

JAMES LOWDER'S GAMES TO GIFT 2025

TOP PICK:

BOMB BUSTERS

PUBLISHER: PEGASUS SPIELE; DESIGNER: HISASHI HAYASHI

2–5 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$43 (suggested retail price)

From designer Hisashi Hayashi, known for his transportation-themed games *Trains*, *String Railway*, and *Metro X*, *Bomb Busters* is a cooperative deduction game of explosives disposal. Players work together to cut the numbered and color-coded wire cards in their trays in the correct order. Get your teammate's wire card wrong and advance the detonator. Cut a red wire, the bomb explodes and the team loses. Role cards grant each player a special ability, and equipment cards can impact the defusing sequence. The eight training missions will introduce you to the game, with 66 total missions to explore. The variety of goals for the different missions mean you are likely to find several scenarios that work at your table, even if others are not to your group's liking. A session reels out in a fast 30 minutes. The quick play time and the cool, cartoony art by Dominique Ferland keep this more fun than fraught. Winner of the prestigious Spiel des Jahres for 2025.

OTHER GREAT NEW GAMES:

Gateway Games:

A PLACE FOR ALL MY BOOKS

PUBLISHER: SMIRK & DAGGER; DESIGNERS: ALEX CUTLER, MICHAEL MIHEALSICK

1–4 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$45

Bibliophiles, unite! In *A Place for All My Books*, you sort and stack books throughout the rooms of your apartment, admire your work, and recharge your social battery so you can venture into the village to collect neat stuff for your place, such as coffee mugs, plushies, and fuzzy sweaters—and more books, of course. Organizing the colored books in a certain order and arranging them in specific patterns around the gridded apartment board help you complete little projects and major accomplishments, all of which can net you victory points, as will the items you pick up in the village. Some of those items grant you special abilities, as well. Played over nine rounds and lasting about an hour, *A Place for All My Books* is just the thing for folks looking for a new game to keep their get-togethers inviting. There's also a solo mode for when your own social battery has run down and needs recharging.

UNMATCHED: SLINGS AND ARROWS

PUBLISHER: RESTORATION; DESIGNERS: NOAH COHEN, ROB DAVIAU, JONATHAN GUBERMAN, JASON HAGER, JUSTIN D. JACOBSON, BRIAN NEFF

2–4 PLAYERS; 9 AND UP; \$40

The *Unmatched* series is a large group of accessible fighting games for two to four players as young as nine. Each character in the game has a special deck of cards used for attack and defense, as well as a health dial to track their status and a miniature, many with associated sidekick tokens, that moves around the battlefield. Each location board presents different challenges and requires new strategies to navigate effectively. Fights last around 30 minutes, with built-in mechanisms in place to exhaust character health so battles don't drag on forever. The series releases to date have included quite a few Public Domain characters, such as Little Red Riding Hood, Bigfoot, Rosie the Riveter, and King Arthur, along with licensed creations Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Spider-Man. With *Slings and Arrows*, players

can add William Shakespeare and several of his characters to their fighter roster: Titania, the three witches from *Macbeth*, and Hamlet. The design for these characters is a study in cleverly merging theme and mechanisms, with Shakespeare wielding a special attack tied to deploying his cards so they total 10 points—the typical number of syllables used in a line of iambic pentameter—and Hamlet must choose each round between To Be, gaining extra actions, or Not To Be, dealing more damage, including to himself. The battleground added for this set is the Globe Theatre, which itself offers some clever design elements, making it a tricky place to fight and a good reason to use caution when calling out the Bard on his home turf.

