

S'poreans on board

Homegrown companies are creating their own board and card games



▶ Lee Sze Yong

MONOPOLY may still monopolise the board game scene here, but made-in-Singapore games like *Milk City*, *Dividends* and *TenseSeconds* might just give it a run for its money.

Milk City has players imagining themselves as rival Mafiosos, scheming to kill the others to become The Godfather.

A roll of *Dividends'* dice will determine whether you lose or win in a game based on a volatile stock market.

A test of words and wit is faced in the card game *TenseSeconds*, with players having to form words in 10 seconds, among other things.

These games are the forerunners of Singaporean competitors which are going up against the big players in the arena of money-making.

This year, upstart *TenseSeconds Games* joined a pool of

homegrown companies specialising in board and card games. They include one-year-old *Fun Factory Games*, which created *Dividends*, and seven-year-old *Van der Veer Games*, which is behind *Milk City*.

Meanwhile, *Alpha-Plus Training Consultants*, which conducts workshops to promote entrepreneurship, has plans to distribute its own-ownership game, *Zeros-To-Heros*, in a month's time.

Actually, made-in-Singapore board games are not new. There were *Kong Fu* and *Stagnum* in the 1970s, but they were few and far between.

Now, at least seven games designed here are on the market, including *Blackmail*, *Trading Routes* and *Players* by *Van der Veer Games*.

Van der Veer Games is a two-

person outfit set up by Dutchman Jacques Deul and his Singaporean wife Linda Tan. They started business in 1998, at a time when PC games were the in-thing. Mr Deul, 35, recalls: "We didn't know anyone who played board games, except for the traditional ones like *Monopoly* and *Scrabble*."

But thanks to the Internet in recent years, Singaporeans have come to know how conventional board games, such as *Settlers Of Catan* and *Chadels* which are huge Europe. The growth of gaming clubs such as *Settlers' Cafe* in Holland Village and *Clarke Quay*, and *Mind Cafe* in Finlayson Street, has also raised awareness of such games here.

Mr Alvin Tan, 33, *Mind Cafe's* outlet manager, says homegrown board games are doing well —

four out of the 20 sets the cafe sells every month are Singaporean products.

"While the games from overseas may be better in terms of game design and fine details in art work, the homegrown ones offer better value at prices that are more affordable," he says.

Still, it is David versus Goliath when small game companies compete against the big boys such as Hasbro and Mattel.

According to toy chain store Toys R Us Singapore, the two American toymakers still make the most popular board games in Singapore.

In fact, Hasbro and Mattel's games such as *Monopoly*, *Scrabble* and *Upwords* were the chain's top five best-selling board games last month.



PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

Top sellers

THE top five board games sold in local Toys R Us stores last month:

- ▶ *Monopoly Uniquely Singapore Edition* (Hasbro)
- ▶ *Scrabble Original* (Mattel)
- ▶ *Game of Life* (Hasbro)
- ▶ *Monopoly Junior* (Hasbro)
- ▶ *Upwords* (Hasbro)

BORED? TURN TO THE BOARD:

(From left) Mr Henry Wee with his *TenseSeconds*, Mr Richard Mak with *Zeros-To-Heros* and Ms Evelyn Brunner with *Giza*.

The American-born Swiss citizen, who is also a Singapore permanent resident, set up her company last year with Singaporean game designer Will Lee.

The game cut that *Settlers* was created by German designer Klaus Teuber in 1995 and it has sold 15 million copies worldwide since.

The business is not all fun and, um, games though. It usually takes about a year to come up with the concept for a game and figure out the rules, and countless hours of test-playing to iron out the kinks.

Also, the companies need to invest between \$100,000 and \$200,000 in a game, depending on how complicated it is and how much marketing is involved.

Such high costs can deter startups which may have a great idea, but don't have the capital to develop it, says Mr Deul.

But Mr Henry Wee, 48, the chief executive of *TenseSeconds*, says time is on their side.

As he puts it: "Unlike computer games, which became outdated once new technology emerges, board and card games do not have expiry dates."

Patriotism also plays a role in Mr Wee's desire to produce games. Every *TenseSeconds* box has the Singapore Lion logo on it.

As he puts it: "Singapore is well-known for its advanced technology and highly efficient environment. It's time to let the world know we can create fun too."

For more information on locally designed games, visit these websites:

- www.vanderveergames.com
- www.funfactorygames.biz
- www.tenseconds.com
- www.innovation.com.sg/series.html (Alpha-Plus Training Consultants)