

Domino effect

Folsom family invents ZingaMino, hoping to ride the ancient game's new popularity

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Dahmane Dahmani of Folsom and his 11-year-old son, Yanni, have created ZingaMino, a game that's a new twist on dominoes. Sacramento Bee/ Anne Chadwick Williams

Dahmane Dahmani and his son, Yanni, get their game on.

"Dig, dig, dig," says Yanni with a sly look of satisfaction, as his father has to reach into a pouch holding dominoes until he can find one to play.

The two have done more than just play dominoes more times than they count at home in Folsom. Dahmani, who is an Intel engineer, and his 11-year-old son have invented their own board-game variation on the venerable tile-slapping sport.

ZingaMino is their baby. It's a clever game in which the tiles are played on a board of four interconnecting circles. The father and son hope it will win in the very long-shot competition of profitable board-game development.

Boosting their hopes is the rise of dominoes as a sport worth playing - and even watching on TV.

"We're looking at dominoes as our next poker," says Santa Brito, a spokeswoman for ESPN Deportes, the Spanish-language ESPN channel. Dominoes made its ESPN Deportes debut with the seven-episode broadcast, March 22 to May 2, of a domino championship. (The championship itself was played in Las Vegas last November.)

ESPN Deportes is also producing an English-language version of the championship series for ESPN2 that is slated for broadcast in June.

The game has long been popular in many Latin American and Caribbean communities, as well as among African Americans.

"We know there's a huge crossover appeal," Brito says.

For Dahmani and Yanni, playing dominoes (and other games) is family business as usual. Dahmani, 49, grew up playing dominoes in Algeria. These days, his wife, their twin 6-year-old girls and Yanni frequently gather round the tiles and other games, including chess, checkers and Monopoly.

The idea of inventing a game started when Yanni was in second grade and had to come up with one for a school project. The two came up with Vamanos to America - a geography game. Dahmani went to a three-day seminar in Las Vegas for wannabe game inventors. He quickly found out that Vamanos didn't have the elusive "repeat factor" that's essential to a marketable game. (Once a player figured out the geographic answers, there would be little reason to play the game again.)

Dominoes with a twist

But Dahmani was already bitten by the game-development bug, which he describes as the ultimate American experience.

"It is good to learn about entrepreneurship," he says. "To be successful in this country, you have to have that mind-set."

In 2003, he formed DYD Games & Toys (yes, the "Y" is for Yanni). First, the father and son came up with the idea of playing dominoes on a circular playing board. But the winning moment came when Yanni suggested a board of four circles that interconnect.

"We took the game dominoes, and we made a good twist out of it," Dahmani says. The name was inspired by the Swahili word "zinga," meaning to turn in circles.

The game uses dominolike tiles with colored dots in four colors - orange, green, purple, and yellow - and 16 tiles in each group that must be played in the correspondingly colored circle. The connecting colored circles can be bridged with doubles tiles or "wild" Zinga tiles.

If you have no tile that can be played, you have to draw new tiles until you do. The winning player is the first to score 64 points. Two to eight may play, but Dahmani says it's most fun with three to four players.

Dahmani has backed up his hopes with his own money. He hired a game-board designer and even went to the American International Toy Fair in New York in February this year. All this adds up to more than passion: Dahmani says he has spent about \$55,000 on development of the game and has had 2,000 units produced. Each game sells for \$29.95 at <http://www.zingamino.com/>. (You can also order or learn more by calling Dahmani at 916-747-7921.)

Domino revolution

Among those who have played the game is Jay King, the 44-year-old commissioner of the Professional Domino Association, which was started a year ago and hosted its first tournament last fall. In February, during a tournament that drew 64 contestants to the Sacramento Convention Center, King tried his hand at ZingaMino.

"I thought the game was great; it was simple to learn and then once you started playing it, it was contagious," he says.