FLIPTOONS

PUBLISHER: THUNDERWORKS; DESIGNERS: JORDY ADAN, RENATO SIMÕES

1–4 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$20

From Wisconsin publisher Thunderworks and designers Jordy Adan and Renato Simões, *FlipToons* has players taking on the role of casting director, scouring Flip Valley for potential animated stars to fill six open roles in an upcoming production. But even toon actors need the right chemistry to shine on the screen, so you'll have to recruit and audition a lot of talent to gather the best possible team. The first player to generate more than 30 points of fame earns the Critic's Choice and signals one final round of auditions before the game ends and a winner is declared. *FlipToons* features engaging art by Diego Sá and plays in a speedy 15 to 30 minutes. The auditions for each casting director run simultaneously, so there's not a lot of time spent waiting for others to finish their turn. The game has been selling out and might be hard to come by this month. If you can't find it and still want to support the Wisconsin company, give their press-your-luck dice game *Emerald Skulls* a look. It's also a lot of fun.

Hobby Games:

ENDEAVOR: DEEP SEA

PUBLISHER: BURNT ISLAND; DESIGNERS: CARL DE VISSER, JARRATT GRAY

1–4 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$59

This latest entry in the *Endeavor* line has players preserving and exploring the modern marine ecosystem. By recruiting experts and using their skills, you can spread knowledge through published papers and launch conservation efforts, even as you investigate locations and dive sites in this tableaux-building game. You'll find 10 scenarios and three modes of play—competitive, co-op, and solo—with a complete session running for an hour or two. Build reputation, inspiration, coordination, and ingenuity, all of which can influence things such as crew efficiency and the exploration opportunities available to your team. Overall progress is tracked on the impact board, with new benefits unlocked the farther along you progress. Victory in *Endeavor: Deep Sea* can be earned through a large number of paths and strategies, with repeat play of rewarding depth. The earlier releases in the line, *Endeavor* (2009) and *Endeavor: Age of Sail* (2018), are also well worth your time. *Endeavor: Deep Sea* took home both the Origins Award for Best Heavy Strategy Game and the 2025 Kennerspiel des Jahres.

CHICAGO '68

PUBLISHER: THE DIETZ FOUNDATION; DESIGNER: YONI GOLDSTEIN

1–4 PLAYERS; 14 AND UP; \$55

The Deitz Foundation helps teachers discover alternate means of approaching education in classroom settings. In addition to endowing scholarships at the high school and college levels, they publish games they hope will prove useful to those educators and of interest to tabletop fans. *Chicago '68* is one of

their latest and best. It's an asymmetric wargame in which players, as either the Establishment or the Demonstrators, vie for control of the delegate count and the media narrative at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Like the actual events of August 1968, the game is built around street battles and political maneuvering. Across five rounds, the opposing forces take turns deploying cards from two decks, one for their leadership and one for their rank-and-file in the streets, hoping to control areas, gather and maneuver forces, and manage resources effectively. For the Establishment to win, they must triumph both inside the convention and with the public. The Demonstrators only need to win on one of the two tracks. The cards refer to real events and people, and the foundation offers additional content about that history on their website: <https://www.1968games.com>. *Chicago '68* plays in 90 to 180 minutes and includes solo, competitive, co-op, and team modes.

UNSTOPPABLE

PUBLISHER: RENEGADE; DESIGNER: JOHN. D. CLAIR
1–2 PLAYERS; 14 AND UP; \$60

Kick around some evil minions to hone your skills and build your power on your way to confront the world-annihilating menace threatening your star system. Will you be unstoppable when you reach the final boss or will the universe need to wait, yet again, for a properly prepared hero to rise up and defeat the cosmic peril? *Unstoppable* works as both a solo and co-op game for two players, but is strongest for the solo gamer who wants to invest some time—potentially a lot of time—to figure out the right mixture of resources needed to beat the daunting bosses. Each session runs between 30 and 90 minutes as you build your deck, gathering weapons and allies, to defeat each escalating scenario's threat. The game includes a clever card-crafting mechanism, where you can spend points to combine two, three, or four elements in a clear sleeve to create a new resource. Increasing the hero's might can also increase the threats from the minions, though, so players need to be wary of trying to stockpile too many supercharged resources. *Unstoppable* offers three difficulty levels, which basically start at challenging. It's a hardcore gamer's game, really, for people who approach the boss battles as puzzles to be cracked and don't mind losing many times before securing a hard-won victory.

