

Toy Fair 2006

If it's January, it must be time for this year's London Toy Fair. This is the annual showcase of the toy industry, where manufacturers and distributors show off the products they hope are going to be the big hits next Christmas. This includes this year's new games – since games are considered just a sub-set of toys. I am always fascinated to see the new games – the games that will be in toy shops and department stores later in the year. A day is just about enough time to work my way round the companies with games at the Toy Fair and I'm happy to keep my visit down to one day.

As usual, the big boys take up most of the space at the Toy Fair and produce most of the games. However, one section of the show (conveniently next to the Press Office) is reserved for small new companies. The Greenhouse features lots of small stands and is where most of the more interesting new games can be found. However, let me start with the established publishers.

First, though, my usual disclaimer. If I say a game is like another, this does not imply that one game is a copy of the other. This is just a shorthand description of the game by referring to a different game that readers may be familiar with. And let me warn you that all my comments are highly subjective.

As always the large Hasbro stand dominates the north hall. It wasn't high on my list of priorities, as the most interesting games from Hasbro are to be found at the stand next door. This is where Esdevium Games shows off the games it distributes, which include Hasbro's Wizards of the Coast and Avalon Hill ranges. And very good it all looked, too. Esdevium had a substantial stand and it was stuffed full of



Some of this year's good-looking games from Front Porch

interesting games – though most of them were already familiar to me. However, I was surprised to see *Polarity* among this number. This is a unique dexterity game where players lean the magnetic playing pieces against each other. If you get it right, the result is a whole bunch of pieces apparently suspended in the air. An amazing game and one I'm pleased to see is available again.

New games included the interesting looking *Dragonology*. The display case had a number of impressive dragon models along with the game's board, but they won't be part of the production game (or it would cost an awful lot more!). The game is based on the *Dragonology* book and is published by Sababa Toys. I was also rather taken with the Front Porch range. These 'coffee table games' look magnificent and the line includes lovely wooden versions of Shut-the-Box and *Liar's Dice*. The Adventure Games line features a pirate game and a *Master and Commander* game. Again, these games are good lookers and I'll be interested to find out how they play. There's more about Esdevium at www.esdeviumgames.com.

Just along from Esdevium was Britannia Games, who specialise in producing board game versions of TV shows. They were still making much of their *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* game. New games include a *Captain Scarlet* trading card game – based on the new animated series, not the classic puppets – and a *Thunderbirds* board game. Britannia is also working on a new *Family Fortunes* game and had a prototype of their horror board game, *Forbidden Terrortory*, based on the Hammer oeuvre of films. See www.britanniagames.com for more information.

Cards Inc is a new name to me, which may explain why I failed to spot their stand. This is a shame as I'd have liked to take a look at *Fleeced*, a Wallace and Gromit game! Designed by Nick Park himself, the game has players rescuing stolen sheep. It's a family game aimed at ages 8+. The other game from Cards Inc is *Big Brother Truth or Dare!*. Players win by answering questions correctly or carrying out dares – all based on things that have happened in *Big Brother* and divided into Prude, Rude or Lewd categories. Clearly this is more of a party game. Both games will be in the shops later this year. Find out more at www.cardsinc.com.

While most of the games publishers were in ExCeL's north hall, a few were tucked away in the south hall. One of these was Drumond Park. Their new crop of games included the inevitable Sudoku game. In this case, *Carol Vorderman's Sudoku Board Game*. I was more bemused by *Rubik's Sudoku*, a physical puzzle that crosses *Rubik's Cube* with Sudoku. The new board game was *Chain Reaction*, a party game for teams. The idea is to keep coming up with things that fit an initial category. ("Things your parents told you not to do," for example.) First person to run out of time loses the turn. Like earlier Drumond Park games, this is a fun game for family and friends. All you need is the right company!

Also on show was an electronic *Deal or No Deal* game, though it wasn't clear how this adapted the TV show for tabletop play. Drumond Park is producing *The Official England FA Who Wants to be a Millionaire Board Game* for late Spring. However, what I most enjoyed was the *Jack and the Beanstalk* game, which is all about

knocking your opponents off the beanstalk. I can't help it. Take a look at the games at www.drumondpark.com.

