

## London Toy Fair 2005

Pevans sampled the new games



The Toy Fair is the industry's annual showcase where manufacturers try to second-guess what's going to be in vogue for next Christmas. My job is to winkle out the new games from the array of exciting new toys (this year there seemed to be a lot of Scalextric look-alikes, but I didn't waste any time on them). Bear in mind that the audience for Toy Fair is the mass market (and toy shops in particular). The exhibitors tend to be very different from those you'd find at a specialist games event (such as GEN CON or Spiel). Even those who do produce 'hobby' games – like Hasbro's Avalon Hill range – don't show them at the Toy Fair. The main exception to this is Esdevium Games, about whom more later.

From a games point of view, there are generally two sorts of companies at Toy Fair. The established companies publish several new games each year, have established networks of customers and design their own stands. The individual games inventors and start-up publishers are in standard spaces (Toy Fair's 'greenhouse' area), usually with just the one game. They are always full of enthusiasm for their product and eager to convince buyers of its merits. Sadly, many of these games turn out to be either **Monopoly** or **Trivial Pursuit**. (In fact, I didn't see a single **Monopoly** clone this year, but there were quite a few **Trivial Pursuit** variants.) Occasionally, somebody crosses the divide, but it's tough to build a business out of publishing games.

I tend not to pay too much attention to the bigger companies at the Toy Fair, since what they are producing is pretty predictable. So this article concentrates on the smaller and newer publishers. As always, let me make it clear that when I refer to a game as being like some other game, I am not suggesting it is a copy. This is a shorthand way of giving readers an idea of what the game is about.

Bored No Longer is an exception to my categorisation of companies at Toy Fair, being a fairly small, fairly new company which has a range of toys and games. Two of the games caught my attention. The first is **Blanko**, a word game along standard board-and-tiles lines that incorporates forfeits/tasks. The second is an abstract game called **Disx**. This uses rings dropped over pegs on a square board. Adding the fourth ring to a peg scores the player a point. S/he then has to re-distribute those rings to the four pegs next to them. Which may trigger further scoring and re-distribution and so on. The game clearly has some tactical options and looks rather good.



Bright Sparx were again showing **Going Underground: Zoo Edition**, which premiered in 2002. It's a family board game of capturing animals that have escaped from London Zoo and are loose in the tunnels of the Underground.

Britannia Games had more board game versions of television shows: **The Vault** and **I'm a Celebrity, Get me Out of Here** were launched at the end of last year. The first is a quiz game where all the contestants can earn money (by selling answers to whoever's in the hot seat) and potentially win the game. The latter has players using their action points each turn to travel round the board and collect things to earn the votes that could win them the game. There are, of course, hazards around the board and players have to remember to eat from time to time or they'll run out of energy. This is quite a clever game with some interesting tactical options. Coming up this year are **Countdown** and **Concludo**, an original word game. No details are available on either yet.

BV Leisure is best known for its murder mystery games, but didn't appear to have anything new for this year.

Abstract game **Cirondo** was on display in the stylish black stand that was also prominent at Spiel. I first saw the game in 2003 and it's been doing well around Europe since then.

Another attractive abstract game is **Cubi-Cup** from Hungarian publisher CubiTeam. The game is somewhat reminiscent of **Pylos**, in that players build up a three dimensional shape – a tetrahedron in this case – and win by placing the last piece on top. The key tactic is setting up a three-cube 'cup', which forces the next player (2-3 can play) to play twice and lose the initiative. The game is simple, plays well and comes in an attractive wooden version and a colourful plastic version.

It was good to see Drumond Park back at the Toy Fair again. This year they are re-launching their verbal challenge game (originally called **Spit It Out**) as **Don't Panic**. You take a card, read out the subject and then name things that fit the subject. Against a timer. Succeed and next time you have to name more things – and there are different levels of difficulty, too. At the centre of **Butt Out!** is a clockwork mountain goat. Players move their people round the edge of the board, trying to get to the top of the mountain. But that goat keeps butting people off! Very silly, good fun. Also new is a junior version of **Bedlam**, which features squeaky chickens for players to grab – or go out of the game.

Flying the flag for 'hobby' games and in line with their status as a distributor for Hasbro, Esdevium Games had a smart stand next to their big partner. The display cases at the front were full of CCGs and other fantasy stuff, but there were plenty of board games at the back of the stand – including **Settlers**, **Ticket to Ride**, **War of the Ring** and others. However, I couldn't find anything there that was actually new.

Falcon Games is the UK arm of Jumbo, but concentrates on jigsaw puzzles. Other than various Bob the Builder-themed games, the only game on display was **Stratego** in its various forms.

