

London Toy Fair 2014

Pevans reports from Olympia

If it's the end of January, it must be time to visit Olympia for the Toy Fair... I was right! Olympia always feels different according to the event that's on: they don't put carpet down for the beer festival, for example. For the Toy Fair, the atmosphere is of subdued busy-ness, the carpeted aisles separating the often walled-in stands of toy companies, which is where the business takes place. It's full of mainly middle-aged, mainly male suits earnestly discussing what will get five year-olds excited next Christmas. I always find this faintly bizarre.

However, my interest is games, so the bits of the Toy Fair that I want to visit are only a small part of the show. This means half a day is usually long enough to see everything I want to. Other commitments meant it was on the last of the show's three days that I arrived. The individual aisles seemed quiet, but there was a constant flow of people bustling about.

In the Greenhouse

The Greenhouse is the area specifically for small companies, usually making their first (and often only) visit to the Toy Fair. In the past this has been the best place to find new games as inventors proudly show off their unique creation – “based on *Monopoly*” (and/or *Trivial Pursuit*). I was thus surprised to see a couple of regulars in the Greenhouse.

The first of these was Destination Games, fronted by the irrepressible Rachel Lowe and a bright yellow colour scheme. When the first *Destination...*



game appeared, part of the marketing was Ms Lowe's appearance on *Dragon's Den*, where she failed to persuade any of the dragons to invest. Now there is a whole range of *Destination...* games, building on the first game's theme of taxis picking up and delivering fares around a particular location.



The new game was *Downton Abbey: the board game*. My first thought was that this was not a *Destination...* game, but I was quickly set right. The board shows the layout of the TV series's eponymous stately home. As junior members of staff, players have to carry out tasks that



The naval version of *War Chess* – with a couple of stray pieces

opposite side of the board. This provides a tactical element to the game as players can use their pieces to hinder their opponents (by jumping on them) as well as positioning their own pieces carefully. *Jask* is a neat combination of two well-known game mechanisms and a nicely-produced package. There's more on the game's website at: www.jaskgames.com

This brings me to the last game in the Greenhouse: *War Chess*. It's Chess, but not as we know it! Essentially, this is a Chess set that uses models of modern military hardware – drawn from a US Army Armored Division – as the pieces. An alternative set is a Navy task force: submarines, destroyers and an aircraft carrier with aeroplanes as the pawns. The other neat touch is that the pieces are magnetic and will thus position themselves neatly in the centre of the board's squares. Even better, you can do away with the squares altogether, using a plain board or one that shows suitable terrain.

The guys behind *War Chess* are full of enthusiasm and have done a good job of giving a new look to a classic game. Building on this, they are working on a campaign version of *War Chess* that would involve playing with several sets. In effect, you'd have to win several games of Chess – or just take out your opponent's command-and-control centre (the King of Kings, perhaps, in old-style Chess terms). I wish them every success with what is a rather different approach to the game. You can find more at: www.warchess.co.uk

On the main floor

Moving away from the Greenhouse, there were lots of games publishers to be found on the ground floor. The big news as far as I was concerned was the appearance of Cambridge Games Factory. Having weathered recent storms, both business and



The array of games from Cambridge Games Factory

personal, main man Ed Carter is now based in the Netherlands and keen to promote the business. On display, along with CGF's best-known game, *Glory to Rome*, were several new titles. *Montana*, designed by Rob Herman, is a card game of claiming land in the eponymous American state just after it gained statehood. Players collect cards to make Poker hands with which they bid – and bluff, of course – to gain control of areas. It sounds interesting, but I do feel that the fascination with Poker is an American thing.

The brightly-coloured cards in *Pala* (designed by Jeffrey Allers) indicate that colours are what players are interested in. It's a trick-taking game – or rather two games – as there are two different ways of playing, though using the same basic mechanism. *Quills* (designed by Paul Mullen) is a word game: each card shows a letter, so they can be strung together to make a word – the longer, the better. However, there are other graphics on the cards and other ways of forming sets, so it's not all about language skills. I, of course, hope to do well with my language skills...

All of these were available last year and CGF has plans for up to four new games this year. I'm looking forward to *Invasion of the Garden Gnomes* – because of the name if nothing else! To find out the latest, see the website at: www.cambridgegames.com

Cheatwell is a brilliant name for a games company, I've always thought. The company's large, wooden displays showed off their array of games, plus lots of other things – models, puzzles and more. Cheatwell's focus is family and party games, so there's not much to interest the hobby gamer. I was attracted by the Bygone Games range of nostalgia-laden reprints – things like *Blow Football* – but managed to tear myself away.

