

Electronic Shock in Toyland

The computer has revolutionized fun and games, and two local companies are at the vanguard of the coup

Studio 54 is agitating like a washing machine when George Ditomassi arrives in the world's longest car. The twenty-six-foot Cadillac pivots onto the dance floor and Dito alights, a vision of swank in navy double-breasted blazer and crisp white pants, shoes, and turtleneck. Even though he hails from Springfield, the Cleveland of Massachusetts, on this night last May Dito is holding his own with New York's *chicest*. His profile sharp and tan from a recent sojourn in Puerto Rico, he might easily be taken for the star of "Mannix"—what's his name?—considering the high turnout of TV actors tonight. Dito nods tentatively to "Barney Miller," who is talking ratings with Parker Stevenson the Hardy Boy and Abe ("Fish") Vigoda. There are show biz people galore: Baryshnikov and Alvin Ailey, cabaret artiste Lorna Luft and Neil Sedaka, tennis champ Vitas Gerulaitis, Geraldo Rivera, the Playmate of the Month (Dito: "We accepted her for what she was"). Disco Sally, who is not on the guest list,

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has been admitted because she is a Studio fixture, its resident senior citizen; she comes every night to boogie. "I can't tell whether she's a good dancer," Dito says to himself, "or whether it's Parkinson's disease." The rest of the guests, though—they are here because of George Ditomassi.

George Ditomassi is not a TV personality, a songwriter, or a sports hero. He is certainly not a discomaniac. He is a self-described pitchman, the vice-president in charge of the game division of the world's largest manufacturer of games: Milton Bradley Company of Springfield, Massachusetts. And he has found himself in this implausible setting because of Simon, his guest of honor, who by the time the gala disbands at four in the morning will have surpassed the celebrity of any and all of the 1,100 assembled.

Meet Simon. He is suspended from the ceiling, a colossal four-color flying saucer trundling back and forth above the dance floor and flashing, by turn, red, yellow, blue, and green light. All around the room, miniature replicas of this disc, about the diameter of a basketball, are

throbbing. An unearthly beep—a different pitch for each color—sounds when a section lights up and somehow manages to assert itself above the trill of the Bee Gees. And people press around them as two, three, four, players try to do what Simon says: touch the colored lenses in the sequence, longer with each turn, that Simon invents.

George Ditomassi has made sure that no one will escape the night unSimonized. Lou Goldstein of Grossinger's does his Borscht Belt Simon Says routine (which, frankly, the guests find a little dumb). Vidal Sassoon unveils a unisex hairdo he's created just for the occasion; it's called "Simon's Sassooning Fever" and it's very disco. Dito announces the winner of the Simon of the Year Award, and since Neil Simon, the recipient, couldn't make it, Cliff Gorman, a star of his latest Broadway play on words, *Chapter Two*, jogs onto the dance floor and accepts in his stead the tributary Simon plaque. After the Simon Celebrity Challenge, in which teams of notables compete for \$1,000 worth of games, a lucky guest is presented with an all-expenses-

By Diane McWhorter





Left, Parker Brothers' R&D chief Bill Dohrmann: Smooth and inscrutable. Right, Inventors Bob and Holly Doyle: Performing some electronic wizardry.

paid trip to St. Simon's Island (Georgia).

Dito is reeling. No doubt about it, Simon is the beau of the ball. The crowd has gone wild over him. Now Dito can start to believe the Simon song and dance he's been ad-libbing since February. Madison Avenue managed to hustle a disco revolution out of *Saturday Night Fever*, didn't they? Well, Simon will get you through the rest of the week. Dito dodges a waiter clad in gym shorts and threads his way through the spectators of a particularly vicious Simon contest. The more competitive players have already devised strategies to fake out their opponents—hesitating to finish a sequence until the last minute, just before Simon emits a raspberry that means time's up. It's unlikely, however, that such crude tactics will have any success against Simon. He is a computer.

The baby-blue penthouse apartment on leafy Huron Avenue in Cambridge looks like the Logan control tower on a holiday weekend. It is actually a game-inventing company on a day in late October, 1977, and though the delirium of a Studio 54 is nowhere manifest, the germ of a phenomenon as infectious as Simon Fever is maturing. Two weeks earlier, Bob and Holly Doyle, vice-presidents of Micro-Cosmos, have gotten the word from on high at Parker Brothers: The world's second-largest manufacturer of games has decided to publish the Doyles' most recent submission, a hand-held computer with an infallible memory able to play a library's worth of games. Exactly which games will be built into the final model is



Milton Bradley pitchman George Dito-massi presents the Simon of the Year award to Neil Simon's proxy, actor Cliff Gorman, at Studio 54.

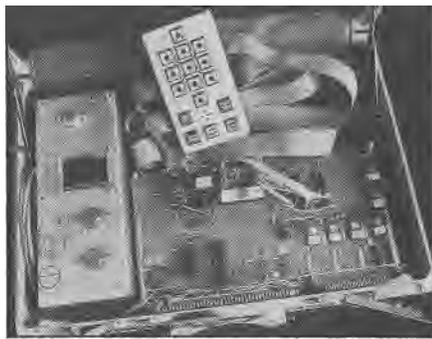
what the Doyles have been puzzling over, around the clock, since Parker called. Their studio is strewn with print-outs of games they're programming on their giant Intel computer. Rejects are crumpled on the glass coffee table. Wires coil out of briefcases.

You'd never suspect the Doyles' baby-blue penthouse of harboring classified research and development, not with all those tell-tale plans lying around. Simon, for example, came out of a game-inventing firm that is practically an armed camp; at Marvin Glass & Associates of Chicago, the country's biggest such company (one out of every ten playthings sold in the U.S. is a Glass creation), even napkins from the employees' cafeteria are expunged lest some designer should have doodled away a company secret over lunch. Bob and Holly Doyle, however, are too busy to be paranoid.

Just now they're sifting through some games that were staples of the computer crowd they ran with back when they worked as astrophysicists, and winnowing out the ones that Parker will repudiate as "engineers' games, yuck." The ones that make it past the guinea pigs, the Doyles' two sons and as many neighborhood kids as they can recruit, are rigged up to a computer that will fit into a suitcase and toted out to Parker headquarters in Salem. If it's all systems go from that end, the Doyles return to their Intel and plug away at more games . . . and more games, until two months later, they deliver the final prototype. This working model looks like Son of Pocket Calculator, but it will emerge in a short time as an "elec-

tronic wizard with powerful computer brain, capable of playing six exciting games, [with] a vocabulary of space age sounds and lights [that] communicates wins, losses, and ties": which is to say, Merlin, Parker Brothers' top game for 1978.