Two-Player Games:

STAR WARS: BATTLE OF HOTH

PUBLISHER: DAYS OF WONDER; DESIGNERS: RICHARD BORG, ADRIEN MARTINOT
2–4 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$60

Star Wars: Battle of Hoth offers players the chance to direct the Rebels or the Empire in a series of combat scenarios set on the winter planet from 1980's *The Empire Strikes Back*. The game is built upon Richard Borg's groundbreaking Command and Colors system, simplified wargaming rules that typically feature battle dice, a hex-map playfield divided into three sections, and a deck of two types of command cards. Section cards issue orders to units in the indicated part of the battlefield. Tactics cards activate special attacks. The game's miniatures are high quality and include the familiar AT-ATs and snowspeeders from the film. Leader cards can be added to the fights, bringing Darth Vader or Princess Leia into the mix. 17 different scenarios and two multi-scenario campaigns are included, with battles playing in 30 to 45 minutes. Once you get the hang of the basics for the Command and Colors system, you can try out the excellent World War II combat game *Memoir '44*, the fantasy-infused Hundred Years War game *BattleLore*, or any of the more traditional wargames Borg has released through the publishers GMT and Compass.

AZUL DUEL

PUBLISHER: NEXT MOVE; DESIGNER: MICHAEL KIESLING

2 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$30

Azul Duel is a terrific two-player remake of *Azul*, our top Games to Gift pick from 2018, from original designer Michael Kiesling. Players are rival artisans who each hope to secure a job decorating a palace ceiling. By way of an audition, they show their skills by drafting decorative tiles from factory supplies and arranging them on their boards to score points. The new day and night mechanism for factories, along with the bonus chips and dome plates, make this a different play experience than *Azul*, while retaining its core play elements and appeal.

EVERDELL DUO

PUBLISHER: STARLING; DESIGNERS: JAMES A. WILSON, CLARISSA A. WILSON

1–2 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$35

A refinement and distillation of successful aspects of several entries in the *Everdell* line, *Everdell Duo* is a fine series entry point and a very strong design in its own right. Over 30 minutes or so, a hare and tortoise compete to build the best woodland haven. In gameplay terms, you gain resources through worker placement and then use those resources to collect and deploy cards to construct your town. Goals can vary across sessions, so the most desirable cards and combinations change, adding to the replay value. The progression of the seasons across rounds impact resources and the movement of the sun and moon tracks change card availability, so players need to plan for these shifts. *Everdell Duo* offers solo and campaign play, as well as both competitive and co-op modes. The artwork from Enggar Adirasa and Andrew Bosley sets the proper cozy tone.

Party Games:

FLIP 7

PUBLISHER: THE OP; DESIGNER: ERIC OLSEN

3–18 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$8

Nominee for the prestigious Spiel des Jahres and winner of the Origins Award for Best Party Game, *Flip 7* is a deceptively simple press-your-luck design where players turn over cards to rack up the highest score, hoping to avoid repeating a number. The cards are numbered 0 to 12, though the numeral also indicates how many total cards with that value can be found in the deck; there are two 2s, three 3s, and so on. Stay before you repeat a number, and you collect those points for the round. Push too far and you get nothing. There are also score modifiers and actions cards—flip 3, freeze, and second chance—scattered throughout to liven things up even more. The first player to 200 points ends the game, which usually zips by in about 20 minutes. A second deck can help you accommodate even larger groups, which isn't a big ask, given the modest \$8 retail price for *Flip 7*.

