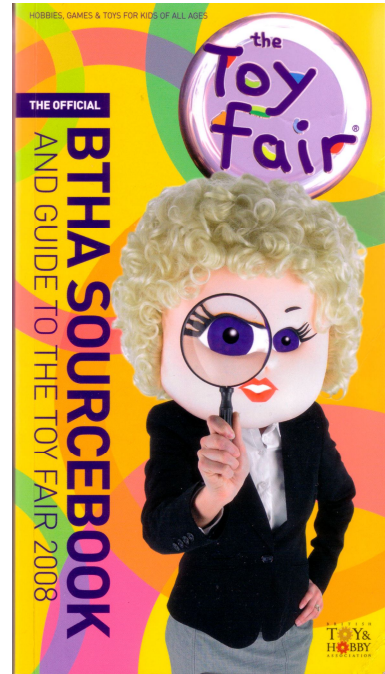


Toy Fair 2008

Pevans visited ExCeL for the London show

I don't expect much from the Toy Fair in terms of interesting games, but this year's show was particularly disappointing. As usual, the bigger companies concentrate on the family market and licensed products. However, the 'Greenhouse' area, which showcases new companies, typically has lots of people each showing the game what they have invented. This year, there were only a few – and most of these were familiar faces. This is good news for them, as it shows they are still operating after another year, but less good for me as I'm looking for new games.

As I'm sure most of you will be aware, the London Toy Fair, run by the British Toy and Hobby Association, is the annual showcase for the UK toy industry. It is an opportunity for manufacturers and distributors to show buyers what they are planning for the year – and, particularly, the next Christmas season. It takes place at the end of January (yes, just after Christmas!) at the ExCeL centre in London's Docklands and is the first in a sequence of fairs around the world (the big Nuremberg show is a week later and the New York fair the week after that).



Games are, of course, only a small part of the toy industry and thus a small part of the Toy Fair. As the games are my sole interest in the show, it doesn't take me long to do the rounds. However, I had a distinct shock on entering this year's fair: there was no sign of Gibsons. Gibsons has been a fixture in British games for over seventy years, though in recent years jigsaw puzzles have taken over as the company's main business. I discovered later that the company was at the Spring Fair in the NEC, which started the day after the Toy Fair. A number of games companies no longer take space at the Toy Fair, preferring to be at the larger, but wider scope, Spring Fair.

Another well-known name that wasn't there was Upstarts!. The company has been around since 1988 and is probably best known in gaming circles as the publisher of *The Really Nasty Horse Racing Game* (and more widely for the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire Board Game*). This year, the stand in Upstarts' usual spot was labelled "University Games". It was still showing games (and other products) with the Upstarts! logo, though. Apparently, Upstarts ran into cash flow problems, went into administration in April 2007 and was bought by University Games in June. This is interesting, not just because it preserves the Upstarts range, but because it immediately makes University Games a bigger player in the UK.



I spotted two new games on the stand, both from University Games. The idea of *Cro-Magnon* is to evolve into Homo Sapiens by 're-discovering' the skills of your Cro-Magnon tribe. One player has to communicate to the rest of their team in various different ways: sketching in charcoal, miming, primitive language and modelling. In other words, it's a combination of forms of *Charades*, *Pictionary* and *Rapidough* – not unlike *Cranium*. The second game was *Smart Ass*, billed as the ultimate trivia game and also under the University Games label. The game has a series of clues for each question, progressively getting easier until someone gets the answer and wins the round. Each round won moves you closer to the 'Smart Ass' and winning the game. It sounds like good fun, but still a fairly standard trivia game.

Distributor David Westnedge was back at the Toy Fair after a few years' absence in favour of the Spring Fair. The company had its usual selection of high quality generic games (Chess sets, Backgammon, playing cards and so on). Alongside this were the ranges of games from US publishers Playroom Entertainment and Out of the Box – including *Apples to Apples*. Playroom has *Ilium*, a new game from Reiner Knizia on the way, but there was no sign of it on the Westnedge stand. Similarly, the new titles from Out of the Box were not yet with Westnedge.

Hasbro were the biggest presence at the show, of course, but Hasbro UK doesn't bother with the parent company's 'hobby' brands – Avalon Hill, TSR, Wizards of the Coast. These are handled in the UK by Esdevium Games. So I spent my time at the Esdevium stand rather than Hasbro. However, Esdevium know their audience and play down the hobby games at the Toy Fair. Pride of place this year went to a *Subbuteo*-branded version of *PitchCar* (or *Carabande* for those who've been around a bit longer). If you don't know it, this is the car racing game where you flick pucks along the track. It's great fun and should do well on the High Street – particularly with the *Subbuteo* name on it.

My old friends at Britannia Games were in their usual place and had several new games to show off in pre-production form. First off was *Concludo*, the word game that's been in gestation for a while. This is a card game where the object is to get rid of your cards by making words. You can use the cards already played, within some restrictions, so there's plenty of opportunity to do this and the game moves pretty quickly. Next up was *The Songs of Lennon and McCartney*. This uses dominoes inscribed with verses and choruses of the songs. They are divided between the players, who then play one domino at a time and re-construct the songs with the lyrics in the right order. Challenges are dealt with by turning over the pieces to check their place in the sequence, with appropriate penalties for whichever player is in the wrong. There doesn't seem to be much of a game there, but it's certainly a challenge getting the songs right. The final game is a board game of TV series *Hell's*



The new, smaller box and the original version of *Where is Moldova?*

Kitchen. This is at an early stage yet, but involves playing the correct ingredients to make one of the various recipes in the box.