The computer revolution has hit the toys-and-games industry, and with a force that hasn't been felt in Toyland since the discovery of plastic. Curiously enough, Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley—"conservative old New England companies," they like to call themselves, which have enjoyed a friendly rivalry since the last century—have found themselves at the vanguard of the coup. Firms whose strength is "perennial" board games, fundamentals of American childhood, seem improbable candidates for electronic warfare, yet there they are,



Merlin's prototype was rigged up to a computer-in-a-suitcase and taken out to Parker Brothers for inspection. All the circuitry in the suitcase was eventually converted to a minuscule chip.

fighting it out for the edge in electronic games.

The arch revolutionary is a computer the size of a stick of Dentyne. "It's as if

someone reinvented dice," marvels Parker R&D chief Bill Dohrmann. Suddenly, the game manufacturers are strangers to their own product. Because of its ability to endow a game with memory, the computer has transformed their notion of what a game is: by providing random variables that dice cannot; by making play cheat-proof, since the computer neither lies nor can be lied to; by adding an "intelligent" opponent, which radically redefines the concept of solitaire games. But this isn't even the fifth of it.

The real gamble posed by the computer has nothing to do with its unpredictability in the rec room. For an industry that lives and dies on pennies, electronic games represent a huge financial risk. Ten dollars has traditionally been the top price a retailer can get for a game (though inflation is nudging it up to fif-

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The Rules of the Game

The toy business is not, ironically, one that promotes good humor, especially within its own ranks. The seasonal sales peak—70 percent of all the industry's earnings is collected in the last three months of the year—creates cash flow catastrophes; inventors of best-selling items may be paid on time, but borderlines often have to wait. The high retail markup (30 to 50 percent) combined with the low ten-dollar ceiling on retail prices makes efficient production essential, and cut corners commonplace. The entire industry ran, with its tail between its legs, into reduced profits when in 1970 consumer activists like Boston product liability lawyer Ed Swartz raised the public's consciousness about toy safety and company negligence. And then there are undeserved blows—like the plastic shortage caused by the Arab oil embargo of 1973 that nearly halted production lines everywhere.

But more vexatious than any accident of history is the year-in-and-year-out task of predicting what the customers are going to buy their kids next Christmas; they are more fickle than adolescents in heat. This year, in addition to all the predictable *Star Wars* gismos, including derivatives like Parker's Battlestar Galactica board game based on this fall's TV series of that name, there are King Tut's Game (move over, Steve Martin), Changeover: The Metric Game, and Mattel's Slime with Worms, which is doing considerably better than Parker's Worm Wrestle of a few years back—even package illustrations by *Mad Magazine* artist Paul Coker could not rescue that one from the mire. ("Let's just say that action games [such as Worm Wrestle purported to be] are not our strong suit," says Parker R&D head

Bill Dohrmann cheerfully; and over at Milton Bradley they're a virtual void.)

The perpetual second-guessing of the public has made the toys-and-games business rather desperate. The expression *knock off* was invented for the toy industry. The first-line companies, which are in that position because they rely on ingenuity, and luck, instead of imitation, still have to protect themselves from the knock-off companies—"If you knock something off," Milton Bradley vice-president George Ditomassi has noted, "you knock it off cheaper." Since many projects are on the drawing board some two years in advance of "publication," the tension and paranoia can become extreme: One morning in July, 1976, a young designer at the game-inventing firm of Marvin Glass & Associates, the biggest in America, walked into his employer's fortresslike offices and shot six people. Three top executives, including the man who had succeeded Marvin Glass as president of the company, were killed; two more were wounded, crippled; and then the designer had put the gun to his own head. No one outside of Marvin Glass knows what made this unassuming, soft-spoken young man obliterate several of his colleagues. A note found on his body listed fourteen fellow employees who he said were out to get him; another note, revealing why, was suppressed by company officials on the grounds that it divulged trade secrets. No doubt. But that the business of fun could be deadly serious was not a secret anymore.

Outright treachery is practiced in the toy industry. "There are absolutely spies," says one local game inventor, who recalls working for a company that was

buying sketches of products from a model maker at a competing business. "The toy industry does not know what works," he continues, "and they spy on other companies mostly to find out what *they* know about the market."

But the routine sleuthing is casual and marginally aboveboard. Tidbits of intelligence are pried out of salespersons who service more than one game company—oh, so Parker Brothers is ordering Texas Instruments' TMS-1100 chip instead of the usual TMS-1000; if they're buying all that extra memory, they must be planning an item that plays several games . . . Companies hire employees away from their competitors, and since even the most discreet worker would have a hard time distinguishing between personal knowledge and classified information, some firms insert clauses in their employees' contracts that forbid them to work for a comparable company until a given amount of time has elapsed (such constraints have been successfully challenged in court). Other companies, like Mattel, deal with the problem of drifting employees by strictly compartmentalizing their operations, so that no individual knows too much. The toy industry's rather indefinite rules of conduct are well summed up by the major game company executive who insisted recently, "Ethics do exist in this business . . . but not a hell of a lot." He was referring specifically to the recent indictment of Mattel's former president, Ruth Handler (who is the mother of Barbie and Ken—the plastic ones were named after her daughter and son). She allegedly unloaded the company in 1973 after selling stock at what turned out to be exaggerated prices, a maneuver that

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teen). Because of the retailer's generally extravagant markup, such a price tag has meant that manufacturers have to keep their costs at rock bottom. Merlin's chip, or computer, alone is worth more than all the plastic, cardboard, and paper in any board game, and Parker spent eight times more money developing Merlin than it did on its top board game of the year, a zany three-dimensional affair called Bonkers! Consequently, the customers will be paying upwards of twenty-five

dollars for the finished product. But maybe they won't pay at all. That consumers won't spring for the newfangled gadgets at their newfangled prices is a possibility certainly worth considering in a business whose \$4 billion in annual retail sales has always been in increments of less than ten dollars.

And where will that leave the manufacturers? The ones seriously committed to electronic games have already invested thousands upon thousands of dollars in personnel and equipment. Parker recently bought a \$25,000 Intel computer like the Doyles' and hired a marketing manager specifically for their electronic line. Twenty members of Milton Bradley's research and development staff of seventy are devoted exclusively to electronics, and though Parker's expansion has been more temperate, they too have had to engage new engineers and retrain old ones. And still, both companies are in an atypical position of dependency on outsiders game inventors like the Doyles, corporations like Texas Instruments—and it doesn't feel right to executives obsessed with self-sufficiency. Parker has had its own plastic factory for years, but no game company in the world is in a position to buy a private semiconductor manufacturer.

Clearly, these are the changes the toy industry has in mind when it shouts "revolution." And as the battle for customers begins this October, the start of Christmas-shopping season, the marshals of the front lines are Parker Brothers' Merlin and Milton Bradley's Simon.

