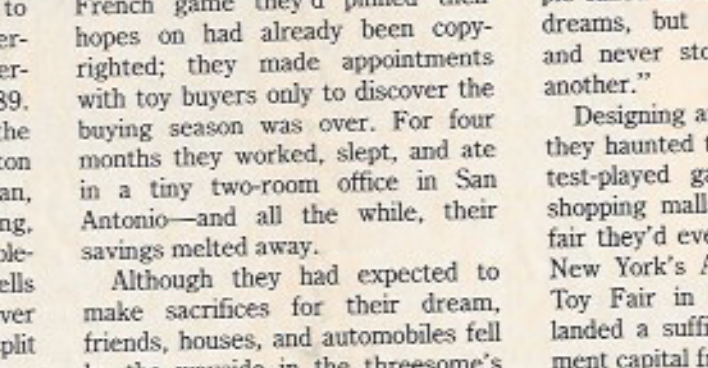


America's playthings has become a colloquy among giants, a maverick with an idea still has a chance. Not a good chance, perhaps, but enough to keep the dream alive.

Sometimes it can be easy, though Gunther Degen didn't think so when he first tried marketing Scattergories, a game currently holding the top-selling game spot on *Toy & Hobby World's* monthly hit parade. For Degen the game was an old idea, one he'd played in Germany before immigrating to Canada in 1954. Originally a tailor, Degen was too busy carving out a career in business—and paying for his wife and brothers to come to Canada—to take time to refine the childhood game he called "Country, City, River." But the possibility of creating a reasonably good seller lurked in his head.

In 1985, after moving to the United States and becoming president of a multinational abrasives company in Virginia, Degen revived his youthful idea and decided to make a raid on the toy business. During the winter of 1984 and '85 he spent evenings in his garage in Virginia Beach perfecting Scattergories. Satisfied that he had an entertaining game, he began contacting toy companies in the spring of 1985. He soon learned they are extremely reluctant to deal with individual inventors.

"My initial contacts were by phone," says Degen, "conversations lasting five minutes and all ending in some version of 'No thank you.'" Rebuffed again and again, Degen eventually relegated the game to a shelf in the back of his garage. Then, in the classic American tradition, the big break came. Hearing from a friend about a newly formed company conducting evaluations of inventions at



Scott Stilling (left) got the brainstorm for Koosh Balls four years ago while trying to teach his children how to catch. Now, Stilling, his brother-in-law/partner Mark Button, and Koosh Balls are riding a tidal wave of success.

no cost to the inventor (located in Chesapeake, Virginia, it was 10 miles from his home), he submitted his game in February 1988, and it was accepted for testing. After two months of rigorous analysis, testing, and video filming of the game being played, a package was presented to Milton Bradley, a division of Hasbro, in May. In what has to be a record, the game giant took just six days to decide Scattergories was a winner.

The rest, so the saying goes, is history. Milton Bradley made some changes in rules and design, issued

Degen and Cactus Marketing Services a contract for the license to manufacture, and introduced Scattergories at New York's American International Toy Fair in February 1989. By June, the game had hit the best-seller list. And although Milton Bradley, Degen, and Tom Ryan, division director of Cactus Marketing, decline to discuss specifics, the wholesale royalty on the game, which sells at retail for an average of \$23, is over the 5 percent industry average—split 70-30 between Degen and Cactus—and has already sold "in the millions."

This year Scattergories is invading Europe: Degen, in fact, just returned from Brussels, where he bought a French-language version of the game in a toy store. A quiet and unassuming man, Degen admits he's overwhelmed by the game's success. "The money's nice," he says, "but I'm still thrilled to see something I made in the stores and people buying and enjoying it. That feeling is worth all the work and effort I put into it."

For Gunther Degen, developing Scattergories was a hobby; for Joseph Rodriguez, Charles MacKenzie, and Michael Poor, inventors of Flimflam and founders of Global Games in San Antonio, Texas, entry into the glamorous world of board games involved sustained acquaintance with disappointment and poverty. In the summer of 1987, in pursuit of long-held dreams of forming a games company, the three young men—all under 35—walked away from careers in banking and retailing, pooled their money, and spent the next two years playing with dice, writing rules, and learning about marketing in an industry known for keeping closed ranks.

"It's not as easy as it seems," says Poor. "To just make a game and stick it on the shelf for sale is what most people assume you do. We had no idea of what we were getting into."

At first the three men floundered:

They discovered that a traditional French game they'd pinned their hopes on had already been copyrighted; they made appointments with toy buyers only to discover the buying season was over. For four months they worked, slept, and ate in a tiny two-room office in San Antonio—and all the while, their savings melted away.

Although they had expected to make sacrifices for their dream, friends, houses, and automobiles fell by the wayside in the threesome's attempt to stay together. "But we refused

to give up," recalls Rodriguez. "People called us crazy for following pipe dreams, but we never lost faith and never stopped supporting one another."

Designing and redesigning games, they haunted the halls of sales reps, test-played games in schools and shopping malls, attended every toy fair they'd ever heard of. Finally, at New York's American International Toy Fair in February 1988, they landed a sufficient chunk of investment capital from an industry professional—who they insist on anonymity—to go into production of Flimflam, the first of four games they've developed.



