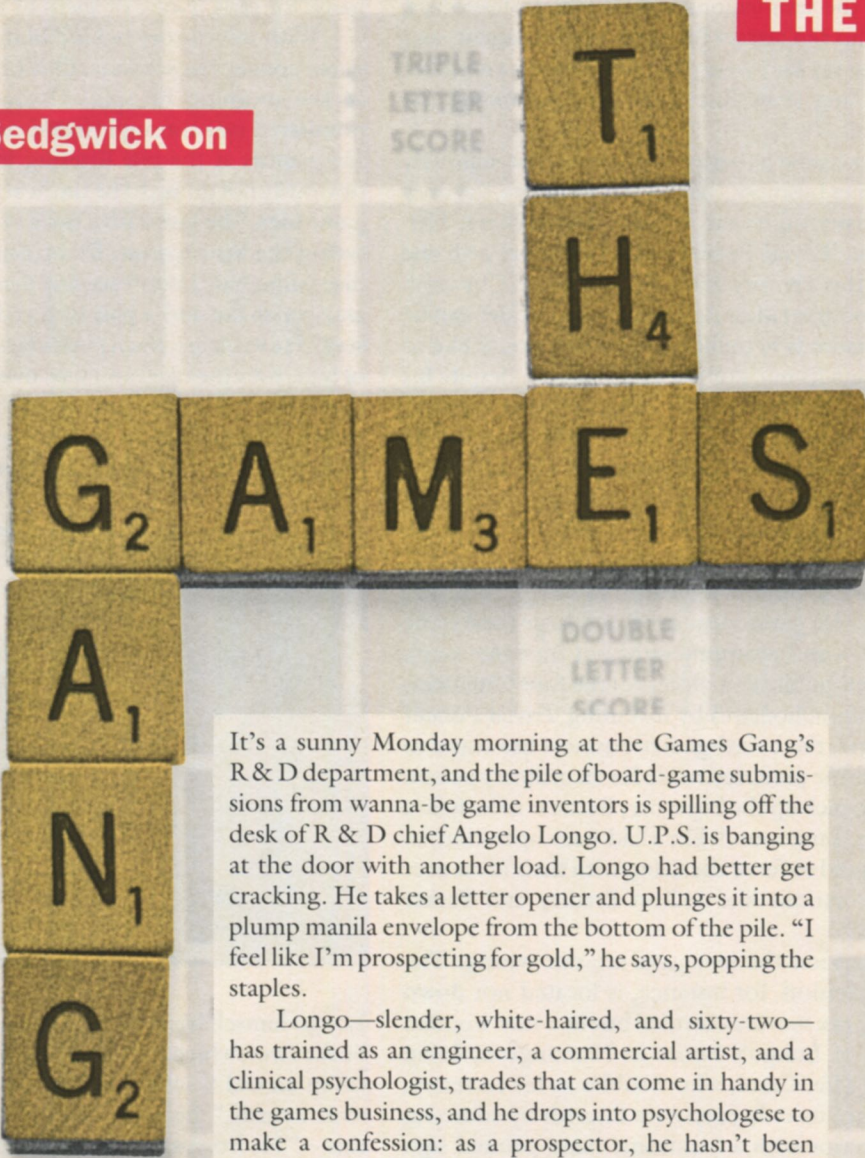


THE FEATURE

John Sedgwick on



It's a sunny Monday morning at the Games Gang's R & D department, and the pile of board-game submissions from wanna-be game inventors is spilling off the desk of R & D chief Angelo Longo. U.P.S. is banging at the door with another load. Longo had better get cracking. He takes a letter opener and plunges it into a plump manila envelope from the bottom of the pile. "I feel like I'm prospecting for gold," he says, popping the staples.

Longo—slender, white-haired, and sixty-two—has trained as an engineer, a commercial artist, and a clinical psychologist, trades that can come in handy in the games business, and he drops into psychologese to make a confession: as a prospector, he hasn't been "reinforced" too much in the four years the Games Gang has been in existence. The Gang has had its hits, chiefly Pictionary, the charades-on-paper game, which has been number one on the board-game charts for three of the last four years, but nearly all its winners were picked up on a licensing basis—appropriated as ready-made games from small, one-game operations that couldn't afford to take their products national. The company has yet to strike pay dirt with over-the-transom submissions.

And it's getting a little frustrating. In 1988, Longo received more than 2,100 packages; inside, he found exactly twelve ideas worth considering. None made it onto the Games Gang list. To keep his sanity, he

decided to limit the submissions—to proven professionals, to individuals who can attract the services of an agent, and to people who can say they were recommended by a member of the Games Gang staff. But that hasn't driven up the quality very much.