The veteran Gibsons was in its usual position in the north hall. Nowadays the company's main business is in jigsaw puzzles, but it had a few new games on display. *Frantic Frogs* is an action game: roll the dice, grab for the appropriate frog and see who gets the most. *Cheese Please* is a dice-based memory game of cat and mouse with the aim of getting the most cheese. *Woof Woof* is about collecting bones using the magnetic nose on your dog. All three are aimed at pre-school children and are UK editions of games from Piatnik. Gibsons also has *Alias*, a *Taboo*-like word game previously published in Scandinavia by Tactic. Gibsons website is at www.gibsonsgames.co.uk.



These days Hobbygames describes itself as an “entertainment merchandise specialist” and fantasy products seem to dominate. There were some interesting things on the stand, though. Lurking in one corner were Orchid Games and their new game, *Yvette Fielding's Ghosts*. This takes the idea of the *Most Haunted* TV show and offers players the chance to try their hand as “ghost detectives.” The game is played on a board showing the rooms of a haunted house. The investigators have to get concrete evidence of a ghost. They may have various bits of equipment, but they certainly have limited time. Meanwhile the ghosts avoid the investigators and “play gruesome tricks on anyone who gets too close to the truth.” Is it me, or does this sound like an episode of *Scooby-Doo*? I'm intrigued enough to want to try it out. You'll find more about Orchid Games at www.orchidgamesstudio.com

Hobbygames is also carrying Orchid Games' simple wargame, *Battle Group Commander*, which sounds interesting. Hidden City Games' *Clout Fantasy* is a

game that uses collectable 'chips' that are thrown around. Aimed at playground games, this has been doing well and further expansions are coming this year. How can anyone resist a game called *Killer Bunnies and the Quest for the Magic Carrot*? This is a new collectable card game from Playroom Entertainment and the aim is to defeat the other bunnies and grab that magic carrot. The same company has a Reiner Knizia-designed game for 2006, too. *King of the Beasts* is a card game where players try to get their preferred animal elected King by playing cards. Aimed at children (8+), it sounds like it may be a simplified *Quo Vadis?*. Hobbygames' website is www.hobbygames.com.

I had no time, alas, to spend with Living and Learning, who produce some fine games and toys for children. Those who are interested can see the range on their website: www.livingandlearning.com.

Mindware is a US company that produces "brainy toys for kids of all ages" and was appearing at the London Toy Fair for the first time. The company has a range of good-looking puzzles and educational toys and books. The one game on show is called *Gambit* and was described as being "a bit like *Rush Hour* for two." The centre of the board holds a grid of coloured square pieces. These can be pushed along their rows onto and off 'carriers' on either side. These move pieces up and down the rows where they can be pushed back on. Completing a row of one colour scores a point and most points wins at the end. Simple stuff (once you've got your head round my description), but a clever little game for ages 8+. More at www.mindwareonline.com.

The only new thing I noticed on the Paul Lamond stand was ... wait for it ... a Sudoku board game. Check it out at www.x-ibitor.co.uk.

I looked wistfully at the Orchard Toys stand as they produce a lot of terrific games (and toys) for children (up to age 10), but lack of time meant I had to pass them by. You can find their full range at www.orchardtoys.com.

Re:creation handles lots of small manufacturers, so there are usually some interesting games to be found on their stand. Not surprisingly this year's crop includes a range of Sudoku games from Cardinal. Cardinal is the only publisher I've seen to include a Kakuro game in their range. There were also a couple of new TV tie-in board games: *Lost* and *The OC*. *World of Beer* is a trivia game and a follow-up to the earlier *World of Wine*. *Typecast* is kind of a *What's My Line* game. The game contains some 300 photos of people and numerous questions about them. The aim is to guess from the photo what the person does, their favourite food or their hobby. *Welcome to Real Vegas* is a board game that features casino games – as played in Las Vegas, of course. Players work their way round the board, trying to win money at the various gambling games and avoid the pitfalls. These all seem to be standard family fare – though *The World of Beer* piques my interest of course! Full details of re:creation's range at www.recreationplc.com.

