

**P**ass Go, Collect \$200. I've always wondered what that *really* means. Maybe today I'll find out. Maybe somebody at Parker Brothers will know.

Random thoughts like this flash in and out of my head as I ride the last leg of my jaunt up to Beverly, Mass. I recall sitting around the dining room table with

my family, totally absorbed in a wonderfully inventive, magical playing board and its game parts for hours. We liked Risk, Careers and, of course, Monopoly. Parker Brothers was responsible for each one.

For a games enthusiast like myself, visiting Parker Brothers' corporate headquarters is like a movie buff touring

one of Hollywood's glamorous film studios. There would be history, memories, nostalgia bordering on schmaltz—all worth experienced for just one day. Parker Brothers was a part of my childhood, like yo-yos, Spalding rubber balls and Bullwinkle & Rocky. I wouldn't miss this visit for all the "Pass Go, Collect \$200" cards in the world.



But I'm getting off-track. Video games are on people's minds, and Parker Brothers is flowing with the times. That's why, on my tour, I should really expect to hear hard-edged trade talk about Frogger and Amidar, rather than sweet reminiscences of Boardwalk and Park Place. A late entry in the software sweepstakes, Parker Brothers is busy playing catch-up.

Forty-five minutes after arriving in Boston I am deposited at Parker Brothers' doorstep. The building is a modern four-story structure, all reflected glass and tan brick with touches of red and white. The setting, a wooded estate removed just far enough from the Interstate, is lovely.

Anxious to get inside, I jog the short distance from the curb to the double-doors and pull back the red handle. I'm prepared for an assault of historical evidence of the company's rise to prominence—the first Monopoly board ever built, encased, like a museum piece, in glass; magazine covers, laminated, on the wall; painstaking portraits of the founder, George S. Parker, and his brothers Charles and Edward. Nothing. Just a staircase, a reception booth and the obligatory sofas and chairs. The only indications that I am, indeed, in Parker Brothers' lobby is a copy of *Toys & Games Merchandising* that's resting on an end table and a visitor's badge with the company's logo that I'm requested to sign. It turns out that Parker Brothers' archives is located in another building in Salem, Mass. So much for my historical tour.

I'm led to a conference room where I will meet Richard Stearns, Parkers' vice-president for consumer electronics. All I know about Rich Stearns is that he went to Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, was once employed by Gillette, and joined Parker Brothers in 1977. Formerly a director of marketing—he handled the company's hand-helds, among other duties—Stearns is now exclusively involved with Parker's video game program.

Dressed in classic Brooks Brothers style, Stearns is in his early 30's and prematurely grey. After exchanging pleasantries, we seem to be at ease with each other. His lack of arrogance makes him immediately likeable and I feel a good interview is in the making.

Stearns is remarkably candid about

## Conquering the World, Computer-Style

**Risk**, a board game that allows you to conquer the world, enjoys a fanatical cult following. It is rumored that Hugh Hefner, Steven Spielberg, and even Ronald Reagan are heavy Risk players. In any case, it generally attracts highly competitive achievers.

Ron Wright plays Risk several times a week. A programmer with Software Exchange, a firm that designs software packages for Wall Street specialists, Wright has created a home video version of Risk on an IBM personal computer.

A typical game of Risk involves three to six people. Each player selects territories by placing armies on a map of the world, then attacks his neighbors. Wars are waged by throwing dice. Each successful attack wins a card, which can be exchanged for new armies at the beginning of a turn. The first set of cards is worth four armies, the second is worth six. The next sets of cards are worth eight, 10, 12, 15, 20, 25, 30, and so on. The game ends when one player takes over every country in the world.

Wright's computer Risk plays just like the board game, just without the board. Except for the cards, all you need is a computer and a TV. The screen lists the countries (in text) and the computer rolls the dice. Players are required to push buttons on the com-



Photo by Alan Aspadi

puter to complete all moves. Ron even programmed in some attack music.

Another interesting feature is statistics a player can consult on the screen, such as offensive and defensive success rates, and the up-to-the-minute attack strength of each player, before or during an attack. Explains Wright: "You can also save a game and review it at the end." But he sees room for improvement. "A monitor for a better picture, a joystick to select territories, and possibly a voice synthesizer to do away with the cards—there are plenty of ways I could make it better," Wright says.

