

Toy Fair 2007

It's Toy Fair season – well, what better time than January to be thinking about Christmas? And Toy Fair season is the middle of winter. One of my abiding memories of visiting the Nuremberg fair is trudging through the ice and snow from the U-bahn station to the Exhibition Centre – and across the cobbles of the old town. So it felt absolutely right that there were ice and snow about as I strolled up the ramp from the Docklands Light Railway station to ExCeL.

The London Toy Fair, held at ExCeL every January, is the annual showcase of the toy industry. It's where manufacturers and distributors show off the products they hope are going to be hits in the coming year and it features most of the big names in toys. Games, of course, are just a sub-set of toys and thus make up just a sub-set of the fair. This suits me, as I can get round the companies with games on show in a single 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.

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 will be familiar with. And let me warn you that all my comments are highly subjective.

The establishment

I'll start with the older, bigger games companies. Alphabetical order brings me first to Britannia Games, who specialise in board game versions of television shows. This year is no exception with one of their new games being *In It To Win It*. Essentially it's the TV show translated to a board – thankfully without Dale Winton. Britannia's other new games are more diverse, however. They include *Magical Mystery Tour*, a DVD-based game of Lennon and McCartney songs. Only mock-ups of these two were on show, so I didn't find out that much about them.

Forbidden Terrortory, on the other hand, is now in production. This game uses Hammer Horror as its source and pits the players, as vampire hunters, against Count Dracula. Other Hammer favourites come into the mix (Frankenstein's monster, zombies and so on), but the aim of the game is to destroy Dracula. Players move round the board to collect the items they need for this ritual, while avoiding – or fighting – the other monsters. There is also the opportunity for a player to become Dracula and try to take out the remaining vampire hunters. But players' time is limited. The game is good on atmosphere and fun, but not particularly challenging fare for gamers.

Drumond Park also has a TV tie-in with their latest board game, *Deal or No Deal*, which was the best-selling toy last December. The game comes with 22 plastic red boxes, to hold the prize money (distributed at random), and an electronic phone for the Banker. This is essentially a calculator, which takes the prizes already found and, at appropriate moments, makes the current player an offer. Yes, the game unfolds pretty much as the television show. The winner is the player with the most money after playing several times. The game looks good and I'm sure it will appeal to fans of the original. This doesn't include me. For this year, Drumond Park is adding the *Deal or No Deal Card Game*. This uses cards instead of red boxes and gives all the players a chance to be Banker.

Distributor Esdevium Games was flying the flag for hobby games as usual. The centrepiece of their display was the new edition of *Polarity* again. This fascinating game uses magnetic discs, which players lean against each other, supported only by their magnetic repulsion. It's a game that requires both manual and mental dexterity and was the Science Museum's "Smart Toy of the Year" in 2006. Esdevium was also making much of the range of classics from US publisher Front Porch that impressed me last year. And promoting the *Pokémon Trading Figure Game*. It's what it says on the tin: model pokémon figures to collect and match against each other.



Esdevium's stand, *Polarity* to the fore

Gibsons is one of the venerable names in the British game industry, but nowadays the company's main business is jigsaw puzzles. It still produces some games, though, and this year will see the publication of a new, 10th anniversary edition of *Pass the Bomb*. For those who haven't come across it, *Pass the Bomb* is a round-robin game in which players take it in turns to come up with a word that begins with, ends with or contains certain letters. The game is controlled by a random timer – in the form of a rough black sphere with a fuse – that is passed on as each player comes up with a word. When the timer goes boom, the player holding it loses that round. Great fun and I'm glad to see it's still going strong.

Gibsons' other new game is *Fumble*, a variation of the old game of guessing what's in the bag without looking. In this version, players have to identify and remove the shapes shown on their card using just their sense of touch. It's harder than it sounds and *Fumble* should make a good party game.

I didn't bother visiting Hasbro this year. I'm sure they have a selection of new children's games, but their more interesting material is handled in the UK through Esdevium. I also avoided Ravensburger. They may be a major games company in Germany, but their UK business concentrates on jigsaw puzzles. I did take a look at their new product list, though. The only 'games' shown are children's action games – such as *Winnie the Pooh Tip 'n' Topple*. 'nuff said.

Time for a quick mention for Orchard Toys. They produce some great games for young children. But not my subject matter, so I'll move on.