An interesting new title from Upstarts! is *The Really Nasty Motor Racing Game*. As with its older stablemate, *The Really Nasty Horse Racing Game*, this is a fairly

simple race game. What raises it above that level are the Event cards that enable players to, umm, handicap their opponents' cars at strategic moments. At first glance this looks like it could be just as much a cult favourite as *Horse Racing*. Expect it to retail at £15. Upstarts! has also got in on the Sudoku craze. *Code Sudoku* provides competitive Sudoku for up to four players (my brain hurts already). *Travel Code Sudoku* is a magnetic version. And *My First Code Sudoku* is a children's (ages 4-10) version that uses pictures rather than numbers.

Other games from Upstarts! this year include a children's version of the set-collecting game, *Sequence*. A clever idea is *Identikit*, which uses the old three-parts-of-a-face idea. The aim is to re-create the face given to you by combining the features in your book. It's done against a timer, of course! Then there's *the Really Wild Bug Eating Party*. Less a game, more a gourmet meal for insectivores. Yes, the idea is to accept the challenge and eat the creatures included in the game. Ants I could probably cope with, particularly if covered in chocolate, but a scorpion?! I have only one thing to say: I'm a nobody – get me out of here! See www.upstarts.co.uk for the full range.

The UK Winning Moves company specialises in producing *Top Trumps* and regional *Monopoly* games. Plus a few other things – like *Pit*, a new edition of *Pass the Pigs* and more. The latest additions to the range are the bath, Swansea and Wigan *Monopoly* sets and *The Sudoku Game*. Yes, another variation on Sudoku. More about Winning Moves at www.winningmoves.co.uk.

Having been round the main body of the show – and carefully avoided spending too long playing *Scalextric* – it's time to see who's in the Greenhouse. Bearing in mind that this is a World Cup year, I'm expecting a few football games. *All About Football* seems to fit the bill nicely. This is a football trivia game in which the players work their way through the divisions by answering questions. There are a few wrinkles to the game with players allowed a few substitutes if they don't like a question and penalty shoot-outs to decide the big points. Apart from the generic version, there are specific versions for major clubs such as Arsenal, Liverpool, Spurs and so on. The game was launched last October and can be found in a number of retailers: see www.allaboutfootball.tv for more information. It's not my cup of tea, though.

At first sight, *Pickout* is one of those deceptively simple games. It's lots of coloured discs in a bag. Plus some bigger discs for collecting sets. Five different games can be played with these pieces. The basic game involves being the first to pick the pieces of your colour out of the bag. While Reverse Pickout is about being the last to get the four pieces. All the games depend on being lucky and are intended for family play with younger children. This is the first game from Colin Buckmaster and Buckmaster Games – see more at www.pickout.co.uk (though this website doesn't work with all browsers).

Cuberty is the name of a new 3-D word game from designer Nigel Newberry and his company, Game Ideas. Under its original name, *Stact*, the game won a prize from SAZ (the German games designers' association) in their competition at Spiel '04.

The game uses letter dice to build words across the table or up into the air. I didn't manage to find out how the game plays, but it certainly looks interesting. Full details at www.gameideas.co.uk.

Gamma Games Oxford had a number of games on show. The first was *Commuter*, a road safety game for youngsters, which was previously (some 20 years ago) published as *Trafikant*. *Palindrome* is a puzzle game in which players try to get their counters into a symmetrical pattern. And *Grand Slam* has players positioning counters on a grid according to the roll of the dice. Four in a row wins the game.

HL Games was back to show off a junior version of *GO mental*. The aim of the game is to identify the odd one out from a set of four things listed on a card – and it's not as easy as it sounds! The new version is called *GO mental FUNDamental* and will be available in the UK later in the year. As well as the US version of the standard and junior games, the US subsidiary publishes *GO mental SACRAmental*, which applies the game's system to religious matters. Find out more at www.hlgames.com.

Wheeler Dealer is a game about making deals – profitably! Players get the option to buy commodities by landing on the appropriate squares as they go round the board.



