

JAMES LOWDER'S GAMES TO GIFT 2018

TOP PICK:

AZUL

PUBLISHER: PLAN B; DESIGNER: MICHAEL KIESLING

2-4 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$40 (SUGGESTED RETAIL)

In *Azul*, players are artisans summoned by King Manuel I of Portugal to decorate the Royal Palace of Evora, using the Moorish art of decorative tile. Take turns selecting colored tiles, filling rows on your work board, and then transfer a tile to your section of palace wall. The game ends when the first player completes a horizontal tile row. Scores are based on the display, with points earned for patterns of aligned tiles, number of horizontal and vertical rows, and so on. *Azul* features simple, elegant rules, but potentially complex choices, as you can select tiles to complete your pattern or to force players choosing after you to select pieces that may go unused and end up costing them points. Gameplay is fast, with the full session taking only 30 to 45 minutes. Earlier this year, *Azul* won the prestigious Spiel de Jahres for game of the year, to almost no one's surprise. *Azul: Stained Glass of Sintra* is a recent reimplementaion, with players serving as stained glass window designers. It features translucent pieces in place of the original's resin tiles and some additional rules. Both versions are wonderful.

OTHER GREAT NEW GAMES:

Family Games:

MAGIC MAZE

PUBLISHER: SIT DOWN!; DESIGNER: KASPER LAPP

1-8 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$33

2018 was another great year for cooperative games, with the release of the latest installment in Matt Leacock's *Forbidden* series, *Forbidden Skies*. But co-ops can get tedious for some gaming groups, if the same players end up directing the action for everyone at the table. *Magic Maze* avoids that problem by strictly limiting talking during the game. Four fantasy characters have been stranded in a shopping mall, and the dwarf, barbarian, mage, and elf must explore the mall and swipe some new gear, then escape before mall security closes in on them. Each player is limited to a single type of move or action—one player can only shift pawns to the north, for example—and no one is allowed to talk during play, except in very specific circumstances. A timer keeps up the pressure as everyone struggles to wordlessly forge a plan, grab their gear, and escape before the time runs out. *Magic Maze* includes various scenarios, some that help teach the game, others that make things more complex. Each frantic session typically wraps in under 15 minutes. The *Maximum Security* expansion adds a security system and *Magic Maze Kids* slims down the rules, layers on a less larcenous theme, and makes the game accessible for kids as young as five.

CRYPTID

PUBLISHER: OSPREY; DESIGNERS: HAL DUNCAN, RUTH VEEVERS

3-5 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$35

In *Cryptid*, players are cryptozoologists searching a gridded map for an elusive or possibly mythical creature. Each player is armed with one clue about where the cryptid may be lurking, near water, for example, or in the mountains. If another player lands on a map space and asks if the cryptid could be there, that answer gets shared. *Cryptid* is a pure deductive game, with set-ups of varying difficulty that lend it good replay value. It's released by Osprey, a house known to longtime hobbyists as the publisher of wonderful military reference books. Like many other book and comic publishers, they've started testing the crowded board game market in recent years. *Cryptid* is a strong release from the relatively young imprint.

FLAMME ROUGE

PUBLISHER: STRONGHOLD; DESIGNER: ASGER HARDING GRANERUD

2-4 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$50

Perfect for the Tour de France fanatics on your holiday gift list, *Flamme Rouge* is a cycling race game. Each player controls two riders—a rouleur and a sprinteur—each with a separate movement card deck. Race stages are created using modular track components. Players simultaneously select movement cards and place them face down. Movement is revealed in turn, until all the cyclists have progressed. Finally, riders with only a space between them and the bikes ahead of them can slipstream, or move up, while riders ending with only space ahead of them add an exhaustion card to their movement deck. In addition, movement cards can only be used once during a stage, so each turn includes several opportunities for tactical decisions. A stage typically takes 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Different stage configurations add mountains, which eliminate slipstreaming, limit ascent movement, and establish minimum decent movement. A clever design, expertly presented.

Kids Games:

CAMEL UP

PUBLISHER: EGGERTSPIELE; DESIGNER: STEFFEN BOGEN

3-8 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$40

Camel Up saw its initial release in 2014, but this new edition seriously improves the component quality and adds some rules that make the game more challenging. Players bet on five different colored camels as they race around a pyramid. The earlier the player places a bet on a winner or loser, the greater the possible payout, but also the greater the chance something will happen on the track to change the race's outcome, like camels crashing into each other or a player using a spectator card to slow down or speed up a particular racer. Good bets earn you coins. Bad bets cost you coins. Movement is based on dice rolled from the pyramid dice shaker. Opportunities for strategy are a little limited, but races play out in a speedy 30 minutes so that's not much of a flaw.

