

A Learning Experience for Us All

by jeffrey a. DOHM

On my five-hour drive home from *Origins 2009*, I reflected on how the Industry has grown from last few years. From my own personal observations, I can see a change is clearly in the works. Five years ago, the *Exhibit Hall* was filled with every *TCG* gamer in the *Midwest*. In 2009, the *Exhibit Hall* and surrounding areas has evolved to be littered with people miniature painters and board gamers. Five years ago, the largest track of *Exhibit Hall* land was occupied either by *Wiz Kids* or *Upper Deck*. In 2009, *Rio Grande* and *Crystal Caste* took up the largest space while neither of the previously mentioned companies had a significant presence. Five years ago, *Origins* was geared toward the collectable market retailer, featuring overpriced *Magic: The Gathering*, *HeroClix*, and *Pokemon* singles teeming from the walls. In 2009, the back half of the Hall was practically a garage sale for boxes of these long since treasured items. I assure you, this type of turnover activity at *Origins 2009* indicates we are at the beginning of a new economic cycle for gaming. And now, here is the big question: "Where is the uptrend going to occur?"

As I had indicated in my previous article, I believe educators are the target market and where the uptrend begins. When the economy contracts as it has, a good business will seek partnerships with institutions that are well-funded. Outside of the state of *California*, schools and their teachers are very well-funded and are constantly seeking tools to use in the classroom. Many teachers believe games to be useful assets as learning reinforcement tools and are willing to spend money on them. This was evident at the four seminars at *Origins 2009* for the *Games in Education* track. In addition to the 25 to 45 teachers who attended each seminar looking for new products, there were also several home schooling parents. Home schooling is on an upward climb according to recent surveys. The biggest gain was between the years 1996 and 1999, where the number of home schooled children rose from about 640,000 to about 760,000 (*US Census*). The current estimate of students between the ages 6 and 17 is around 1.8-2.5 million children (www.nheri.org) with a per annum growth rate of 6%. Several of the families which choose to home school are involved with the military or have parents with online jobs.

And as a gaming retailer, why should you care about these numbers?

It is money, plain and simple! As a government-employed educator, I hadn't originally dismissed home-schooling as practice long since dead as of the 1960's. However, these

numbers clearly state the prevalence of an upward trend as well as a growing market for gaming retailers. Doing market research ALWAYS pays off, especially when you can reveal niche markets. Marketing to specific groups is much more effective than the age old practice "cold advertising or calling".

So, what to carry?

At *Origins 2009*, I was recommended a number of different companies to look at for educational games by *GAMA's Games in Education* program. Specifically, I was looking for games which contained educational content, but were not strictly "cookie cutter" built for education and nothing else. A good educational game has market appeal to both the educator and other game consumers as well. In this article, I will highlight the two companies, one from *Origins 2009* and one from *GAMA Trade Show in Las Vegas*, which I found had the best games with educational uses as well as popular appeal. The two companies with the best educational games from were clearly *Mayfair Games* and *Ody-see Games*.

Mayfair Games has been a mainstay for providing educational support for many of their game lines. On their main web page (www.mayfairgames.com), they include a section

called the "Teacher Zone" where an educator can find some lesson plans which coincide with certain games in *Mayfair's* lines. I was particularly impressed

with their lesson involving there game *Road to the White House*, it covers educational standards as while explaining the responsibility of US citizens to their nation. Most of *Mayfair's* games can be integrated into a history or economics class as a hands-on learning activity. *Mayfair Games* has specific direction as to how to effectively use their classic *Settlers of a Catan* in the classroom, as well as the educational theory behind it. *Mayfair Games* is truly a must carry line of board games for any retailer.

Ody-see Games (www.odyssey.com) is an upstart board game company based out of *New Zealand*. They have not had much exposure to the adventure gaming world because they specialize in one particular educational game line. However, if you are looking to tailor a section of your store to teachers, I suggest giving this company a good look. Founded by *Len Wicks*, the company produces *Global Ody-see* and *American Ody-see*, which are best described as 3D travel board games. *Global Ody-see* is designed to

continued next page –


A Learning Experience continued from page 21

encourage people to explore the world's natural features, nations, and cultural accomplishments. Although a traditional board game, it is far from the usual brand because it features stunning satellite images on its board and images. The rules are fairly simple, but when applied to a classroom setting can lead to an intricate web of student decision making.

The best selling points on *Global Ody-see* are its full accommodation of the target market and the cost per unit. Foremost, Wick and company thoroughly play-tested their game on groups intermediate level school children and received plenty of feedback in pre-production. Their games are built for a target market, being teachers. The board itself is a fantastic teaching tool. Not only can a teacher use it to play *Global Ody-see* with a class, but it also *DOUBLES AS A TOPOGRAPHIC MAP!* Alone, current maps are an invaluable resource to school systems; any geography, earth science, or history teacher can attest to their worth. The fact *Global Ody-see* additionally comes with fact cards about the various places on the game board is a complete bonus. Speaking of "bonuses", what about the price? The version I described earlier has an MSRP of around \$65.00, but *Ody-see* also makes an economy version with an MSRP of only \$35.00! With such accommodating price structure, *Global Ody-see* is a perfect addition to your educational game displays.

As the economic thermometer that was *Origins 2009* fades into the background, we can take away several retail concepts. First of all, the gales of change are here. The time to explore and cycle into newer product lines is now. It seems the proverbial "King of the Hill" is the board game portion of the industry. Slowly, but surely, miniatures are coming back from being almost exterminated by easier play-and-go games like *TCG's* or *TMG's*. *TCG's* are on a plateau, not expecting their customer base to shrink nor expand as we deepen into this recession. If anything, the *TCG* will benefit

from popular online games spinning off a *TCG*, as in the case of *World of Warcraft*.

The second point we should take away from *Origins 2009* is that in order to fully master the board game market, as a retailer, you will need to have a diverse game selection for a diverse target market. I have been highlighting the educational market over the last few issues of *Greater Games Industry* reference because I believe it to have vast untapped potential. Helping educators learn to use non-traditional teaching tools as part of *GAMA's Games in Education* program or otherwise is vital to establishing a mutualism between our retail economy and the educational system. Establishing mutual partnerships between economic communities is vital to seeing the end of this recession and a return to prosperity. As more games continue to hit the market, I will continue to highlight their application/use in education. This section in *Greater Games Industry* reference will be called *The Professors' Deck of Many Things* and will feature reviews on games with educational potential for the purposes of retail research. With these last thoughts, I depart by saying "Pass the dice, a sorting hat, and a red lightsaber, it's on to Gen Con." 

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