reading Around: Journalism on Authors, Artists, and Ideas.”