Still, Longo keeps at it, because he knows that, uniquely to the board-games business, the real blockbusters, the ones that set the industry on its ear, come from nowhere. Monopoly, Scrabble, Trivial Pursuit, and Pictionary—all the biggest hits of this century have been invented by rank amateurs with one great idea. And since that one idea can be worth hundreds of millions, the Gang would like to get its mitts on the next one. So, despite his better judgment, Longo's hopes rise with each U.P.S. delivery. "I don't necessarily expect a finished game. All I'm hoping is that somewhere in this pile"—he surveys the heap of manila in front of him—"there is the germ of an idea, *something*."



For their part, inventors are eager to oblige him, and they deluge him with game ideas small and large (one came by steamer trunk—and promptly went out the same way). Ever since the well-publicized success of the four Canadians who became multimillionaires by inventing Trivial Pursuit in their spare time, the board-games business has come to rival the lottery as the preferred route for an ordinary person with no capital to rack up the big score. Because of its folksy name, the Games Gang sounds like a laid-back operation, so game inventors tend to favor the Gang with their ideas over heavy-duty corporations like Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers.

In this perception the inventors are not wrong. The Gang's R & D division, for instance, is located not down some gleaming *faux marbre* corridor but in a tiny wooden cottage in back of Longo's house in Huntington, Long Island. Longo's wife, Carol, who doubles as his secretary, has given the place its only corporate flourish by adorning the shingled exterior with a handsome hand-painted sign declaring it the Angelo Longo Studio. It is here that the submissions come, each delivery setting off a round of excited barking from the Longos' dog, Bandit.

Longo himself got interested in making games out of necessity. He was a child of the Depression, and his parents couldn't afford to buy him any. One of the first games he made was an elaborate pinball machine crafted out of rubber bands, nails, and a scrap of wood. After a stint in the Army Corps of Engineers, he spent four years at Capitol Books designing covers for children's books, worked as a free-lance commercial artist for a decade, and then moved on to Selchow & Righter, a century-old games firm best known for publishing Scrabble. (Later, it would become better known for publishing Trivial Pursuit.) There he helped develop other people's ideas and invented a dozen games of his own, including a "Wheel of Fortune"-like game called What's Up, a Little Orphan Annie game, a spoof of guerrilla warfare called Bravo Gorilla, a Ouija-type board game called Madame Planchette, and What Shall I Be?, a career-choosing

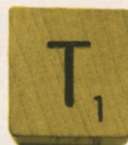
game for girls. None of them lit up the industry.

With this history behind him, Longo can size up a new game concept in seconds. Out of the first manila envelope of the morning he spills several sets of cards, each set numbered two through twelve, and a letter of instructions. He glances at the pile littering his desk and sighs. This is obviously not going to be the next Pictionary. "This is an old game idea," he says with a trace of irritation. "Without even seeing the instructions, I'll explain the game. It's usually a dice game, but I don't see any dice." He gives the envelope another shake and a pair of dice tumble out. "There, you see?" He explains: Each player lays out a set of cards in front of him, rolls the dice, and flips over the cards corresponding to the total. The first person to flip over all his cards is the winner. Not much to it, obviously, but that's O.K. The problem is that the game has been done to death. In fact,



Longo himself has produced the game, in a version he called Snake Eyes, which came in a plastic kit that he proudly shows off in an old Selchow & Righter catalog. "My packaging won awards," he says. "It was a super, super item. But this—" He frowns and looks over the cover letter for the first time; his frown deepens as he reads that the inventor claims to be a professional. "I'm going to sound bitter here," he says. "But a lot of people say they are professionals in this business, and they are not. In my day, you wore a sports jersey, you were on the team. Know what I'm saying? These days, everybody is an inventor."

I figure this is not the time to tell him I have an idea for a game myself.



The Games Gang is barely a gnat compared to the games-industry behemoths, Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley. Their employees run well into the hundreds; the Games Gang consists of seven full-time in-house employees and seven salesmen operating out of their houses in different regions of the country. And, unlike the usual young bucks of the classic start-up, all but one of the original Gangsters—as they sometimes call themselves—were in their fifties when

the Gang got going. The company is headquartered on East Fourth Street in New York City, a few blocks from the Bowery, in a former warehouse whose only mark of distinction is that the Martin Scorsese segment of *New York Stories*, the one with Nick Nolte as a lunatic painter, was filmed upstairs. The Games Gang's third-floor loft, with its flimsy baffles and no-frills furnishings, seems more appropriate for an underemployed drama troupe than a thriving corporation.

