



Toy Fair 2004

Pevans reports on the new board games at the UK event

If it's January, it must be time for the Toy Fair. Organised by the British Toy and Hobby Association and held at ExCeL in London's Docklands, the Toy Fair is the annual showcase for the British industry. The primary audience is the buyers for the big chains, buying groups and independent retailers. So the show is very much about products aimed at the mass market, though a few 'hobby' companies are there as well.

Of course, only a small proportion of those exhibiting have games to show. So it only takes me a day (or so) to get round them all. Here's my report on the new games I saw at this year's Fair.

As always, 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.

First off, I spotted some differences with the show this year. New companies were concentrated in a showcase area close to the Press Office in one corner of one hall: "The Greenhouse". This is a return of a feature of the Fair that hasn't been seen for a few years. Perhaps because the area came to be known, rather unkindly, as "Death Row". It did make my job easier as I didn't need to traipse down every aisle on the off-chance that a small games company was tucked away somewhere.

However another useful feature had disappeared. The New Products display has always been a helpful introduction to what's new at the show. And a handy place to take photos. Alas, this year it was not in evidence.

Very much in evidence this year was distributor Esdevium, which had a substantially larger stand than last year. It was great to see lots of familiar 'hobby' games on display. I hope that Esdevium will succeed in interesting a wider audience in these.

Each year, I look for trends at the show. This year's seemed to be a proliferation of slot-car racing – that is, Scalextric look-alikes. Plus lots of stands with these large, silver, inflatable Frisbees. Okay, not Frisbees, technically, but you get the idea. Quite what they're about, I don't know.

Anyway, on to the games. I'll start with the regulars, move on to the newbies and then round things up at the end.

Regulars

Distributor Boxer Games has a substantial range of adult and drinking games. Additions to the range this year include *A Night at the Dogs* board game. This is a gambling game based on greyhound racing, rather than the more usual horse racing. No details of the game were available, but it looks interesting.

Bright Sparx were back with their game *Going Underground: Zoo Edition*, which was first seen in 2002.

A wedge of jungle appeared to have materialised in the middle of the North hall. This turned out to be Britannia Games promoting their latest licensed title, *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!*, and offering "bush tucker" to passers-by. This game will be in the shops later this year. Britannia is also producing a new edition of its very first title, *Soccer Master*. This is a card game in which players try to beat their opponent with a better 'team' of forwards, defenders and midfield players. As well as the 'vanilla' edition, this will appear in Arsenal and Liverpool strips.

Britannia has a couple of other TV tie-in games just out. *Wish You Were Here...?* is a *Lost Cities*-like game of playing cards to build up tours of particular parts of the world. Cards must be played in numerical order, which gives players some decisions as to what cards they keep in their hand or discard. However, your tour has to reach a minimum total to score points. *The Vault* is a quiz game where players earn money by answering questions. The format, like the TV game, allows all the players the opportunity to gain some cash by selling answers to the main player. The player with the most money wins.

BV Leisure is best known for its range of murder mystery games. This year the company appeared to have several new games, but nobody was prepared to talk to me, so I can report no more than the basics. *Debate* looks like it's an opportunity for players to pontificate on topics given by cards. The game has Adult and Family topics and includes a timer and a gavel.

I first saw Creative Conceptions a couple of years ago with *Monogamy*. This year they have a range of over a dozen adult games. *Lust!* is a two-player game of exploring sexual fantasies. Players earn love-making cards by acting out various fantasies. Then they can cash in their cards for one of their fantasies with their partner. *What the F*ck* is an *Apples to Apples*-like drinking game, with a series of ridiculous questions (hence the name of the game). Players have to guess what one person's response to a question will be – and they have to have a drink if they get it wrong. Other new games due out later this year are *Fetish!* and *A Hot Affair*.

I've already mentioned that Esdevium had a larger presence this year. They were showing off titles from Rio Grande Games, Mayfair, Uberplay and others. The only new game I spotted was *War of the Ring*. I'm told this is an *Axis &*

Allies-style treatment of the *Lord of the Rings* from an Italian publisher. Fantasy Flight Games is producing an English language edition, which Esdevium will bring into the UK. Esdevium is also the source for Hasbro Avalon Hill games in the UK, as Hasbro UK does not carry them.