FIREBALL ISLAND: THE CURSE OF VUL-KAR

PUBLISHER: RESTORATION GAMES; DESIGNERS: CHUCK KENNEDY, BRUCE LUND, ROB DAVIAU, ET AL

2-4 PLAYERS; 7 AND UP; \$75

Fireball Island first saw life as a fondly remembered 1986 Milton Bradley release, with visitors to a 3-D volcanic island racing around to collect treasures while the eternally angry volcano spit fireballs (okay, marbles) at the people trying to steal its prized gem. In this updated version, players collect treasure and snapshots from around the island, while still trying to avoid the wrath of Vul-Kar and its marble-fueled mayhem. Card-based movement replaces the old random dice roll and a set collection mechanic for the treasure adds some potential for strategy. There's a dexterity component, too, as players can push fireball marbles at their rivals' pawns, stealing treasure from anyone they wipe out. *Fireball Island* is an old school American game, with great toy value and a lot going on. The clever redesign also added conditional rules that are easy to pick up with play, but which add some surprising depth. Expansions to *Fireball Island* layer on player powers and secret (sinister) motives, moving this more firmly into family game or even hobby game territory.

Hobby Games:

BETRAYAL LEGACY

PUBLISHER: AVALON HILL; DESIGNERS: ROB DAVIAU, J.R. HONEYCUTT, ET AL

3-5 PLAYERS; 12 AND UP; \$75

Betrayal Legacy is a prequel of sorts to the already-awesome *Betrayal at the House on the Hill*, first released in 2004 and updated in 2010 with a second edition. The original *Betrayal* is a tile-based exploration game that has players creating their own haunted house, even as they search for the

traitor in their midst. *Betrayal Legacy* marries the haunted house exploration theme with legacy mechanics. Players represent families involved with the house over three centuries. During a prologue and thirteen chapters, which run 45 to 90 minutes each, the characters create the house's backstory, the tragic tale of its haunting. Powers and story elements revealed in one chapter can carry over to the next. Event cards can change game components. Items can achieve heirloom status and provide better benefits for the family to which they are connected. All this builds to a version of the house with a unique history created by your gaming group. Better still, the end result is a game you can continue to play, something not always possible with legacy-style designs.

KEYFORGE: CALL OF THE ARCHONS

PUBLISHER: FANTASY FLIGHT; DESIGNER: RICHARD GARFIELD

2 PLAYERS; 14 AND UP; \$40

KeyForge is the latest design from Richard Garfield, creator of the classic collectable card game *Magic: The Gathering*. Like *Magic*, *KeyForge* is a card-based combat game. It's not a deck-building game, though. No adding cards to your deck through booster packs. No drafting from a larger fixed set of cards. The deck you have is unique, and your goal is to discover its strengths and weaknesses through repeated clashes with other unique decks. (In just the first set, there are supposedly more than 104 quadrillion possible decks; with Garfield's background in combinatorial mathematics, I believe that.) Players are Archons, powerful ancient beings who fight to find and unlock their planet's hidden vaults to gain ultimate knowledge and power. They live on an artificial world called the Crucible, which was created from pieces of countless other planets. In any combat, the first Archon to forge three keys is the winner. The *KeyForge* starter set comes with four decks: two trainer decks, which are the same in every starter set, and two regular decks. Each regular deck has its own Archon and a unique set of cards. The interesting twist here is focusing the player's attention to the hand they're dealt, as it were, so that each deck is scrutinized and mined for every possible advantage.

Role-Playing Games:

KIDS ON BIKES

PUBLISHER: RENEGADE GAME STUDIOS; DESIGNERS: JONATHAN GILMOUR, DOUG LEVANDOWSKI

2-6 PLAYERS; 12 AND UP; \$25 (SOFTCOVER) OR \$35 (HARDCOVER)

If you've seen the Netflix show *Stranger Things* or the older network offering *Eerie, Indiana*, you have an idea of the pre-Internet setting and tone the designers were after with the *Kids on Bikes* roleplaying game. This rules-light design focuses on cooperative storytelling, with players taking on the role of kids in a small town who band together to fight monsters and other weird threats. The entire rulebook fills about 80 pages, including some terrific Heather Vaughan art and a sample adventure scenario. Character creation builds upon familiar tropes, so getting a session started is quick and easy. The players and game master also share control of a character with a special power, but use of the power can be dangerous and lead to story complications. *Kids on Bikes* emphasizes roleplaying as an inclusive experience and makes for a solid starting RPG.

