

JAMES LOWDER'S GAMES TO GIFT 2014

TOP PICK:

KING OF NEW YORK

PUBLISHER: IELLO; DESIGNER: RICHARD GARFIELD

2-6 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$50 (SUGGESTED RETAIL)

Giant monsters battle each other and the military in an epic struggle to conquer Manhattan and be declared king of New York. This game is a sequel of sorts to last year's fun, but more lightweight *King of Tokyo*. The mechanics added this time around by designer Richard Garfield open up more opportunities for both strategy and giant monster mayhem.

OTHER GREAT NEW GAMES:

SUSHI GO!

PUBLISHER: GAMEWRIGHT; DESIGNER: PHIL WALKER-HARDING

2-5 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$15

In this quick and charming card game, players collect the best combinations of sushi over three rounds. Points are earned from the specific groups of sushi selected, but the card drafting mechanic makes this more than just a luck-of-the-draw affair. It's easy to get caught up in the fast play each round, but you also need to be mindful of longer-term strategy so you don't find yourself penalized for having the fewest pudding cards when the game ends and it's time for dessert.

PANDEMIC: THE CURE

PUBLISHER: Z-MAN; DESIGNER: MATT LEACOCK

2-5 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$50

This dice-based version of the outstanding *Pandemic* board game has players working cooperatively to battle four diseases plaguing the world. Each player takes a different role, which uses its own set of dice and grants specific abilities, and the team strives together to prevent outbreaks and find cures for each of the four maladies. Too many outbreaks and the team loses. Gameplay is faster than the board game, making this even more appealing to groups with disparate ages.

SAILS OF GLORY

PUBLISHER: ARES; DESIGNER: ANDREA ANGIOLINO, ANDREA MANINI

2-4 PLAYERS; 13 AND UP; \$90

The long hours required to pore over detailed rules and paint all those little armies have long rendered miniatures games inaccessible to all but the most ardent hobbyists. Like its predecessor, the WWI/WWII aerial combat game *Wings of Glory*, *Sails of Glory* does a spectacular job of making a historical miniatures game both accessible and fun. Players can recreate famous battles from the Age of Sail or stage their own skirmishes using the pre-painted ship miniatures and the easy card-based movement system. The starter game comes with a quartet of ships—two French and two British—as well as movement card sets for each ship and everything else you need to begin play.

ROBOT TURTLES

PUBLISHER: THINKFUN; DESIGNERS: DAN SHAPIRO

2-5 PLAYERS; 4 AND UP; \$25

This clever game for younger children teaches the basic concepts of computer coding in the guise of robot turtle wrangling. Players utilize code cards to dictate the movements of their turtles across the game board. Play continues until all the turtles have reached their target jewels and everyone

wins, which minimizes competitive conflict. Advanced obstacles and code cards mean the game can be scaled up in difficulty as the players master the earliest levels.

ONE NIGHT ULTIMATE WEREWOLF

PUBLISHER: BÉZIER; DESIGNER: TED ALSPACH, AKIHISI OKUI

3–10 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$25

The townsfolk have only one day to figure out who among them is a dastardly werewolf. This streamlined version of the popular social deduction game *Werewolf* has players taking on one of a dozen roles, each with a special ability, and then trying to either survive, if you're the werewolf, or eliminate the threat. The game is completed in a single round, with no player eliminations. With its simple rules and a play time of around ten or fifteen minutes per game, this makes a great ice breaker for parties or a change of pace between longer games.

FIREFLY ROLE-PLAYING GAME

PUBLISHER: MARGARET WEIS PRODUCTIONS; DESIGNER: MONICA VALENTINELLI, MARK DIAZ TRUMAN, ET AL

2–? PLAYERS; 13 AND UP; \$50

2014 was a stellar year for role-playing games, and several deserve your attention. The new Firefly RPG stands out because it offers everything you need to play in a single book, including story hooks and a gaming system that foregrounds player interaction and storytelling over combat. The game is more attractive to people who already know the setting from the TV show *Firefly*, but at its heart this RPG can provide the foundation for any kind of space opera adventure.

DEAD OF WINTER

PUBLISHER: PLAID HAT; DESIGNERS: JON GILMOUR, ISAAC VEGA

2–5 PLAYERS; 12 AND UP; \$80

Dead of Winter shows that there are still original things to be done with zombie games. Players control a group of harried survivors in a post-apocalyptic wilderness. Everyone is cooperating toward a common goal, but each player must also complete a secret personal objective that may or may not cause conflict within the group. This is a wonderfully story-centric board game, particularly through its use of the narrative “Crossroads” cards.