The venerable Gibsons was present, as always, though their games range is only a small part of the company these days. *Faces* was a new game, rather like *Apples to Apples*. In this game, players have a set of faces in front of them. One player picks a card and reads the question – “Which face is trying not to break wind?” for example. The other players each choose a face, trying to guess which one the questioner has picked. It should be fun.

Also from Gibsons is the compendium, *Box of Silly Word Games*. It does what it says on the tin: 25 short, sharp word games. The cube-shaped box includes a timer and scorepad.



The Green Board Game Company have several new games for the pre-school age range: rather younger than the company’s usual audience. These include two Snap games in the company’s card games selection. Then there are two Lotto games and *Farmer’s Market*, a colour-matching game. On the board games front, two new games will be out in the Autumn: *Cultural Attaché*, and *Knowbody*. Both were only on show in mock-up form. In *Cultural Attaché* players travel round the world, aiming to collect five “Cultural Attaché” cards from different areas and return to their home before anyone else.

Hasbro was a large presence, as usual. The company is celebrating the twentieth anniversary of *Trivial Pursuit* with a new version of the game under the Parker label. *Trivial Pursuit 20th Anniversary Edition* has questions covering events and celebrities through the last twenty years. Also happening this year is the 12th Monopoly World Championship. The final takes place in Hong Kong in October and the UK & Ireland Championship is in August. Another new game is *Cluedo SFX* which is a prequel to the original game. This gives the stories of the various characters in *Cluedo* and why they are suspects. It also features an electronic board with speech and sound effects.

The perennial popularity of *Monopoly* took a blow last year: *Bop-It Extreme* was Hasbro’s best-seller. This year we have *Bop-It Extreme 2*, a further incarnation of the beeping, twisting, pulling, bopping object. Meanwhile there will be several new, themed *Monopoly* games this year: *Shrek II Junior Monopoly*, *Thunderbirds Monopoly* and *Duel Masters Monopoly*. For those who prefer the classic, there’s *Nostalgia Monopoly*. This is a reproduction of one of the early editions of the game with wooden and pewter pieces in a wooden box.

Super 5 is a card game that’s rather like *Uno*. Players aim to get rid of their cards quickly without breaching the 21-points level. *Candyland* is a game for pre-school children that was a big seller in the USA in 2003. It’s a simple game of colour matching to be first to reach Candy Castle.

Under the Wizards of the Coast label, Hasbro will be bringing us *Duel Masters* later this year. This is a trading card game (or CCG), originally from Japan and with Manga-style artwork. It appears to be aimed at those new to this type of game with relatively simple mechanics. Meanwhile *Magic: the Gathering* continues to march onwards with its 8th Edition. This year's expansion is called *Fifth Dawn* and will launch in the summer.

Distributor Hobbygames was present and had a rather less cluttered stand than usual. The emphasis here was very much on fantasy role-playing, together with *HeroClix* and look-alikes, plus various CCGs – notably Decipher's *The Lord of the Rings* film tie-in CCG.

Imagination Entertainment is the new UK distributor for Canada's University Games as well as their own titles. Their big item is still *Battle of the Sexes*, the male vs female quiz game. There was also a new range of DVD games, such as *Screentest*, a movie trivia game.



I came across Impact International for the first time last year. As then, the most noticeable games on their stand were their three *Lord of the Rings* games. One game for each of the trilogy volumes/films. Each game stands on its own, but they can be linked together to provide “the ultimate battle for Middle Earth”. Impact also has a *Thunderbirds* board game due out later this year – presumably a tie-in to the new, live action film.