PRINCE VALIANT: THE STORYTELLING GAME

PUBLISHER: NOCTURNAL MEDIA; DESIGNER: GREG STAFFORD

2-6 PLAYERS; 12 AND UP; \$15 (PDF) OR \$30 (HARDCOVER)

2018 saw the release of a lovely new edition of the *Prince Valiant* roleplaying game, designed by the grand shaman of RPGs Greg Stafford and published by Stewart Wieck's Nocturnal Media. Set in the world of Hal Foster's classic comic strip, *Prince Valiant* is among the best starter roleplaying games ever designed. Players take on the roles of adventurers in King Arthur's Britain, initially as knights, but after a little more experience with the game, other types of heroes, as well. The game foregrounds cooperation and group storytelling, with rules that can be boiled down to a single page

and a simple coin flip mechanic for resolving actions. The game first saw publication as a black and white paperback in 1989, but the new edition is a sturdy hardcover with full color Hal Foster artwork. *Prince Valiant: The Storytelling Game* was released late in 2018 and is just now working its way into distribution, so its availability may be limited. It can be found at Chaosium.com now and should be more widely available later after the first of the year.

Party Games:

UNRIVALED

PUBLISHER: LARK AND CLAM; DESIGNERS: STALEY KRAUSE, SAWYER KRAUSE-THOMPSON, ET AL

4–10 PLAYERS; 16 AND UP; \$20

One potential fatal flaw of party games is that they are structured around a single theme or skill that may not interest everyone at your party. *Unrivalled* addresses that problem by offering players a variety of trivia, storytelling, and dexterity challenges, both as teams and as individuals. The challenges are novel—each team is given two minutes to write a love song about a pet, for example, and then one of the team members must perform the song. Best rendition and lyrics win. On top of this, the players get to predict the winners when the general question is read, but before the specific challenge is revealed. If you stink at a particular type of challenge, be patient; your turn to shine may come up next.

Stocking Stuffers:

TRASH PANADAS

PUBLISHER: GAMEWRIGHT; DESIGNERS: LISA ESKUE, MICHAEL ESKUE

2–4 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$12

In *Trash Pandas*, players are raccoons trying to accumulate food and shiny objects from the local garbage cans. The game is built around a push-your-luck mechanic; each turn players roll a die to gather tokens that can be redeemed for certain actions, such as drawing cards or stealing them from a rival raccoon. A player can keep rolling and amassing tokens, and eventually cards that are needed as victory points, but a duplicate roll will cost them most of their winnings for the turn. Cards held in a player's hand also activate special powers. These can increase interaction, allowing you to distract a fellow raccoon with a shiny object so you can steal from them or to tempt a rival raccoon with chocolate to encourage them to keep rolling the die. But cards don't count as victory points until they're stashed away. A typical game wrap up in 15 to 20 minutes, making this ideal for fidgety kids or fidgety adults, or as a change of pace between more epic contests. It's a fun and lively design, with a very modest retail price.

Books About Games:

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ART & ARCANA: A VISUAL HISTORY

PUBLISHER: TEN SPEED PRESS; AUTHORS: KYLE NEWMAN, JON PETERSON, MICHAEL WITWER, SAM WITWER
\$50 (REGULAR EDITION) OR \$125 (SPECIAL BOXED EDITION)

With *Dungeons & Dragons* expanding its place in the public consciousness, it's no surprise that the game has garnered more serious attention of late from pop culture historians. This impressive new volume from Ten Speed Press chronicles the game's history through its artwork and graphic design. You'll find reproductions of hundreds of pieces of art and memorabilia, including many never-before-published drafts and concept sketches, along with artist interviews and gaming history, spread across more than 450 pages. The regular edition of *Art & Arcana* is impressive. The deluxe edition comes in a sturdy, lavishly designed box with poster-sized art reproductions and a pamphlet facsimile of Gary Gygax's original, unpublished *Tomb of Horrors* adventure module.

JAMES LOWDER has worked in fiction and hobby game publishing as an author and editor for three decades. He is the editor of the award-winning anthologies *Hobby Games: The 100 Best* and *Family Games: The 100 Best*. The anthologies feature short essays by the top game designers and publishers from around the world sharing their personal selections for the most enjoyable and innovative card games, board games, miniatures games, and roleplaying games. He also edited *The Munchkin Book*, an official companion to the hit card game. His most recent game design writing can be found in the ENnie Award-winning *Pulp Cthulhu*, a supplement for the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game. He has been the guest for Lake Effect's annual Games to Gift segment since 2010.