Four or five years ago, Bob and Holly Doyle watched the cost of electronic equipment make a near meteoric descent. As astronomers, Harvard Ph.D.s working with high-level computers at their alma mater, they were naturally privy to such intelligence. Bob, who had become an astrophysicist largely because of President Kennedy's PR campaign about "man's future in space," was growing disillusioned with the field. By the end of the sixties, physics was in a slump, and employment prospects in astronomy were dim. "Besides," says Holly, "we were beginning to feel that it might be a little immoral to have the taxpayers support us for the rest of our lives." Bob was a dissident member of a Harvard group consulting for NASA on Skylab—a disaster, as we discovered recently, that has cost the taxpayers some \$4 billion—when he bailed out of space. While Holly continued to work at Harvard Observatory, Bob went into business, founding Super8 Sound, a firm that manufactures and sells filmmaking equipment. "The only thing missing from my equation for success in that venture," says Bob, "was money."

Before too long, the Doyles sighted a brighter enterprise. Electronics, they realized, would soon be cheap enough to mass-market in various forms. Corn-

panies like Texas Instruments had been putting out semiconductors for years, but no one except NASA types knew about them until they turned up in pocket calculators. This marked the real beginning of the computer revolution. Ordinary folks were no longer afraid to push buttons and see the flicker of light-emitting diodes (LEDs). And with prices of these items halving every year, the general public could appreciate what the engineers meant when they talked about this

Dohrmann was "interested." And he was still "interested" two years later when the Doyles had begun to despair of ever having their games produced. "Hell," says Dohrmann, "we'd spent ninety years pasting paper on cardboard, and suddenly we're dealing with computers." Welcome to the twentieth century, said the Doyles. But this was too much input for Parker's little circuits to bear.

In the fall of 1976, after conference upon conference, evaluation upon re-



Arthur Venditti, Parker's "Mr. Games," shown with the Nerf glider he designed before he went electronic

being an "exponentially explosive" technology. Only ten years ago, the information stored in the silicon grains of a pocket calculator would have required a computer, say, the size of the Ritz Bar and the price of a diamond as big as the Ritz. But as technological advances made the equipment byte-sized, so the cost became manageable. By 1976 the prices were lower than a bargain basement, and that was a fact the toy industry could no longer afford to ignore.

In early 1975, Bob and Holly Doyle and Holly's brother Wendl Thomis, an IBM systems engineer who would act as president of MicroCosmos, mined the wealth of games they had played on the computers of their various employers over the years, and they came up with fifty or so that could be adapted to a small, relatively unsophisticated unit. This they did for four of their ideas, and took those prototypes out to Bill Dohrmann at Parker Brothers in Salem. He was a charmer, smooth and inscrutable. They were, for game inventors, odd: sweet-faced, serious, downright intellectual. Their sons called them Holly and Bob: they worked in their jogging clothes. The inventors Dohrmann usually did business with were garrulous, mad-cap, often hard-assed generalists—like the Damon Runyonesque Marvin Glass, who had died a few years earlier. Still, the Doyles were articulate about the future of electronic games, and their prototypes, though far too technical for the average American kid, had possibilities.

evaluation, the Parker executives summoned Bob and Holly Doyle. The Doyles had submitted this game called Sink the Sub in late summer of 1975; the submarine was a computer, and the players had to track it down, determine its depth, and fire. It was a radical proposition for Parker Brothers, but at least it could be construed as a board game, since players plotted their ships' courses on a map. Parker felt a little more comfortable with that; board games, after all, was their business. In February, 1977, Parker Brothers unveiled a version of Sink the Sub to the trade at the annual Toy Fair. The new name it had been given was as arcane, and as sinister, some felt, as the game itself ... Code Name: Sector.

At Toy Fair that year, Milton Bradley was showing an electronic game of its own, but frankly, the manager of the company's game division, George Dito-massi, thought it a little shaky. It was Comp IV, a hand-held computer game, not a computerized board game like Sector, and when it was first given to Dito for scrutiny, he remembers, "I didn't jump up and down." Experienced game players were telling him that Comp IV was just like the wildly popular MasterMind, only it used numerical instead of color codes, but Dito wasn't impressed; he was put off. "I'm not cerebral, I'm antsy. I don't like being made to look dumb, and boy, I get blown out of strategy games. It took me a year to figure this thing out," says Dito, as he demonstrates the game competently, if indifferently, a year later.

Dorothy Worcester, Milton Bradley's vice-president in charge of market research, had informed Dito not long ago, however, that her team had detected a lonely child syndrome in the American family—nowadays there are more only children, and siblings are further apart in age—and she strongly recommended Comp IV's appeal as a solitaire game. And when he passed the computer around to the company employees, Dito's resistance began to dissolve. "It was significant how many people got into it," he says.

But even more significantly, the reaction of the retail buyers to Comp IV was "reserved" that February. Number games are generally perceived as cold, sterile, and Comp IV's design was just that; furthermore, the nineteen-dollar wholesale price was steep. Later that spring, Dito would chain Comp IV to the bars of New York watering holes like Charlie O's and Brokers Restaurant, and he would gather from the bartenders he checked with a few weeks later that 35 percent of the people who tried Comp IV abhorred it and 65 percent adored it. This bit of informal research would make Dito rest a little easier, but right now, at Toy Fair, 1977, he was worried.

When he spied Parker's Code Name: Sector, surrounded by attendants dressed as sea captains in a murky-blue, "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" chamber, Dito

was more than worried; he was affronted. Why, naval war games were Milton Bradley's specialty; Battleship, the old favorite that sailors had played on graph paper long before his company thought to issue it in plastic, was the flagship of the Bradley line. And now Parker Brothers was invading their territory. Fortunately, Dito had a countermove: displayed in a back room of Bradley's Toy Fair booth was a rough prototype of a Battleship game that the company engineers planned to hoke up with electronic *Up Periscope* sound effects—the bleep of instruments, the wheeze of homing missiles, explosions, a whoop-whoop-whoop battle cry at the end of the game. After Toy Fair, they proceeded with the project full speed ahead, and by May they were taking orders for it. The strategy was an effective one. At Christmastime that year, Electronic Battleship blew Code Name: Sector off the map.

Actually, that first year, 1977, was a boom season for all six of the electronic games new to the toy department. Even with dauntingly complex instructions and without maritime sound effects, Sector navigated a course into the hands of a respectable number of skippers—mostly twelve- to thirty-year-old males—thanks to a vigorous ad campaign (Parker spent \$800,000 to put Sector on network TV that year to Bradley's \$700,000 for Electronic Battleship). Besides, Parker had es-

timated conservatively, and even if Sector sold less than half the copies Electronic Battleship did, it nonetheless exceeded company projections. Comp IV, too, defied Dito's pessimism; he had had the good sense to ship the item in June, well before the Christmas shopping season, and this may have had something to do with its success.

