From *Family Games: The 100 Best*
edited by James Lowder, Green Ronin Publishing, 2010

Mike Selinker on

SET

KEY DESIGNER: MARSHA J. FALCO

SET ENTERPRISES (1990)

2 – 8 PLAYERS; SUGGESTED AGES: 6 AND UP

I'M A BIG FAN of brain cells. One should have as many of the little buggers as one can. But I confess that in my geologically brief time on the planet, I have done two things to significantly reduce my supply of usable brain cells. The first, of course, is imbibing various beverages not compatible with continued consciousness. The second is getting good at *Set*.

Because, as my mathematically inclined friend Robert Gutschera sagely says, any brain cells you devote to getting good at *Set* cannot be used for anything else.

Looking at the game's 81 cards — and that's all the game contains — you'd be hard pressed to discern why Robert speaks the truth. The cards feature no numbers or words, just colored shapes one step up from *Candy Land*. A *Set* card's symbols have the following four characteristics:

⭐ **A Quantity:** one, two, or three;

⭐ **A Color:** red, green, or purple;

⭐ **A Shading:** solid, striped, or open;

⭐ **A Shape:** ovals, diamonds, or squiggles.

The object is to collect sets of three cards. A set is made up of three cards that satisfy four conditions. All cards in a set have:

⭐ The same number of symbols, or three different numbers;

⭐ The same color symbols, or three different colors;

⭐ The same shading on their symbols, or three different shadings;

⭐ The same shape of symbols, or three different shapes.

The cards may be the same for some of these characteristics, and different for others. As the deck contains one of each possible card, for any two cards there is exactly one additional card that completes the set. The one-green-striped-squiggle card and the two-purple-solid-squiggle card can only make a set with the three-red-open-squiggle card.

(Pausing here for effect: This is a serious game whose rules contain the term *squiggles*. How fun is that?)

The game is played in real time, which means there are no turns. The real-time card game is a little-explored genre, primarily limited to kids' classics such as spit, *Pit*, and a few later proprietary games by James Ernest, myself, and a paltry few other designers. There should be bunches more, given how prevalent real-time computer and video games are. Everybody else in this book: Get to work, slackers.

Instead of taking turns, you just lay 12 cards on the table, and then everybody stares at them. The first person to say, "Set!" stops the game while she points out the set she found. If it's legit — on each of the four conditions, the cards are all the same or all different — she takes those three cards, and they are replaced with new ones. If it's not legit — say, two cards have diamonds and one has ovals — she gets mercilessly mocked and the game continues. In the rare case where no one can find any sets, you just add three more cards and keep playing. (In theory, you can put out up to 20 cards without getting a set, but I've never seen it.) Once you run through the deck, whoever has the most sets wins.

As you can probably see, nothing in your daily life prepares you for *Set*. There are times where you need to be able to spot things that are the same ("all of those cars are mine") and other times where you need to be able to spot things that are not the same ("one of those cars is on fire"). But it's very rare that you need to be able to identify things that are both the same and different on multiple axes at the same time ("all of the cars are mine, but I think I'll drive the one that's not on fire").

So you try to get good at it, devoting unused bits of your brain to set-sorting. You probably no longer need that instantly recallable list of Elvis B-sides, so that can go. Soon you're turning into Johnny Mnemonic, de-rezzing portions of your childhood so that you can get a little extra processing speed. Last week, I forgot how to use a fork.

Set is that rare game where you can get better at it alone. Just drop a dozen cards on the table and see what you can see. You can also pick up the *Set* hand-held game or the *Set* iTunes app. Or, even better, go to the Set Enterprises website,

setgame.com, where you can play a daily *Set* puzzle. I went there today and found four of the six sets quickly. I found the fifth a lot less quickly. I still haven't found the sixth one, and it's making it hard for me to finish this paragraph.

At its heart, *Set* is a puzzle game like *Scrabble* and *Boggle* and *Trivial Pursuit*. Puzzle games appeal to those who are good at puzzles. Unfortunately, this means that playing *Set* with an expert can be a grueling experience for the newbie. Your goal becomes to get any sets at all, while the machine hoovers them up around you.

But fear not. People plateau in *Set*; while the preening expert can revel in his expertise, he also knows his limit. You do not. You may discover untapped potential in spotting sets that he could never attain. And someday, after you play a lot of rounds, you may crush him. Talent at this can come out of nowhere: Many of the best *Set* players are kids. The same way Little Jimmy can waste you in *Halo*, he can waste you in *Set*.

So back to that claim of Robert's at the start of this article, that any brain cells you devote to becoming good at *Set* cannot be used for anything else. I stand by that claim, but I also claim that any brain cells you use for this purpose make those around them smarter. *Set* is mental yoga; it makes your brain flexible. If you can process data at high speed — well, you can sure use *that* for something else. You can identify ingredients in food faster. You can find your keys faster. You can talk that officer out of a speeding ticket faster. *Set* will train your brain to unclutter itself. And if you can think with a clearer focus, you can . . .

Darn it, where the heck is that sixth set?

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MIKE SELINKER is a game and puzzle designer from Seattle. He is the co-designer of such board and card games as *AlphaBlitz*, *Key Largo*, *Risk Godstorm*, *Link 26*, *Escape from Zyzzlvaria*, and *Pirates of the Spanish Main*. At Wizards of the Coast, he helped revitalize *Axis & Allies* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. Mike also writes puzzles for the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Games* magazine. He runs the game design studio Lone Shark Games (lonesharkgames.com) alongside a happy crew of mercenaries, including fellow *100 Best* writers Teeuwynn Woodruff and James Ernest.