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By Christine Lagorio-Chafkin, Senior writer, Inc.
@LagorioSeveral months ago, I brought a game to a bar. Three girlfriends and I started playing the game of a bar. It's silently projecting don't talk to us, we're busy, the waiter who brought us beers asked to be obligd. We obliged. Three times, complete strangers interrupted us, asking whether we were playing Cards Against Humanity—and whether they could join. This was getting out of hand. This is to say, Cards Against Humanity has attained quite a cult following. It's also extraordinarily addictive. The formula for play is simple: The dealer reads from a black card posing a question, or asking for a blank to be filled in. Other players, holding hands of white "answer" cards with words or phrases, each submit one to the dealer. It's like the card-comparison board game Apples to Apples—only instead of being rated "G," it would be rated "R." One round's dealer-card might be "Daddy, why is Mommy crying?" or "Hey, baby, come back to my place and I'll show you ____." Answers—the dealer reads them aloud before choosing a winner—are generally nouns or gerunds, and include "Racially biased SAT questions," "lumberjack fantasies," and "Michelle Obama's arms." It's also a very successful product, and seems well poised to be the break-out party game of this decade. When it's not out of stock, it's the No. 1 game on Amazon.com (currently, an expansion pack is on top of the Toys & Games category). By one estimate, as of more than a year ago, a half-million \$25 decks had sold, earning the game's creators an estimated \$12 million.While Cards Against Humanity might seem like one of the hippest and fastest-growing startups in its hometown of Chicago, this isn't the work of a shrewd executive. Quite the opposite. It's the brainchild of eight friends in their mid-20s, some of who met in grade school, and most of who attended Highland Park High School together. Their names are Max Temkin, Josh Dillon, Daniel Dranove, Eli Halpern, Ben Hantoot, David Munk, David Pinsof, and Eliot Weinstein. Today, each is likely a millionaire thanks to his contribution to the game. But not one has quit his day job to work on Cards Against Humanity full time.As a business, it's completely bootstrapped, with no major outside investment and having completed just one small crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter to fund the first production run. And somehow, along the very winding and counterintuitive path this rag-tag group of young men have taken, they've managed to create a successful—and perhaps even admirable—business.Only, it barely resembles a business. I called Temkin, the 26-year-old Chicago-based game designer and graphic artist who's something of a ringleader for his co-creators of Cards, to ask if what he and his friends have created is merely an extraordinarily profitable hobby. He tells me the company behind Cards is indeed incorporated and that the company recently obtained a business address—a sort of small-scale co-working-space Temkin manages. (Temkin also takes graphic-design freelance gigs and designs other games.) But as a company, Cards Against Humanity isn't trying to emulate corporations. To me a 'company' seems to be something with cost-benefit analysis, and that tries to make a profit at every turn," he says. "Our main priority is to be funny—and to have people like us."So while maximizing sales is certainly not top prerogative for these game-creators, every customer is extremely important to them. So important that they give the full game away as a free PDF file on their own website. More than 1.5 million people have downloaded it to print out cards themselves. Most paid orders of a proper box of Cards Against Humanity are fulfilled by Amazon, and a box of 460 white and 90 black cards costs \$25. Occasionally, the group has fun messing with popular conceptions of pricing, though. For Christmas sales in 2012, it released an expansion pack of cards, letting individual customers choose their own price. Sales totaled more than \$70,000, which the group donated to a foundation. On Black Friday this past year, Cards ran something of an anti-sale, pricing the box at \$30, with a note, "Today only! Cards Against Humanity products are \$5 more. Consume!" Inexplicably, more orders were placed on Black Friday 2013 than on the same day-after-Thanksgiving of 2012.How the company works behind-the-scenes also bucks convention. The eight founders make decisions like these—and every significant business and creative decision—by consensus. That's logistically tricky, because they are scattered all over the United States, working in a host of different professions. It requires a lot of group chats on HipChat and Google Hangouts. When the group decides to create an expansion pack of cards—approximately twice a year—the founders take a trip together to brainstorm. When money comes in, they split profits, fairly evenly, based on their level of responsibility. This head-scratcher of a management structure was born back in 2009, when the eight friends had graduated high school, gone off to various college, and were back home over winter break. They'd get together, reminisce about how they created an improvisation club in high school "basically just to get the school to pay to let us bring in comedians to teach us," Temkin says. They'd celebrate New Year's Eve, and also play—and make up their own—board games and party games.One that really got them howling was called Cardenfreude (a portmanteau of "card" and "schaudenfreude," a German word that translates roughly to "deriving pleasure from another's misfortune") that entailed asking and answering absurd questions. The game was fun, but didn't stick until both the questions and the answers were pre-written out on highly interchangeable cards. "It was the first game we'd made up that we were still thinking about when we woke up in the morning," Temkin says. "It was still really, really funny."He didn't know it would resonate outside his small circle until each of the eight guys brought a deck back to his respective colleges with him in early 2009."We each had the experience that once someone played, they'd want their own copy," he says. "And once you started playing, an hour later there'd be 30 people in your dorm room."During