But the Games Gang is a gnat with teeth. Frank Reysen, editor of *Playthings* magazine, likens the Gang to a hot ad agency, the small shop that does the cutting-edge work. "They're very creative, very entrepreneurial, and they are not afraid to take chances," he says. The Games Gang shot to stardom in 1986 as if it were a hot game itself, coming from nowhere to do \$150 million in annual sales and capture more than a third of the adult board-game market, which it still retains. Heading into this Christmas season, when close to three-quarters of the year's sales are made, the Games Gang has a roster of eighteen games which is the envy of more established firms, although whether they will actually sell is another question. Pictionary, while still number one, is finally falling off after selling more than three hundred million dollars' worth of games, but it is being milked with such profitable line extensions as a children's version called Pictionary Junior, a portable version called Party Pictionary, and even a religious version called Bible Pictionary (a big seller in the South), all of which Longo developed. The Games Gang also has the current number-four seller, Balderdash, a packaged version of the old parlor game Dictionary, plus a few other promising contenders, like Sniglets (a sort of reverse version of Dictionary), conceived by Rich Hall of HBO's *Not Necessarily the News*, and a version of Twenty Questions called Clever Endeavor that the company is banking on heavily for this Christmas.

With such hits, the Games Gang is the only up-and-comer in a business that has been in retreat since Trivial Pursuit single-handedly tripled its size in the mid-eighties. Currently at \$200 million, the board-games market is a tiny fraction of the \$14 billion toy-and-game industry: it barely equals the annual sales of Barbie clothes. (It was considered a measure of Pictionary's extraordinary success that it was not just the best-selling game but, at its peak, the fourth-best-selling toy as well.) Most of the larger toy-and-game manufacturers are content to seek the bulk of their fortune from toys.

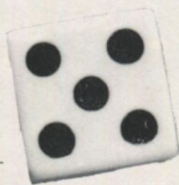
Their decision leaves the Games Gang as the only firm to specialize in adult board games. "That's our little niche," says Gang president Ralph Donnelly, adding, "That's also where the biggest dollars are." Thus, the Games Gang downplays straight-out children's board games like Uncle Wiggily, although it is developing a family-style dice-and-cup game along the lines of Yahtzee. It eschews skill-and-action games like Nintendo, which currently outsell all



board games three to one and appeal primarily to adolescent boys. Ditto military and strategy games, such as those made by Avalon Hill, which appeal to a relatively small number of zealots across the country.

For the most part, it concentrates on after-dinner amusements for an "adult" market that is defined on the box tops as age ten and up but consists primarily of twenty-to-forty-year-olds of some education and verbal facility. Yuppies, you might say, although the Games Gang tastefully avoids the term.

A glance at the games reveals their target audience. In an age when other companies are still stuck in the concept of the "two-dollar box" of yesteryear—typically long, flat, and light, with a smiling family on the cover—the Games Gang leans toward sophisticated packages of nearly cake-box dimensions, with sedate colors, tight graphics, and genuine heft. "One of the things we learned from Trivial Pursuit," says national sales



manager Lee Gelber, only half joking, "is that if you want to sell your game, put a brick in it."

But, of course, there are no bricks inside. Instead, the games typically consist of a board, play pieces, and a box of printed cards. The cards power the game. In this, the Games Gang has, paradoxically, returned to the origins of the games business. The early games makers regarded themselves as publishers, not hard-goods manufacturers as one might expect. Games are still traditionally referred to by edition, not model number, and for legal purposes they are copyrighted, not patented.

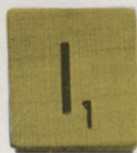
By engaging so explicitly in publishing, however, the Games Gang has gone much further than the original games publishers ever intended, devising games that are almost completely dependent on the printed word. In the language of the trade, their games are all "quiz games." Inspired by TV game shows, they are products of the information age. Remarkably, quiz games, along with word games like Scrabble, are the only new kind of board game to come along in over a thousand years. Historically, board games, for all their apparent variety, have come in only four types. There have been war games, like chess and checkers; chase games, like Parcheesi and backgammon; positional games, like tic-tac-toe and Nine Men's Morris; and collecting games, like bingo and Concentration. "If you want to know the history of board games," says Angelo Longo, "that's it."

