

Contemporary Collectibles: Vintage board games worth more than Monopoly money

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Even with the virtual lives most of us lead, there's still a place for the old-fashioned board game, be it in long, leisurely, summertime sessions of Monopoly with the family or more manic rounds of Operation, Battleship, Clue or Sorry.

As a collecting category, the area is split into two segments: the 19th to early 20th century examples appreciated for their charmingly illustrated box covers, and the more modern games with their bold graphics, prized mainly for their baby boomer-childhood and adolescent associations.

The American-made board game was introduced in the early 1820s, a byproduct of the invention and refinement of color lithography techniques. Displaying meticulously chromolithographed detail and a brilliant palette, many of them were made by the New York firm McLoughlin Bros., the dominant force in the field from 1858 to 1930. That is the era considered to be the golden age of board games, when they were a prime source of middle-class family entertainment.

In addition to strong visual appeal, their subject matter offers collectors of today a unique perspective on the activities, occupations and preoccupations, morals and mores of their time. There were those primarily aimed at children — games of riddles, anagrams and fortunetelling. Many dealt with social behavior, and scores of spelling, geography, history, literary and other didactic games, as well as war and sports subjects. Some typical examples of these were The Game of Playing Department Store, Bulls and Bears: The Great Wall Street Game, and The Sociable Telephone: A Game for the Smart Set.

Easier to relate to are those from the second half of the 20th century, many of which were tied to pop culture phenomena, including radio, television, movies, and offshoots of other kinds of toys, like Barbie and Strawberry Shortcake dolls. There were few popular TV programs that didn't have a home-participation version. One of the first was a Hopalong Cassidy game made by Milton Bradley in 1950 at the height of the Hoppy craze, when his cowboy image was found on boys' bedspreads across the land.

Even a program as unlikely as the "Today Show" wasn't impervious. In 1950, Athletic Products Co. produced a board game starring Dave Garroway with playing pieces in the form of miniature TV cameras.

Among other kinds of entertainment with play-at-home counterparts were movies, such "Goldfinger"; theater, with "My Fair Lady"; and sitcoms galore, with titles like "Gilligan's Island" and "Bewitched." Quiz shows were a natural for home audience participation, with examples such as "Strike it Rich" and "Beat the Clock." Adventure games also sprang forth from TV shows such as "The Bionic Woman" and "Charlie's Angels." Even Saturday morning cartoon shows inspired games, such as The Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids Game.

Prices for good examples of both types of vintage games – the McLoughlin Bros. classics and the mid-century moderns – saw a big jump that began in the late 1980s when Game of the Man in the Moon, a McLoughlin rarity, broke the \$5,000 mark at auction. The three principle factors governing price are rarity, condition and completeness. Many of the 20th century games had multiple elements, including play money, cards and die-cast playing tokens. One expert advises checking the contents of the box against the list found in the instructions before buying, and subtracting approximately 25 percent of the price if 10 percent of the contents are missing.

The brand new "Garage Sale Flea Market Annual" (Collector Books; \$19.95) offers the current market values for some modern games, all of them in mint, near mint or excellent condition in their original box:

– Rare King Kong game, Ideal, 1963 \$400

– Creature from the Black Lagoon, Hasbro, 1963 \$175

– Hopalong Cassidy Lasso Game, Transogram, 1950 \$135

– James Bond Message from M, Ideal, 1966 \$150

– Man from UNCLE Target Game, Marx, 1965 \$250

– Untouchables, Marx, 1950s \$225

– Wild Wild West-The Frontier, Transogram, 1955 \$225

– Howdy Doody Beanbag game, Parker Bros., 1950s \$75

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 18 books, including "Cool Names for Babies" and "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press).

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