

Reiner Knizia

Home Again

After just a few weeks, the accent clearly suggests it: Reiner Knizia has broken camp in Windsor and returned to his old home Bavaria. We took the opportunity to interview the record-breaking designer – for the first time in more than 10 years.

spielbox: Were you trying to escape from Brexit, or did you have other reasons to make camp in Germany once more?

Rainer Knizia: When I left for England 24 years ago, my main job was banker, and game design was only a hobby. But after my 40th birthday, when I took the freedom to become a full-time game designer, I remained in England, simply because I felt comfortable there.

I had never intended to emigrate to the UK. All I needed to motivate me to go back was the proverbial "kick in the butt". Many reasons have now contributed to this return, one of them being the progressively xenophobic behavior of the English government and the resulting Brexit. My partner has already been living in Munich for several years. And my brilliant company assistant, Karen Easteal, was willing to accompany me there.

sb: In many interviews, you talk about "we" and you mention a team that develops your games with you. Who are these people, and what is going to happen to those left behind in Windsor?

RK: Yes, that is definitely the downer of the move, and it makes me sad, although I am very excited to be living in the middle of Munich once more. After all, developing games means playtesting games, over and over again. And for this important task I had a highly experienced and motivated group of people in England.

I cannot stress too much how this nuclear team contributed towards the creativity and success of our games. I would like to take this opportunity to send a heartfelt thank you to Iain Adams, Chris Bowyer, John Christians, Chris Dearlove, Drak, Gavin Hamilton, Martin Higham, Ross Inglis, Kevin Jacklin, Simon Kane, Chris Lawson, Dave Spring and the ingenious Sebastian

Bleasdale, who is now a successful game designer himself.

I am leaving many lovely friends behind, in my business as well as my private life.

sb: Will there be a new team ready in Munich?

RK: Of course! Things would never work out without a team. My old Munich group is already on board and the technical university has a games club, which means I can fall back on a good crowd for playtesting. I am very confident that we can build another powerful team as time goes by.

sb: New environment, new team: Is there also potential for new impulses and stimuli in game design?

RK: Absolutely! Creativity and innovation constantly require new input. I am sure the new student-based environment is ideal to keep my designs in touch with

the latest trends and to remain a relevant author in the current board gaming market.

sb: How long can we keep expecting new stuff from Reiner Knizia? Is the increasing pressure to deliver original games going to turn into a curse at some point?

RK: You really need to ask this question to the higher powers. At the tender age of eight I started to play and develop games, and if it is granted to me, I shall continue to do so until I am 80 years old.

My curse is actually a different one: I have too many new ideas!

There are 50 drawers in my studio, each containing a new game currently in development. I have absolutely no problem filling these drawers with new ideas; what I struggle with is clearing them out again – by creating a fantastic new game out of every single one; a game that can give joy to many people.

I do not permit myself to fill more than 50 drawers. This restriction helps me to develop my ideas more responsibly, to properly raise the children that I fathered, as it were.

sb: Today's media is fast-paced, which also applies to games. For example, some are published at SPIEL in Essen

and already forgotten by the time the Nuremberg Toy Fair comes around. There is definitely a cult of the new. Can authors keep up with that?

RK: But what a fantastic situation for consumers, with so many new games coming on the market every year! And for the game designers, this market also offers many opportunities to place their new creations with publishers as there is a huge demand from editors.

On the other hand, the wealth of new games prevents many from becoming established on the market. Short-lived products with their high costs up-front are not profitable, neither for the publisher nor for any forward-thinking author. So yes, the pressure to succeed is high.

In turn, this leads to the weird situation that many publishers do not regard a solid, simply fun game as good enough. Every product needs to be somehow special, to stand out from the rest.



The UK-Playtester



Photo: Karen Eastaill

My best defense against the fast-moving nature of the business is to design my works so they represent as sustainable and in a sense as timeless a value as possible. I do not believe in simple gimmicks and cheap showmanship. Many of my former games are still very popular today, for example *MODERN ART* (1993), *MEDICI* (1995), *EUPHRAT & TIGRIS* (1998), *SAMURA* (1998) and *RA* (1999).

sb: It is only in the last couple of decades that intellectual property rights to a game concept or for a central gaming element have actually been recognized. How does Reiner Knizia in his work avoid infringement of the rights of others?

RK: A very important topic indeed, for I believe it has now become impossible for any individual to keep a comprehensive overview here.

For my part, I rely on my playtesters, who sometimes rein me in if I accidentally get too close to another designer's work. Plus, I rely on the insight of the publishers when it comes to preventing an infringement out of ignorance.

sb: Every game designer has their favorite gaming elements. The danger of imitating yourself is high. How do you avoid self-plagiarism?

RK: Ignorance of others' rights is one thing. Blindness against reprocessing your own ideas another. Again, playtesters and publishers are an important part in keeping me in check.

