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Film Reviews

Posted: Wed., Mar. 2, 2011, 2:27pm PT

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New U.S. Release

Under the Boardwalk: The Monopoly Story

(Documentary)

By DENNIS HARVEY

A Tostie production in association with Rhino Films. Produced by Kevin Tostado, Craig Bentley. Executive producer, Stephen Nemeth. Co-producer, Betsy Stahl. Directed by Kevin Tostado. Written by Tostado, Craig Bentley.

With: Domenic Murgo, Tim Vandenberg, Matt McNally, Ken Koury, Dale Crabtree, Rick Marinaccio, Bjorn Halvard Knappskog, Geoff Christopher, Phil Orbanes, John Meyer. Narrator: Zachary Levi.

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"Under the Boardwalk" provides an amiable overview of one very famous board game's history and impact, alongside a moderately engaging portrait of players preparing for the 2009 World Monopoly Championship.

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While no "The King of Kong" in terms of eking high drama from personalities who are deadly serious about a competitive arena outsiders might consider pretty silly (at least in comparison to high-stakes pro athletics), Kevin Tostado's docu is a pleasant diversion that opens on a single San Diego screen March 4, with other cities following. Wider niche theatrical play is possible; pic is already available on disc.

The rare commercially marketed game to remain popular over decades, Monopoly nonetheless had a difficult launch. At the start of the 20th century, Illinois-born Quaker Elizabeth Magie invented "The Landlord's Game," designed to convey an anticapitalist message in a fun way. Whether because that message repulsed, or because the game was overcomplicated by the era's standards, she failed to win a major manufacturing contract.

Nonetheless, it continued to be played, with enthusiasts often making their own unique copies, sometimes for classroom use. Thus it came to the attention of Philadelphian Charles Darrow, who modified it further, keeping a later version's Atlantic City names and flipping the real-estate-grabbing, fellow-player-bankrupting game toward a giddy celebration of high capitalism.

Still, as the docu recounts, Darrow, too, had trouble selling the game until self-published sets began moving like hotcakes. Having failed to buy on the cheap earlier, Parker Brothers paid dearly; the Darrow family is still being enriched by royalties. (Poor Lizzie Magie eventually sold her rights for a flat \$500.)

At the height of the Great Depression, Monopoly's vicarious get-rich-quick fantasy held great appeal. Once marketed throughout the U.S., its immediate success soon translated internationally. Today localized versions are sold in more than 100 countries by the game's current distributor, Hasbro.

Forty of those nations sent competitors to the 2009 World Championship in Las Vegas, and Tostado provides some narrative involvement tracking a few aspirants. Among them are Virginia labor negotiator Domenic Murgo and California grade-school teacher Tim Vandenberg, both branded cheaters for debatable minor infractions by "internationally known" veteran player-coach Ken Koury, who admits he can come off as arrogant. That clash of personalities never really ripens, though there's some gratification in seeing blustery Koury's fabled skills utterly fail him this time around.

Late-introduced protag Bjorn Halvard Knappskog, a 19-year-old Norwegian student, enters as a lark but just keeps winning and winning. His modesty and good sportsmanship offer an appealing contrast to the humorless type-A intensity evinced by some players (many of them revealingly, lawyers).

Episodic pic alternates between tracing this 2009 competitive path and illuminating various factors of Monopoly's historic and cultural reach. Latter range from the game's surprise role in helping Allied

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soldiers escape WWII POW camps to the fact the game has long been banned in communist nations. Most delightful are clips from its myriad surfacings in pop culture, from "Meet Nero Wolfe" (1936) to "The Flintstones" and "30 Rock." Filmmakers strike a slightly mean note by highlighting one player, John Meyer, as the personification of board-gaming geekdom.

Not particularly elegant in structure, and occasionally resembling an extended promo for the game, "Under the Boardwalk" is slickly packaged by docu standards, with decent computer graphics and a sometimes over-earnest score by Larry Groupe.

Camera (color, HD), Jordan Guzzardo; editors, Tostado, Bentley; music, Larry Groupe; music supervisor, Craig DeGraff; sound, Dave Mendez, Nejc Poberaj; sound designer, Jeffery Alan Jones; re-recording mixer, Jones. Reviewed on DVD, San Francisco, Feb. 26, 2011. MPAA Rating: G. Running time: 88 MIN.

Contact the variety newsroom at news@variety.com

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