The quiz game marks a significant departure. Each of the four original types of games captured an aspect of human experience: war games came from war, chase games from sports, positional games from art, and collecting games from agriculture. They made, in short, a game of life. This essential concept for the board game remained intact through much of this century, most explicitly in Milton Bradley's sixties hit of that very name, *The Game of Life*. Monopoly also illustrates the principle, as the players engage in such real-life pursuits as buying property, paying taxes, building houses, and avoiding jail. Such games take reality and lay it down flat on a board. Part of their pleasure lies in the teasing connections they make to life as it actually is lived.

The new quiz games exist in a world of their own—a world completely detached from anything real. Play money is unthinkable in these games, and, far from mapping out a version of reality, the



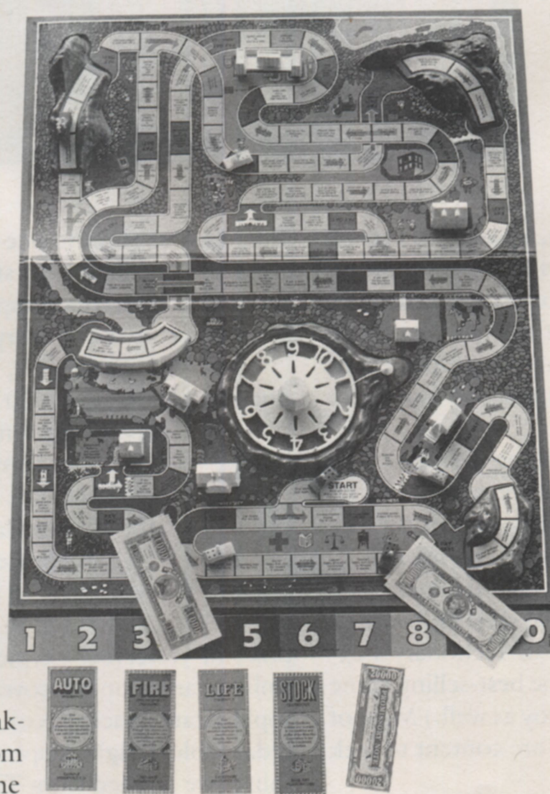
boards themselves merely set up a system for letting one player get ahead of another. The world has been refined to an abstraction, and a remote one at that. It is a pool of trivia or a source of jokes. Instead of being based on life, these games are based only on other games—old parlor games, often, like charades, Dictionary, or Twenty Questions. The only object is to get the right answer—and, of course, to have fun doing it. The players' fundamental connection is not so much with the board at all but with each other, through the jokes, commentary, and general chaos that the games generate. In testing a new game, the Gang always checks the players' noise level: the higher the better. This is a new territory for board games. They aren't really games anymore at all. They're parties.



If the Games Gang keeps real life out of its games, it takes it fully into account in its business decisions. The company's bare-bones operation is both its style and its strategy. The Gang is well aware that it is in a fashion business. What's in today can suddenly, mysteriously, distressingly go out tomorrow. David Leibowitz, a toy-industry analyst, says that the trendiness is "worse than the movie industry," since it is both seasonal and cyclical. "It's a double whammy," he says. And the Games Gang doesn't want to be left with a lot of bills to pay when it gets whammed. So it subcontracts out everything it can. The Games Gang focuses

on the two ends of the publishing process—on the acquisition of new games and on sales to retailers. It stays out of the messy, expensive, labor-intensive parts in the middle. Printing, assembly, distribution, and warehousing are all handled for the Games Gang by Western Publishing, a major games company based in Wisconsin. "We'd have to have three more floors here if we did all that," says Gang operations manager Mary Croasdale. And the Gang goes light on the parts that it does handle. All off-site staff members are responsible for their own expenses. (Longo pays his own postage in sending back those thousands of submissions.) Unlike other companies, it skips expensive TV campaigns. "If business goes bad, we can still keep it together," Ralph Donnelly, the Gang's president, concludes. "In fact, we can be quite profitable."

Perhaps as a consequence, the Gang members betray little anxiety



In Pursuit of Trivial Pursuit

In 1979, Chris Haney, a photo editor for the *Montreal Gazette*, and Scott Abbott, a sportswriter for the *Canadian Press*, decided to settle a long-running dispute as to which of them was the better board-game player by devising a board game of their own. They called it Trivial Pursuit.

The two pulled in Chris's brother John, a former Colgate hockey standout, to help think up trivia questions. John, in turn, recruited his friend Ed Werner, a fellow Colgate player turned lawyer, to attend to the business issues.