Distributor Coiled Spring had loads of new stuff, particularly from American children's games specialist Gamewright and German publishers/distributors Huch & Friends and



Cheatwell Games's stand

Schmidt. I was particularly impressed by the range of expansions for *Rory's Story Cubes*, one of the games Coiled Spring distributes. I'm something of a fan of the base game, but these had passed me by. Leading the selection of gamers' games were *Keyflower* and *Trajan*, along with *Keyflower: the Farmers* and *Mauna Kea*. Coiled Spring can be found at: www.coiledspring.co.uk

The main attraction at distributor Esdevium Games was their selection of CCGs. However, they're also the major source of gamers' games in the UK, including Hasbro's hobby brands. Nostalgia kicked in again with the display of reproductions of vintage versions of *Cluedo*, *Monopoly* and *Scrabble*. There's more information at the website: www.esdeviumgames.com

The venerable Gibsons Games majors in jigsaw puzzles these days, but they had a few games on display. These included new editions of *Hare and Tortoise* and *221b Baker Street*. gibsonsgames.co.uk

The Green Board Game Company still has their older interesting – and generally educational – games, but seem to have been taken over by the



A retro selection at Esdevium

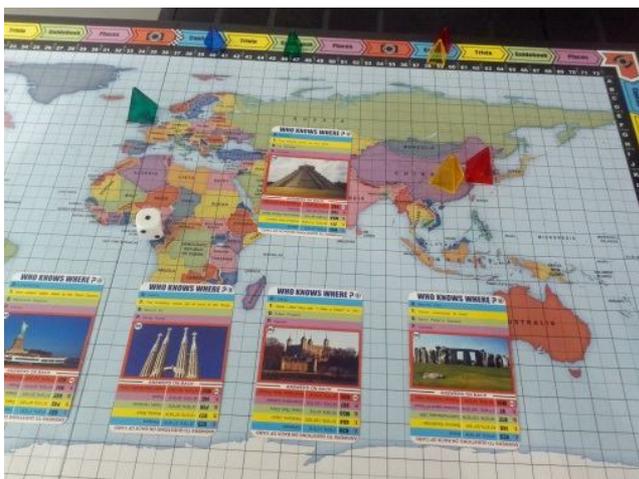
Brainbox range. The common mechanism of these games is that players study a card for a few seconds and then answer a random question based on what's on the card. It's quick to play, doesn't rely on what players already know and has an obvious educational aspect. I also suspect it's highly addictive! It's clearly been a big hit with families and I can see why. However, my aversion to memory games makes me shy away. You can find out more at the website: www.greenboardgames.com



Murder and Mystery at Paul Lamond Games

Paul Lamond Games stands out from the other stands by having black walls, rather than the ubiquitous white. Their selection of games is more ordinary, though: children's, family and party games. They do have an interesting range of Murder Mystery Dinner Party games, but I didn't see any new titles. What I did spot, lurking at the back, was what looked like a new edition of *Perudo*. This is an Aztec-themed variant on Liar's Dice, which I remember of old. However, it seems the Paul Lamond edition has been around for a while. Find more at www.paul-lamond.com

Ravensburger may be one of the giants of the German games industry, but their UK subsidiary concentrates on jigsaw puzzles. A small games section at the back of their stand featured *Scotland Yard* and *The aMAZEing Labyrinth* as the token games. There's more at: www.ravensburger.com/uk/



Wild Card Games have been regulars at the Toy Fair since their first game, *Backpacker*, something like ten years ago. Main man Sean Byrne's new game is *Who Knows Where?*, a trivia game played across a map of the world. The questions are geography-based with players placing a marker on the board to show where they think the answer is located – you may know that the picture is of Chichen Itza, but can you locate it? What's more, everybody is involved as they can all stake their claim to an answer and multiple players can be right (players' markers stack neatly).

