

LIFESTYLE

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Soviet collapse provides building blocks for game



Ross Porter

HOW DOES a game idea get into an inventor's head? In Ross Porter's case, a combination of his vocation and a trip to the Soviet Union.

How does the idea get out of an inventor's head and into a box? In the case of Porter's Moscow! Auction!, pure serendipity.

Porter teaches world history, geography and political science to juniors and seniors at Smethport Area High School, McKean County, and is interested in Soviet history, particularly the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

In the summer of 1990, he led a tour group of students and adults to the Soviet Union and found it "obvious the Soviet system was a flop and going to collapse."

He subsequently toyed with a game based on the visit, and the lightbulb popped on last February "on an ice-fishing trip in Canada at 4:30 in the morning. The game just appeared, and I had to pull off to the side of the road to record it."

Porter, 42, began working on Moscow! Auction! immediately, and he and his students were playing a rough version a few weeks later.

The premise of the game is that

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the communist government has fallen, that properties must be sold back to private ownership and that the money goes to the new democracy bank.

Much of the game is real. The self-penned sketches on the Black Market cards depict some of Porter's experiences in Moscow — he actually was chased by a butcher for photographing food lines, as shown on one card.

Many properties and the overall locale are legitimate, too, "but it is a game," he says. Hence he took geographical liberties such as bringing the airport and Moskva River closer to town.

The game's vodka factory is indeed in operation but doesn't make booze, and some properties on the block in the game — Lenin's Tomb, the Kremlin and Red Square among them — wouldn't be in real life.

As a gag, the burger joint called "Capitalism Cafe" has as its logo a "C" that looks suspiciously like an arch (you can guess what color) on its side.

Porter took most of the photos on the property cards, and getting them wasn't always easy. For the picture of Red Square, he had to shinny 12 to 15 feet up the side of the State Historical Museum — with two security guards sitting in a

nearby car. "If they saw me, they let me do it."

There's risk in the game as well. Players are chased by the KGB, represented by a red car, which can steal properties or the auctioneer's commission.

The real-life twist to Moscow! Auction!, which is the fourth game Porter has invented although the first to be published, is that the Russian communist regime indeed fell in late August.

"The day of the coup I was in Manhattan showing a prototype to an advertising agency," he says. "We thought, 'This is unbelievable.' The coup was the essence of my game."

In an even greater coincidence, the first property auction in Moscow was on Oct. 13.

Porter, who also is an auctioneer, laughs when asked if he plans to use such precognition at the race track or on the state lottery and says his game required no ESP. "Those people who are students of current affairs are not so amazed."

Moscow! Auction! is being printed by Davis & Warde, Downtown, and Process Reproductions, North Side. It costs \$28.50 at the University of Pittsburgh Book Center and is recommended for pre-teens to adults.

— Pete Bishop

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