In order to get investment capital for their board game Flimflam, inventors (from left) Michael Poor, Joseph Rodriguez, and Charles MacKenzie haunted the halls of sales reps, and attended every toy fair possible.

"Flimflam hit the stores in June," Poor says, "and the reaction has been enormously encouraging. Everyone who's played it, including industry professionals and store owners, has told us our hands. Better yet, indications are it's selling well."

A game combining bizarre and obscene puns within the city limits; Karl Marx wrote for *The New York Tribune* with players' ability to alter

When Gunther Degen's childhood game—what he had years ago called "Country, City, River"—was finally refined and presented to Milton Bradley Company as the board game Scattergories, the game giant took just six days to decide it was a winner.

them into bluffs, Flimflam is theirs from copyright to manufacture, as is Double Cross, a domino-like game issued in September.

As Global Game's inventors and marketers, Rodriguez, MacKenzie, and Poor never once considered approaching big companies with licensing rights, even in desperate times. "Forming a company and selling games for 20 years is what we wanted from the start, and we jumped in with both feet," says Poor. "And while it's been incredibly tough, you can't imagine how satisfying it was to see the first Flimflam come off the assembly line. It suddenly made all the difficult times worthwhile."

If the big splash makes it worthwhile, then Scott Stilling, inventor of the Koosh Ball, is riding a tidal wave. The Koosh is a brightly colored, wriggly ball made

of hundreds of thin rubber tendrils emanating from a soft core. A computer-design engineer for a California firm, Stilling got the brainstorm for it four years ago while trying to teach his children, ages 5 and 8, how to catch. What he came up with is a soft, bounceless toy that goes "koosh" on contact. But what's an idea unless it's shared?

As it turned out, Stilling's brother-in-law, Mark Button, a marketing manager for Mattel before joining an investment firm in Los Angeles, had nursed a year to form his own business from college days. So on April 3, 1987, both men quit their jobs to form OddzOn Products.

Although they laugh about it now, things got rugged for a while: "I ended up selling everything, including my car," Button says. "I figured I lived close enough to work to do without a car, and besides, Scott and I both knew everything we were giving up could be reacquired if OddzOn succeeded. We just calculated the risk and took it."

The first balls were made at home, then in a barn that Stilling remembers "was strung with rubber from loft to floor." At one point the two rented office space, student a day

getting it in shape, then looked at each other and asked "Now what?" For nine months they worked alone, then hired one employee.

But gradually Button's marketing experience paid off. By October of 1987, after testing the balls with 270 schoolchildren and a number of parents, they began shipping the Koosh to California retail stores. It quickly became a leading seller, and reorders poured in. By January, distribution had hit 400 California toy stores and gift shops, and unsolicited orders inundated OddzOn from around the country—all without a single dollar spent on consumer advertising. That month Stilling and Button doubled their manufacturing capacity, then tripled it a month later. By December 1987, the company had established a manufacturing plant in Northern California's Silicon Valley and had grown to more than 75 people. That same month distribution hit 20,000 stores, and *Toy & Hobby World* magazine called Koosh Balls "one of the great success stories in the history of the industry."

OddzOn had done the impossible: It beat the odds. In an industry where hundreds of new products clamor for attention each season, Stilling and

Button had won the lottery; they'd created a fad of the first order, a toy as popular as the yo-yo or the Slinky. Since then, they've produced Koosh Kins, which are Koosh Balls with lovable faces; as well as Woosh, a flying ring that bounces like a ball. And they are currently negotiating with several animation companies for a possible Koosh Kin cartoon for television.

"Now we're a toy company in our own right," Button says, "and inventors bring ideas to us. That's how we developed Woosh. And with Koosh as our cornerstone, we're developing other products and expect to be in the business for a long time."

Like others, Stilling and Button won't talk specifics, but say the Koosh has sold "millions and millions." Stilling adds, "We weren't surprised by its longevity. We have been surprised by the extent of its success."

Even more off-the-wall than the spongy Koosh Ball is Howard Jay Fleischer's Polygonzo. A simple 3-inch cube consisting of 12 hollow metal tubes strung together by elastic cord that allows it to be manipulated into dozens of geometric shapes, Polygonzo is touted by Fleischer as "sculpture, puzzle, toy, stress releaser, educational tool."

As entrepreneurs with world-beating ideas are wont to do, Fleischer left a solid job, in his case selling insurance in the family firm, to pursue his muse—the marketing of an original toy. The idea, he says, dates to his student days in Paris in 1980, when he strung straws together while sitting in a cafe: "I thought then I had a great idea, but it took five years selling insurance before I broke loose and followed the insight."

Going gonzo took more time than he had guessed. For two years Fleischer researched his idea, dogging the offices of manufacturers, rubber suppliers, and toy dealers looking for materials and formulas to make his dream real. "Those were lean years," he recalls, "but like anyone with a great idea, like Edison or Bell, I hung on against all odds."

His break came while sitting in the American Hotel on Long Island show-



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Richard Mattheus is a free-lance writer who lives in Charlemon, Massachusetts.

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