Computer Risk is cerebral and subdued, more like group chess than the typically loud and active board Risk game the cultists know and love. It's like playing the idea of Risk rather than actually playing Risk.

Since Risk is a 19th century war game, Wright and his friends have been discussing plans for a Risk game based on nuclear technology. Now that's a game that would end with a big bang, huh?

—John Holmstrom

the circumstances that brought Parker Brothers into the video game business. "We had a very successful experience in hand-helds (electronic games)," he says, "but then the crash came. We didn't get hurt as badly as some of the other companies did, though we did have some inventory problems. I don't think anybody really anticipated that drastic market glut in hand-helds and so we just got a little sidetracked.

"We were so delirious over the hand-held category, that we believed the video game category was insignificant in comparison. Where the hand-helds were a billion-dollar business in '79, video games were lingering around \$150 million. We weren't sure they were for real.

And, frankly, we know we missed the video game thing by one year. We were definitely a year late."

In 1981, with hand-held electronic games at the point of no returns, Parker Brothers began seriously considering going video. President Randolph P. Barton assigned Stearns to investigate. Ignorant about the video game business, Stearns started making phone calls, the first to a "little information service in New York. I told them that I wanted to learn something about the arcade industry, what do I do? They said there are trade magazines called *Play Meter* and *Replay*. I said, 'Fine, send me copies of last year's issues.' I read them all, familiarizing myself with the names of all the



companies, and I picked up the phone and started calling them.

"From a directory I could see that Pete Kaufman was the president of Exidy. So I called Exidy and said, 'Is Pete Kaufman there? I'm Rich Stearns from Parker Brothers, and I want to talk to him about licensing.' That's how I met all the top guys. Then I started going out on the road to meet them personally, two, three and four times. I just tried to represent Parker Brothers—tell them what we were doing and why we could do a great job for them.

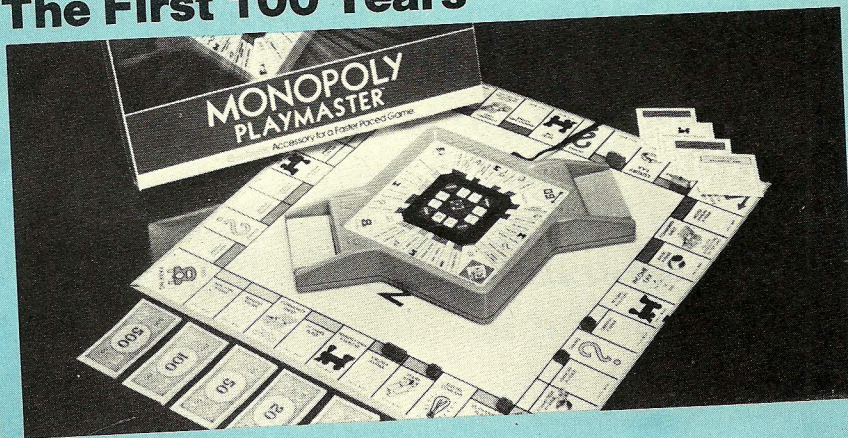
"We were like the 'Jimmy Who' (Carter) phenomenon, you know. Parker Brothers knew nothing about the business a year ago, and we had no video games."

But Parker Brothers had an ace in the hole. Its sister company, Kenner Products (both owned by General Mills) had signed a contract with Lucasfilm in 1977 that gave General Mills' Toy Group exclusive worldwide rights to toys and games based on the *Star Wars* series. Admits Stearns: "The only thing we had to do was a real good convincing job to Lucas (Lucasfilm) that we could represent them well in the home video area, because I think they were ready to try to get out from that contractual arrangement one way or the other."

Last February, accompanied by a fair amount of hype, Parker Brothers released its maiden video game cartridge, *The Empire Strikes Back*. Of all the scenes in both movies, Parker decided to duplicate the Ice Planet Hoth battle. Why? "Because, in my opinion," Stearns explains, "that's one of the 10 most exciting moments in cinema history. We also felt that it had the right elements to make a good game—the heavy, sluggish, clumsy guy against the quick, agile and maneuverable guy. You know, the old David and Goliath routine."