HOT STREAK

PUBLISHER: CMYK; DESIGNER: JON PERRY

2–9 PLAYERS; 6 AND UP; \$50

In *Hot Streak*, four odd, off-brand mascots compete in a race. Think the American Family Field's Famous Racing Sausages by way of the Twilight Zone. Players wager on the race's outcome, using a snake draft mechanism to select betting tickets, and place side bets on possible events, such as a mascot falling down or veering off the track during the competition. Mascot movement is controlled by a central deck,

which players can influence by adding cards from their hands that may or may not align with whatever deals they might have struck with the other gamblers. The player with the most cash after three races wins the day. Be sure to read the rulebook for details on each winner's fate, coded to the dollar value of their haul, and the inventive backstories for the mascots, all crafted by writer Sophie Abromowitz.

CAUTION SIGNS

PUBLISHER: WACKY WIZARD; DESIGNERS: SCOTT BRADY, DANIELLE REYNOLDS
3–9 PLAYERS; 8 AND UP; \$25

Each turn, players of *Caution Signs* are handed an adjective and noun combination, and in a mere 20 seconds draw an image on their dry erase board to indicate the hazard they are trying to warn people about: beware the angry wizard, for example, or the laughing cow. The person guessing that turn then collects the caution signs, as well as all the adjectives and nouns used to generate them, plus a few more words from the stack so attaching the correct combinations to the artwork isn't too easy. The guesser and the artist gain points based on the accuracy of the speculation. The role of guesser passes to someone else, and everyone sketches their warning based on a new word combination. The very short drawing time addresses one of the inherent problems with art-based party games—the potentially massive differences in players' artistic skill. The length of the game here can vary, with everyone deciding how many rounds they want to play before the first caution signs are drawn.

Kids Games:

CORGI PILEUP

PUBLISHER: GAMEHEAD; DESIGNERS: STEVE ELLIS, PAUL SALOMON
2–7 PLAYERS; 7 AND UP; \$20

In this trick-taking kids game, play a higher card than the one that was just revealed or, if you don't have a higher card, use your lowest card. Highest card takes the trick. Some cards interject special rules that determine what can be played next or what other players must do. You only score the last card in your hand, moving up the corgi pyramid on the display board until someone tallies 15 total points and reaches the top. You don't want to be the first dog to the top of the corgi pile, though, since they always tumble off. It's the second-place pup that wins *Corgi Pileup*. A fast, strategy-light game that only takes about 20 minutes and will appeal more to younger kids. To change things up, try the underdog variant where the lowest-scoring corgi emerges from the pileup victorious.

CAT SAYS MOO

PUBLISHER: WACKY WIZARD; DESIGNER: MATT FANTASTIC
2–8 PLAYERS; 6 AND UP; \$15

Cat Says Moo is a clever, chaos-fueled design from Matt Fantastic and Wacky Wizard Games. Turn over cards into two stacks. If the animals on the cards atop the piles match, be the first to yell the sound the animal makes. If the sounds written under the two animals match, even if the animals shown do not, yell the critter that makes the sound. The pace of play and the deliberate, brain-taunting similarities in Jordan Elise Perme's cute artwork—the cat and the owl share deceptively similar shapes, for example—mean confusion and silliness will result, which is really the point. Clear the deck and the person with the most points win. *Cat Says Moo* works as a party game for players as young as six, but might work well for the right gathering of adults, too.

CASCADIA JUNIOR

PUBLISHER: ALDERAC, FLATOUT; DESIGNERS: FERTESSA ALLYSE, RANDY FLYNN

2–4 PLAYERS; 6 AND UP; \$30

Cascadia Junior is a simplified, but not overly simplistic riff on the award-winning *Cascadia* (2021), a tile-laying game themed around the habitats and wildlife of the Pacific Northwest. In this version, players draft tiles and place them to align wildlife markers and group habitats to attract animals and gain sighting tokens. At the end of 10 turns, which speed past in 15 to 30 minutes, everyone flips their sighting tokens to count victory points. The Beth Sobel art is charming, and the advanced option where more patterns are required to gain sighting tokens will keep *Cascadia Junior* engaging if younger kids develop beyond the basic game but are not yet ready for the full, ages 10-and-up version of *Cascadia*. A very worthy finalist for the 2025 Kinderspiel des Jahres.