(Mattel's Electronic Football ended up at the top of the entire heap of computer games, but this didn't alarm Milton Bradley or Parker Brothers because Football was a reduced version of the arcade video games: an LED "running back" has four tries to go ten yards against four LED "tacklers," while assorted whistles and trumpet blasts serve as referees. Mattel's profitable Auto Race and its Missile Alert, which backfired, were also adaptations of video games. Bradley's and Parker's electronic strategy games were in a class unto themselves, and their fine debut that Christmas season brought good cheer to toy stores everywhere.)

These electronic gifts from the manufacturers couldn't have arrived at a better time as far as the toy trade was concerned. The consumer revolt of the seventies had wised a lot of people up to the fact that, as one seasoned toy buyer put it, "90 percent of all new toys and games are crapola"; parents were pickier about their children's playthings. The declining birth rate was further cutting into the

number of Christmas toys sold every year, and in a business where volume of sales must compensate for the generally low price point, this was serious.

Perhaps both these realities—selective parents and older children—contributed to the fact that games were becoming a bigger and bigger part of child's play. The top-selling category—with dolls and accessories coming in second—games now account for up to 20 percent of total toy department sales. At least the new electronic games were contributing to a sympathetic cause. The canny consumer might well treat them as an investment, and gladly shell out the extra cash for the extra value. And from the retailers' point of view, the hefty price tags meant more money on fewer sales—the hardware, it was true, carried a smaller profit margin than the plastic they were used to selling, but the increased dollar volume more than made up for that. In 1977, six measly games accounted for \$21 million of the \$3.3 billion (wholesale) collected by the entire toys-and-games industry. Some buyers would cut back in slower categories to accommodate the new expensive entries—obviously, people who were buying Comp IV, the reasoning went, were passing up Gnip Gnop—but others, like Bruno Ferretti of the large Child World/Children's Palace chain, decided to increase their budgets in order to bring on the computers. "I don't know where the money is coming from," says Ferretti, "but it's coming, and it hasn't affected any other categories so far."

But the trade had more than just those assurances to rejoice over during the Christmas season of '77. The new electronic games, it seemed, had also gotten the industry out of its biggest predicament since the plastic shortage of 1973: the one caused by those damn home video games.

Ralph Baer has recently found himself in something of a pickle—a rather sweet one, though. Baer is the inventor of Simon, which was sold to Milton Bradley through Marvin Glass & Associates, and even though Simon has become quite a sensation, Baer is not keen on having his authorship broadcasted. You see, Baer holds the patent on the home video game, but though his name appears on the patent, his employer, Sanders Associates of Nashua, New Hampshire, actually owns it and collects all the royalties it earns. Baer, a slight, wry man in his mid-fifties, had for ten years or so been devising radar and electronic defense systems at Sanders, when in 1967 he began to tinker with some TV sets. "Pretty soon," Baer recalls, a trace of his native German in his voice, "I had two spots chasing each other around the screen of a set that was hanging around one of the labs for one reason or another." The good men of Sanders, who attract some \$200 million in

defense contracts each year. know a patent when they see one, and soon they made Baer's experiments an official R&D project.

Within a few months, Baer and his two associates were playing target games, chase games, Ping-Pong, and hockey. A short time later, they applied for a patent. Three years passed before they got a nibble from a manufacturer, however, and it wasn't until the summer of 1972 that Magnavox put Odyssey, the first home video game, on the market. "I was floored by the \$100 price tag," says Baer. "I had been counting on \$29.99."

Nearly 100,000 Odysseys were sold that first season, but video games did not really catch on—some say because Magnavox's technology was so limited—until 1975. Then Atari came out with some screen gems with flamboyant symbology and sound effects; Fairchild, APF, and a few other firms also made worthy entries. In 1976 the number and variety of models and manufacturers more than doubled, and their prices nearly halved. The home video game now qualified as a craze.

The folks in the traditional games business were watching this fad with increasing dread. At Milton Bradley, George Ditomassi had started to get a little uneasy in 1975 when Pong became a national pastime. His company had tested that game and concluded it was "boring, dull, and of very poor play value"; it got about three months of use before it was put away for good. "I was amazed," says Dito, "that people would spend that kind of money on Pong. And it wasn't just the disposable income crowd; it was blue collar types as well." Obviously the money all those video nuts were spending on TV games was coming out of some part of the family budget, and chances were it was money that would have otherwise shown up on the balance sheets of Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley. Moreover, the new games were cutting into the leisure time once reserved for Monopoly and Careers and Candy Land.

In early 1976, when the price of video games dropped drastically, Milton Bradley decided it was time to do something about these interlopers, and the company began to accumulate the twelve people who would eventually research and develop video exclusively. The executives at Parker Brothers, not usually alarmist types, had carefully reviewed the video games and, arriving at the same conclusions Bradley had, decided just to sit tight; they were convinced that good games had to be of "lasting play value," and three months was not considered lasting enough. The ideas they had been discussing with Bob and Holly Doyle for the past year and a half seemed more durable.

In 1977 came the crash. "The video picture got cloudy around then," says Bruno Ferretti, the buyer for Child

World. "We had gone into video games in a pretty big way—we even had a 'Family Electronic Center'—but the technology was advancing so fast that by the time a product hit the market, it was obsolete." That year, having sniffed out the trend, some forty companies came out with video games, and a good portion of them paid through the nose. The market wasn't flooded; it was tidal-waved. Coleco, a video leader, was stuck with \$15.2 million worth of inventory. But the fiasco was just as much a function of too little as of too much. "The manufacturers were slow to realize that a video game for the home cannot be like the arcade video games," says Ralph Baer. "The arcade environment is not real life. At the arcade you pay your quarter and the game will be pretty much the same no matter who your opponent is. In real life you play against your peers, and you have to develop some skill." The video games did not provide its players a wide enough margin for improvement. Another problem, notes Bruno Ferretti, was that people didn't like having their TV sets tied up with the equipment—and you know a game that has fewer takers than "Three's Company" has got to be a bust. Ferretti pronounced video dead.

In truth, many insiders are now predicting that by 1979, when the sophisticated "programmable" units—such as the Atari model with cartridges for combat games using jet planes, biplanes, guided-missile jets, invisible tanks, etc.—slip under the \$100 price point, video games will be revived with more enthusiasm than ever before. Ralph Baer is currently at work on some high-tech video games involving telephones and cable television, and Mattel, according to rumor, will eventually issue a video game with an animated screen. And if video units should ever become standardized, in the way that phonographs were universally adapted to 33 r.p.m. after World War II, then the traditional game companies will be in the privileged position of making game cartridges to fit other manufacturers' machines. As Ralph Baer says, "You want to be in the chocolate bar business, not the dispenser business. The real name of the game is the game."

