

Playing with Friends

With just under 400,000 inhabitants in all of Iceland – almost two thirds of whom live in and around the capital – it is relatively likely that people within a particular scene know each other. So “Spilavinir,” at Suðurlandsbraut 48 in Reykjavík, is a well-known place to go for all board game enthusiasts in the country. But who actually plays games in Iceland? What kinds of games are in demand? And what role does the game store play in this? spielbox wanted to find out more about that and talked with the owners on site.

By SYBILLE WHITEHILL

“Spilavinir” is not located in the center of the city, but in a commercial area. So you head for this store very consciously. Once you fight your way through the 6-degree-cold stormy summer weather and enter the store, you feel right at home: Numerous lamps on the ceiling create a cozy living room atmosphere, the walls are plastered with game instruction booklets, and pictures from the BoardGameGeek Artist Series hang everywhere.

Thorri Ludvíksson (52) welcomes us. His T-shirt shows a reference to a Bob Dylan song that is sometimes interpreted as criticism of unwelcome journalists. But this doesn't seem to apply to **spielbox**. As it turns out, the magazine is

well known here. Linda Ros Regnarsdóttir (53) joins in. Linda and Thorri guide us to a large table in a corner by the window (an ideal game table!), so we can talk without being interrupted. In the meantime, others take care of the shop – “various family members use to work here on and off,” Linda says with a smile.

“It all started with a glass of red wine with my best friend,” she recalls. “We got into talking about where we see our professional future ten years from now. Svanhildur was dreaming of opening a board game store, ideally combined with a café where people would be taught how to play games and could try them out.” Svanhildur Eva Stefánsdóttir (53) already knew games, especially German



Invitation to play: sign at “Spilavinir”

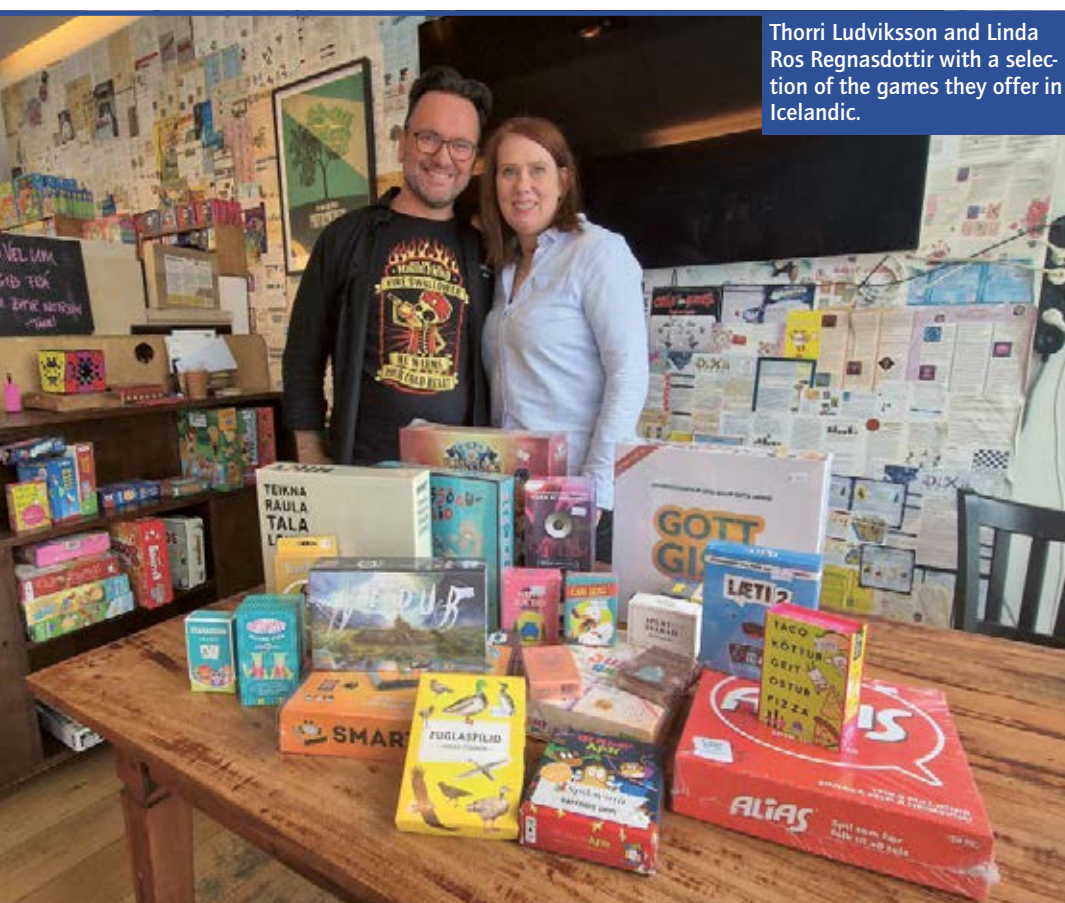
ones; now she needed the business know-how in addition. When Linda happened to see an advertisement in a newspaper for a how-to-create-a-business course, she persuaded her friend to take it.