Stearns is confident the average video game consumer—a 14-year-old male, according to his data—will pick a *Star Wars* game over the competition's shoot-'em-ups. "There's Space Blaster, Space Honker, the Attack of the Space Mutants—every kind of space target practice imaginable—and then there's *Star Wars*. Now which one is he going to pull off the shelf?" Stearns asks rhetorically. "*Star Wars*, of course, because it's the best movie he's ever seen. He reads the comic books, loves George Lucas

## The First 100 Years



- 1867** George S. Parker is born.
- 1882** Bored with chess, checkers and dominoes, George makes up his own game, called *Banking*. It's a card game in which the wealthiest player at the end wins. He publishes 500 sets with his own money and sells it throughout New England.
- 1883** With the \$100 he earns from *Banking*, he establishes the George S. Parker Company in Salem, Mass.
- 1888** George's oilman brother, Charles, joins the company. It is renamed Parker Brothers.
- 1906** *Rook*, Parker's most popular card game ever, is published. It will go on to sell more than 55 million decks.
- 1920** Parker creates a new national pastime—the jigsaw puzzle.
- 1935** Depression or not, *Monopoly* arrives. Brought to the company by Charles Darrow, it is rejected at first. Supposedly the rules are too complicated and the game is marred by countless fundamental playing errors. Darrow returns to Philadelphia and begins producing it by himself. But he's unable to keep up with the demand and asks Parker Brothers to reconsider. They do. The rest is history.
- 1953** George Parker passes away at age 86.
- 1956** Parker reaches agreement with a British firm to manufacture and distribute the board game *Clue* in the States. Whodunit? John Waddington Ltd, of course.
- 1957** Opportunity knocks on Parker's door in the form of a board game named *Careers*. Credit Dr. James C. Brown, a professor at the University of Florida.
- 1959** Parker's partner in Paris, the Miro Company, comes up with an unusual board game theme: world conquest. Parker decides to take a *Risk*.
- 1968** Parker Brothers is gobbled by General Mills Inc.
- 1970** In a departure from its catalog of heady board games, Parker presents *Nerf Ball*. Hailed as the world's first indoor ball, it is followed by an assortment of Nerf products, including a football that currently outsells every other leather and rubber model on the market.
- 1977** You never needed batteries to operate any of Parker's products before *Code Name: Sector* came along. Such is life in the brave new world of electronic games.
- 1980** *Merlin* becomes Parker's top-selling hand-held of all time.
- 1982** You never needed a TV and AC to play any of Parker Brothers' games before *The Empire Strikes Back*, a video game cartridge based on the movie, came along. *Frogger* follows close behind as Parker makes its move in the TV-game derby.
- 1982** Is nothing sacred? Apparently not. For the first time in *Monopoly's* glorious 47-year history an accessory is introduced. The electronic *Playmaster* does everything but turn out the lights when the game's over.

—S.B.



and everything he does. He'll have to see what this video game is all about."

Meanwhile, Stearns practically took up residence in Japan, where many of the arcade games originally come from. He's been there eight times since Parker's Project Video began, and thinks he has learned what the Japanese are looking for in an American partner. "Honor, honesty and forthrightness, those are the keys," says Stearns, "and someone who likes to drink a lot of tea."

Just the name Parker Brothers is likely to inspire trust. And let's just say that General Mills inspires sitting down at the negotiating table. Crows Stearns: "We have as much money behind us as Atari. We're an honest company with a lot going for us. We're not here today and gone tomorrow, and on that basis they (the Japanese) have started more and more to trust us and sign agreements with us."

Stearns' first agreement was with Konami, a company he describes as having a "pretty good record." The deal was for Frogger, Amidar, Super Cobra and Tutankham. "We're willing to take a risk on Konami," Stearns explains, "because we think that one time out of three they're going to have a super hit." But weren't all those games hits *before* Parker bought them? "We've bought a number of games up front, some of which have been very successful, some of which have been less successful," he replies. "That's the name of the game today."