How fortunate for the toys-and-games industry, in the meantime, that while retailers like Bruno Ferretti are having to unload their video games at just about cost—\$20 to \$30—Simon and Merlin and Mattel's new Basketball and all the rest of those bleeping machines are practically walking off the shelves. Watching their royalties from the video games diminish, Sanders Associates just might regard Ralph Baer's freelance invention, Simon, as the competition.

In our technological time, when the computer-in-every-home age is announced almost weekly, the new robots in Toyland will not fool anyone into thinking that

the industry has caught up with the state of the art. *Star Wars* special effects they aren't. "The Jetsons wouldn't be caught dead playing with Merlin," says one young skeptic. And an electronics whiz from MIT says of Simon's simplicity, "It's incredible that Milton Bradley could have gotten hold of a microprocessor and come up with something that dumb." For one thing, the technology that can be mass-produced is a few years behind the latest breakthroughs: the computer games rely on chips originally developed for washing machines and microwave ovens. For another, "you have to make the computer dumb and slow," says an electronic game inventor, "for people to be able to play with it." Moreover, the games' "displays," or faces, are currently limited to primitive configurations of LEDs, and as Ralph Baer points out, if you get too fancy—and expensive you might as well go into video. Still, in order to accommodate the modest chip, the game companies have had to make enormous adjustments.

Arthur Venditti is Parker's manager of product development and its nearest approximation of a romantic's notion of a game designer—a tinkerer in Santa's workshop. And he experienced perhaps more than anyone the computerization of Parker Brothers. Arthur is Mr. Games; even on his lunch hour he is always involved in a vicious card game of Oh, Shit! "I'm used to putting on many game-

playing hats," says he who named Parker's fabulous Nerf line (after a substance used to protect race car bumpers) and who has designed some one hundred Parker products—10-4, Good Buddy, Soma, Boggle, Gnip Gnop—in his ten years at the company. By the time Merlin was handed to him for development, even electronics was old hat, or at least a familiar hat, for him. Though he would still protest, "Hey, I graduated from the Mass. College of Art, I couldn't write a program to save my life," he had absorbed some electronic smarts "by osmosis" from Bob Doyle when they worked together on Code Name: Sector the year before. The following summer, Arthur had picked up some more pointers when he developed (and came up with the name for) another Doyle product—P.E.G.S., or the Parker Electronic Game System, a computerized peg board game that would be on the market in September of '78. "Every time Bob opened his mouth, I listened," says Arthur, "and now I have an advantage. I still ask a lot of stupid questions that engineers wouldn't ask, and a lot of interesting things come out of it." He was going to have a great time quizzing Merlin.

Merlin first came to Parker Brothers as a computer ticktacktoe game. Holly Doyle had noticed that kids were mad about the electronic ticktacktoe at the Museum of Science, but that they lost interest quickly because the computer

always made the same countermove to a given play. Though the version Holly submitted made a variety of responses, "it wasn't gangbusters," says Arthur. "Can't you give me something brand new?" Bill Dohrmann urged.

When the Doyles came back with something brand new, "we had an embarrassment of riches," says Arthur. Bob and Arthur took the new, improved Merlin down to Houston to find out what Texas Instruments could and could not handle on its TMS-1100 chip. Games with different levels of strategies built in were simplified; those with the lengthiest programs were discarded. Back in Salem, Dick Dalessio, Parker's new marketing manager for electronic games, joined the sorting-out process. "Basically," he says, "I'm trying to stuff twice as much into a game for half the price. That's how I interface with these guys." After some vigorous "play-testing" on real children, five games were selected: Tic Tac Toe, which Holly had insisted on because "it's a good way to confront a computer for the first time, on familiar turf", Echo, a version of Simon in which the player reproduces the computer's sequence; Blackjack 13, like the casino game; Mindbender, a number code to decipher, like Comp IV; and Magic Square, another puzzle. Then Bob Doyle had a brainstorm: a simple addition to its program would enable Merlin to make music too. Parker was reluctant—Merlin was already capable of

space age tantaras and raspberries, and they didn't care if it could sing or not. "It was icing," says Arthur, "and no one here wanted to get fat."

At the last minute they relented. Down to Houston went Bob, Dick, and Arthur for the sixth and last time in three months. Can you make this thing memorize sixteen musical notes? they asked. No problem, TI replied. But sixteen notes, the Parker brigade realized, is pretty trivial. How about thirty-two? they said to TI. No way, said TI. The chip won't take it. Just do it, said Parker, and they left for the evening. The next morning, Merlin wasn't just whistling "Dixie." But then Parker got to thinking: most musical phrases are in increments of forty-eight beats. The engineers, bleary-eyed from the night before, went slack. Look, fellas, said TI, we've done all we can. Thirty-two is the positive absolute limit. We're going out to lunch, said Parker. See you in a couple of hours. At two o'clock, Merlin had a sixth game, Music Machine, and it played forty-eight notes. When Parker engineers officially presented the top game for 1978 to company brass, they had a whole colony of Merlins play "Frère Jacques" in rounds.

Merlin's guts were in good shape now, but its image needed a lot of work. It didn't even have a name yet. Some people had been calling it Adversary, others Challenger, but these seemed only to indulge the adult public's basic fear of the computer (even Dick Dalessio confesses that he was "put off by the hardware" the first time he met Merlin). Maybe, then, the game should be billed as a child's pal—like HAL the friendly computer in *2001*. Parker's ad agency, Humphrey Browning & Macdougall, recommended against this it almost denied the game's main attraction—and finally Parker decided to invoke Camelot's wizard: he was human, and he was magical.

Now Sam Kjellman, a young, deliberate staff designer at Parker, had the Herculean task of making Merlin's appearance reflect these qualities. "My first consideration," he says, "was that people be able to relate to Merlin. The beauty of the computer is that it has humanistic qualities but that humans still know they're superior to it." By happy coincidence, it was around this time that R2D2 and C3PO were arousing a nation of androidophiles. "Here was something technological people could relate to," says Sam. "This was extremely significant because electronics has traditionally been perceived as cut and dried." Sam's first models, unfortunately, did not break with that tradition; the ones that didn't look like calculators simulated space-agey telephones, walkie-talkies, or transistor radios. "We wanted to be at the forefront of design instead of falling somewhere in the middle," says Sam. "We wanted something crisp, angular, severe, and modular." At last Merlin emerged, deep

red, sleek, and elongated. The look was serviceable, but, as Sam says, "it was the voice that did it. It anthropomorphized Merlin in a way the design couldn't." Sure enough, when Merlin was play-tested through a market research firm, the child testers were a little bashful with this peculiar plaything until they heard it "talk." And when Merlin "sang," the kids began making cordial overtures of their own; the icing that Arthur had doubted turned out to be the best part of the cake. From then on, the players would refer to Merlin as "he," though Bob Doyle insists that "it should really be 'she' because what's inside of Merlin is Holly."

