

JAMES LOWDER'S GAMES TO GIFT 2017

TOP PICK:

PHOTOSYNTHESIS

PUBLISHER: BLUE ORANGE; DESIGNER: HJALMAR HACH
2-4 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$45 (SUGGESTED RETAIL)

With *Photosynthesis*, Hjalmar Hach clads the core of an abstract strategy game with a novel theme. Players direct trees through their life cycle in a quest to gather sunlight. The more sunlight you gather, the more actions you can take on your turn. The positions players claim for their trees matter, as does the trees' growth, since their shadows can prevent neighboring trees from collecting light as the sun moves steadily around the board. The playing pieces are well made and visually appealing. The simple mechanics make *Photosynthesis* easy to learn, but those looking for a weightier game will find it challenging and worthy of many replays.

OTHER GREAT NEW GAMES:

Family Games:

KINGDOMINO

PUBLISHER: BLUE ORANGE; DESIGNER: BRUNO CATHALA
2-4 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$20

A recipient of the prestigious Spiel de Jahres award for 2017, *Kingdomino* is the latest release from the co-designer of such classics as *Shadows over Camelot* and *Mr. Jack*. As its title suggests, the game can be described as dominos with a kingdom-building twist. Rival monarchs are looking to expand their lands, and they do so by selecting tiles with which they can build a five-by-five grid of new farmlands, mines, and waterways. When the players have run through all the dual-imaged terrain tiles, they tally the score and declare a winner. A clever mechanic for determining the order in which tiles are selected each turn keeps things lively and competitive. The basic game plays in 15 to 20 minutes, though the rules include variants that can run a little longer.

KHAN OF KHANS

PUBLISHER: CHAOSIUM; DESIGNER: REINER KNIZIA
2-5 PLAYERS; 9 AND UP; \$25

A fast-paced contest of cow stealing in the fantasy setting of Glorantha, with rules by game design heavyweight Reiner Knizia. Players are the khans of different fantastical groups, such as the Bison Riders or the High Llama Tribe, trying to earn the title Khan of Khans by raiding nearby areas to gather the largest herd of cattle. The triple threats of stampede, enemy magic, and thefts by rival khans mean the cows might be scattered before they are corralled and tallied, so players have to carefully time their actions. Push your luck too far and you'll lose part of your herd before heads are counted. Longtime hobbyists will recognize Glorantha as the storied world created by game design legend Greg Stafford and featured in the *RuneQuest* roleplaying game and *King of Dragon Pass* computer game, but no prior knowledge of the setting is required. *Khan of Khans* plays in under 30 minutes and will entertain kids and adults alike.

Kids Games:

GHOST FIGHTIN' TREASURE HUNTERS!

PUBLISHER: MATTEL; DESIGNER: BRIAN YU
2-4 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$35

Ghost Fightin' Treasure Hunters! first saw life in Mattel's German division as *Geister, Geister, Schatzsuchmeister!* in 2014 and won the Kinderspiel des Jahres award for children's games that same year. Finally available in the States, it's a terrific cooperative adventure game wherein the players are kids working together to collect eight jewels from a haunted house. The ghosts residing in the creepy old mansion have other ideas, though, and the kids have to balance their treasure hunting with battling the specters. If too many ghosts gather in one room, they become hauntings—or super ghosts—and if enough hauntings appear, the kids lose. The playing pieces are fun, and the game requires enough strategy to make this suitably challenging for kids eight and up. The game is also available as *Ghostbusters: Protect the Grid*, reskinned and with different playing pieces to promote the 2016 movie, but the generic version is the edition to grab.

RHINO HERO: SUPER BATTLE

PUBLISHER: HABA; DESIGNERS: SCOTT FRISCO, STEVEN STRUMPF

2–4 PLAYERS; 5 AND UP; \$30

Like its predecessor, HABA's award-winning *Rhino Hero*, *Rhino Hero: Super Battle* is a stacking game. This time, though, the heroic rhinoceros is joined by Giraffe Boy, Batguin, and Big E the elephant. The heroes scramble up the rickety tower as it is being built and fend off both the rival superheroes and the nasty spider monkeys they find hanging along the way. The goal is to be the hero at the top and in possession of the coveted superhero medal when the building comes crashing down—as long as you're not the one who caused the crash. *Super Battle* can be combined with the original *Rhino Hero* to expand the player count to five. The rules include variations for older or more advanced kids, and like all good stacking games, this one can double as a teen or adult party game for the right crowd.

Hobby Games:

ONITAMA

PUBLISHER: ARCANE WONDERS; DESIGNERS: SHIMPEI SATO

2 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$30

Originally released in 2014 by a small publisher in Japan, *Onitama* is a “perfect information” two-player strategy game. Each player has a master token and four student pawns arrayed against each other on a five-by-five gridded board. The goal is to capture the opposing master or position your master on the opposing player's pagoda square. Movement is determined by five cards selected from a possible 16, with cards played face up, so that each player understands all possible options at all times. Cards are also passed between players after use, so what your opponent will do with the movement option must be factored in to your move selection. A typical game takes only five to 10 minutes, but the movement cards in play will change with each new game, making for wildly different strategies and outcomes.