Role-Playing Games:

RIVERBANK

PUBLISHER: KOBOLD PRESS; DESIGNER: KIJ JOHNSON

2–6 PLAYERS; 13 AND UP; \$50 PRINT, \$30 PDF

Written by Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author Kij Johnson and edited by Milwaukee's own Sue Weinlein, the *RiverBank* RPG is "a cozy game of elegant animals, chaos, and whimsy." Players create their own interactive cottagecore tales set in an idyllic English countryside. The stories it favors are not combat centered, as with many roleplaying games, but rather collaborative social adventures and relationship negotiations, in keeping with *RiverBank*'s inspirational roots. Think Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, the Brambly Hedge series by Jill Barklem, or Johnson's own *The River Bank*. Character design is simple and built upon only four stats. Random event tables, one for use during game sessions and the other for use between sessions, provide plot and character development prompts. (The random events decks can be purchased separately but the prompts can also be accessed using standard playing cards and the appendices in the rulebook.) The artwork by Kathleen Jennings, Erika Lundrigan, and Svenja Muche is marvelous, and the text by Johnson is evocative and frequently delightful, particularly the footnotes.

THE REVENANT SOCIETY

PUBLISHER: VAN RYDER; DESIGNERS: BANANA CHAN, SEN-FOONG LIM

3–5 PLAYERS; 14 AND UP; \$50 CORE BOOK, \$80 DELUXE BOX SET

Last year we covered Banana Chan's art-centered solo RPG, *Forgery*. This year brings us another stellar design, *The Revenant Society: The Endless Loop Beneath the City*, which she co-designed with Sen-Foong Lim. (The two worked together previously on 2021's superb *Jiangshi: Blood in the Banquet Hall*.) Players are revenants, restless undead, stuck in Limbo. They strive to complete a mission or solve a mystery that will free them from their past life so they can move on. If there's one thing that's worse than being an unquiet soul trapped in Limbo, it's being an unquiet soul trapped in Limbo forever. The revenants have four nights to play each scenario—and possibly replay, thanks to a nicely integrated time loop mechanism—in order to make things right. *The Revenant Society* glitters with Art Deco inspirations and foregrounds the unreliable nature of memory and information in ways that make for interesting character development and a satisfying investigatory roleplaying experience. The game utilizes the Powered by the Apocalypse RPG engine, with sessions designed to last two to four hours.

WEIRD HEROES OF PUBLIC ACCESS

PUBLISHER: GET HAUNTED INDUSTRIES; DESIGNER: JOEY ROYALE

2–6 PLAYERS; 13 AND UP; \$35 PRINT

Weird Heroes of Public Access leans into the strangeness that was 1980s America and drops players squarely at the crossroads of old and new media with a mission to save their small town of Fairhaven from the prowling cryptids, shadowy corporations, and threatening oddities that have awoken with Reagan's "morning in America." Outside the requisite eight hours at their soul-crushing day job, the wannabe heroes staff tiny local TV station WHPA, channel 13, putting together shows such as Lunch with a Luchador and Saturday Night Seance. They also use the powers and props they've gained through their public access creativity to keep Fairhaven safe. It's *SCTV* meets *Twin Peaks*, and the Devil take the lowest rated. *Weird Heroes of Public Access* utilizes a rules-light d6 pool system, and the 100-page core rulebook boasts an '80's zine aesthetic perfect for the setting and the theme. Available from Get Haunted Industries at: <https://www.etsy.com/shop/GetHauntedIndustries>.