There aren't many games amidst Feva's range of toys, but they do have **CSI: Crime Scene Investigation – the board game**. Yes, it's a TV tie-in, but it looks more interesting than most. This is a deduction game with some eight cases included. Players have to emulate the characters in the television series in working out who carried out a crime from the forensic evidence. The game sounds pretty challenging and I, for one, would like to give it a go.

**Blag!** is, quite simply, Fictionary Dictionary (or **Call My Bluff**) with pictures. One player shows a picture to the others, who write captions for it. All the captions, including the original, are read out and players vote on their favourites. Players score votes for their caption as points. The first game from Futurus Games, this is a nice variation on an old favourite.



Nowadays the venerable Gibson's is more about jigsaw puzzles than games. They did have one new arrival for 2005: a travel version of **Pass the Bomb**. This has the timer mechanism in just half the 'bomb' so that the other half can hold the cards. My only worry is just how well this will go down with airport security!

Hobbygames was the other hobby games distributor at the show. Their stand seemed a bit sparse with the emphasis on fantasy games and figures.

Hasbro is the biggest presence at the Toy Fair. Most of its stand is about toys, of course, but the company does show its new games. Heading the list was **Monopoly Here and Now**, an updated version of the classic. The idea of this is that it's **Monopoly** as if it had been designed today. Thus we have debit cards instead of cash, different locations and, of course, rather different prices. Hasbro has a lot more updated versions of old games this year. The other noticeable feature was several DVD versions of **Trivial Pursuit**. CCGs got a mention with new expansions for **Duel Masters** and **Magic: the Gathering** later this year.

Imagination Entertainment is UK distributor for Canada's University Games, best known for **Battle of the Sexes** and its range of Dr Seuss games. The new Dr Seuss game is **Rhyme Time** and there's also a new quiz game, **Blast from the Past**. This is kind of a nostalgia trivia game with questions on each decade from the Sixties to the Nineties.

Knowall Games is a new publisher with its first game, **Knowwhere**. This is a good-looking Memory game with an educational slant. Instead of finding identical pictures, players have to match countries and their capitals. Each card shows the country's national flag and highlights it on a map, helping players who don't already know the capitals. The first version, of European countries, appeared last year and has been a big hit in classrooms. Coming up is an Americas edition, featuring the countries and capitals of North, South and Central America. The game is nicely produced and its educational content is sufficiently well disguised not to put off potential players.

Paul Lamond Games produces a wide range of games: children's, family and 'adult'. I wasn't able to find out anything about their new titles for 2005.

I spotted an English language version of the new edition of **Expedition** on the Ravensburger stand. This is better known as the classic **Wildlife Adventure**. Apart from having a National Geographic logo on it, the game did not seem to have changed significantly from its earlier incarnations. But it's heartening to see Ravensburger UK giving it some attention – normally they concentrate on the parent company's jigsaws and children's games.

I expect to see a lot of different games on re:creation's stand, as the company handles marketing for quite a few small publishers. Chief amongst these is **Cranium** and its range of spin-offs. New for this year are a family edition of **Cranium** and **Cranium Hullabaloo**, a noise-making game aimed at 4 year-olds. Apart from that, re:creation had two new trivia games for us. **Lifestyle** is "a superb trivia game based on exclusive brands and knowledge of the finer things in life." Hence the questions are pretty eclectic, but all have a common theme of celebrity lifestyles. Gameplay is pretty straightforward, but players have the option of gambling on getting the answer right to win extra points. Not a game I'd do well at, but **World of Wines** sounds more my kind of thing. The topic of the game is pretty obvious and cards have three levels of difficulty to give everybody a chance of competing. Now if only it contained a few bottles to sample...



RTL Games already has a success on its hands as **Destination London!** did well over Christmas. This is a family board game in which players are cabbies delivering fares around London to earn money. While the topic is the same, it is a different game from the earlier games I know: **Taxi!** and **The London Cabby Game**. **Destination** has several little wrinkles, such as the need to re-fuel and random event cards. It's bright, fun and makes a good family game.

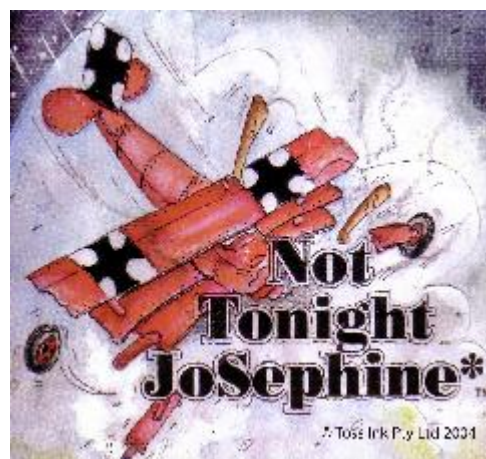
Shannon Boardgames made their first appearance at last year's Toy Fair with a couple of games. This year they're back with a range of around a dozen. Designer Ewan Shannon has come up with lots of new games, which he's packaged in the same size of box to make an attractive display. Taking them in alphabetical

order, we start with **Antonine**. This is a dice and pawns two-player game of Picts vs Romans over the Antonine Wall. It's a game of tactical manoeuvring, though with a substantial luck element. **Crazy Golf** has the players competing over a series of hazard-strewn mini-golf challenges. Dice rolls provide the impetus, but players have to use them to avoid the hazards. **Dribble!** is a clever football game using four- and six-sided dice to dribble and pass the ball and to tackle other players.

