

A black and white photograph of a card game. In the upper half, a person wearing a grey hoodie is holding a deck of cards. A black wristband with white text is visible on their left wrist. The text on the wristband includes 'T O M I' and 'Gathering 2005'. In the lower half, a hand wearing a silver glove is pointing at a set of cards laid out on a dark table. The cards feature various geometric shapes and patterns in different colors. A white banner with black and green text is overlaid on the image.

**GAME, SET, MAS**

**T**he popular, fast-paced card game Set is a long-time favorite of Mensans. The life of Set can be divided into two distinct periods: before Mensa Mind Games (MG) and after. Before MG: Designed by Marsha Falco in 1974 while researching genetics, the game proved popular enough amongst family and friends to launch commercially in 1990. After MG, having won accolades at the second-ever Mensa Mind Games in 1991, Set achieved Amazon best-seller status and distribution in more than 40 countries

Falco credits the game's Mensa endorsement as a pivotal

Shepherds, which was a very complicated affair. I was recording different factors in different dogs, and they were sort of the same factors with different dogs. I put each dog on a card and instead of writing out the factors each time, I just used symbols. I was working with veterinarians who were studying the disease for clinical signs and the brains of these dogs that had epilepsy. They were looking over my shoulder and saying, "What are you doing?" and I tried to explain to them – combinations and permutations and set theory. One of the guys pointed to three cards and said, "Oh, this makes a set!" I said, "Well, you mixed up three dogs, but yes, that does make a set!" So the game developed out of that.

**WE DEVELOPED THE GAME, WE THOUGHT, FOR POST DOCS AND GRADUATE STUDENTS. WE DIDN'T THINK ANYONE ELSE WOULD REALLY PLAY IT.**

# TERSTROKE

## **MIND GAMES AWARD LEADS TO BOOMING BUSINESS FOR GAME MAKER**

**BY GREG WEBSTER, 2016 MESA MIND GAMES CHIEF JUDGE**

catalyst for growth. Set Enterprises, now owned and operated by her daughter, Colette Falco, has since launched the games Five Crowns and Quiddler, as well as kids and mini-game versions of those and Set; the board game Set Cubed; Xactika; and, most recently, the elimination-style, large-group game Karma.

On the game's 25th anniversary, Falco details to Greg Webster, chief judge for the 2016 Mind Games, the impact of winning the Mensa award and other interesting facets of game making.

**GREG WEBSTER:** You've said that research on population genetics helped you develop Set. How so?

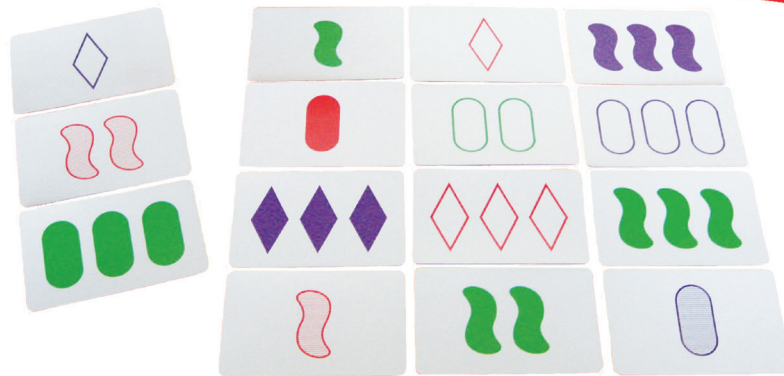
**MARSHA FALCO:** I was doing population genetics when I was studying epilepsy in German

**GW:** What kind of audience did you anticipate for the game?

**MF:** When we developed the game we thought it would be four factors with two variations in each factor, which gave 81 cards. And we developed the game, we thought, for post docs and graduate students. We didn't think anyone else would really play it. And then I had children, and they started to play it. My children are gifted, but the other neighborhood kids could play it as well. So we realized that everybody can play this game; you don't need to have a Ph.D.

