

JAMES LOWDER'S GAMES TO GIFT 2013

TOP PICK:

LOVE LETTER

PUBLISHER: AEG; DESIGNER: SEIJI KANAI

2-4 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$12 (SUGGESTED RETAIL)

A lightning-fast game where players compete to get a love letter into the hands of the princess or prince. Sixteen cards represent palace staff who might help transport your missive and scuttle the hopes of your rival suitors. The person with the best contacts for the round wins a token of esteem from the royal. Collect four tokens and you've won the day. There are two versions of the game available: The Kanai Factory Edition features the original Japanese art and cards, while the Tempest edition offers fantasy art and slightly different rules.

OTHER GREAT NEW GAMES:

FORBIDDEN DESERT

PUBLISHER: GAMEWRIGHT; DESIGNER: MATT LEACOCK

2-5 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$25

From the designer and publisher of our 2010 Games to Gift top pick, *Forbidden Island*. This time your party has crashed in the desert and must contend with a raging sandstorm and the blistering sun as you search for the pieces of a legendary lost flying machine so you can make your way back to civilization. Like its predecessor, *Forbidden Desert* is a cooperative game and utilizes a modular board, but it's more complex and offers new gameplay challenges.

ROFL!

PUBLISHER: CRYPTOZOIC; DESIGNER: JOHN KOVALIC

3-7 PLAYERS; 13 AND UP; \$35

Reduce the famous phrase to the fewest letters, numbers, and symbols, and if the guesser figures it out from your clue, you both get points--a clever riff on the sort of shorthand favored by texting addicts, as the game's title suggests. The guesser starts with the shortest clue, so there's some strategy involved. Make your clue too long and the guesser may never see it. Make it too short and it may not be clear enough.

CATAN: JUNIOR

PUBLISHER: MAYFAIR; DESIGNER: KLAUS TEUBER

2-4 PLAYERS; 6 AND UP; \$35

There have been several attempts to bring the hit Eurogame *Settlers of Catan* to younger players. The newest, *Catan: Junior*, does a very nice job of simplifying the resource-management mechanics and keeping the play more focused on strategy than luck, unlike the earlier *Kids of Catan*. Players explore the seas of Catan as swashbucklers, building hideouts and ships to expand their pirate kingdoms.

FATE ACCELERATED

PUBLISHER: EVIL HAT; DESIGNERS: CLARK VALENTINE, LEONARD BALSERA, FRED HICKS

2-? PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$5

A highly condensed version of the Fate game system for roleplaying. In a mere 48 pages you get the basics on how to create characters and tell group stories. If you've ever wondered what roleplaying games are about, but you aren't that keen on wading through several hundred pages of rules or forking over a lot of money to get a glimpse, this is a great place to start.

TOKAIDO

PUBLISHER: PASSPORT GAME STUDIO; DESIGNER: ANTOINE BAUZA

2-5 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$40

Travel through Japan on the magnificent East Sea Road. The game here is in the journey. Enjoy the hot springs, sample great food, meet interesting people, discover panoramic vistas. How you choose to fill your days on the road is up to you, but the game is won by the traveler who has discovered the most interesting and varied things along the way. Though competitive, this is a low-stress game with beautiful graphics likely to appeal to experienced gamers and neophytes alike.

PATHFINDER ADVENTURE CARD GAME: RISE OF THE RUNELORDS

PUBLISHER: PAIZO; DESIGNER: MIKE SELINKER

1-4 PLAYERS; 13 AND UP; \$60

A cooperative sword & sorcery-themed card game where players take on familiar roles such as rogue or wizard to battle goblins, giants, and other fantastic menaces. The heroes utilize decks of spells, weapons, and other helpful items as they explore exotic locations and work against a target villain, which has its own deck of unpleasant challenges that must be conquered within a certain number of turns. The game does a brilliant job of capturing the dungeon-crawl RPG theme and the card variety, plus the expansions being released steadily by Paizo, lend it high replay value. The game offers options for solo play and can be expanded to include more players.

THE DUKE

PUBLISHER: CATALYST; DESIGNERS: JEREMY HOLCOMB, STEPHEN McLAUGHLIN

2 PLAYERS; 13 AND UP; \$35

A well-designed strategy game where players maneuver and battle across a small, gridded game board, striving to capture each other's duke. It's a bit like chess, only each side starts with three pieces on the battlefield and add more through random draw. The pieces all have special movements and abilities, which also vary by turn. Coupled with the random draw factor, this means no two games are alike. Once you master the basics, you can add terrain tiles such as mountains to increase the challenge. Expansions are already available that add such notables as Robin Hood and Conan to the mix.