At that time, Linda and her partner in business and in life, Thorri, a cousin of Svanhildur, operated a graphic design company together. But in fall 2007, after Svanhildur had completed her course, the two women established “Spilavinir,” and Linda focused on the new enterprise. Thorri joined in with the company right from the beginning, initially working part-time, and later on, full-time. He is responsible for the website and the online contact to customers. Nowadays, the homepage shows all the games in their inventory, and additionally provides descriptions and translations, a booking engine for events, and an online shop.

I Game-playing in Iceland

When the store opened up 18 years ago, board games were not part of the general leisure culture in Iceland: Back then, games were sold only before Christmas, mostly in supermarkets, and the choices were limited to just a few: SCRABBLE, UNO, MONOPOLY, and Risk.

In January 2008, when the “Spilavinir” owners, after their first successful holiday season sales, wanted to restock from domestic wholesalers, they ran into problems: Not even the usual games were available at that point, since, as said above, they were sold only before Christmas, and other games were not known anyway. Therefore, Linda began to look around at wholesalers in Germany, Great Britain, and the USA. With the in-



Thorri Ludvíksson and Linda Ros Regnarsdóttir with a selection of the games they offer in Icelandic.



Cozy living room atmosphere in the game store, with an impressive assortment of ceiling lamps.

tention of expanding "Spilavinir's" range of games, she visited the game fairs in Nuremberg and Essen, made contacts and gathered valuable experience.

The next step needed to be making game-playing more popular in Iceland in the first place – and thus ultimately acquiring customers who are interested in new, unfamiliar games. Linda says, "If customers don't come into the store, how and where can you reach them?"

Linda and Svanhildur, both mothers of three children each, considered it vital to introduce children to play. As early as 2008, they got in touch with schools and parents. Twice a year, a school event used to take place in Iceland, where parents did something together with their kids. So Linda and Svanhildur went there and brought games with them – SPEED CUPS, HALLI GALLI and others that primarily were supposed to be fun for parents and children.

Beyond this event, "Spilavinir" has visited schools in the afternoon; at the present time, ten people do this job. Educators were also made familiar with games and were inspired to integrate them into their work. In the process, the teachers learned that game-playing involves more than the imparting of knowledge, but also, and especially about social interaction: "A game is about the game, and the teaching happens around and in the game," Thorri explains.

One of the rules for these meetings is that "it's not us teaching the kids – it's us teaching the parents and the kids to play together." In the early years, this service was for free; now the parents pay a small fee. The concept became a "wild success," and to this day, schools still regularly request their services. "Over time", says Linda, "we've got a generation that was brought up with game-playing. I think it is fair to say that our efforts did their part in teaching them, as school kids, how to play. And now they have children of their own whom they introduce to games, and the parents come into our store to buy games for them."

Nowadays, Icelanders can also buy games in other places: Some supermarkets and bookstores sell games as well. And there is even another game store in Reykjavík. "We know each other, we talk, but it's still a competition," Thorri clarifies. "It's like playing a game: We're having a nice conversation, but each of us is also trying to win."