Merlin was indeed the offspring of a highly unorthodox relationship between inventor and manufacturer: during the making of Merlin, the Doyles had conferred with Parker nearly every day; company executives had traveled the world, Houston to Hong Kong, investigating new suppliers and technology for the Doyles' handiwork. "We have a good working relationship," says Arthur. "We trust each other implicitly, but we aren't married to each other." But the Doyles' exclusive contract with Parker (which binds them to Parker but not vice versa) was about the closest the toy industry has ever come to sacred vows, and as with most such arrangements, the dependency was mutual: the Doyles needed Parker's game sense, and Parker needed the Doyles' electronic know-how, at least until they built up a staff to replace them. If this left the Doyles vulnerable, at least they had some protection in the toys-and-games jungle. When they were new to the business, Bob had made a presentation to a New York company that was expanding into electronics. A man at that meeting took Bob out to dinner afterwards—and identified himself as a game inventor. He had been invited to sit in on Bob's talk and see if his firm might want to help itself to any of Bob's ideas. Fortunately, the man wanted to give Bob a job (an offer he declined), instead of steal his games. Parker Brothers, however, certainly has no motivation to spurn the Doyles, and so it has been a model partner. Some industry people believe that Merlin, P.E.G.S., and Code Name: Sector stand to make the Doyles millionaires, which will make Parker very happy as well.

If Merlin was the product of careful, collaborative breeding by inventor and manufacturer, Simon sprang full-grown from Ralph Baer's head as far as Milton Bradley was concerned. It seemed only appropriate that Simon should be given a coming out party at Studio 54, since Merlin was getting a quarter-million-dollar network TV ad campaign (\$400,000 is average for most board games), with time on family programming and sports broadcasts in addition to the usual Saturday morning kidvid ghetto; Parker marketers figured that fathers would be in

on the game purchase for the first time, because of both the high price and the macho appeal of electronics. In mid-September, the Doyles would embark on a ten-city promotional tour, pitching Merlin primarily—"he's like the candidate who's running for President," says Bob—and also putting in a good word for P.E.G.S., a worthy senator. But Milton Bradley was the company renowned for publicity stunts, the most outrageous of which got its games on TV for free. Their promotion of Twister had broken new ground by seducing Johnny Carson and Zsa Zsa Gabor to cavort on the game's plastic mat in front of the millions of randy people who tune in to "The Tonight Show." Last year, George Ditomassi persuaded Dick Clark to preside over a Twister contest in Fort Lauderdale that commemorated the game's tenth anniversary. And in 1969, Dito had toured the country with the Amazing Kreskin as he bewitched TV audiences with Milton Bradley's ESP game, which nevertheless, says Dito, "went the way of all bad games." But even for Milton Bradley, Studio 54 was a bit much, because Simon was an unknown quantity. Going disco was costing Bradley big bucks, and in fact, Dito would joke later, "it'll cost me my job if this thing doesn't take off." So before he took Simon to Studio 54 in May, Dito ran four weeks of trial TV commercials, starring Vincent Price, in New York and Boston, and the response was "encouraging." Simons were donated to Channel 2 and other PBS stations for their fund-raising auctions so that Dito could get an idea of the game's "perceived value"; at every auction, Simon went for more than thirty dollars, which wasn't out of line with the retail price.

In the meantime, as the first sample Simons were being sent to Milton Bradley in April, more employees were tracking through George Ditomassi's office than he had seen in his eighteen years at the company (Dito had joined Bradley straight out of UMass as an assistant foreman in the factory; "it was either watch the factory fall apart or promote me," he says, "so I was promoted the day before I was going to be fired"). The people coming to see Dito always had one thing on their minds: they wanted to borrow a Simon to use at a party they were giving that weekend, because, it seemed, Simon was as much fun to watch being played as it was to play. As soon as the first batch of Simons came off the assembly lines, MB employees seized them. Dito had never seen anything like it, until he saw something like it at Studio 54. Simon was indeed a good mixer, and he seemed to appeal as much to metropolitans as to peckerwoods, to grownups as to children. Back in Springfield, Dito started to get feedback (Feedback, incidentally, was Simon's working name, before they decided it was a he): the father of a deaf boy called from Maryland and, choked

with gratitude, told Dito that his son could somehow pick up Simon's beeps; a nun from Indiana wrote that she was using Simon in her classroom to help develop her pupils' concentration. "Simon is like the Red Sox this year," says Dito, a Yankee fan, grimacing. "It can do no wrong."

Well, yes, the contest shaping up between Simon and Merlin has all the markings of another close pennant race of recent history. Though Simon has been on a tear in toy departments since May, Merlin was shipped in late August and, like some pesky team from New York, could overtake Simon in the last month of the season. Indeed, Dito says that at the rate it's moving now, Simon will be sold out by November, and since that game requires a nine-month lead time just for manufacturing, the supply of Simons will not be replenished in time for Christmas.

For shoppers, the choice presented by Simon and Merlin couldn't be clearer. Their wholesale prices are comparable—\$19.00 for Simon and \$19.95 for Merlin as is the cost to the consumer, which varies from retailer to retailer, but remaining similarities are few. Merlin is the product of a think tank, a slick, mature item that, according to some people in the industry, children will find cold, unsympathetic. "It's not good to be too sophisticated," notes the editor of the trade magazine *Playthings*, "or you'll leave your public behind." Simon, on the other hand, seems more the offspring of a PR giant; its Technicolor lights and sci-fi sounds make for a pretty face, but it missed out decidedly on the brains. Says one unimpressed shopper, "They should have given the game its full name: Simple Simon." But Dito is not concerned that Simon plays only one game to Merlin's six (one of which is a version of Simon), because, he claims, "you're better off selling parcheesi and checkers separately than as part of a game chest. We've found that the package deals don't generally do that well." More important, as an adult party novelty, Simon will attract a larger market than the nine- to fourteen-year-olds Merlin is intended for. The retailers, however, are confident that both Simon and Merlin will be winners. Now that the *Close Encounters* rage has almost made us forget the *Star Wars* phantasms, it won't hurt that Simon looks like a flying saucer of the third kind or that Merlin hums the movie's theme song.