A new edition of **Britannia** – from Esdevium's catalogue

Once they get a set, they can sell – at a profit. They can also buy cards off other players, which can be a faster way to complete the set but means sharing some of the profit. Once they've raised enough capital, players can enter the inner circle of the board where the stakes are higher. Deals cost more, but the profits are bigger. And so are the risks. First to reach a set amount of money wins the game. There's clearly a big luck element in this game, but it looks intriguing and challenging. Designed by Ken Cottingham and published by his imprint, KC Games, *Wheeler Dealer* made it in to the shops last year. Production (by Carta Mundi) is of a high standard and the game retails at £20. It can also be bought direct from the publisher at www.kcgamesltd.com.

Every few years a golf board game pops up at the Toy Fair. This year we got *Matchgolf*. This is a nicely-produced board game that simulates a game of golf across a 9-hole course. As you'd expect, the board shows the course. Each hole is marked out by spaces showing the distance from tee to green – and beyond. Players choose the club they want to use for each shot and draw a card that says how far that shot has gone. There is a certain skill in judging the best club to use – though the range of each is shown on the board – and in avoiding the hazards. Players also start with a hand of cards and must use these up. Making the best use of these gives some further tactical options.

The bulk of the rules of the game are, of course, the rules of golf. Which means that the aim is to complete each 'hole' in as few 'strokes' as possible. There are lots of nice touches to the game: a medal for the winner, a cardboard golf buggy that holds the cards for the different clubs. *Matchgolf* is a pleasant family game, but doesn't offer much of a challenge to gamers. Designers Peter Penfold and Keith Harris have done an excellent job with the game. It retails at £25 and there's more about it on the website: www.matchgolf.co.uk.

Another newcomer was *Mentality*, which is at heart a memory game. Players progress round the spiral track by remembering which cards are where in the four different sets. Just to confuse things, more cards appear as the game goes on – and they can be moved around. First person to the centre wins. The game is well-produced with little brains as playing pieces and lots of cards packed into the triangular box. As well as the rather challenging "International Edition", there is a children's version, *Junior Mentality*, which uses fewer cards and brightly coloured pictures. I might be able to cope with that. The game is published by an Irish company, who have already had some success with the game in the USA. See www.mentality.com to find out more.

EleMental is the name of the two-player abstract strategy game from Minds United. Designed by Chris McCann, players' pieces (and the layers of the board) represent the four elements (air, fire, water and wind). Each element has a speed and strength, which changes depending on the layer they're on. There is also one piece that represents time, which must be carried by another playing piece. The ultimate aim is to get to creation – the peak at the centre of the board – and combine all five elements. Other ways of winning add an element of uncertainty to the game. The

basic set costs £20 and is available (+ p&p) direct from the publisher's website: www.mindsunited.co.uk.