While I always associate Paul Lamond Games with ‘adult’ games, the company's range is much wider, including educational, children's and family games. With the adult titles now branded as McNaughty Games, the Paul Lamond name remains on everything else. This year's crop of new titles includes a UK edition of the US hit, *Marry, Date or Dump?*. This is another party game in the *Apples to Apples* mould. Faced with three well-known people, which will you marry, date or dump? And can the other players work out your choices? *Word of Mouth* is a dice-based word game. With dentures as a dice-shaker. The latest addition to Paul Lamond Games's murder mystery range, *Murder à la Carte*, is *Death in Venice*.

Re:creation was a revelation! Last year they had a medium-sized stand to publicise *Cranium* and the children's version, *Cadoo*. This year they had a large stand with a profusion of games – mostly from small, one-game companies. These included dexterity game *Corx*, which was previously produced by Upstarts!. *Cut and Run* is a gambling board game that first appeared a couple of years ago and was voted Toy of the Year in Holland last year. The game's designer, Beau Honey, was busy showing it off. Abstract game *Cirondo* was also new last year and was on show here. Here, too, was Fridgeplay, with their selection of magnetic games. Latest in the range is *FridgeFootie*, a football simulation game released for Euro 2004 – though the Fridgeplay game seems to

be 5-a-side! I like the idea of games that you stick on the fridge, but I think they need a larger kitchen than I've got.

Amongst the new games on the re:creation stand was *Mensa Connections*, a Reiner Knizia design. Unfortunately, no-one was able to tell me more about it. *Go Mental* comes from HL Games. The object of the game is to spot the odd one out from the list on each card. It's a game that needs a bit of lateral thinking to



identify the connections. I was completely flummoxed. But then amused and rueful when I realised what I'd missed. From Tadpole Games comes *Ntropy*, an action game that I didn't get the chance to try out. *Jenga meets Kerplunk!* is the best way I can describe it.

Zobmondo!! Would you rather...? is a party game in which one player has a choice and the others guess which option they will go for. The decisions are given in form of "Would you rather..." questions. "Would you rather eat a head of rotten lettuce – OR – drink a glass of sour milk?" for example. Apparently the game's been around for a while in various versions, but this is the first time I've come across it.

Treasure Trove is now the UK distributor for Scandinavian publisher, Tactic. This year's new titles from Tactic include *Piggyback*; a children's race game played with some great, stackable, wooden pigs. It might be a children's game, but it looks fun. *UK Trivia* is a quiz game of UK history, sport, geography and so on.

The big draw at the Upstarts! stand was Rick Parfitt of *Status Quo* fame, launching *Rick Parfitt's Name Game*. Players have to identify people in a specific category with initials that match the letter cards played. Other cards allow players to tamper with game play – changing the initials, for example. *Spooks* is a tie-in to the BBC TV show. The board looks rather *Escape from Colditz*-like, but I didn't get an idea of how the game plays.

It looks like being a busy year for Upstarts!. The company is starting a range of DVD games with *Mr & Mrs*. It has a number of travel games, including *Mr & Mrs* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*. This range also includes a new game, *Fruit Dice*. This is a fruit machine simulation using dice. Players have token money to bet with. FHM Games is another new range: 'adult' games developed with *FHM Magazine*. *Boys Night Out* is a collection of dares, pranks and tests to play in the bar. *Bar-Room Jokes* challenges one player to keep a straight face at a collection of jokes. *Two Pints* is a drinking game in which players score points by bouncing corks. All three are due out in July. And then there are the BBQ Games: a set of party games for the summer patio. *Tea-Tray Water Polo* is an old joke involving soaking an unsuspecting partygoer. *Griller Warfare* has players throwing plastic foam chops at each other. In *Chuck Another Shrimp on the*

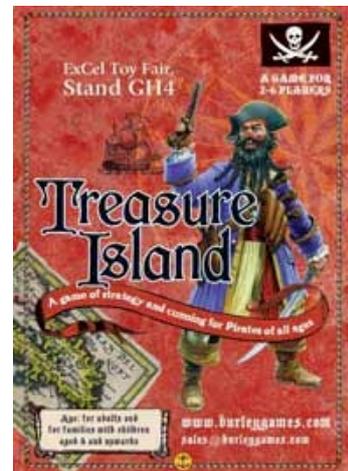
Barbie it's plastic foam shrimps, which one player is trying to catch. And *Sunny-Side up* is about hitting foam fried eggs with a frying pan. You score a point for each one that lands "sunny side up"!