So, who will be ahead in the electronics standings after this Christmas, Parker Brothers or Milton Bradley, is a subject of controversy. Parker has repeatedly asserted that it will publish only electronic games that could not be done without a microcomputer to add an "intelligent" player; Sector and Merlin and P.E.G.S. could not exist without a chip. Milton Bradley, by contrast, has repeatedly man-

ufactured electronic games that could have just as easily done without the hardware: Electronic Battleship is an obvious example, but as *Consumer Reports* has pointed out, Comp IV's game, too, could be played by any two people with some paper and a pencil. "It will be very hard for anyone to catch Parker now," says a local electronic game inventor. Yet Milton Bradley took the initiative with hand-held strategy games by issuing Comp IV a year before Parker Brothers made its hand-held contribution, and this year Bradley has gone truly experimental and come out with its first electronic toy—and its first toy since World War I—a rather basic hand-propelled spaceship, called Star Bird, that accelerates, "shoots lasers," and decelerates. On the basis of these and of the company's sales record, Jim Halpin, the main toy buyer for Zayre, believes that Milton Bradley has the electronic category sewed up. About Merlin and Simon in particular, Santa will tell. Which will it be: the wizard or the simpleton?

Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley will undoubtedly split the monopoly on electronic games—and both will pass Go and collect \$200 many, many times. But there are other players in the game.

"The toy industry is flagrant in not considering the kid," says Steve Caney, a local game inventor and author (most recently of *Kids' America*) who has spent

thirteen years in the trade. This attitude is particularly appalling given how significant play is to a child's development. Toys and games promote all manner of acting out, problem solving, socializing, and fantasizing (see Erik Erikson for more on this). But the truth is that if Kenner toys had Burton White "develop" a line of preschool playthings, it was only because market research told them that parents were insecure about child-rearing and would "respond" to endorsements by experts. Nor is there any burden of responsibility on the inventors—of toy designers Marvin Glass once said, "It helps if they're emotionally retarded."

American kids, Caney believes, are losing their capacity for play. Toys satisfy a "give me a possession" impulse more than an urge for recreation, and so they must gratify instantly. Whereas European children spend days constructing elaborate toys from scratch, American kids snap together the precut parts of their model airplanes when "Laff-a-Lympics" breaks for a commercial. Toys for the generation of child TV addicts are "self-tending," says Caney, make no more demands on the child than would a morning with Captain Kangaroo. It is certainly no fluke that the single most effective trend in children's board games is the licensing of popular TV shows; identification with Grizzly Adams, the Fonz, or the Six Million Dollar Man—even if they've been canceled is far more im-

portant than the quality of the game. Marvin Glass himself said that "play value" is an industry myth, a buzz word to describe anything that strikes a so-called toy expert's fancy.

Many believe that the electronic games are accelerating the instant gratification syndrome in American children. Now the kid has almost no "input" into play; the computer is programmed with all the answers *and* all the questions. (For European "electronic games" the children build the computers themselves.) The new games could skew a child's perception of competition in the way digital watches make time linear. Steve Caney believes that those little LED-studded boxes may deprive children of the fantasy life encouraged by open-ended, or multi-purposed, toys, just as television dispossessed radio listeners. "There were a lot of disappointed kids who saw what the Lone Ranger looked like for the first time," says Caney. Joseph Weizenbaum, an MIT professor of computer science, is more critical of the electronic games' potential for supporting asocial behavior, especially as they're intended to console all those lonely children Dorothy Worcester's people at Milton Bradley have spotted. "It's an exploitation of the problem, not a solution," says Weizenbaum. "It only embeds the child's loneliness. What that child needs is the companionship of other people, not a computer. It's just another example of

how we're always applying technology to fundamental social problems for its immediate 'benefits.' "

Perhaps the solitaire, hand-held variety of electronic games will have died out before they make *Clockwork Orange* misfits of our children. The same three-year cycle that boosted, by turn, calculators, digital watches, and video games into best-sellerdom, and then remaindered them on the third year, may very easily affect the hand-held electronic games. This year, Coleco, the Hartford Company, has no less than six hand-held models on the market retailing for less than twenty dollars. If all goes according to schedule, the deluge of Merlins and Simons and so forth will come in 1979, and put a lot of manufacturers under.

Whatever the fate or future of this year's models, electronics in toys and games is here to stay. The smart companies, like Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley, already have countless new computerized tricks up their sleeves, and the stunning debut this year of Texas Instruments' own *Speak & Spell*, a robot with a 300-word-vocabulary sound chip, suggests that next year the game companies will be buying talkies from TI. Computer toys, of course, will be scooting around homes across the nation when the technology is a little further along—the none-too-thrilling *Star Bird* (which did, however, thrill the trade, eliciting ten times more orders than *Simon*) contains a custom-made chip that set Bradley back several hundred thousand dollars. Bob Doyle has a fantasy about the kind of play the computer will eventually make possible: One day in the distant future, as sure as we all own record collections today, we will have our experience libraries. Whenever we feel like the Indianapolis 500 ... the Queen's coronation ... a trip to Mars ... a grope session with Errol Flynn ... we can take a chip from our files, wire it to a cathode surgically implanted on the base of our skull, and *voilà*: instant experience, prepackaged and Consumer Safety Act-approved—the ultimate toy.

One shudders to contemplate the sinister side of this plaything of the space age, but perhaps, considering its origins, the computer is destined to have noxious effect on the nature of play. In a paper to be published in *The Future Study on the Impact of Computers and Information Processing*, Joseph Weizenbaum writes: "The computer in its modern form was born from the womb of the military ... It is probably a fair guess, although no one could possibly know, that the largest fraction of computers devoted to a single purpose today are still those dedicated to cheaper, more nearly certain ways to kill ever larger numbers of human beings." It is no accident, surely, that the largest fraction of computer games pit missiles, tanks, and biplanes in combat against one another; no accident that a percentage of

every dollar paid on home video games helps finance the electronic defense systems being developed at Sanders Associates. Perhaps the Merlins and Simons of the world are not militant enough to be candidates for the psychosis that Weizenbaum says is bound to afflict the computers running our Information Society of the future; yet even as far back as 1968 a computer was "lying" to the Pentagon about the bombing of Cambodia. And still, one wonders whether the executives at Parker Brothers who suggested that Merlin be named after the amiable computer in *2001*, remembered that at the end of the movie HAL routs the astronauts and takes over the spaceship. □

The Rules of the Game

(Continued from page 107)

prompted a \$30 million class action suit.

"The difference between Milton Bradley and Mattel," says George Ditomassi, "is the difference between a choirboy and a convict." (Under new management, it should be noted, Mattel has gotten its stock back up, legitimately.) And indeed, Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers have, astonishingly, managed a reputation for high-quality gamesmanship, on and off the board, for most of their existence. Both were born of good Yankee stock in the last century. George Parker of Salem, Massachusetts (already a game-making center in the mid-1800s),

spent forty of the fifty dollars that were his life's savings to manufacture a board game he had dreamed up called Banking. That invention was such a success that shortly after he graduated from high school a year or so later, in 1885, he founded the George S. Parker Company, where he presided as chief game inventor until his death in 1955. Around 1860, Milton Bradley migrated from the Lowell area to Springfield via Hartford, and there bought one of the few lithograph presses in the country. His brief career as a printmaker came to an end when one of his subjects grew a beard soon after he posed for Bradley, who was then forced to destroy his considerable inventory of clean-shaven Lincoln portraits. Fortunately, just as intimations of civil war were forcing Bradley's business further into doom, a game inventor came along with the Checkered Game of Life, and put Milton Bradley on his way to becoming the biggest game manufacturer in the world.