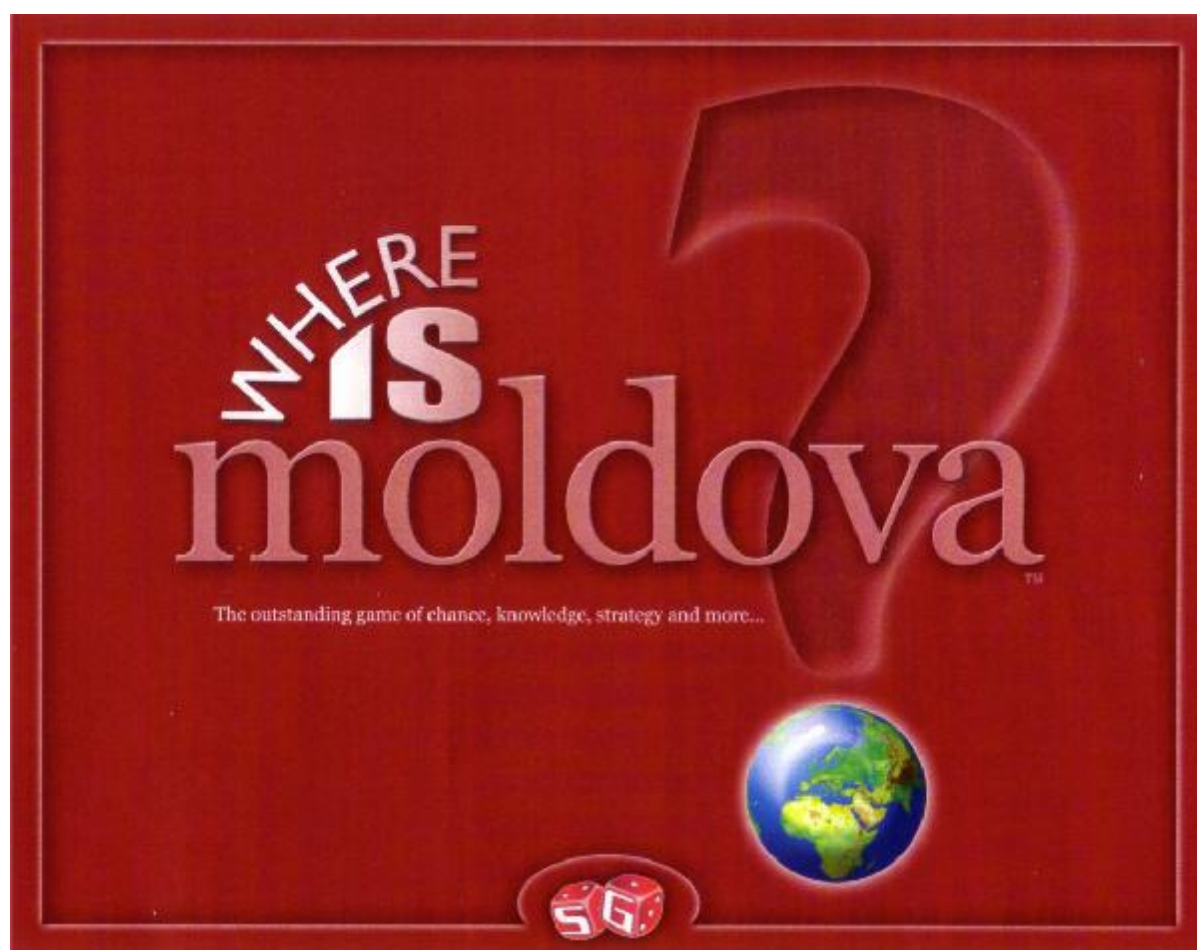
Mobile Intelligence Games launched the UK edition of their travel trivia game, M.I.G., at the show. The game comes in a chunky box, most of which is packed with question cards. A couple of special dice give players a choice between 2 of the five topics to answer a question on. The other die decides whether the player carries on if they get it right or have to end their turn. After this, it's a pretty standard trivia game: first to get a question right in each of the categories wins. It's nicely produced, but nothing special. The website is at www.playmig.com to find out more.

As far as I'm concerned, a company called Natchos Limited has to be worth a visit. Their game is *The Beautiful Game*, a game of World Cup trivia, puzzles and tasks. As players progress round the board (by rolling a die, naturally) they build up their team of 11 players (cards) by getting the questions right or completing the puzzles and tasks – though they may lose some to hazards and failure. This builds up to a final showdown in the "World Cup Final." As someone who's not keen on either trivia games or football, this is definitely not for me. Since the Toy Fair I've learnt that the game has been picked up by Marks and Spencers. Find out more at www.natchos.co.uk.

Another game I seem to have missed on my way round the Toy Fair is *Cash Trap* from New Century Games. The aim is to get your nice 'money bag' playing pieces across to the far side of the board. To do this you play movement cards from your hand and move your money bag. Or someone else's, depending on the card played. While avoiding the cash trap obstacles. Another game that I'd like to try. Find out more on the website: www.cash-trap.com.

Playerz Games is a Dutch company staffed, if the guys at the Toy Fair are anything to go by, by a bunch of nutters. I liked 'em. They have invented a cast of cartoon characters with attitude and the games revolve around them. *MadWish*, their first game, is happening, it's down on the street, it's roll the dice, move your pawn and do what it says on the square. Oh dear. This is essentially a pretty ordinary game of challenges and forfeits jazzed up (or 'pimped', even) for a young, urban audience. Which isn't me. I hope the game goes down better in the 'hood. The second game, *KidzWish* is due out later in the year and looks to be much the same game aimed at an even younger audience. (I can say things like this now I've passed fifty.) Take a look at www.madwish.com (but be warned: there doesn't seem to be any way to switch the music off!).