Drumond Park has an interesting selection of family games. Their big title for 2008 is *Britain's Got Talent*: the game, which will be released alongside the second series of the TV show. As you'd expect, this will be a performance game and the box will contain lots of "fun-packed props". A second TV tie-in is *Play Your Cards Right*, which makes a point of reproducing as much as possible of the television show.

Several old Spears titles made a re-appearance with Paul Lamond Games: *Scrabble* (in its classic format with wooden tiles), *Game of the Year* and *Perudo*. It's good to see these available again, but they're not really new. However, I didn't see anything else of interest on the Paul Lamond stand.

Re:creation is a marketing umbrella for many different manufacturers and usually includes several board games publishers. However, apart from *Cranium*, there was no sign of any board games on their stand this year.

RTL Games returned with the latest versions of the *Destination...* game – driving your taxi to deliver passengers to their destinations and collect the fare (and the tips). One of these is the *Destination Hogwarts* that was touted at last year's show. As the name suggests, this is a Harry Potter-themed version of the game. The other is a Pixar tie-in, *Destination Animation*, featuring artwork from *Toy Story*, *Finding*



Rotten Romans from Sophisticated Games

Nemo and other Pixar films. The game, however, remains essentially the same. An interesting feature of RTL's stand was the screen showing the footage of Rachel Lowe (the game's inventor and boss at RTL) being rejected on the BBC's *Dragon's Den*. An enterprising use of a very public rejection! Not that it seems to have done the game or the company any harm.

KC Games has graduated from the Greenhouse area to the main floor of the show. They were showing off the second edition of their game, *Wheeler Dealer*. This is a game of buying and selling with the aim of making a profit by guessing correctly what the dice are going to do. The new edition has re-vamped artwork and new rules and has been selling well in independent stores.

Other games companies around the show were Ravensburger UK, who concentrate on jigsaw puzzles, and Tactic Games UK, whose new games all seemed to be for children this year. This leaves the Greenhouse area and I was surprised how many here were returning companies rather than first-timers.

Rasib Khan was back with *Alphabet Runner*, the educational word game that I saw first at last year's show. Circa Circa is the publisher of *About Time*, a trivia game that was launched at Spiel last year. All the answers in this are dates, allowing people to be closest rather than having to be right. Special powers liven things up a bit. Seager Games returned after two years with the second edition of *Where is Moldova?*. This is rather smaller than the original version of the game, making it much more manageable.

Coiled Spring is a distributor and handles Gamewright's fine range of children's games in the UK. They are now UK distributor for Gigamic's abstract games as well. The latest from them are *Marrakech* and *Tortuga*, the first with little carpets to lay on the board to score points and the latter featuring little turtles racing across an island. As usual, these games are both interesting and attractive – coffee table games as I call them.

This is the first time I've seen Sophisticated Games at the Toy Fair, though the company has been around for quite a while with games like Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* and *Ingenious*, not to mention *Shakespeare: the Bard Game*. Their new game for this year is *The Rotten Romans*, based on the Horrible Histories series of books. I didn't get any details of the game.

The brand new people started with Art meets Matter, a design agency that has produced its first board game: *Bookchase* – the brainchild of main man Tony Davis. As you'd expect, this is a nicely produced



game with attractive playing pieces. Players gain books by visiting the bookshop or the library or answering questions correctly, but may lose them again (dropping them in the bath, for example). Not a deep game, but entertaining enough. And the book theme means it's reaching parts other games don't (Waterstone's, for one).

Game Ideas was back with *Cuberty*, the 3-D word game that has been around for several years now. Designer Nigel Newberry has added to his with a 3-D 'card' game, *Ordered*. Like *Cuberty*, this uses cubes with some blank sides. However, this time the printed sides show suits and ranks (like playing cards), rather than letters. This provides different approaches to conventional card games as well as the opportunity for something different. Lots of potential here.

JC Games is the publisher of *Blackhole*, designed by John Chambers. This a board-based word game using tiles of single letters and combinations (like 'sh' or 'ing'). Players move on the board to collect tiles and use them to make words. The combinations make it easier for players to make longer words and provide phonics to help youngsters play the game. It was produced in a limited initial print run and has been selling well since its launch last autumn.

Last on this list, but my favourite of the games I saw at the show is *Ruk-shuk* from Canadian company Zabazoo. This is a dexterity game that uses artificial rocks in various colours. Players have to match the construction on the card they draw without it falling over. Incorporating the coloured rocks, which are more unstable, scores more points. This is a cracking little game and I hope it gets a much bigger audience. Capitalising on this game, Zabazoo also produces *Stonees*, a box of the artificial rocks used in *Ruk-shuk*. Just what every small child wants – and a few big ones too!

Zabazoo's new game for this year is *Jakbo*. This is a two-player abstract where players try to build their pieces across the board to their opponent's side. The pieces are 3-D shapes made up of four, five or six cubes. A simple premise, but a complex and good-looking game.



Overall, this was a disappointing show with very few interesting new games. I do hope that next year's fair will be better: 28th-31st January 2009 at ExCeL. For more information, see the website at www.toyfair.co.uk.

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