

NORTHERN LIGHTS

THREE PACIFIC
NORTHWESTERNERS
WHO'VE TRADED
BUSINESS FOR
PLEASURE

HE'S GOT GAME

For the time being, at least, Bruce Alsip isn't putting much effort into advertising the new game he's invented; he'd rather people hear about it from friends. It's not sold in stores. He doesn't particularly want the game, called Canoe, to become the Next Big Thing, and expects to sell no more than 10,000 sets a year—not exactly blockbuster numbers. “We're not interested in having people buy it for a gift,” says the 61-year-old Seattleite, “if it won't ever get played.”

Not that Alsip doesn't have high hopes for his brainchild. Played on a compact board of mahogany veneer, Canoe represents what he hopes will be the climax of a quarter century of serious game playing—brainstorming games into existence, to be more precise. After 13 years in sales and marketing for a timber company, in 1979 he invented a game called Wykersham, soon followed by Bottle Topps, Down Under, Twist Tac Toe, and others: all strategy games that won acclaim and avid followings, selling more than a million units, combined. (By one apocryphal account, two aficionados playing Wykersham on a boat during a storm went down with the ship rather than tear themselves away from a heated game.) In 1996, Alsip went “into seclusion” for six years, conceiving 30 ideas before emerging with a favorite. “Canoe is the biggest thing I've ever created,” Alsip says. “I plan to devote the rest of my career to the game.”

The game's fundamentals are fairly straightforward, with hints of other rainy-day classics—backgammon, cribbage, checkers, chess—although Canoe opponents sit not across from each other but at right angles, elbow to elbow. Each turn involves rolling two dice and then rotating and moving one of seven numbered cubes in various ways, as dictated by the dice. Although rather tricky to explain, Canoe's rules are easily learned, and games usually last half an hour. “It's very simple, but the layers of strategy are incredible,” Alsip says. “It's addictive.”

Alsip named the game in honor of a Pacific Northwest icon of sorts: the Willits Brothers canoe, a handcrafted boat of cedar and mahogany that Alsip's uncle and others built from the 1910s until the early 1960s. Fewer than a thousand were ever made. “The quality was just ridiculous, they were so good,” says Alsip, who owns Number 906. “The name conjured up every good feeling.” Like each canoe (the boat), each Canoe (the game) comes with a unique number on the side. The game is available for \$75 online or by telephone (www.canoegame.com; 888-207-2580), or at one of the “launch parties” Alsip helps set up for anyone interested in learning to play. “It's a good brain gymnastics game,” he says. “I see it as a huge connector—connecting people.”

BY MIKE GRUDOWSKI

After a sales and marketing career, Bruce Alsip became chairman of the board game.