RTL Games was back at the Toy Fair to report more success for their *Destination ...taxi* games. *Destination Brighton & Hove* and *Destination Delhi* (now there's a strange juxtaposition) launched in 2005. This year kicked off with *Destination New York* (for which the company's yellow colour scheme seems well matched) and *Destination Las Vegas*, *Destination Orlando* and *Destination Dublin* are set to follow. Also due out this year is *Destination World*, a junior version using a map of the world and aeroplanes (rather than taxis). There's more at www.rtlgames.co.uk.



The first thing you notice about Seager Games' *Where is Moldova?* is the sheer size of the box. It's easily the biggest game box I've come across. Hang on ... a little work with the tape measure tells me the box is 63 x 50 cms (or over 2 x 1.5 feet in old money). The reason for this is that one of the chief components is a metal-backed map of Europe. With the addition of a couple of feet, this stands up so that players can mark the countries they control with magnetic markers. Get five in a row and you win the game.

The second board – which goes flat on the table – is where the game play takes place. This is a classic roll the dice and move your pawn around the *Monopoly*-style track along the edges of the board – there's a second track on the inside, which you get to by paying a 'strategy card', that provides some tactical options. Not surprisingly, if you land on a square representing a country you get the chance to 'buy' it. This you do not with money, but by answering a question (or rolling the dice and getting lucky).

The questions vary between complete trivia and Europe-related trivia, some of them being multiple choice ("What nationality was Ivan the Terrible: Latvian, Russian or Polish?"). A neat touch is that there are 12 questions on each card and you roll dice for which question you get. Two 6-sided dice means more of questions 6, 7 and 8, which are easier than 1, 2, 11 or 12. Using the 12-sided die gives an even chance.

This provides a handicapping system – though we are also promised some “Kidz Kwestions” (sic, very) as an expansion to the game.

The game provides further tactics by allowing the ownership of countries to be challenged for. This is a way of getting the crucial link in a chain when an opponent has got there first. Of course, to do this you have to land on the right square, so the luck of the dice still controls the game. Essentially, designer Peter Seager has given us a trivia game where you need to roll the right numbers on the dice as well as knowing it all. And it comes in a big box. Huge. (Ivan the Terrible was Russian, but you knew that. And Moldova fits neatly in between Romania and Ukraine.) Full details at www.whereismoldova.com.

Somehow I managed to miss Shannon Boardgames’ stand this year. I shall chase them up to find out what’s new for 2006. In the meantime, take a look at www.shannonboardgames.net.

Disqualified! comes from Tucker Enterprises and is described as “an action packed family board game which capitalises on Britain’s excessive speeding penalties.” Hmm, do I detect that designer Andrew Tucker has been caught speeding a few times? The aim of the game is to complete a journey of 100 miles while evading the hazards of speed cameras and traffic cops. Except for the police player, who’s trying to get 12 penalty points on everybody else’s driving licence. The game has *Formula 1*-style dashboards to record speed, fuel and damage for each player – a neat touch. The demo games used some nice model Minis, which are available as an add-on. It looks good and I’ll be interested to see whether the game play matches up to its looks. Advance orders can be placed on the publisher’s website at www.disqualified.co.uk.

Vickers Holdings is a property development company and the publisher of *Housebuilder*, a game about building houses. The board has a figure-of-eight track, which allows players to raise funds and buy the raw materials they need to build their house. This is carefully done in several stages, ending with the roof (seems logical!). The game is clearly intended to be realistic – go past your overdraft limit and you’re out! However, there’s a strong luck element in what movement around the track lets you do. Production is of a high standard, with little hard hats as the playing pieces. As family games go, this is an interesting one. It’s been available since May 2005 at £30 and can be bought direct from the publisher at www.housebuildergame.co.uk.

Looking over the Toy Fair as a whole, I didn’t spot many trends. Though there were a lot of Sudoku games and quite a few football games (must be something in the air). And, on the toy side, no end of Daleks! As always, the games on show were almost all aimed at a family market, but there were several that will be of interest to hobby games-players.

© Copyright Paul Evans 2006. All trademarks acknowledged.