Now that the four are multimillionaires, they have turned to other pursuits that are, perhaps, more in keeping with their newly elevated tax brackets. John Haney and Scott Abbott have established King Caledon Farms, Ltd., a stable of nearly twenty racehorses headquartered in Toronto. One of their horses, a Kentucky-bred thoroughbred named Charlie Barley, purchased for \$50,000, has accumulated winnings approaching a million dollars. Chris Haney teamed with Scott Abbott to build a private 750-member golf club, the thirty-six-hole Devil's Pulpit course outside Toronto. Haney explained that he had grown tired of the long lines to tee off at his old club.

Besides making its inventors rich, Trivial Pursuit has also made them heroes in the eyes of many Canadians, a surprising number of whom are determined to duplicate their feat. This eagerness is renewed with each wave of publicity about the foursome. Not long ago, a movie about them on Canadian TV called *Against All*

Odds doubled game-idea submissions the next month at one Canadian games manufacturer. "All the inventors tell me their game is going to be the next Trivial Pursuit," says Cindy Crawford, editor of the Toronto-based magazine *Toys & Games*. "You hear that, and you go, 'Right. That's only call number six today.'"

In fact, Canada is an ideal test market for new games, since it virtually replicates American tastes at a tenth the expense of an American rollout. And a few of the ideas have been pretty good. The result is that enough of these Trivial Pursuit-inspired submissions have caught on in America, and then overseas, to make Canada the world's leading producer of board games. The Games Gang's Pictionary (invented by a Vancouver native who moved to Seattle) and Balderdash, Milton Bradley's *A Question of Scruples*, and Therapy, published by Pressman, a family-owned New York-based company, all originated across the border in the wake of Trivial Pursuit.

For every Canadian who hits it big, though, thousands more lose their second mortgages trying: it can cost \$15,000 to produce a five-thousand-unit test run of a new game. "Trivial Pursuit has been heaven and hell for the games business," concludes Crawford.

"Heaven because it has opened up a new market, hell because so many Canadians have the false impression they can crack it."



as they head down the chute into the make-or-break Christmas season. "We're very loosey-goosey around here," says Kevin McNulty, the national accounts sales manager. Most of the Gang sit at desks lining one big open room, where they can all listen in on, and freely intrude upon, one another's conversations. It's a party atmosphere, if not an actual party. Light streams in from the arched windows, and, in the few dull moments during the day, eyes occasionally wander to the leotarded young women practicing their pliés in the dance studio across the street. Only Ralph Donnelly has a private office, although even it is not truly private, since he shares it with a stuffed gorilla.

"President" is the only title that means very much in the

Gang, and all it seems to mean is that he gets the private office. Ask anyone else what his title is and he's likely to throw up his hands in a kind of beats-me gesture. Everyone does a little of everything: sales, promotion, research. And everyone, including the receptionist, has an equity stake in the results. "It sounds like socialism," Angelo Longo says. "But it's capitalism at its greatest, because the money doesn't filter."

Stylistically they are all of a piece as well. Many of the original Gangsters were salesmen—"peddlers," says one inspired new recruit, "selling a shoeshine and a dream"—and most of the employees still have a salesman's touch. Donnelly, for instance, is a big, tall fellow, a former basketball

player for Boston College, although, with his potbelly, he jokes that he now looks as if he'd swallowed the ball. Nevertheless, he can give a guy a slap on the back in greeting that can send him into the next room. And all the Gangsters have the salesman's Everyman appeal, with street-thickened accents and solid handshakes.

But this is, after all, a games company, and the Games Gang also knows how to screw around. There's a little extra space in a back room, and the high point of each week comes on Friday afternoon, when the Gang gathers around a table there to check out Longo's latest submissions, test a rival's game, or, if things are slow around the office, pull out one of their own games to play for the hell of it. The Gang's new marketing director, thirtyish David Gillies, reads out the instructions in a mock Don Pardo voice, and Lee Gelber, a dapper figure with a walrus mustache and (usually) bright red suspenders, provides the wisecracks. All the Gangsters are remarkably willing to ham it up. Not long ago, Ralph Donnelly was spotted testing a board-game equivalent of Polish poker: with a card identifying him as Pee-wee Herman stuck to his forehead, he was trying to guess who he was. "Would you say that I was sexy?" Donnelly asked, to a chorus of "no"s from his underlings.



In the meantime, back at R & D, Angelo Longo continues to toil over his slowly diminishing pile of game submissions. "Ever see those producers on Broadway?" he asks. "Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. *Next.*"

The ideas have come and gone without lament. There has been one not-so-hot contribution from a genuine professional, which Longo will not let me see, because the man is known to be litigious. There was a three-games-in-one game that was way too complicated, and had the further problem of being pitched simultaneously to children and adults, frustrating both parties. There was a game mapping the path to greater self-esteem that might work for a company that made psychological games (like Talicor, Inc.,



makers of a non-competitive game called The Ungame) but was decidedly not for the Gang. And now there is a variation of the Games Gang's very own Balderdash. Longo wearily scans the cover letter: "Dr. Longo, My dream is to make it with one of my ideas." It closes with a P.S.: "I'm an Idea Man." Longo writes a note to his wife to send back a rejection that will insure he won't hear from the Idea Man anytime soon. Then he eases back in his chair.