The UK Winning Moves had several new special edition *Monopoly* titles, more *Top Trumps* and a number of licensed games based on Roald Dahl stories.

Newbies

Battle Command is the first game from Armada Scale Replicas, based in Dublin. This is a strategic Second World War wargame using model tanks. Each player has one of a set of objectives, depending on which nation they are playing. Battles are fought on the tactical, battle board using the models. The strategic game includes elements of logistics – keeping your troops supplied. The game should be available from March, distributed by Esdevium and Hobbygames.

Treasure Island was designed by Paul Burley and is published by Burley Games. As the title suggests, the game is about collecting treasure from an island. The various treasure chests around the island are represented on a separate board, with treasure cards dealt into the space for each chest. Players find the treasure by expanding their tokens across the board from the various landings on the coast according to the roll of the dice. At first glance, it looks like there's an interesting, if fairly abstract, game at the centre of this. However, there also seems to be a strong luck element, with lots of dice-rolling.



Games for Fun is re-launching its football game in a new version: *The Euro*. This is intended as a simulation of football tournaments and is timed for Euro 2004. Each player gets a number of teams and tries to get their teams through the tournament. Matches are resolved fairly simply using dice, modified by a seeding handicap. In the case of a tie, there are golden goal dice and even penalty shoot-outs. The game is being distributed through Hobbygames and there is also a tie-in to a charity to support the treatment of sports injuries in children (and particularly Osgood Schlatter's Disease). The World Cup version of the game has trivia questions as well.

Beat the Traffic Warden comes from Gladstone Design. It was first produced at the end of 2003 and got into a few shops for Christmas. The game has a basic roll-the-dice-and-move-the-dobber mechanism. The players are drivers, running foul of various penalties as they move round the board. However, some cards allow you to give the traffic warden back the ticket! A straightforward family game that looks quite fun.

Prospecting in Gold is an interesting name for a company. The name of their game is just as interesting: *Grab a Pig*. It was launched last year and was well-received in shops in East Anglia (the company is based in Thetford). The game has some great model pigs plus cards representing six farmyard animals. Players start with a hand of cards dealt at random. Everybody passes one card to their left. And again. And again. Until someone has a full set of the animals and grabs one of the pigs. Then everybody else has to grab one – except that there is one less than the number of players. So one player is out, you reduce the number of pigs by one and play another hand. It's played quickly, it's very silly and it's good fun.



Despite what I took to be an Irish name, Shannon Boardgames comes from Glasgow. The company has two games, *Crazy Circles* and *Tycoon*, which were both designed by founder Ewan Shannon. The first is a clever numerical version of Snakes and Ladders. The board has a grid of interlocking circles and players roll dice to move around it – where you end up depends on the die roll, but you do have some decisions to make. It's aimed at children and families.

Tycoon has a board that shows city blocks and streets, but turns out to be a *Monopoly* variant. Players move around by die roll, having the opportunity to buy property they land on – or paying rent if the property's already owned (and more if one player owns the whole block). You win when everyone else is bankrupt. However, some neat mechanisms make the game stand out. The streets give players scope for where they move, allowing them to avoid already-owned buildings and get to property that's still available. Buying property is on a hidden bid system, which is only resolved at set points. By which time other players may have bid for the property! It looks an interesting challenge.

Round-up

Having finished wandering around this year's show, I reckoned there were fewer games companies than last year. So I did a quick totting-up of the stands I'd visited: 25 versus last year's 32. But Re:creation had some dozen publishers on their stand, so there's a strong argument that there were actually more games companies present this year!

A few people were definitely missing, though. First of these was Cheatwell Games, who have a large range of fun family games. A quick look at their website suggests that they have half a dozen new games for 2004, so the company seems to be in good health. Also missing was David Westnedge, a distributor of classic games (Chess, Backgammon, Go etc) and playing cards. I'd guess that the show is no longer particularly useful for them.

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