One of the games that fits into the latter category is Reactor, Parker's only American arcade license. Another is Sky Skipper, Nintendo's inauspicious offering after Donkey Kong. "We took Sky Skipper on the hope that it would be as big as Donkey Kong," Stearns concedes. "As it turned out, they decided to not even produce Sky Skipper in the States." But Parker has decided to go ahead with the cartridge anyway. "What we're saying to Nintendo is that we really want to do business with you on your *next* game."

Be it an arcade game or some other pop culture icon or craze, you can bet Parker Brothers will be there. Back in 1888, Mark Twain's novel, *Innocence Abroad*, was attracting a good deal of publicity, so they based a game on it. When the nation's military spirit was on the upswing a few years later, they re-

leased War in Cuba, The Siege of Havana and Battle of Manila. In the roaring '20s, Parker Brothers came on strong, largely the result of its Mah-Jongg game. Even then, the company was shrewd enough to secure the rights to that ever popular Oriental tile game.

So I'm not surprised when Stearns tells me that Parker Brothers will also be creating video games tied to the Strawberry Shortcake characters, Spiderman, GI Joe, the Incredible Hulk, *The Lord of the Rings* series and the forever immortal 007. "We generally look for licenses which have long-term franchises," he says. "James Bond has been around since 1962 and he's always been popular with teenage boys. Whenever a new movie comes out it's a box-office success. We feel it's the kind of thing that would lend itself to video games—you know, espionage, chasing, battles, the good guy gets the bad guys. I don't think it's the strongest license we have,

---

*"Parker Brothers knew nothing about the business a year ago. We're like the 'Jimmy Who' phenomenon, you know."*

---

but if we can put a good game behind it we'll be in good shape.

"Right now," Stearns adds, "we're busy getting our licenses out because we think that initially that's the best way to buy our way into the market."

In other words, don't expect to see any original, non-licensed games coming from Parker Brothers for awhile. "This month," he says, "a kid can go out and buy Donkey Kong, Berzerk, Frogger, The Empire Strikes Back and Defender. Is he really going to buy Lost Luggage, Shark Attack and Space Spartans? I think in 1982 those companies will have some success, but beyond that I don't know. There's going to be 300 to 400 games out there next year. To get that kid's fair consideration, we think you need a good strong license."

Between now and June, expect about eight cartridges from Parker Brothers. Amidar and Spiderman, a climbing

game with some neat tricks, should be in the stores already; Super Cobra and a second *Star Wars* game called Jedi Arena, which is based on the jousting scene in the original movie, are scheduled for January; Sky Skipper, Tutankham, Reactor and the Strawberry Shortcake game, which is being specifically geared toward the "little sisters who aren't into Demon Attack" and is moderately educational, should be out by April; and The Revenge of the Jedi cartridge will appear shortly after the film's May release.

Intellivision owners, currently unable to take advantage of Parker Brothers' products, will be happy to hear that Frogger, The Empire Strikes Back, Jedi Arena and Super Cobra cartridges are all being readied for a spring shipment. Explains Stearns: "The best titles from our VCS-compatible line will be made for Intellivision by the end of next year. Beyond that, we're looking forward to designing products for the more sophisticated systems. The better the system, the better products we can put out."

Stearns isn't only talking about ColecoVision and Atari's new 5200, but home computers as well. "In 1983, our objective is to have our first games for personal computer systems on the market. It's a go program. We have the market area staffed and people working on it. It's just a question of which system we're going to commit our resources to."

Having touched most of the essential bases, the conversation begins to wind down. It's time to find out whether Rich Stearns, family man and corporate executive, is a gamer, too. "I love the games!" he explodes, as if wondering what took me so long to ask. "I really love to play them. Hey, man, if you don't play them, you shouldn't be in the business. You have to have a little bit of a 15-year-old kid in you if you're going to be making these kinds of decisions."

Super Cobra is his favorite of all of Parker's licenses, but Stearns really leans towards Asteroids, Centipede and Turbo. "Randy Barton once told me, 'Rich, if ever see a weekly expense report of yours that doesn't have at least \$10 for arcade games on it, you're fired.'"

As of this writing, Rich Stearns was still at Parker Brothers. And I still don't know what "Pass Go, Collect \$200" really means. ▲