I figure this is my moment. I tell him I have a game idea. "See what I mean?" he asks, shaking his head. "In this business, *everybody* is an inventor." He doesn't ask what my idea is.



If the idea for the Games Gang itself had turned up in some venture-capital slush pile back in 1986, it is doubtful that anyone would have plucked it out of the heap. By their own cheerful admission, the Gangsters were washed up when they started. "The over-the-hill gang," Angelo Longo says.

A photograph of the original gang taken shortly after the company's founding in 1986 shows a group of silver-haired gentlemen in boxy 1950s jackets and posh neckties, slapping each other on the back and smiling to beat the band. They might have been a bowling team celebrating the league championship. In fact, they had done something far more exciting. After toiling in the shadows of the games business for the better part of their working lives, they had started their own company to show their know-it-all bosses how the game should be played. And they *had* showed them.

There were nine Gangsters back then; seven of them had, like Angelo Longo, worked for Selchow & Righter for fifteen years or more, and none of them were particularly pleased with the way things were going with the company. Selchow had lucked into the hit of a lifetime in Trivial Pursuit, but was blowing it royally. "Management kept cranking out product until the consumer was gagging on it," says Kevin McNulty. "We kept telling them to slow production down and create a little scarcity. But they kept cranking it out and cranking it out. It was simple stupidity on their part." And the effects were dire. When the Trivial Pursuit phenomenon dried up, the company was heavy on unwanted inventory and light on cash to develop other games. In 1986, Richard Selchow, the president of the family-owned business, sold the company to Coleco, the maker of Cabbage Patch dolls. For the sales force, that was really bad news. "They were straight number-crunchers over there," says McNulty. "And not too honest, if you want my opinion." Worse, Coleco had its own sales force, and was unlikely to need Selchow & Righter's.

Fortunately, in the fall of 1985 one of the Selchow salesmen, Tom McGuire, had heard about a game called Pictionary that had been developed in Seattle by a waiter named Rob Angel. The game was

flying off the shelves at Nordstrom, a major Seattle department store. "It was tracking just like Trivial Pursuit," McGuire says, meaning it was selling like crazy. After trying the game out on his three grown daughters, he left Selchow & Righter to hook up with Angel as his sales manager. Then he had the idea of pulling his old buddies in on a new company to bring Pictionary to the nation. He linked up first with Joe Cornacchia, a printing broker who had jobbed out Trivial Pursuit for Selchow; McGuire figured he would need someone for Pictionary who could manage big things. And, just as important, Cornacchia was a "good guy," relaxed, trustworthy, and respectful. He was also a former yacht club commodore, and McGuire wanted to set the right tone for the new operation.

By that time, Angelo Longo had grown so disenchanted with what he perceived as the crass commercialization of a

shabbily—they were all going to get fired after the Coleco deal went through. Of course I wanted to get in there. It was David against Goliath."

And so, one by one, the Gangsters signed on. Each of them dug into his own pocket and put up \$25,000 apiece to establish a pool of working capital, and then Tom McGuire and Kevin McNulty headed to a bar in Chelsea one evening to decide what to call themselves. McGuire saw a picture of the James Gang among some old movie posters on the bar wall, and he turned to McNulty and said, "Hey, why don't we call ourselves the Games Gang? You'll be Frank and I'll be Jesse." He expected McNulty to slap him on the shoulder, tell him that was a good one, and that would be the end of it. "It was a little outrageous," McGuire says now. Instead, McNulty thought it was a crackerjack idea, and so did the rest of the gang. "We were a new company, so I guess