This brings me to Re: creation, which distributes games from a number of companies and includes several games in its portfolio. The only thing of note this year was *The Golden Compass*, a tie-in to the film of the first book of Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' trilogy (I'm slightly confused, but apparently this is the American title of the first volume, *Northern Lights*). No details were available (and the game doesn't feature on the company's website – but then, this shows the "Latest News" as being from 28th February 2006!). Otherwise, re: creation had various trivia and TV tie-in (*Lost*, *The OC* et al) games that I'd seen before.

Tactic Games UK is the British branch of Scandinavian publisher Tactic. The company is best known for producing licensed editions of other publishers' games for their native market. As far as I could see, the new games this year were all for young children.

I only spotted one new game on the Upstarts stand this year: *The Really Nasty Golf Game*. This is an interesting combination. Upstarts' previous 'Really Nasty' games have been good, fun family games, so this should be a good game. On the other hand, I have yet to see a good board game based on golf. The problem is that golf doesn't seem to have an appeal outside golfers. While there are lots of them, they're much more likely to be playing golf than playing board games. I didn't get the chance to find out more about the game at the Toy Fair, so I shall be interested to see how this goes down.

However, Upstarts also has *CSI: Senses*. According to the company's literature, this is a "multi-sensory board game." I presume this means there are things to sniff and feel in the game, though the components seem to be mainly cards – plus nice little models of the *CSI* characters. There are six cases to solve and each case involves a series of challenges – pick the right insect out of the bag without looking, sketch an item for other players to guess and so on. There's also an ultra-violet light that reveals the answers to some of the puzzles. Sounds like fun.

Winning Moves is another company whose UK incarnation is less interesting than its American and German counterparts. Winning Moves UK produces lots of *Top Trumps* and regional/city *Monopoly* games and not much else.

Old friends

These are smaller companies that have been around for a while. The alphabet brings Burley Games to the top. Peter Burley was showing off *Take it to the Limit!* to a UK audience after its earlier exposure at Spiel '06. This is a development of Peter's earlier *Take it Easy!* and you can find more about it in my report from Spiel '06 in *TWJO* 70.

Coiled Spring Games is a distributor that aims to sell the "very best award winning fun, educational board games, card games and puzzles." In practice, they distribute an interesting selection of children's, family and abstract games. The highlight for me is that Coiled Spring is now handling US publisher Gamewright's range of terrific children's games. But Gamewright doesn't just publish children's games and one of its latest titles is *Luck of the Draw*. This is a family/party game that invites an immediate comparison with *Pictionary*. However, the aim here is not to communicate to other players. Instead, everybody draws whatever the current subject is. Then players decide which drawing best fits the (random) category: most embarrassing, least artistic, the "squiggliest" and so on. Bad drawing may be an advantage! It sounds like my kind of game.



I got the chance to learn more about *Cuberty* this year. The brainchild of Nigel Newberry, the game is published by Game Ideas and I first saw it at last year's Toy Fair (see *TWJO* 64). It's a word game that uses cubes, rather than tiles, with letters on. Words can be built vertically up as well as across the table and can even be stacked on top of each other. As each cube has blank sides, they don't have to be

included in every word. It's an interesting variation on word games and is due for a full commercial launch this year (after some test marketing last year).

Ken Cottingham is the man behind KC Games and its game, *Wheeler Dealer*, which were back at the Toy Fair for the second year. See my report in *TWJO* 64.

Minds United was also a first-timer last year with *EleMental*, an abstract strategy game based around the four classical elements (air, earth, fire and water). Since last year, the game has been taken up by the Science Museum (the only board game to carry the museum's logo) and by chemicals firm DuPont for its innovative use of materials. (Specifically, Corian, which is used for the board and pieces in the different versions of the game.)

The company also has two new games this year. The first is a pocket-sized version of *EleMental* using dice with the same elemental symbols as the original game. Designer Chris McCann describes it as Yahtzee-like, so it's about rolling the dice to make different sets of symbols. The second is *Fight Dice*. This is a neat little game. Like the first dice game, it consists of a few dice in a tube that fits neatly into a pocket. The first player rolls the first die and then others according to their initial roll. The aim is to make successful 'attacks' against your opponent, but the dice may give them the opportunity to counter. It is pure luck, but good fun. The game is based on Karate, using the correct technical terms for different attacks and blocks, and the rules introduce the philosophy behind this martial art. *Fight Dice* is explicitly aimed at the playground and the plan is to produce further editions based on different types of fighting. I just hope you can mix and match the different sets – boxing versus taekwondo, say.