I The product range

"Spilavinir" offers about 1000 different game titles, plus puzzles and comics. Visitors from abroad are particularly struck by the products from Icelandic publishers. For instance, from Gamia Games, a publisher who develops and releases games with Nordic themes. And from Nordic Games, a localizer and distributor

of games from Asmodee and Repos. Besides this, there are games invented and self-published by Icelandic designers – mostly in the tradition of Icelandic card games, sometimes with witty illustrations, simple quiz, pub or memory games.

"Spilavinir" has even released Icelandic editions of a few foreign games on their own. Linda proudly presents Too MANY MONKEYS, originally published by Gamewright (USA). Since the game was not particularly successful in America, the publisher is surprised that "Spilavinir" has sold thousands of copies of the Icelandic version. Linda and Thorri agree that word of mouth has significantly contributed to this success in a small country like Iceland. Linda and Svanhildur acquire most games directly from other countries. Often, these titles include their original English instructions – almost all Icelanders understand this language. Only for particularly popular games, Thorri translates the rules into Icelandic and puts them on the company's website.

The store also comes with a game café ("the first one in Iceland!") that extends across the entire basement. This area also has the feel of a living room to it, and visitors can order drinks and sweet or savory snacks there. Additionally, there is a corner for toddlers and high chairs, if the little ones are supposed to watch the grown-ups play. Besides regular game nights, "Spilavinir" organizes special events three



"Spilavinir" shop counter

to four times a month, such as a pub quiz or tournaments. For instance, a pile of game boxes in a corner reveals that the Icelandic DOMINION championship will be held here this evening.

I The concept

"Spilavinir" is a made-up word, a compound of "spila" ("to play") and "vinir" (friends). It is an invitation for people to come together at this place in order to get to know games and try them out with others who are, or become, friends. And, if they like them, to buy these games and spread them among family and friends.

This approach is reflected in their consulting and sales concept. Linda explains: "We are interested in people and games and try to fit these two together. We want to help the customers find exactly the game they like and need. For instance: Oh, last time you bought CABANCA! Then you should also have a look at FLIP 7. And we ask how many players of what age there are in the family."

Thorri adds that even bad game reviews don't necessarily deter him – tastes are different, and what one customer doesn't like might be exactly what somebody else is looking for. Some customers now even come into the store with specific wishes, for instance, for a game with a certain mechanism – "that's something people would never have done 15 years ago!"

The clientele expanded, but the main target group of "Spilavinir" is still families. Adult serious players also often have children and would like to play with them together. To make pretty complex titles more suitable for their offspring, grown-ups tend to simplify these games. Sometimes Thorri advises parents that it is best to choose an age-fitting game in the first place: "That's because it's fun to be good at stuff, but it's no fun to have to struggle with understanding the rules."

I Game-playing in the countryside

Akureyri, the 20,000-inhabitant major town in the north, also has an – albeit small – game store, with game nights

towns – for instance in Sauðárkrókur in the northwest, where up to ten board game enthusiasts get together every week to indulge in their hobby.

This gives quite a strong signal: In a country with such a small population, everybody knows everybody, as Thorri states, and if a game is a hit in one game group, news spreads fast and leads to a higher demand. Even in the remote Westfjords, people want to play, as Linda and Thorri know from numerous online orders. And the schools in Ísafjörður and Patreksfjörður are also interested in board game programs.

The Icelanders – a nation of game players? Thorri gets to the heart of it when he says, "There's always room for improvement, but I'd say the game-playing culture in Iceland is very healthy nowadays!" After all, the many long, dark winter nights in Iceland create good conditions. "Due to the darkness and cold, we spend a lot of time indoors. A storm is howling outside, and we say: This is a perfect day for board games!"

Now, at the time of our visit in June, it is still so bright at midnight that one could read **spielbox** or a rule booklet with no lights on. Come to think of it, it's always the right time to play a game. And so, after our long conversation at the large table, we are all surprised that we haven't played at all. (sbw) ◆



taking place in an extra room. But besides this, Linda also emphasizes the significance of the town's library, which buys and rents out games and sells used ones. And there are player groups in some