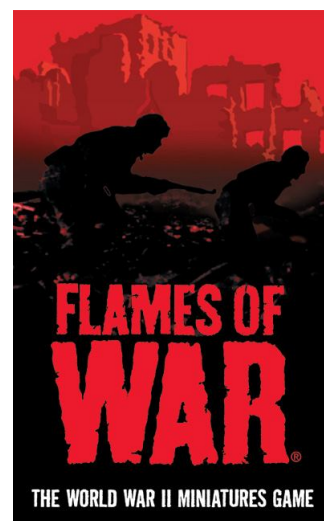


Olympia in January

Pevans visits the British Toy Fair

Sadly, Toy Fair is not really a place for board games enthusiasts – not least because it's a trade show rather than an opportunity to play. Games are conventionally part of the toy industry. (Mind you, the sort of game favoured by the toy industry is a rather different beast from those preferred by gamers.) However, games seem to be an increasingly small part of the toy industry. I'd say vanishingly small, judging by what I saw at the 2012 London Toy Fair. With a few honourable exceptions, there was a distinct lack of new games to see.

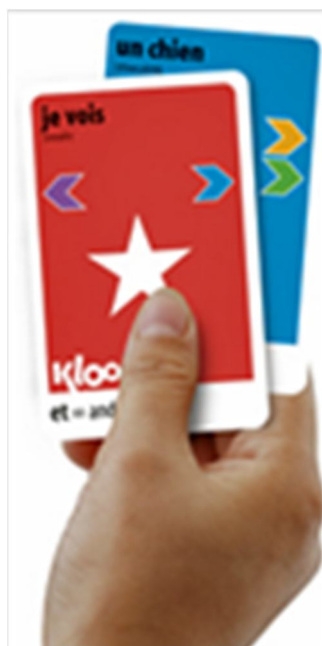
As usual, the brightest sparks were to be found in the 'Greenhouse' area, which is the Toy Fair's showcase for newcomers. Battlefront Miniatures is hardly new, having been around for 10 years, but this was their first year at the Toy Fair. Having recently published the third edition of their WW2 miniatures wargames rules, *Flames of War*, they were promoting the new starter pack that goes with it.



Open Fire! is a boxed set that contains the full *Flames of War* rules together with a set of tanks (15mm scale miniatures) and dice to enable newcomers to pick up the game quickly. I was impressed with the level of detail on the models, given they are substantially smaller than the Airfix models (25mm, OO scale) that I played with in my younger days (ah, nostalgia!). Once you're past the beginners' stage, Battlefront Miniatures provide a large range of vehicles, troops and scenery – some of which was on display at the Toy Fair.

I hadn't come across *Flames of War* before and was quite taken with the range and the approach to wargames. In particular, the *Open Fire!* set looks an excellent starter pack for the budding wargamer. Now I have an urge to blow the dust off my wargames stuff – assuming I can find it at the back of the garage. The Battlefront/*Flames of War* website is at www.FlamesOfWar.com and their European operation is run from Nottingham.

The second highlight of the Greenhouse area was *Kloo*. At first glance, this appeared to be a rather ordinary looking card game. However, there is a gem of an idea inside the box. It is, indeed, a card game – though there is a board game version as well, where the board is essentially used as a way of keeping score (players race through French cities to be the first to Paris, which does add another element to the game). It is also a clever way of learning a language.



A couple of *Kloo* cards

Each card has a word in the chosen language (French or Spanish at the moment) and is colour-coded. It also shows the colours of words that can go before or after it. In the simplest game, players try to get rid of as many cards as they can. They must start by playing a specific colour and can then play any other cards from their hand, as long as the colour-coding allows them to go adjacent to a card already played. They will end up with a sentence that is grammatically correct in the foreign language – with bonus points if they can say what it means.

What's happening here is that the colour of a card reflects the word's grammatical function: verb, noun, adjective and so on (though these terms are not used). The restrictions on what can be placed next to each other means the sentence produced must be grammatical, though it may be longer or shorter depending on the number of adjectives etc. Players are absorbing the grammar of the language just by playing the game.

What's more, each card also has the translation of a word – from a different card – at the bottom, so players will gradually build up their vocabulary.

What a brilliant idea! After thirty seconds, I could see *Kloo* going down well with my nephews (aged 9 and 13). They would happily play the game, while they would object strenuously to any suggestion they should learn French grammar or vocabulary. And this is, of course, the intention: to provide a fun way to absorb a language without even knowing you're doing it.