King is an indefatigable one-man band attempting to orchestrate a new life for dominoes. He has a showbiz background to bring to his enterprise. King, who grew up in Sacramento, was a lead singer of Club Nouveau, which had a string of hits in the 1980s, including a cover of "Lean on Me."

"Dominoes has always been popular in this country," he says. "Of course it will work on TV."

Especially the way King and many others play the game. It's steeped in traditions of swagger and slamming tiles down so hard they sometimes break - and nonstop rapping.

"If I score five points, I say 'fever in the funk house,' and if I score 10, I say 'tention.' If I score 15, I might say 'Christine,' " he says. "Every domino player has their own talk. There's a lot more talking between the players, versus poker where a guy has to keep a face on."

Music was just a detour from King's true vocation, he says, speaking by phone from Los Angeles, where he now lives.

"My calling is dominoes; I'm like the Michael Jordan of dominoes, the Tiger Woods of dominoes, the Muhammad Ali of dominoes," he says. "I'm going to make a billion dollars; we're creating a whole new industry."

Small but growing market

The hype may be a little premature.

"We carry some dominoes but we don't have a huge traffic on them," says Ed Teays, manager of Great Escape Games on Howe Avenue.

But talking big is the way of dominoes devotees.

"Everyone who plays dominoes is so evangelical about it," says Scott Pitzer, the president of Puremco Inc., which has been making dominoes since the '50s and is based in Waco, Texas.

Puremco makes 100,000-plus sets every year. Among the reliable orders: about 5,000 sets sold annually to the Texas prison system.

Dominoes have caught on over the years with such disparate groups as oil field workers (where they are easier to keep in playing condition than cards), the RV crowd and even members of San Francisco's elite Bohemian Club.

Domino-game variations, such as Mexican Train and Chicken Foot, have given the game a boost in recent years, particularly among women, Pitzer says.

John Kaufeld, a spokesman for the Game Manufacturers Association, says firm sales numbers for games like ZingaMino are hard to come by. They are considered part of the specialty game market, which excludes the big players, Hasbro and Mattel, and mass-market stores. Kaufeld says the annual sales for these smaller specialty games - with 400 to 500 different titles available - are estimated at \$200 million to \$350 million annually in the United States.

It's not huge, but it's a healthy market, he says, and one that families are building.

"There's a thriving world of specialty games," Kaufeld says. "You've got a lot of parents in their 30s and 40s who say, 'I want to spend time with my children,' and they're finding games are a good way to do that."

But small-game makers shouldn't bet on making a fortune, Kaufeld adds, and they should be prepared to be thrilled if they sell 5,000 copies of a game.

"The running joke is if you want to get rich in the game industry, then you start out rich," Kaufeld says.

Hopes for the future

Dahmani says his investment of time and money has already paid off in personal terms.

"What I said to myself and my wife is, I like that I spent a lot of time with Yanni and it bonded us more as a father and a son," he says. "We're looking at it as a hobby, but my hope is to have one of these big companies license it."

Dahmani certainly displays a winner's attitude. When a first-time player beats him handily, he looks as though he couldn't be happier.

"Even if you're the inventor, it doesn't mean you're going to win," he says.

DOMINOES

* Evolved from dice and probably originated in China in the 12th century, using tiles made of ivory with black dots (called pips). Some believe the game may have originated in Egypt. The Inuit of North America play a similar game with tiles made of bones.

* The name domino, Latin for "master," appears to have come from the name of a type of monastic hood worn by some Christian orders that looks a bit like the tiles.

* Dominoes can be used for many games and became popular in Europe in the 18th century. They are popular in many ethnic communities. (The name for the playing tiles in Spanish is "fichas"; English-speaking American players often call them "bones").

* ESPN Deportes, the Spanish-language ESPN channel, broadcast its first dominoes championship (which took place in Las Vegas in November 2005). It started airing March 22 and finished May 2.

* An English-language version of the program is planned for broadcast on ESPN2 in June.

Sources: <http://www.domino-games.com/>; ESPN Deportes spokeswoman Santa Brito

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