**GW:** How did you take Set from a game for family and friends to a wider audience?

**MF:** The kids really liked playing it, and I was making up the decks by hand. At the dinner table one day my son said, "Oh, Mom, I need another deck of



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Set.” And my daughter said, “Well as long as you’re making them, I could use two.” I looked at them and said, “What do I look like, a factory?” And they said, “Good idea! Why don’t we get them made professionally?” I said, “Do you know how much that would cost?” And they said, “Oh, just take our college money. We can sell them and get the money back.” So either I had kids who didn’t really want to go to college or really believed in the game. So, we did that; we took their college money. We very rapidly learned the game business of how to manufacture, how to distribute, about reps, all sorts of things. The 5,000 games that we were forced to make at the beginning we quickly sold, greatly due to the Mensa award, which was our first award. At that point I didn’t even know games won awards. We were making these up in our basement and then selling them. Then we ordered 50,000, and I thought, “Oh, no.” I was pretty depressed.

**GW:** 50,000 games is a big commitment. Did you continue producing them in your basement?

**MF:** One of our friends introduced us to Beekman Center, which has handicapped people that work there. What they do is take the game and put it together with a person who is not handicapped and time them so they can figure out how many they can do in an hour and what the rate would be per game, and that’s what the kids get paid, so much per game. So we worked with them for years, putting our games together.

**GW:** Did you have any idea the game would be this successful?

**MF:** When we started we had no dreams other than selling our original 5,000 decks of Set. But Set kept winning awards; in fact, Set is one of the most awarded games in history. And I don’t consider being a best seller on Amazon an award.

**GW:** In 1991, the year Set won Mind Games, the event was still in its infancy, only its second year. How did you happen to cross paths with Mind Games?

**MF:** I went to Toy Fair [in New York City] and I didn't have a booth, but I was going around looking at stuff, learning the business. I had some games with me, and I traded some for some juggling equipment because my kids juggled, and the person that I traded with gave it to someone in Mensa, and they [suggested the game].

**GW: What was the impact of your Mind Games win?**

**MF:** The impact of the win long term is that we were able to go international. We're now sold in more than 40 countries. Also, we were just a one-game company, so it was hard for reps to represent you fairly. We ended up in a store on 6th Avenue called the Game Show, and they started carrying Set. One day a guy walked into their shop and was looking around. He said he was looking for a game for his boss who has just about every game. [The store's employees] pulled out Set. The man said he'd never seen it and hadn't seen it around the offices, so he bought it and gave it to his boss as a gift. So his boss, Will Shortz, called me up and said, "Why haven't you sent me your game?" I didn't know who he was, but then they reviewed it in *Games* magazine. So it was from the Mensa win that put it in the store and got it into *Games* magazine. [Shortz] also put it in his World Puzzle Championships.

**GW: Several years later, you invented Quiddler, another game I love. Tell me what led up to that.**

**MF:** Well, I love words and I fool with them all the time. I'm not a crossword puzzle person, mostly because I can't spell very well. I wanted a game where you can use the dictionary, where you could build words but not be stuck forever. I also liked Rummy, which is where Five Crowns came from. [*Five Crowns is another game by Set Enterprises.*] My mother liked to play Rummy at the senior center, but they wanted to play by Michigan rules, except for the people who wanted to play by Ohio rules. So she said make me a game where we don't have to argue about the rules. A lot of my games have my math background in them. For Quiddler I wanted to use the dictionary.

**GW: How would you compare and contrast your Mind Games experience with Quiddler with that of Set?**

**MF:** Well, with Quiddler we were much more knowledgeable by that point! With Quiddler we knew how Mensa Select could impact the public learning about the game and their perception of how good of a game it was. So we've always considered the Mensa award an extremely valuable award, partly because only five games get it. Unlike others, where a lot of different games can win, as many as 500 games!



**GW: One of the things we have said is that Mensa Select is one of the few games awards that you have to earn on the table. It's gamers that are playing the games and comparing them and deciding which ones are the best. That's not the case with a lot of awards.**

**MF:** That's why it's one of the most coveted awards for people in the game industry.

Another thing that helps are the comments that come back to us from the players. Very valuable feedback from the players.

**MF:** What I like about games is that winning is not really important. I enjoy playing the game, and we have fun together. It brings everyone around the table in enjoyable comradeship, and that's why we have so many games nights.

**GW: That's one of the things that I like so much about the Mind Games competition. Everybody is there just to play games and we're all playing games that none of us have ever played before, so it's all just about having fun and meeting people and exploring what the game is.**

**MF:** That's true. Here in New Mexico we have the rule [at our game nights] that we have to play one new game each night. Then you can play your old favorites, but you have to branch out one time. That helps me as a game creator, because I can watch what parts of games that people like and don't like. 🎲