DOOMTOWN: RELOADED

PUBLISHER: AEG; DESIGNERS: DAVE WILLIAMS, MARK WOOTTON

2–4 PLAYERS; 12 AND UP; \$40

Players battle it out for control of a town in the Weird West in this recasting of the collectible card game from 1998. Use poker hands and card pulls to settle gunfights and cast hexes to destroy the enemy factions. Since this is now a deck-building game with fixed sets of cards, it avoids the unequal resources trap common to collectible games, where the player with the most money can just buy the rare collectible components needed to make him or her unbeatable. The game's setting, known as Deadlands, is rich and compelling, with future expansions for *Doomtown* promising to add even more depth and complexity.

ADDITIONAL RECENT GEMS:

As noted above, 2014 was a banner year for role-playing games. For younger kids, ages eight and up, looking to learn the basics of tabletop RPGs, **ADVENTURE MAXIMUS** (EDEN STUDIOS; \$25) is a great place to start. The innovative card-based character creation system will have everyone up and playing in minutes. For more experienced gamers, the fifth edition of **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** is a must-have. The authors have corrected many of the design mistakes that hampered the last two iterations of *D&D* and rescued many of the best concepts from the storied game's earliest versions. The place to start is the **PLAYER'S HANDBOOK** (WIZARDS OF THE COAST; \$50).

From the crop of recent party games, **STRIKE A POSE** (R&R; \$20) is winning a lot of fans. One player leaves the room and everyone else freezes like a statue to represent an object or person indicated on a card. All the statues will be linked by a theme, and it's up to the person who left the room to come back and figure them all out. **SAY THE WORD** (PEACEABLE KINGDOM; \$25), meanwhile, has players cooperating to weave together a story using the zany central character and a group of varied keywords dictated by card draw. As the tale gets longer, it's harder to repeat, so a sharp memory and good listening skills win the day here. For those who like to mix their tech and their games there's **SELFIE** (USAOPOLY; \$15). Draw a card and make the proper face to show the status described. Then you capture the expression with your own phone (or use the enclosed cardboard frame, if you don't have a phone). Players offer up a card from their hand that best fits the selfie, with the winning guess receiving the point that round. Fans of *Apples to Apples* or *Cards Against Humanity* will recognize the game's basic structure.

Dice games also garnered a lot of attention this year. The Wild West-themed **BANG! THE DICE GAME** (ASMODÉE; \$18) from 2013 found a larger audience. One of the hottest and best-reviewed collectible games this year was WizKids' **MARVEL DICE MASTERS** superhero combat game, which mixes dice and card mechanics. A starter set costs around \$16, with booster packs a great stocking stuffer at just \$1 each. Players eager to destroy the world will love the **MARS ATTACKS DICE GAME** (STEVE JACKSON GAMES; \$20), which brings all the chaos and carnage of the infamous 1960s trading card set to your table. Those in a more nurturing mood will prefer **GARDEN DICE** (MERIDAE; \$40), which mixes dice, set collection, and tile placement mechanics as players compete to plant, water, and harvest their crops. **ROLL FOR IT! DELUXE EDITION** (CALLIOPE; \$38) combines two earlier *Roll for It!* sets so the game now accommodates as many as eight players, ages eight and up. It's another hybrid dice and card game, with participants trying to make the rolls required by the target cards. It's a solid casual design suitable for mixed groups of kids and adults.

The fledgling game division of comic book publisher IDW offers up a hit with their new edition of **MACHI KORO** (\$30). Players compete to develop the rural city of Machi Koro into a thriving metropolis. Use dice to construct all the desired sites and monuments, while stealing from your neighbors' coffers. A fast and smart game for adults and kids as young as eight. For a slightly older crowd, ages ten and up, **IMPERIAL SETTLERS** (PORTAL; \$39) is an enjoyable civilization-building game, with four major powers allotting resources to strengthen their economies as they carve up the globe. Fans of the animated adventures of Finn and Jake will appreciate **MUNCHKIN ADVENTURE TIME** (STEVE JACKSON; \$25). All kinds of affectionate nods and sly winks to fantasy gaming culture pepper both *Munchkin* and *Adventure Time*, so it's no surprise these two work so well together. As with many *Munchkin* releases, this one stands alone, but it can also be combined with previous sets, for additional *Munchkin* madness.