FUSE

PUBLISHER: RENEGADE GAME STUDIOS; DESIGNER: KANE KLENKO

1–5 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$30

From Madison-area game designer Kane Klenko, *Fuse* is a real-time, 10-minute cooperative game where players are members of an elite Bomb Defusal Team racing to deal with more than 20 bombs placed on their spaceship. Each bomb is represented by a card that indicates the dice combination—color and/or number—needed to render it harmless. Turn over a fuse card and you may have to discard a die, which makes defusing the bombs all the more challenging. The number of bombs deployed and the bombs' difficulty is scalable, so you can make the game easier or harder, depending upon the skill level of the people gathered at the table. The quick playtime lessens the likelihood that one dominant player will take control of the team's every move, a common problem

with cooperative designs. Grab Renegade's *Fuse* timer app to add atmosphere to the game. Klenko also has a terrific cooperative dexterity game, *Flip Ships*, out this year from Renegade.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: TOMB OF ANNIHILATION

PUBLISHER: WIZKIDS; DESIGNER: KEVIN WILSON

1–5 PLAYERS; 14 AND UP; \$80 (STANDARD) OR \$160 (DELUXE)

A giant box of gaming goodness. *Tomb of Annihilation* is the latest cooperative fantasy game set in the Forgotten Realms, the default setting for the *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying game. This time, the heroes must contend with the dinosaurs, zombies, and lost temples in the remote jungles of Chult. The game includes a large number of plastic miniatures—unpainted in the regular edition, painted in the deluxe edition—and a book of scenarios for play. The scenarios can be handled as stand-alone adventures or as part of a campaign, where the treasures get more valuable and the monsters get more fearsome as you go along. *Tomb* can also be combined with earlier games in the series, for additional story opportunities. I'm particularly fond of this *D&D* board game because it showcases several characters and monsters I created for a novel set in the Forgotten Realms a couple decades ago. (I don't get royalties for this use. It's just cool to see Artus Cimber, Ras Nsi, and the pterafolk show up again in a Realms product.)

Role-Playing Games:

BLUE ROSE, 2ND EDITION

PUBLISHER: GREEN RONIN; DESIGNERS: JEREMY CRAWFORD, STEVE KENSON, JACK NORRIS, ET AL

2–? PLAYERS; 14 AND UP; \$50 (HARDCOVER), \$25 (PDF)

When the first edition of *Blue Rose* was published more than a decade ago, it was clearly ahead of its time. The roleplaying game encourages players to create characters from a wide spectrum of genders, races, sexual orientations, and physical abilities. Its setting, the world of Aldea, owes more to the works of fantasy authors such as Mercedes Lackey and Jacqueline Carey than the conflict-oriented sword & sorcery of Robert E. Howard. While the adventures undertaken in the game can have their fair share of swordplay and derring-do, relationships and character interaction are the main motive force. The gorgeously illustrated new edition of *Blue Rose* utilizes Green Ronin's Adventure Game Engine, which will be familiar to players from their *Dragon Age* RPG. It's a sleek system that's easy to learn. If you're looking for an RPG that encourages you to explore new perspectives—one of the best things about roleplaying games, to my mind—*Blue Rose* is an excellent place to start.

PUGMIRE

PUBLISHER: ONYX PATH; DESIGNER: EDDY WEBB

2–? PLAYERS; 12 AND UP; \$50 (HARDCOVER), \$15 (PDF)

In the distant future, after the fall of humankind, dogs rise up and build the fantasy kingdom of Pugmire. They cobble together a civilization that must contend with and contextualize what fragments remain of the old world. Their central ethos is to be a Good Dog, to live up to the tenets of the Code of Man that have come down to them across the centuries. The *Pugmire* roleplaying game features a simple fantasy rules system that foregrounds cooperation and action over competition and violence. The setting is not post-apocalyptic grim, but rather mysterious, making it suitable for a wide age range. Creator Eddy Webb recently Kickstarted *Monarchies of Mau*, a companion game allowing cat people the chance to play feline heroes. *Pugmire* is offbeat, but hopeful fun and a terrific addition to the ranks of fantasy RPGs.

Party Games:

SPYFALL 2

PUBLISHER: CRYPTOZOIC; DESIGNER: ALEXANDR USHAN

3–12 PLAYERS; 13 AND UP; \$25

In this social deduction party game, players try to identify the spy in their midst. At the start of each round, most of the players are given the same location card, with one or sometimes two of them getting a spy card instead. Players then ask each other questions, being careful not to reveal too much information about their location to the spy, while trying to get enough information from the other players to figure out the spy's identity. If the players identify the spy, they win. If the spy identifies the secret location, the spy wins. This new edition increases the maximum number of players from eight to 12 and adds the possibility of a second spy at each location, improving upon the already-strong design of the original game.

Stocking Stuffers:

SIMON'S CAT

PUBLISHER: STEVE JACKSON GAMES; DESIGNERS: SAMUEL MITSCHKE, RANDY SCHEUNEMANN

3–6 PLAYERS; 6 AND UP; \$8

Based on Simon Tofield's animated YouTube series, this fast-paced game has players matching numbers or colors to get rid of the cards in their hand—a mechanic familiar to anyone who has ever played *Uno*—all in the hopes of passing the blame for the mess all the pets have made in Simon's house. If you can't play a card, the blame for that particular mess is yours. Get the most messes in a round and you get a Simon card. The first player to three Simon cards loses and everyone else wins—Simon feeds the losing pet last. With art taken directly from Tofield's charming work and some nice twists to the game mechanics, like unequal suits of cards in the deck, *Simon's Cat* makes for a great light diversion.

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.