There is also scope for bluffing as a tactical move. The aim of the game is to complete a circuit of the board along the track around the edge. And, if you feel the game is a bit easy, you can try playing on the other side of the board where the map doesn't show countries! Or use the small markers so that you have to be more precise in choosing a location. It's a clever twist on standard trivia games, which should go down well. There's

information about the game at www.whoknowswherethegame.com and more about the company at www.wildcardgames.com

Winning Moves UK is mainly about classic (ex-)Hasbro games: *Pass the Pigs*, local *Monopoly* games, *Top Trumps*, *Risk* and more. To this we can add word game *Bananagrams* and its spin-offs. There's more at the website: winningmoves.co.uk



The view from the balcony, with the Greenhouse area closest

On the balcony

That pretty much completes the floor of the hall, but there's a good wide balcony running all the way round and this, too is full of stands. My first discovery up here was Battlefront Miniatures with the latest *Flames of War* products. However, much of the space was given over to *Firefly: the game*, which the guys were demonstrating by playing! It's not often you see a game actually being played at the Toy Fair and the banter between the guys (clearly old sparring partners) was entertaining in itself.

As the name suggests, *Firefly* is based on the Joss Whedon TV series. Players are the captains of their own firefly-class ship, trading around the various worlds – or even trying a bit of smuggling. The problem is that dodgy jobs can come back to haunt you – but they're the best way of making money. The game is largely card-driven, with several different scenarios for players to try. The neat models and well laid-out board add to the appeal. Not that any fan of the TV series will need any encouragement! This is another

game I'm looking forward to trying. The latest *Flames of War* news is at www.flamesofwar.com while *Firefly: the game* can be found at co-publisher Gale Force 9's website: www.gf9.com

A little further round the gallery was *Corkers*, billed as "the wine game". Immediate appeal there! However, my heart sank when the introduction started "it's a cross between *Monopoly* and *Trivial Pursuit*." If I had a pound for every time I'd heard that sentence, I'd have... well, some money. To give them their due, Christine and Geoff Smyth have done a good job of disguising this. To start with, the board is round and nicely illustrated. As you'd expect, players roll dice, move round the board and try to buy the vineyard they land on. This they do by correctly answering a question, which earns them grapes. Get enough grapes on the vineyard and it's yours, but up until then you can be gazumped by another player. Owned vineyards earn fees when other players land on them, but the owner must answer a question correctly if they land on their own vineyard.

Corkers has several other elements that will be familiar to anyone who's played *Monopoly*, but is sufficiently different to provide a different twist. Sadly, one of the



Firefly: the board game in play



things that's been retained is the knock-out element: the aim is to drive the other players bankrupt until only one is left. The alternative, of playing for a set length of time, will still leave players sitting to one side as the game continues. This is a shame, as otherwise the game has plenty going for it – and I was assured that the questions are balanced so the wine experts don't win all the time. Find out more at the website: www.corkerswinegame.com

The banner above Drumond Park's stand stated "It's all about brands." This is apparently a lead-in to *The Logo Board game*, where players try to remember logos and brands from the past. The game itself has been around a while, but Drumond Park have been expanding the idea and now have a family of games based on this theme. The latest is *Logo Billionaire* where players collect sets of brands to make companies of variable value. First player to be worth a billion wins. The "Executive" rules allow players to take over each other's companies and adds random events in the form of newsflashes. It's an entertaining family game that I'd be happy to have a go at. Find out more at: www.drumondpark.com

Gen 42 was showing off John Yianni's clever two-player game of territory-grabbing insects, *Hive*, and its expansions, the latest being the Pillbug. *Hive* is now available as an Android app too, and I'm sure we'll see versions of a lot more games being set up like this. The website, www.gen42.com, has more about all the Gen 42 games.

Streetlight games was another new publisher not in the Greenhouse. Their game is *Hidden!*, described as a cross between *Cluedo* and Hunt the Thimble. I was intrigued at once. The idea of the game is the hunt for the missing will of a recently deceased relative. Some of the game's colourful cards will have been hidden around the house and players have to race to find them. In *Cluedo* style, it's the cards they don't find that are the answer. Players get points for discovering some of the answers with a bonus for getting all of them. I like the idea of a game that combines the physical activity of hunting for clues with the brain work of deducing the answer – I'll handle the latter bit! Find out more at www.streetlightgames.co.uk

And finally...

All in all, it was a more interesting Toy Fair from a games point of view than is often the case and I enjoyed my afternoon. I should remind readers that it is strictly a trade show, aimed at professionals in the toy business. Toy Fair is organised by the British Toy and Hobby Association, who do a good job each year. There's lots of information about the show and the exhibitors on the BTHA's website, www.btha.co.uk, and the dates of next year's Toy Fair are 20th-22nd January 2015.



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