RELIC RUNNERS is another winning design from Days of Wonder (\$60). A group of archaeologists race through the jungle to retrieve artifacts from scattered temples. Victory points are earned by collecting relics of different types, but also by creating and successfully navigating particularly long routes. **SPLENDOR** (ASMODÉE; \$40) casts players as Renaissance gem merchants competing for resources and prestige. The simple chip and card mechanics means the game is easy to learn and fast to play, though with enough strategy to make *Splendor* more than just a quick filler. **SHERIFF OF NOTTINGHAM** (ARCANE WONDERS; \$40) sees players taking turns as merchants and the sheriff himself, in a game that foregrounds bluffing and negotiations. That means you have to get the right group of people around the table to truly appreciate the game, but for players who can get into the spirit of the roles, it will be a lot of fun.

Those looking for a slightly more cerebral challenge will appreciate **CASTLES OF MAD KING LUDWIG** (BÉZIER; \$60). Players are tasked with creating a wild, complex castle for Ludwig II of Bavaria, one room at a time, using an auction mechanic and tile placement to determine who gets to add what feature in a round. The new edition of **BIBLIOS** (IELLO; \$25) has a group of medieval abbots competing to amass the greatest library of sacred books. This one features an auction phase, too. It also requires careful management of the cards in your hand as you attempt to gather the most workers and resources in any of the game's five categories. **THE DOOM THAT CAME TO ATLANTIC CITY** (CRYPTOZOIC; \$75), on the other hand, is a clever riff on a certain famous real estate management game. Instead of building houses on properties, players try to demolish them in order to unlock cosmic gates. Capture enough gates and you summon down one of the Great Old Ones of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, dooming the world.

FOR YOUNGER KIDS:

For kids eight and up, one of the best recent games is **CAMEL UP** (Z-MAN; \$40). In this award-winning design players wager on a camel race, trying to time their bets for maximum impact. The dice mechanic for this one is especially clever and it can welcome up to eight players, something of a rarity for kid-friendly games. For ages six and up there's **DOODLE QUEST** (BLUE ORANGE; \$28). In this drawing game, players study challenging quest cards, then try to replicate the path from memory on their doodle pad. **SPY TAG** (RAVENSBURGER; \$28) is a fun and innovative matching game for kids as young as five. Players match the spy tiles they uncover to the appropriate agent while a random timer ticks off the seconds. Get caught with a match in your hand when the timer goes off and you select a briefcase, which may be empty or may contain the gizmo that bumps you from the game.

Seven-year-old Franklin Wright won the 2013 National Young Game Inventors Contest with **CONVEYOR BELT** (UNIVERSITY; \$30). Kids ages six and up will enjoy this nice mix of luck and strategy. Move your pawns around a conveyer belt toward the finish line, using cards to change the belt's direction and even the location of the finish. Finally, folks familiar with the outstanding game *Hey! That's My Fish* will find similar mechanics in **BATTLE SHEEP** (BLUE ORANGE; \$28). This game of ovine conquest is intended for kids eight and up, and it works well for them, but there's enough strategy that adults will find the game enjoyable and rather cutthroat when you get the right people at the table.

STOCKING STUFFERS:

Cards games such as **HANABI** and **LOVE LETTER** (last year's top Game to Gift) are ideal stocking stuffers. You can add the new edition of the clever card game **FALLING** (CHEAPASS; \$10) to that list. As the title implies, players are all falling from the sky, for no particular reason, and the goal is to be the last to hit the ground. For value, though, you can't beat the **OGRE POCKET EDITION** (STEVE JACKSON; \$3). Last year SJG released a massive \$100 "designer's edition" of this classic combat game. A giant tank rolls toward a command post. Who will win? The pocket edition contains enough counters to play five different scenarios. A terrific value and a really enjoyable classic design.

A NOTE ABOUT AVAILABILITY:

Publishers of hobby games like the ones covered in this segment tend to work with relatively small print runs. If a hobby game is even a moderate hit, it can quickly become hard to find, particularly for brick-and-mortar retailers. It's certain some of the games covered in this list will be scarce around the holidays. If you can't find a particular game this year, take a look at the Games to Gift lists from previous years for alternatives. (Search for "games to gift" in the Lake Effect archives; the

list has been released annually since 2010.) In addition, you can talk with the staff at any Milwaukee-area hobby shop, too. They might be able to point you toward other titles of interest.

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. Online at jameslowder.com.