However, my job is to look at this as a game, rather than an educational tool. The basic game is ... basic. The points you score will depend on the cards you draw and whatever you already know about the language – a gift for a French-speaking smartarse like me! However, there are rules to some 16 different games that can be played using the *Kloo* cards. These include *Kloo* versions of Patience, Rummy and Whist, so there should be something to everybody's liking. I shall certainly be getting a copy and trying out some of them.

For more about *Kloo* (including the rules to all those games), see the website at www.kloogame.com



My third find in the Greenhouse was *Chatterback*, another ingenious game. In this case, it's a gadget, the revoicer. This is a little recording device that plays back your recording *in reverse*. The game is played in teams, with one person using the revoicer and the others trying to identify what they are saying. This comes from a card which shows some gobbledygook. However, say this into the revoicer and, when it's reversed, out comes something comprehensible. Hopefully!

I was intrigued to see how different words need to be for the pronunciation to make sense in reverse. It's not simply a question of writing the word backward, the text has to get people to make the noises in reverse (I suddenly have new respect for the backwards-speaking bits in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*). Thus, games becomes zmeeairg. I kid you not – and I've heard the recording that proves it.

Chatterback is another clever idea, but I'm not sure how much of a game there is. Say the text into the revoicer and it gives you the answer. I can see teams getting near-perfect scores every time. They'll probably have plenty of fun along the way, but I can't see there being much demand to play it again. Now, trying to work out the phrase from the backwards text is much more of a challenge: "ner yeeberackerth vostereeyarp"* anyone?

For more on *Chatterback*, see the website at www.chatterbackgame.com

The only other games in the Greenhouse area were at Sophisticated Games. This was a fairly low-key display of Sophisticated's terrific products (*Ingenious*, *Lord of the Rings* et al). Having said that, they had plenty of visitors every time I went past and I wasn't able to get a word with them. See more at www.sophisticated-games.com

I was surprised that these comprised all the games on show in the Greenhouse area. However, several publishers that were in the Greenhouse a few years ago were now to be found in the body of the show. One of these is Circa Circa whose position was up on the balcony overlooking the floor of the hall. Their main feature was the revised, 2011 edition of their flagship game, *About Time*. As Circa Distribution, they are also distributing a number of other titles, but I didn't find anything new amongst them. There's more about *About Time* at www.abouttimeboardgame.com and about Circa Distribution at www.circadistribution.com

Seager Games was sharing the stand with Circa Circa to show off their new game. They are famous, as far as I'm concerned, for *Where is Moldova?*, a game of general knowledge and geography with a connect-five tactical element. The game has been around for several years now and Seager is looking to launch into the US market with *Where is Koocanusa?*. This applies the system of the game to a map of North America. A prototype was on display at the Toy fair, enabling the

SG team to **show** me where Kooacanusa is! I trust it goes well. You can find out about the original game at www.whereismoldova.com

Also up on the gallery was Pants on Fire Games, of *Liar Liar* fame. They had the production version of their latest game, *The Victorian Gamer*, on show. As expected, the finished artwork looked much better than last year's prototype, but the game remains the same. Players put up their 'team' in a series of 'sporting events' and bet on the outcomes. They roll dice to decide each event and the player with the most money wins. Players need good judgement and some luck to win. There's more about this and the other games on the website: www.pantsonfiregames.co.uk



The Victorian Gamer on display

A little further along the gallery I was pleased to see the return of the Destination games. This series of family games has players as cabbies taking fares around a town, city or region – or even Hogwarts! Now published by She Who Dares UK Ltd, the latest in the series is *Destination London 2012*. This is a revised version of the original *Destination London* to tie in with the London Olympics. For more see www.destinationboardgames.co.uk

Moving back to the floor of Olympia, the largest toy company is, of course, Hasbro. I didn't get on to their closed stand, so I don't know what games they were presenting. However, of much more interest to me was the next-door stand of Esdevium Games, who distribute Hasbro's hobby games titles (in particular, the TSR, Wizards of the Coast and Avalon Hill brands) along with games from many other publishers. Esdevium's stand, by contrast, was bright and welcoming and had a lot of games on display.



At the back of the Esdevium stand

Apart from the latest Trading Card Games, those given pride of place at the front of the stand were for a general audience: *Fly Trap!*, a children's dexterity game, and TV tie-ins like *Take me out*, *Would I Lie to You?* and *The Walking Dead*. I'm intrigued by the last two. A game where you are expected to tell lies should be good fun, though probably most people won't be as convincing as the participants on the TV show. There are plenty of zombie games around, but tying in to the TV show should give

this one an advantage in the shops. The question is how good a game is inside the box.