But at this point another effect comes into play. If a designer is working intensely on a gaming system, he develops a very fine perception for its details. Things that seem very different to him may appear very similar to an outsider who lacks his detailed understanding.

sb: All authors are usually associated with specific preferences, mechanisms and thought patterns. Do they themselves see it the same way?

RK: All designers have their own signature, their own personality that distin-

guishes them. Which is a good thing. It makes our world of games so hugely fascinating and multifaceted. In my case, I like to condense situations to a few fundamental basic laws. And that is also how my games work: Only few rules, but they still create a distinct platform for player interaction. Few thematic details or explanatory texts, but innovative and suitable game mechanisms that grant players an emotional experience of the respective theme.

In my work, I always keep in mind which emotions I would like to have myself in any particular situation of the game. The great skill is to let these emotions evolve quite naturally out of gameplay.

For example, a trend in my games would not be triggered by a chance event card, but by the action of a player. Say, a caravan would appear on the border of the game board, on its way to our market. The players realize that soon there would be more goods available. In a forward-looking manner, some of them would quickly sell their goods at the current prices even before the arrival of the caravan, particularly when they anticipate the other players are going to do the same thing. So the players' behavior actually triggers the trend that leads to a drop in prices. The emotions here are totally different, for the players themselves are an integral part of the trend's evolution and can experience the trend themselves.

It does not really help if the rulebook prescribes that a game has to be played cooperatively. Players need to feel the threats emerging from the game mechanism itself; they need to perceive them as such a staggering predicament that the question of cooperation is never actually raised. Instead, the only thing that counts is how they can all pool their resources to reach the common goal.

sb: As an established author, you will surely be approached by publishers asking for game ideas related to specific projects. Is this heaven or hell for you?

RK: If the initiative for a specific game comes from a publisher, it is almost always related to a certain specification: a trademark license, for example for *The Lord of the Rings*, a specific gaming material, for example *Lego*, or a new technology like in *WHOOWASIT*.

sb: I would like to be more specific. *DRACHENHORT* (dragon hoard), published with Ravensburger in 2015, supervised by an experienced editor (Stefan Brück) and illustrated by a great artist (Franz Vohwinkel) in a publishing house that has likewise not just existed since yesterday. The game was relatively well received, and yet in 2017 it is already gone. What went wrong?

RK: I regret to say that I do not have a satisfactory answer. There is no predicting if a game will gain enough momentum to establish itself on the market. Maybe all it needs is a little bit of luck.

sb: One result of these hectic times is that a game only ever receives a single print-run, and not a very large one as that. This of course limits the author's royalties. Is it still worth the effort of development, considering that the cooperation with the publishers is also a time-consuming affair?

RK: What really matters here is the original motivation of the game designer. I consider designers primarily to be artists whose intrinsic aim is to create new works of art. For many of them, certainly for me, the monetary aspect comes second – it is not entirely irrelevant, of course, because everybody would like to be adequately paid.

Usually the box size and the retail price are already decided upon, sometimes the publishing date is set. With a tight schedule, certain components that require long production lead times are right out. All of these factors reduce my level of freedom as a designer.

The most important factor for success in such a project is to place the specified age range, usually also predetermined, right in the center of the game.



Photo: Karen Eastaai

With trademark licenses I try to capture the true spirit of the respective universe. LORD OF THE RINGS is designed from the point of view of the fellowship of the ring, which naturally results in a cooperative game of hobbits versus the evil. With new technologies it is particularly important to recognize their strengths and their potential and to make full use of these to achieve a perfect balance between production costs and gaming quality.

These are the challenges that I absolutely love! They keep me on my toes and time and again force me to leave my comfort zone and keep improving as a game designer.

sb: Does Reiner Knizia still develop games according to the motto: "I really fancy doing this right now"? Inspiration hitting you in the shower, on a walk – and off you go?

RK: Of course, I design games that I enjoy. Come to think of it, I only design games that I enjoy.

My motivation has always been to design a nice game that makes many people happy. I believe you can feel it in a game if the designer enjoyed the creative process and worked with a smile on their face.

sb: Looking at your games over the decades, it is striking that initially you worked almost exclusively for a grown-up audience and over time the proportion of family and children's games has steadily increased. Is there a specific reason for this?

RK: It is only natural that game designers start off with a segment they prefer playing themselves. With my degree in mathematics I initially leaned towards strategy games. Later in life, as a full-time game designer, I did not want to get boxed in, but tried to commit myself to as many different genres as possible. Each of them offers new inspirations and experiences and also stimulates and enhances the others. PICKOMINO, MMM, BEE ALERT, LOST CITIES and KELTS are good examples. Today, with the advance of the electronic games, the range is even broader.

sb: Worker placement, the hype in the board gaming scene – happened entirely without Reiner Knizia. Why?

RK: I think I already designed a similar game very early on, MUNICIPIUM (2008), even though I only realized later that it actually belongs in that category. I am always fascinated by a nice mechanism, but that fascination quickly dwindles when many people get involved.

I am generally not very keen to follow new trends, and will only do so when I am able to make a substantial new contribution, like I did for example with EL DORADO (2017) for deckbuilding games.

sb: And what is the new element here?