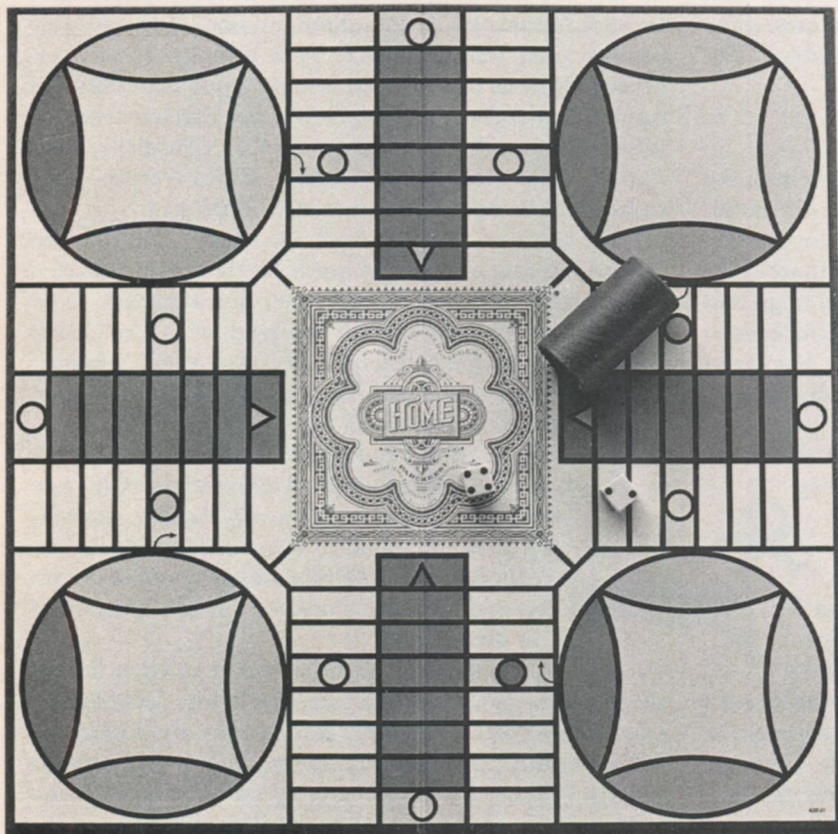
we had to come up with something a little different," McGuire says. He decided to throw in a high-class English way of saying "Inc." as an added fillip. Thus the Games Gang, Ltd., was born.

By now, however, Milton Bradley had gotten wind of Pictionary's prospects, and before the Games Gang had a chance to get Rob Angel under contract, Milton Bradley tempted him with an offer of its own. But the Gang's offer was "something I just couldn't pass up," says Angel. He liked the idea of a company formed around his game. So the Gang secured its first product. Cornacchia cut a deal with Western Publishing to handle Pictionary's manufacture and distribution. He needed a major outfit to keep up with the demand the company was projecting, and Western had been in on Trivial Pursuit. If it could stay with that, it could stay with anything. The Gang was in business.

It still hadn't sold any games, of course. And for a while things seemed rather bleak on that front. In July of 1986, the Gang held what was meant to be a splashy P.R. party at a SoHo art gallery to announce its debut, and only two reporters came around, both from the trade press. The following February, during Toyfair, the annual New York

trade show, it opened with a flourish a showroom on Broadway, and not a soul showed up. "I started shaking at the knees," Kevin McNulty recalls. "I thought, Oh my God, it's all over." But the dearth of patrons had nothing to do with Pictionary or the Gang: the airports were closed because of a heavy snowstorm. As soon as they reopened, customers flocked in. Afterward, the Gang retired to the Palm restaurant for steaks and lobsters, and drank themselves silly.

Pictionary made \$300,000 on its own momentum in 1986, and once the Games Gang got fully geared up in 1987—with widespread distribution, radio airtime, and



games maker once known for its Old World craftsmanship that he had left Selchow & Righter to get a doctorate in clinical psychology, with the idea of opening a practice. He was in the middle of writing his dissertation on children of father-absent families when Cornacchia called to ask him to sign on as head of R & D in charge of expanding the new company's line beyond the one game—a critical element if the fledgling enterprise was to avoid its forebear's blunder. Cornacchia had been best man at Longo's wedding, and Longo couldn't turn him down. "But it wasn't just Joe," he says. "I just really liked all those guys. I'd known them all forever, and I could see they were really being treated

several prominent window displays—it went wild. It made \$57 million that year and an astonishing \$130 million the next, before cooling down to \$75 million last year and a projected \$71 million for 1990. Cutting the profits nine ways, the Gangsters were millionaires. Cornacchia bought a powerboat and named it Pictionary. (He has since added another, named Balderdash.) Longo bought a country house. McGuire traded up in Villa Park outside San Diego. McNulty acquired a pair of alligator shoes, a Cadillac, and a fancy place in New Jersey—for exactly three months before he turned around and moved back to New York City. Outwardly, though, the Gangsters remained pretty much the same as ever. “Except for a couple of sharp neckties,” says Tom McGuire.