KOI POND: A COY CARD GAME

PUBLISHER: SMART PLAY; DESIGNER: DANIEL SOLIS

2-4 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$15

Collect koi and decide whether to place them in your public pond or hide them in your house. At the end of six turns, players compare the number of fish they've gathered for each of the different suits, in both their pond and house, with points scored equal to the lower number. Have a crane, turtle, or cat visit your pond for bonus points. *Koi Pond* boasts a masterful mix of casual play and subtle strategy. Available through the print-on-demand service DriveThruCards.com:

<http://www.drivethrucards.com/product/113454/Koi-Pond%3A-A-Coy-Card-Game>

ADDITIONAL RECENT GEMS:

2013 was a pretty good year for party games. In addition to **ROFL!**, the game **SNAKE OIL** (\$20), from Madison's Out of the Box Publishing, pits players against each other as impromptu salespeople (or hucksters). One player takes on the role of buyer for the round, with the persona chosen via card draw, and the other players try to sell that person an item created by combining two cards from their hands. Don Eskridge's **THE RESISTANCE: AVALON** (INDIE BOARDS & CARDS; \$20) is a social deduction game that has players secretly serving either King Arthur or Mordred and trying to

complete missions without the traitors fouling up the votes necessary to succeed. The rules granting characters such as Merlin special insight into what sides players make this a clever new take on the *Werewolf/Mafia*-style deduction format. **GOING, GOING, GONE!** (STRONGHOLD; \$50) is a fast-paced auction game with easy-to-grasp rules that can be picked up just by watching a round or two.

Many of the best designs hitting shelves in the past year have come in the card game category. In **SMASH UP** (AEG; \$30) you combine two faction decks—say, pirates and dinosaurs—and battle other similarly wacky hybrids in a race to smash bases. For people on your list with a darker sense of humor, there's **EVIL BABY ORPHANAGE** (WYRD; \$18). Travel through time and collect infamous figures from history, from Caligula to Kim Jong Il, and try to reform them, even while provoking the babies in the care of the other Time Nannies to go berserk. Inspired by classic video games, **BOSS MONSTER** (BROTHERWISE; \$25) casts each player as the master of a dungeon hoping to lure hapless adventurers to their doom.

HANABI (R&R; \$11), on the other hand, offers players a more peaceable goal of creating a pleasing fireworks display. You cannot see your own cards, though others at the table can, which adds a nice twist to the cooperative play. *Hanabi* was the 2013 *Spiele des Jahres* Game of the Year, but has been difficult to track down as word of mouth has spread on this terrific design. Some smaller game publishers have been dealing with this kind of supply problem by working through print-on-demand outfits. The very enjoyable card game **MONSTER CON** (\$10 printed cards; \$4 PDF), from Wisconsin publisher Popcorn Press, is available from DriveThruCards (<http://www.drivethrucards.com/product/115394/Monster-Con>). Monsters descend upon a horror convention to grab the star of the latest horror flick and escape without the crowd realizing they're not just wearing a costume. There are several additional decks available, each with new monsters boasting unique abilities.

Several fine roleplaying games saw release this year, often after a Kickstarter campaign to gather initial funding. Dedicated RPG fans will enjoy **NUMENARA** (MONTE COOK GAMES; \$60), which offers an intriguingly developed science-fantasy setting in a thick and beautifully illustrated core rulebook. **HILLFOLK** (PELGRANE; \$30) is built around Robin Laws' mechanics-light DramaSystem rules, which foreground group storytelling over combat and number-crunching. The base setting for the game is the Iron Age, but additional options from an all-star roster of creative folks provide lots of alternatives for play. Those looking for more familiar territory will enjoy the **STAR WARS: EDGE OF EMPIRE: BEGINNER GAME** from Fantasy Flight (\$30). The boxed set is a solid option for novice roleplayers, with its pre-generated characters and a "learn-as-you-go" style adventure. Recommended for ages 12 and up.

FIREFLY: THE GAME (GALE FORCE 9; \$50) is another very successful licensed design. Captain a Firefly-class ship in the universe of the Joss Whedon TV series. The game nicely captures the show's tone, making it a winner with *Firefly* fans, but the design is also sharp enough that those unfamiliar with the setting will have a good time playing, too. **CASTELLAN** from Steve Jackson Games (\$35) is a clever castle-building game with lots of toy value. Players construct castle walls with interlocking wall and tower pieces, trying to claim sections by enclosing courtyards. The base game is for two players, but can be expanded to four with an additional set. Just keep in mind that those walls will never be high enough to keep out the **GENTLEMEN THIEVES** (ASMODEE; \$35). Skulk through the palaces and back alleys of early 20th-century Paris with Arsène Lupin and other nefarious characters inspired by author Maurice Leblanc. The game adds some suitable treachery in with its cooperation, for a nice change of pace. **RISE OF AUGUSTUS** (Asmodee; \$40) has been jokingly called "Caesar Bingo," but that will give you a good idea of how its deceptively simple gameplay

mechanic works. Players mobilize their legions in the service of Augustus, completing objectives based on the randomly selected resource tiles. The design works for both casual and strategy-focused play, making this a nice introductory resource-management game for kids as young as 8 years old.