RK: The combination of a very evocative game board and a deckbuilding mechanism. The board, the path is the real challenge, while the cards show the means to master it. As new challenges appear in EL DORADO via the freely combinable game board, the deck can be much smaller and clear-cut than in other games, for example DOMINION.

But I have a far greater ambition. I want to provide the gaming world with innovative, new impulses, and ideally I would like to set new trends. However, this is not easy, as it demands a good amount of luck, and most importantly the ability to anticipate potential trend leaders in time.

I still remember very clearly when I told Richard Garfield many years ago, even before the publication of MAGIC - THE GATHERING, that his game would not have any market potential because of its high complexity. Luckily, he did not listen to me at the time, and he not only went on to fashion a new trend, but even to create the entirely new sector of collectible card games.

sb: Apart from bits and bytes, are there any new areas of work for the game inventor Knizia, apart from the classic publisher's fare?

RK: Many companies today show an increasing interest in entertaining, playful additions to their events or goal-oriented training games. In addition there are consulting contracts that could be filed under the buzzword of "gamification".

Companies are motivated to use the fascination emanating from games to influence behavior in real life. Be it to

improve internal business processes, external image ideas or even for customer retention. It is all about finding suitable, really quite simple mechanisms that do not seem artificial and fit in easily. In this part of my work I can join up my experiences in the industry and in game design most intuitively. I also cooperate with CORMENS, the partner company of my life partner Dr. Margret Klinkhammer, which has



Photo: Karen Eastaai



Photo: Karen Easta

specialized in change management and executive training. This is still a very small and specialized area, generating around 10 percent of our revenue. It is labor intensive work, but very exciting.

sb: As a game designer you do not only need to be creative, but also to sell your ideas. How time-consuming is that role?

RK: Customer contact, predominantly with publishers, is essential. And it is not only about placing our games in their program, but more importantly about feedback and future perspectives: What is working, what is not working, where are the challenges and strategies of the publishers, and how can we contribute to their success?

Accompanying the publishers over the entire process of implementing an idea into a finished game is time-consuming. Commenting on the graphic design, checking the rules, answering hundreds of questions are important parts of our work. Attending to the licensing contracts and the administration of more than 600 copyrights are also not a trifling matter.

I think a good balance between the creative and the operative business element is key to the success of a designer.

On the operative side, my long-standing assistant Karen Easta supports me in all my activities with great efficiency. Her commitment to our success is truly unique.

sb: Reiner Knizia's favorite game idea that no publisher wanted to take on, is called what? And works how? And is self-published on Kickstarter when?

RK: We are consciously focusing on our strengths on the things we do best: Developing innovative games for the joint success with our customers, the publishing houses and other companies. Which is why we are never going to become publishers ourselves and will also never self-publish our games.

This is the reason we do not use Kickstarter. As helpful as crowd-funding may be in specific areas, it also poses serious risks. Especially with board games, the Kickstarter campaigns sometimes get out of control and become veritable battles of material, where

attractive gaming components have to secure the financing. Once the money is cashed in, the motivation to deliver a really good game gets lost on the way.

sb: Do you sometimes get the impression you are misunderstood when it comes to gaming? By editors, us journalists, the gaming scene?

RK: Let me answer this briefly: As an artist you almost always feel misunderstood, particularly when you are criticized. But I say that with a laughing eye, for it is part of the business.

sb: People say Knizia is one of the few who can make a living off designing games! This is my chance to ask the man directly: Is this true, and is it earning your pension as well?

RK: Yes, it is, and I am very grateful for it.

sb: Do you have a life outside of inventing games? Any hobbies that are not game-related?

RK: I just do not have enough time for other hobbies. But I am living my greatest hobby every day.

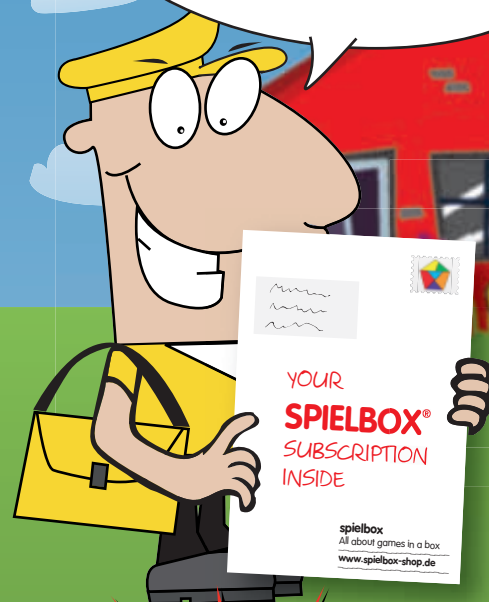
sb: If you had three wishes for the gaming scene (publishers, multipliers, hard-core gamers), what would they be?

RK: I really only have one wish: Better legal protection for games, so that honest game designers can get on with their work.

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Claus Voigt/cs*

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