Tucked away at the back of the stand, I was pleased to see several shelves of hobby games, though nothing that was particularly new. Esdevium's website is www.esdeviumgames.com

Cheatwell Games have a huge range of fun little games and, over the years, have been quite innovative in using new formats for their games. Thus I was not surprised to see that they had developed smartphone apps for their games. However, I didn't expect *App-player*. This gadget is essentially a scoreboard that players can use with any number of games running as apps on smartphones. Clever stuff. Also noticeable on the Cheatwell stand was their range of Bygone Games – reproductions of games from a hundred years ago, including Blow Football and card games such as Happy Families. It was wonderfully nostalgic. To see the full range from Cheatwell, see www.cheatwell.com

Distributor Coiled Spring Games was promoting the latest offerings from Gamewright in the USA and Gigamic in France. The former produce excellent children's games, the latter elegant abstract games. Coiled Spring were also celebrating last year's success of *Rory's Story Cubes*. This is a set of nine 'dice' whose faces have symbols instead of pips. The idea is that you roll the cubes and then tell a story using the symbols visible. It's a brilliantly simple and completely brilliant idea and I'm sure it will continue its success this year.

For more on all of Coiled Spring's offerings, see coiledspring.co.uk

I have something of a soft spot for Drumond Park, not least as the current publishers of *Rapidough*. However, their recent titles all seem to be board game versions of TV game shows – *Eggheads*, *Million Pound Drop* – and I gave them a miss this year. If you'd like to see more, their website is at www.drumondpark.com

Gibson's is a venerable name in British games, but the company produces far more jigsaw puzzles these days. Hence it was good to see a new game on their stand. *Mission Earth* is a children's game with the players racing to save the planet. The game appears to be a simple one of rolling the dice, moving your pawn and doing what it says on the space you land on. The neatest thing about it is that the board folds up to make the box for the game components. Gibson's also have a fine new edition of *Hare and Tortoise* in a classy black box. For more see www.gibsonsgames.co.uk



Green Board Games was another busy stand, but I did take a look at the *Horrible Histories* games in their Brainbox series. The idea of these is that players study a card for a few seconds and then have to answer a random question about it. Most cards after a set period of time wins. This is quite possibly something that my *Horrible History*-obsessed nephew could challenge me at! For more see www.greenboardgames.com

Jumbo is one of several European games publishers whose stands at the Toy Fair are more about their jigsaw puzzles (and other things) than their games. I saw *Stratego* on the Jumbo stand to represent their range of games. They were another company promoting smartphone apps. www.jumbo.eu is the Jumbo website.

Orchard Toys produce some delightful games for young children amongst their range. Not what I'm here to write about, but worth a mention. Visit www.orchardtoys.com to see for yourself.

Paul Lamond Games had their usual black stand in the middle of the floor – most stands are basically white, so it does stand out. Their contribution to the retro vibe I was picking up is *Subbuteo*, the classic football (soccer to my American readers) game. My nostalgia for *Subbuteo* is somewhat tempered by the fact that I have never played it and have no interest in football, but I know it was a big thing with many of my contemporaries. Other than this, I couldn't see anything new – though there may well have been a new title or two in Paul Lamond's excellent range of Murder Mystery Dinner Party games. For the full range, take a look at www.paul-lamond.com

Ravensburger, like Jumbo, is a European games publisher that concentrates on jigsaw puzzles in the UK. The only board games I could see on their stand were

Labyrinth and *The Memory Game*. For more see www.ravensburger.com/uk/games

I still think of University Games UK as Upstarts! and they still publish some of Upstarts! titles (*The Really Nasty Horse Racing game* for a start). Their range also includes games from their American parent, of course. The only new item I spotted was the board game of the TV game show *Pointless*. It's an interesting variant on the quiz show and I can see this having quite some appeal. Full details are on the website www.universitygames.co.uk

Winning Moves UK is the home of *Top Trumps* and regional *Monopoly* games and had several Olympics-themed "London 2012" games. I also noticed that Winning Moves are now handling the *Bananagrams* series of word games. For more see www.winningmoves.co.uk

That brings me to the end of another Toy Fair. As I said at the beginning, I was very disappointed to see so few new board games this year. Though perhaps it was more the lack of new publishers as most of the established names were present and had some new offerings. Away from the High Street market that is the focus of Toy Fair, there are plenty of new games, of course – as demonstrated by Esdevium's substantial display. It's just a shame that this rich diversity of products is hidden away.



One of the BTHA's three best new games of 2012...

The London Toy Fair is run by the British Toy and Hobby Association and all the details are available online at www.btha.co.uk/toyfair – also the place to find out more about the BTHA.

* "Pirates of the Caribbean"

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