spring break of 2009, the group reconvened, and worked on setting up a website for the game, and uploading the cards. The name morphed to Cards Against Humanity, a play on Crimes Against Humanity. They designed a logo. For the next two years, the game was simply free-for-the-taking online, under a Creative Commons license. In 2011, the group decided to go for producing it in physical form.Instead of seeking venture capital or a cash infusion from an angel investor, they took the project straight to Kickstarter. It raised more than \$15,000, and before long, this little hobby required sophisticated branding, a manufacturer, a supply chain, and distribution. It had no choice but to be a business.Only, these eight guys had no idea what they were getting into. Hantoot, 26, who today oversees the supply chain of Cards Against Humanity when he's not working as a creative director at an ad-design agency, tells me if they knew then how much work actually manufacturing the first 2,000 boxes of Cards Against Humanity would be, they might have thrown in the towel. He says: "If at that point we had known more about how the industry worked, I think we would have looked at it and thought, 'Well, we'll just leave it free online as a PDF.'""We got lucky, because we didn't even know enough to be daunted at that point," Temkin adds.Trial and error, plus a lot of Googling, got the first order filled by a custom playing-card manufacturer in New Jersey called Ad Magic, which is the printer that still makes Cards Against Humanity. In 2011, the shipment arrived, and a semi-truck dropped palletes of the game boxes off in Temkin's driveway."At some level, it's such a stupid product! We had this moment of 'I can't believe so many people like this that some truck driver had to unload 2,000 boxes of poop jokes,'" Temkin says. The gang of eight hand-packed the Kickstarter orders, and again hit some snags. Temkin says he recalls a staffer at the mailing house the company used to send its packages saying: "This is not the worst-packed order we've ever seen, but it is close." Two years later, the company has come a long way. It now has two employees and five desks in a Chicago co-working space. Temkin and Hantoot devote much of their time—but not all; both still work creative gigs—to Cards Against Humanity. They group has created several expansion packs and new packaging for the game. They do trade shows and are considering a retail strategy beyond just Amazon fulfillment.When I ask whether I'd soon see Cards Against Humanity on the shelves of Target or Walmart, Temkin scoffs."I'd rather people bought it out of a brown paper bag from the back of a van on a college campus," Temkin says. "We think people who shop in American Apparel or Urban Outfitters would certainly be interested in buying it, but we don't want to have that cheapen our brand."The only brick-and-mortar retailers the whole group can agree work for the brand are small independent game stores. It's highly unlikely this startup will ever act like a Silicon Valley tech upstart. Hantoot told Chicago Grid: "Whenever we hear someone refer to their business as, 'Oh, this is my startup,' we're like, 'Oh, you mean your unfunded business.' We are beholden to nobody." I asked Tim Ferriss, the author of The 4-Hour Workweek, and a master of multitasking and hustling on multiple projects at once, how he'd describe Cards Against Humanity. He seemed to think it might be a sustainable model for a bootstrapped passion project. "So-called 'lifestyle businesses' provide cash-flow first, potential lottery ticket-like exit second," he said in an email. "They're more certain if engineered and tested properly." He also noted that while he's an investor in several fast-growth startups, including Evernote, Uber, and Twitter, and enjoys, that, he is well aware that most tech startups built under today's model fail. Entrepreneur Catherine Herdick has built her own games that have become company-like entities, not unlike Cards Against Humanity. She has also worked at larger gaming companies, including Electronic Arts, and says there can be frustrations involved with adding bureaucracy to something that was previously a passion project—despite that growing a company might not seem unnatural to game designer. "When you are a game designer, you are in control of a fairly closed system. You are designing the rules, and you are creating an experience. That's not that different than creating a business, which is in itself a game," she says. "But for game designers, that might be a very boring game."She likened Cards Against Humanity's comfortable revenue stream coupled with the fact none of the founders are working on it full-time to the business structure of a gaming festival she co-created. She says: "Side income is a really nice in-between place, where you're not worried about how you're going to make a payroll, but get to create something really cool." Temkin says keeping up with demand is still a stress for the partners in Cards Against Humanity, and that he gets calls from investors and acquaintances asking why he and his business partners don't try harder to ramp up sales and scale the business. "We do get pressure," Temkin says."But this is not Angry Birds," Hantoot quips.And growth is something of a conundrum, just as mainstream adoption is the killer of anything "cool." "We see the most desirable thing our coolness and our underground nature," Temkin says. "If the game continues growing at the rate it is, that will not longer be the case."One smart business move the company is executing is continuing to innovate. This holiday it launched the "2013 Holiday Bullshit" expansion packs of cards, as part of an offer to send customers 12 days of holiday gifts for \$12. It's also created a new, larger set of cards that come in "The Bigger Blacker Box." Still, about 25 percent of the cards in a deck sold today are from that original 2009 game. Temkin and Hantoot said that while not every card stands the test of time, a couple of the classics from the white answer cards are still being printed. They include: "A windmill full of corpses," "The Jews," and "A falcon with a cap on its head." And they're not going anywhere. "Those cards are where we got it right from the start," Temkin says. "They're just atonic."

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