Until recently, Bradley and Parker were able to pass themselves off as the Mom and Pop stores they originally were. Board meetings at Parker Brothers were taken literally: according to legend, the executives sat around playing, discussing, refining, the games being considered for their line (and the sincerest competitors among them would cheat occasionally). The three-thousand-odd annual submissions from amateur game inventors were

evaluated individually, and invariably returned to sender. And even as modern times kept them busy learning about injection molding and microprocessors, still the company chiefs abided by George Parker's rule of the game: that "the excellence of its actual playing qualities" is paramount. Certainly Parker would publish its share of schlock—current examples being the Laverne & Shirley game, in which the winner is she who accumulates the most "dating hours," and Bionic Crisis, a spin-off of their Six Million Dollar Man game—but this was the prerogative (and, of course, a financial necessity, too) of a company that has more staples to its credit than any other: Sorry!, Risk, Clue, Careers, Ouija, Rook, the Nerf line, and Monopoly, the best-selling game of all time.

"They may have the number-one game," Milton Bradley people like to say, "but we have the next nineteen." And indeed, with entries like Yahtzee, Battleship, Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders, Twister, Concentration, Jeopardy, and Password, their list is nothing to sneeze at. Whereas the average company derives 60 to 70 percent of its yearly income from new games, Milton Bradley gets only 30 percent, claims George Ditomassi.

Maybe Bradley doesn't seem to have as much fun at their games as Parker does, and maybe they have more empty calories in their provisions (one of these is, suitably enough, Fat Chance, in which

players consume imaginary junk food, drawing cards that say, for example, "Eat at Jelly Roll Jack's"), and maybe, according to industry insiders, Parker has a classier, slicker operation than Milton Bradley—any such distinctions would be lost on the people who buy their games. "The first thing people ask me when they find out I work for Bradley," says Ditomassi, "is, 'Oh, don't you make Monopoly?,' and by then I've already walked away."

Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers are, in fact, fond and enthusiastic rivals—"our chief competitor and friend," Bradley president Jim Shea calls Parker Brothers—and this rivalry is frequently and publicly expressed in the anecdote about how this unemployed heating engineer came out to Springfield peddling a game he had invented that had squares named after streets in Atlantic City, and about how the company bigwigs hadn't thought it a very good game at all—it took too long to play and the rules were too complicated ... About how this heating engineer ended up in Salem, and Parker Brothers ended up with Monopoly, a game that has reportedly made them \$50 million, with \$3 million more coming in each year. Both companies still like to laugh about this irony, but recent developments make it appear that the joke may after all be on Parker Brothers.

In December of 1973, a San Francisco State professor of economics named Ralph Anspach put out a board game he called Anti-Monopoly, in which players busted up monopolistic corporations like Nazareth Steel, Egson Oil, and Flame Rock Tire. Parker Brothers claimed that the game's name infringed upon their Monopoly trademark, and when a court of law upheld this contention, 40,000 copies of Anti-Monopoly were ploughed into a land-fill in Minnesota. But in preparing his defense, Anspach learned some very interesting things about Monopoly. Charles Darrow, this unemployed heating engineer with a pregnant wife who, according to Parker's current brochure, "recalled the happy days of the 1920s when he had enough money to take his family to Atlantic City on holidays, basking in the sunshine and strolling along the Boardwalk ... and decided in 1933 to devise a game based on the resort area he so warmly remembered"—why, he was not the inventor of Monopoly at all. In fact, Monopoly was a direct descendant of one Lizzie Magie's turn-of-the-century Landlord's Game, based on nineteenth-century reformer Henry George's lefty notions that only land should be taxed in order to subsidize the government. It became Monopoly around 1915 and was played in places as diverse as Philadelphia, of which Darrow's native Germantown is a suburb, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Williamstown, Massachusetts, Indianapolis, and, of course, Atlantic City, where the game was

paved with Baltic Avenue, Park Place, et al. Thus Anspach uncovered what he is calling the \$50 Million Monopoly Rip-Off: Parker Brothers' paper goldmine, it seemed, was a hot property in more ways than one. Though his research didn't win him the trademark case, Anspach is hoping it will have more direct bearing on the antitrust proceedings he plans to initiate against Parker Brothers once his appeal of the trademark business has been settled. "They're in trouble," Anspach vows.

Anspach's assurance might have more punch if this was a small New England family operation he was up against. But it isn't. In 1968, Parker Brothers was bought by General Mills for a rumored \$70 million cash, and if, as the then-owners of the company testified, Monopoly alone is worth \$60 million, you can bet that General Mills is going to protect that game as aggressively as they would their Betty Crocker line. In his *New Yorker* article on the subject, Calvin Trillin described the Monopoly conflict as "a battle over monopoly between someone who owns just about everything on the board and someone who is about on the point of having to mortgage Mediterranean Avenue." Right now, Parker is unperturbed, and seemingly imperturbable in the glassy masterpiece of office design off 128 in Beverly that the firm moved into last January the factory workers left behind at the musty gray complex in Salem refer to it as Camelot.

And even though the company's retired president allowed in court as to how he personally had never believed Darrow to be the inventor of Monopoly, Parker will continue to circulate press releases proclaiming the touching story of the unemployed Darrow, who "rather than moping around feeling sorry for himself, spent his time doing odd jobs such as walking dogs, fixing electric irons, patching concrete" ... and, of course, inventing the most popular game in all the world. Until, perhaps, Parker Brothers and General Mills are faced with an unsympathetic jury.

Looking on the bright side from Parker's viewpoint, the deception that was allegedly perpetrated more than forty years ago finally caught up with them at a time when they could take advantage of General Mills' arsenal of legal defense. Besides, no cynic of the seventies would be shocked by a little monopolism, even as related to a near-sacred piece of Americana.

At about the time that Parker Brothers became part of the General Mills Fun Group in 1968, Milton Bradley began doing some corporate expansion of its own, buying up subsidiaries, domestic and international, as though they were property on a Monopoly board. Within four years they had doubled their sales; in the first quarter of 1978, Bradley's profits amounted to \$2,052,000, a 43 per-

cent increase over the first quarter of last year. Winning profits is, unquestionably, more important than how their games are played.

But then, everybody has grown up since 1968, and no one would expect even a game company to be altruistic anymore.

—D.M.