Stocking Stuffer:

THE GANG

PUBLISHER: KOSMOS; DESIGNERS: JOHN COOPER, KORY HEATH

3–6 PLAYERS; 10 AND UP; \$16

The Gang is a co-op bank heist game cleverly built around Texas Hold 'Em poker play. After each player receives their two face-down hole cards, they choose a numbered chip indicating the potential quality of their hand. As new cards are revealed face-up over the next three rounds—the flop, the turn, and the river, in poker jargon—the would-be bank robbers reassess the strength of their hand and select another ranking chip. After the fourth round, hole cards are revealed. If the chip order aligns with the final hand strength, the vault has been sprung. If not, an alarm has been triggered. Open the vault three times before you trip the alarm three times and your gang escapes with your ill-gotten gain. In the advanced mode, challenge cards and specialist cards nicely complicate things. Professional mode and master thief mode up the difficulty levels even more. The base co-op mechanism of ranking poker hands is a blast in itself, provided you have at least a passing understanding of poker hand hierarchy.

Books About Games:

BUILDING BLOCKS OF TABLETOP GAME DESIGN: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MECHANISMS, 2ND EDITION

PUBLISHER: CRC PRESS; AUTHORS: GEOFFREY ENGELSTEIN, ISAAC SHALEV

\$105 HARDCOVER, \$83 PAPERBACK, \$63 EBOOK

Whether you're thinking about designing your own tabletop game or just want to understand how the games you enjoy are put together and do what they do, *Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design* is an irreplaceable reference. Across more than 600 pages, designers Geoffrey Engelstein (*Pit Crew*, *The Fog of War*) and Isaac Shalev (*Tír na nÓg*, *Retreat to Darkmoor*) compile hundreds of game structures and mechanisms—set collection, stacking and balancing, trick-taking, and so on—and organize them by category, with crosslinks for related concepts and examples of successful use in published designs. This revised version expands upon the already-impressive and groundbreaking first edition. An essential work for any game lover's library.

Top Picks from Previous Years:

2010: *Forbidden Island* (Matt Leacock; Gamewright)

2011: *7 Wonders* (Antoine Bauza; Asmodeé/Repos)
2012: *Once Upon a Time* (Richard Lambert, Andrew Rilstone, James Wallis; Atlas Games)
2013: *Love Letter* (Seiji Kanai; AEG)
2014: *King of New York* (Richard Garfield; IELLO)
2015: *Mysterium* (Oleksandr Nevskiy, Oleg Sidorenko; Asmodeé)
2016: *Imhotep: Builder of Egypt* (Phil Walker-Harding; Kosmos)
2017: *Photosynthesis* (Hjalmar Hach; Blue Orange)
2018: *Azul* (Michael Kiesling; Plan B)
2019: *Wingspan* (Elizabeth Hargrave; Stonemaier)
2020: *Dune* (Bill Eberle, Jack Kittredge, Peter Olotka; Gale Force Nine)
2021: *The Crew: Mission Deep Sea* (Thomas Sing; Kosmos)
2022: *Coyote & Crow RPG* (Connor Alexander; Coyote & Crow LLC)
2023: *Votes for Women* (Tory Brown, Fort Circle)
2024: *Adventure Party* (David Smith, Travis Winstead; Smirk & Dagger)

JAMES LOWDER has worked in fiction and hobby game publishing as an author and editor for more than three decades. His award-winning anthologies *Hobby Games: The 100 Best* and *Family Games: The 100 Best* feature short essays by notable game designers and publishers from around the world who share their personal selections for the most enjoyable and innovative card games, board games, miniatures games, and roleplaying games. He also edited *The Munchkin Book*, an official companion to the hit card game, and authored the bestselling D&D-related novels *Knight of the Black Rose* and *Prince of Lies*. His most recent game design writing can be found in the scenario collection *De Felis Mysteriis*, part of the tenth anniversary edition of the *Cats of Catthulhu* RPG. He has been the guest for Lake Effect's annual Games to Gift segment since 2010.