Moving to the countryside, **Sheepdog Trials** pits one player's sheep against the other player's attempts to round them up – and the timer. Swapping sides, the players try again to see who does better. Again, the game uses dice to control movement, but the time element adds another dimension. Similar, but different, is **Showjumping Trials**. Here players have to use their dice rolls to get across the various obstacles, while attempting to complete the course in the shortest time. Do you slow down to get a clear round or accept some 'faults' and get a fast time? In **Yachting** the dice show the actual movement directions as players try to manoeuvre their boats around the board. This looks rather neat and provides an interesting challenge. As if these weren't enough, the range also includes a version of **Hnefatafl**, the Viking board game, and several children's games.

I was pleased to see the return of Sibling Revelry – for the company name if nothing else! Their game is **Cinémathique**, a cinema-based trivia/performance game, which is now in production. Teams have to complete all five subjects – by answering a question, miming, acting or singing – in their two chosen eras. First to complete the set of 10 wins.

**Not Tonight Josephine** is a good-looking trivia game from Australian company Toss Ink. The subject matter here is history, with players looking to correctly answer questions on half a dozen different aspects of history. The questions and answers provide all sorts of fascinating and entertaining trivia and the whole thing is very well produced.



Treasure Trove handles games from Tactic and Fundex in the UK, but didn't seem to have anything new on display.

Upstarts' new publications for 2005 include **Who Wants to be a Millionaire – Gold Edition**. This is another chance to pit your wits against friends and family. The latest quiz game is **Bullseye**, which comes complete with a velcro dartboard and darts. At least, the board game version does. There's also a DVD version of the game and I can't see them fitting the darts into a DVD case. **Identikit** has one member of the team describing a face from the picture they have. Their team-mates have to match the description by combining a top, middle and bottom of a face from a book of identikit-style features.

I was quite taken with a two-player climbing game, whose name escapes me. This uses figures with pegs for hands and feet. These are moved up a vertical board by shifting the pegs. But while one player is doing this, the other player, sitting on the other side, pushes the pegs out!

Also on the Upstarts! stand was their range of adult games under the FHM brand. There were several games for younger children involving frogs.

**TV Bingo** livens up advert breaks on the television. Players fill in a bingo-style card when they see or hear particular things. Some sort of prize is needed, I feel. Another game on show was **Sequence** from Nordic Games in Iceland. This has been around for a while: players build lines across the board by marking pictures of playing cards. There were DVD versions of **Catchphrase** and lots of other games as well.

**Backpacker** is a new card game from Wildcard Games and reminded me a bit of **Grass**. Players score points by playing cards for different countries, with a hefty bonus for visiting five continents in one trip. However, you don't score anything until you get home. Which is where everybody else gets in the way, playing cards to stop you or reduce your score. There are, of course, cards to clear obstructions and get you home quicker, but your options are limited by the cards in your hand. Then again, there are opportunities to swap hands, pick up fresh cards and pass cards on. The game's pretty chaotic, but it generates the right atmosphere and is quite fun. It doesn't take long to play a single hand either, so this makes a good filler.



The UK Winning Moves had new regional **Monopoly** games and **Top Trumps** packs, as usual. They also had **The Da Vinci Code**, a tie-in to the thriller. The aim of the game is to work out what your opponent's number is. Both players set a code. They then try to guess each other's sequence of numbers, with each correct answer giving some clues as to what the other digits are.

I didn't spot any noticeable trends at this year's Toy Fair. Apart from a move to using DVDs to deliver quiz games. It was interesting, too, to see more companies opting for closed stands this year. Some years ago, it was the norm for all stands to be walled off and access controlled via a reception desk (or uniformed commissionaires in the case of Hasbro). Then companies moved to having open stands so that everybody could see all the exciting new stuff. Now we seem to be moving back to controlling who can see things.

© Copyright Paul Evans 2005. All trademarks acknowledged.

Toy Fair logo courtesy of BTHA. **Disx** picture courtesy of Bored No Longer. **Blag!** picture courtesy of Futurus Games. **World of Wines** picture courtesy of re:creation. **Not Tonight Josephine** artwork courtesy of Toss Ink Pty Ltd. **Backpacker** artwork courtesy of Wild Card games.