

Play Around This Year

Games are serious business. Last year, Americans spent more than \$300 million on board games alone (not counting electronic games or sporty games like badminton). Since Monopoly, the all-time favorite board game, was invented in 1935, it has sold 80 million copies, not including its success in 27 foreign countries. Runners-up in popularity are Parcheesi (the oldest, imported from India in 1867) and Scrabble, the baby of the bunch, invented in 1948. Pretenders to the Game Throne are Risk, The Game of Life and Diplomacy. But those are all pretty familiar by now. We decided to ignore these — and the backgammon phenomenon, about which too much has already been written.

We set out to show you something New. Or at least Different. Gripped with the spirit of idealistic consumer research, clutched by a desire to help *Ampersand* readers make difficult choices in the days ahead, and tickled by a yen to play some games, we sallied forth to a toy store. Our purpose: to buy, play and evaluate new games. A Reader Service.

It should be noted here that the Milton Bradley company, largest manufacturer of games in this country, tests and evaluates its proposed games over a ten-to-eighteen-month period, sometimes spending as much as \$500,000 on such research before they ever put the thing on the market. We didn't do quite that much.

Armed with very little information and naive determination, Publisher Achee and Editor Sims found themselves faced with about 500 shelf feet of games in the "adult" section. Eeny, meeny, miny, moe worked for awhile; then they went by manufacturers (one Avalon Hill, one Kenner, etc.), and finally switched to impulse (the brightest colored packages won here).

Their Selections

Boggle (Parker), Spill & Spell (Parker), Panzer Leader (Avalon Hill), The Guinness Game of World Records (Parker), The Ungame (Ungame Inc.), Star Wars (Kenner), and Petropolis (Pressman).

The Test Setting

The palatially furnished tenement apartment of our publishers in Fox Hills, a hitherto unknown section of Los Angeles. They served potato chips and a sour cream dip. The wine was OK, but M&M's?

The Cast

The entire *Ampersand* staff—Achec, Dickey, Everett, Hatch, Lampton, Rice and Sims, fleshed out (figuratively speaking) with friends (victims) Pete Senoff and Denise Galvin, plus two children, Lori and Kelley, rented for the occasion (and their Young Opinions).

The Script

Each game, in no particular order, was played and then rated according to time required to set up and learn; degree of challenge and hilarity; attractiveness of packaging; and space was provided for suggested improvement.



The Results

We won't save the best for last. The hands-down winner of the day, which kept five people riveted to a card table for four hours (long moments of silence followed by groans of dismay and whoops of triumph) was Boggle. That's right, a simple word game, where players try to make as many words as possible from a number of adjacent letters. Great fun; no doubt about it.

Spill & Spell, another word game (no we weren't all editors and writers), was the runner-up. With this one, small letter cubes are shaken up, tossed out, and then arranged in as many (preferably long) words as possible, crossword-puzzle-style, within three minutes. Nerve-racking.

The silliest game of the day had to be Guinness, a board-stunt-trivia ordeal during which children and grownups alike demonstrated their total lack of coordination. Guinness makes you DO things, like tiddly winks, bouncing a ping-pong ball off a piece of paper, and other feats of worthless prowess. The multiple choice or true/false questions from the *Guinness Book of World Records* weren't terribly difficult, and the answers were far too abrupt: "Which is smaller? A. smallest reptile B. Heaviest insect." The answer is A, but wouldn't you like to know which reptile is so tiny? Presumably, this game was devised so people would have to buy the book. Only one person said she'd like to buy Guinness: one of the kids, not surprisingly.

Star Wars wasn't as bad as everyone thought it would be; the kids liked it, especially when their opponents were sent to the Trash Compactor, but the game had some serious

drawbacks. Too easy, for one (players ranged in age from 8 to 32; the 8-year-old won, much to the chagrin of the 32-year-old). Too awkward, for another: the playing pieces were too large. Most players agreed they would play Star Wars again—but they wouldn't buy it.

Petropolis is a lot like Monopoly, played with Petrodollars instead of mere dollars. Deals are made, monopolies maneuvered and rents charged, but instead of Boardwalk and Park Place, the prime real estate here is Saudi Arabia (\$1,000,000). Inflation is everywhere.

The Ungame. Blech, yuck and phooey. This is one of those dumb psychological tell-the-truth games where players can wander aimlessly around a board picking cards which pose tasks and questions: "Give one word to describe each person in the group." There are two sets of cards, one called "Light-hearted," the other "Deep understanding." No one wins or loses; it really is an Ungame. All this is meant quite seriously; it's supposed to help you get to know your fellow players. This may be nifty if you're playing with Norman Mailer, Joni Mitchell, or Fidel Castro, (they're not so hot either, now that we think of it), but for us, nix.

Panzer Leader was too intimidating, with maps and thick book of instructions and tiny little squares with letters and numbers. We gave up before we started. Figured it would take less time to re-fight World War II than learn this game. If you start Panzer Leader when you enter college, you'll probably have it set up and ready for play by the time you graduate. Nobody could ever say you wasted four years.

That's it, folks. Our First (and probably last) Annual Game Tasting Party. If any of these games inspire you with a spirit of competition and greed—just think how useful they'll be during final exam week.