For the more dedicated hobbyist—those folks who look for a game to last a few hours, with mechanics that favor carefully wrought strategy over the random fall of dice—there's **TZOLK'IN: THE MAYAN CALENDAR** (RIO GRANDE; \$60). Rival Mayan tribal leaders try to direct their people toward prosperity. This worker-placement game features a novel game board design with interlocking wheels that move as the calendar turns. The longer you leave your worker on the moving gears, the better their action can be when redeemed, but you have to balance the costs of leaving them in place versus gaining quicker, but smaller rewards. **SUBURBIA** (BEZIER GAMES; \$60) is a Mensa Select tile-laying game where players strive to build a town into a metropolis through careful stewardship of the borough's economics and infrastructure. In **TERRA MYSTICA** (Z-Man; \$80), factions compete to terraform a landscape and expand their holdings. The game involves very little luck as each group balances developing skills with building up their civilization.

YOUNGER KIDS:

For younger kids, the **ZOOLORETTO DICE GAME** (Z-MAN; \$20) is a fast-play version of the popular *Zooloretto* board game. Populate a zoo through dice rolls, but choose your animals carefully so as not to overfill an enclosure. **DWEEBIES** (GAMEWRIGHT; \$12) has been around for a few years, but this clever card game has recently become more widely available in retail stores. Match the whimsical characters at the ends of a row of cards to collect everything lined up between them. Gather the most cards to be declared Dweebie-in-Chief. **CARDLINE: ANIMALS** (ASMODEE; \$15) has players testing their memory skills to place animals in order by size, weight, or lifespan. Like all the entries in the excellent *Cardline* and similar *Timeline* series, *Cardline: Animals* is great fun with a solid educational component.

NEW PRINTINGS AND EDITIONS:

A couple of games we've recommended or mentioned in past Games to Gift segments are available now with new printings or new editions. The cooperative play mechanics in **PANDEMIC** (Z-MAN; \$40) will be familiar to those who have tried Matt Leacock's other brilliant games, *Forbidden Island* and *Forbidden Desert*. Players work together to prevent the spread of global epidemics. The second edition streamlines rules and adds some additional roles and special events. If you'd like to destroy the world rather than save it, **KING OF TOKYO** (IELLO; \$40) transports players into the middle of one of those epic giant monster battles, via the ace design work of *Magic: The Gathering* creator Richard Garfield. Through a mixture of dice and card play, duke it out for the title of baddest mutant, monster, or giant robot in Tokyo. It's finally become available on more than just an occasional basis from retailers.

The king of all new editions for 2013 has to be **OGRE DESIGNER'S EDITION** (STEVE JACKSON GAMES; \$100). This futuristic tank battle slugfest first saw release in 1977, the first game created by legendary designer Steve Jackson. The new edition was initially funded on Kickstarter, raising almost a million dollars, and the final product delivers. It's a fun, fast miniatures combat game that's easy to learn. If you're wondering about the price, the *Design Edition* weighs in at over 20 pounds of maps, counters, and 3D constructible buildings and tanks. If the price for this collector's edition is a little daunting, Steve Jackson Games is working now on the *Pocket Edition*, which promises to be priced more in line with the original 1977 "microgame" release.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2014:

2014 looks to be another great year for hobby games, with the debuts of **SAILS OF GLORY**, a Napoleonic naval miniatures game, and **ADVENTURE MAXIMUS**, a brilliant, card-based introductory roleplaying game for kids. On the board-game front there's the street racing game **10 SECOND CARS**, the cooperative "bug hunt" SF game **ALIEN UPRISING**, and Sandy Petersen's awesome **CTHULHU WARS**. Speaking of the Great Old Ones, there will also be a new edition of the venerable **CALL OF CTHULHU** horror roleplaying game and the possible release of the long-awaited new edition of **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS**. Start saving up those holiday gift cards now.

JAMES LOWDER has worked in fiction and hobby game publishing for more than two decades. He is the editor of the award-winning anthologies *Hobby Games: The 100 Best* and *Family Games: The 100 Best*, available in print and select ebook formats. 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 of the last century. Online at jameslowder.com.