The latest additions to RTL Games's line of *Destination* games are Disney (*Destination Animation*, featuring characters from Pixar animations) and Harry Potter (*Destination Hogwarts*) titles. A more conventional new setting for this taxi driving game is *Destination Paris!*, which is bilingual.

Sibling Revelry – my favourite name for a games company – returned with *Cinematique*. The game has players pitting their wits, performances and knowledge of films against each other. The game launched with a parade of movie stars at Hamleys in July 2006, sold out over Christmas in the stores stocking it and will be more widely available this year.

New boys

Time to move on to the new publishers, starting with Alphabet Runner. This is also the name of the game, which is explicitly an educational game based around the alphabet. In its simplest form, players compete against the clock to make 3-5 letter words from the cards available. Each valid word scores a point, advancing the player's scoring marker. On getting to the end, players need to make a long word to win the game. Colour coding of the cards allows an extra element to be added to the game for older children and tournament rules (which may better suit adults) are

available from the publisher. The first *Alphabet Runner* Championships will be at Games Expo at the beginning of June.

Dinner Party Challenge is the game you can play with your meal! The game has a series of different challenges to accompany each course of dinner. Failing a challenge means paying a forfeit. These are intended as ice-breakers, helping to set the mood and relax people.

Fusion Games didn't have a game, they had a whole series of games: the Psilesia Project. These start with the board game, *Kayn*. This is a fantasy combat race game that uses a computer (or games console) to administer the game and act as GM. There is also a role-playing element as players can develop their character and customise their vehicles. Coming next is *Kayn-Net*, an online environment where players can compete and build up their standing and resources. The first expansion for the game, *Kayn-Team*, is expected to be available before the end of 2007 to allow team competitions. This is a fascinating cross of board game, role-playing game and computer game and I hope it develops the following it needs.

JR Sports is the brainchild of Jonathan Rudd and publishes *In the Drink*, a drinking game themed around Golf. The rules are flexible, allowing players to play the game in the way they want. The key element is the use of measures on players' drinks glasses. These are calibrated to show how much they have to drink to achieve



The *Kayn* racetrack – and computers

particular numbers of yards. The game is then played over a series of 'holes' of different lengths. It is not intended to be taken seriously, but as a focus for social gatherings. The idea is that people won't abandon this game in favour of a trip to the pub!

Powershot Soccer is the creation of Powerplay Industries and is a card game with a football (soccer) theme. Each player has their own deck, representing a particular team. They take a hand of eleven cards and play a series of passes or dribbling while their opponent uses tackle or intercept cards to try to take control. String a series of passes together and they can take a shot at goal, hoping that their opponent can't save it. Play continues through the decks and the winner is the player with most goals. The teams have different strengths and weaknesses – the Dutch, for example, have a strong goalkeeper, while the Italians are good at intercepting passes (there are 10 national teams available at the moment). The game is mainly luck, but is fun and has a collectable aspect as well.

SolBenk is a new company with a couple of new games. *Saikoro* is played across a grid of dice, which players move to create gaps and isolate each other's pawns. It plays quickly and provides lots of tactical opportunities. *Solomon's Stones* is a game of removing stones from the triangular grid. You can take as many as you want from any row, but whoever takes the last loses the game. The game is played with polished haematite stones

Accused! is published by Twisted Winds and has the players competing to establish their alibis for the murder that is the start of the game. At the same time, they can provide evidence and motives that point to other players. Unfortunately, the details of the crime aren't known until the end game, so you may be stacking the odds against yourself. The game ends with an opportunity for each player to make the case for their innocence. And the 'real' killer can win by bumping off everybody else!



This game has several elements that I like the sound of – and it looks good, too. One I definitely want to try when it's available later in the year.

Wicked Vision had all sorts of interesting things on their stand, including lots of indoor boomerangs and just the one board game. *World Discovery* is a game of travelling the world by a given route and answering geographical questions about the places you visit. The first player to get all their 'visas' (by answering their questions) and return home wins the game. I particularly liked the little aeroplane playing pieces, which complete the look of this as an entertaining family game.

And that was the end of another Toy Fair. It was good to see that so many smaller companies are clearly flourishing and returning to the show. There were some interesting games on show, too. I'm looking forward to playing them.

Next year's London Toy Fair is scheduled for 23rd-26th January 2008 at ExCeL. For more information, see either the show's website – www.britishtoyfair.co.uk – or contact the organisers, the British Toy & Hobby Association: www.btha.co.uk.

© Copyright Paul Evans 2007. All trademarks acknowledged.



Two versions of *Solomon's Stones* from Solbenk