

## Innovation Doesn't Have to be High-Tech

Entrepreneurs who dream up high-tech companies like Atheroson and Soren Systems put great stock in the elevator pitch: that essential distillation of a complex business concept into a 30-second sound bite that will grab the investor or customer before he gets bored or bombarded by the next pitch.

Michel Alvarez (MBA 2004) needs no such device. His invention, WonderChess, is simple enough in its entirety. "The first chess set with prize-fillable pieces," is how Alvarez describes it, same as he has to dozens of receptive store owners and sales reps. Hide a jelly bean or sticker inside each piece, and when a child captures one, she opens it up and gets a surprise.

If this sounds like a pretty subtle innovation, it is one in perfect sync with modern child philosophy—and the legion of parents who buy into it. "Chess has always been, literally, black-and-white, win-or-lose," Alvarez explains. "Once kids start losing, they don't want to play anymore. With WonderChess, all you have to do is capture one piece and you've won something. This is an entirely innovative approach that emphasizes what kids react to and what they feel good about."

The story behind WonderChess takes a bit longer than an elevator ride to tell, though it's plenty compelling. Alvarez learned to play chess in a trailer on the US-Mexico border when he was four years old. His teacher was a friend of his father, a Mexican immigrant who found education late in life and wanted to equip his sons with the seeds for success in his new land. Participation was not optional. "If I had had my choice, I might have played football on those Sundays," Alvarez recalls. "But eventually I came to enjoy it."

He began to play competitively, won some tournaments, earned a national ranking. But Alvarez was no Bobby Fischer. He did well in school and rose to vice president at a medical devices company before joining the UW MBA program.

During his time at the UW, Alvarez's own son turned four. Naturally, he wanted to teach him chess. "Here I am trying to use a standard chess set and children's book," he recalls.

"But we encounter the same old problems: the game is slow, complex, a little nerdy. I thought, this is a problem I've got to crack."

Alvarez thought of his son's affinity for Cracker Jacks, Kinder Eggs, anything with a surprise inside. And the light went on. He designed the pieces, documented his methods and refined the incarnations of WonderChess in his entrepreneurship classes and last year's Business Plan Competition.

He didn't win, but was undeterred. After graduating in June, Alvarez invested his own money, hired a graphic designer, brokered a



MICHEL and JEAN-MICHEL ALVAREZ

manufacturing partner in China, filed a patent, and went into business at the worst possible moment: the month before Christmas. "I threw the game in my backpack and went to several stores where I thought it might be a good fit," he recalls. "I got the best training because this was probably the last time of year that

they wanted to see anyone coming in their door to sell something, I was expecting to get thrown out the door."

But he didn't. More than 90 percent of the toy, game and book store owners bought from him that first month.

Alvarez's days of peddling games may be numbered. He has signed deals with influential game sales reps across the country, and is working to get WonderChess on the shelves of several national chains. He's aiming to sell 800,000 units in five years.

Not bad for a stay-at-home entrepreneur. But then, Alvarez could be the poster man for the many benefits of the game. "Chess teaches you to have vision, see several moves ahead," Alvarez says. "If chess hasn't impacted my life, I don't know what has."