Possibly more satisfying than their material success, though, was seeing Coleco follow Selchow into oblivion, and then having one of their old Selchow bosses come around and let it be known that he was “available.” The Gang ignored him.

It is easy enough to see what’s wrong with the entries on Longo’s desk. They are like dumb ideas in any field: half-baked, old, sloppy, misguided. But what’s right about a winner? Like dress designers and TV producers, Longo is in search of something that is, as he says, “different, but not too different.” Different enough to stand out as new, but not so different that it leaves buyers mystified. But what is that, exactly?

The past offers little guidance. The real classics in the field have come down from so far back that they seem never to have been invented at all, let alone to have vied with rival concepts for manufacturing, distribution, and marketing. Parcheesi (or, more properly, pachisi) is the national board game of India, and it has been in existence for several hundred years. When Longo worked at Selchow & Righter, he had the option of tinkering with the board’s Oriental design, but he wouldn’t think of it. One might as well shave the mustache off the Monopoly man. There are many such untouchable classic games. Some are familiar: chess, checkers, Chinese checkers, cribbage, backgammon. Others, like the ancient Egyptian game Wari and the English game Nine Men’s Morris (also traceable to ancient Egypt), are a good deal less so.

In this century, three board games have been added to the roster of true classics: Monopoly, Scrabble, and Trivial Pursuit, although the last is a matter of some debate. While Trivial Pursuit sold more copies in a single year than any other game in history—21

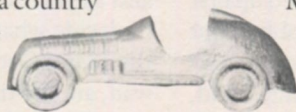
million in 1984—sales have fallen off sharply of late, leaving its long-term prospects in doubt. Scrabble and Monopoly, by contrast, remain on the list of the country’s five best-selling board games decades after their debut. Worldwide, Scrabble has sold 100 million copies since its inception, Monopoly an astonishing 125 million.

Monopoly, Scrabble, and Trivial Pursuit have many things in common, which reveal a good deal about what makes it so difficult to find (or create) a hit. Each game appeared during a recession: Monopoly in the Depression year of 1934, Scrabble in the Truman recession of 1952, and Trivial Pursuit in the Reagan recession of 1982. Timing, then, is obviously a factor. They appeared roughly a generation apart, suggesting that each generation discovers its own favorite game. Each created a whole new category—or, in the case of Monopoly, a collecting game (property, houses, money), awakened a long-dormant one. And, possibly because each was developed by a complete amateur—Monopoly by an unemployed heating-equipment salesman named Charles Darrow, Scrabble by a failed architect named Alfred Butts, and Trivial Pursuit by four Canadians, Scott Abbott, Chris Haney, John Haney, and Ed Werner—each violated the accepted industry tenets of the day.

For instance, to start with the most recent, Trivial Pursuit was said to cost too much (at thirty-five dollars, a good twenty bucks more than other board games); to be packaged too smartly (in blue and gold, what Lee Gelber calls “Brooks Brothers colors”); to expect too much knowledge of its players (all that trivia) that it would never appeal to the broader market; to fall into an unsellable category, namely the quiz game; and simply to be too heavy (the original Canadian edition weighed five pounds). Only one American company, Selchow & Righter, was willing to take a gamble on it, and it did so reluctantly, reducing risk by offering the game to some stores on consignment, a practice virtually unheard of in the industry.

Likewise, Scrabble was rejected at first by all the major games manufacturers for being, according to one history, “too serious, too complicated, too highbrow, too slow, not pictorially interesting, and not glamorous enough.” Only the wild success of a privately printed edition at Macy’s caused the manufacturers to reconsider.

Monopoly was a variation on a 1904 board game called The Landlord’s Game that had failed miserably. What Charles Darrow did was apply Atlantic City street names to the properties and add the bright idea of compiling monopolies. Parker Brothers tested the game and declared, in a phrase that is now famous among games inventors, that it contained “fifty-two fundamental errors.” Among them: the game was too long, its rules were too complex, and no one wanted to bother with all the complicated she-



nanigans of high finance. Darrow went ahead and produced the game on his own for sale at stores like F.A.O. Schwarz, where it came to the attention of Sally Barton, the daughter of Parker Brothers' founder George Parker and the wife of its president, Robert B. M. Barton. At her suggestion, Robert Barton brought the game home, and played until one in the morning. Darrow signed a Parker Brothers contract four days later.

Given this history of rule-breaking, one might suspect that Longo would be reluctant to cling to many rules of his own, but cling he does. Certain types of board games are rejected automatically. Despite the success of Monopoly, money games are out. "Women do the shopping for games," Longo says, "and they simply don't like them." That's why

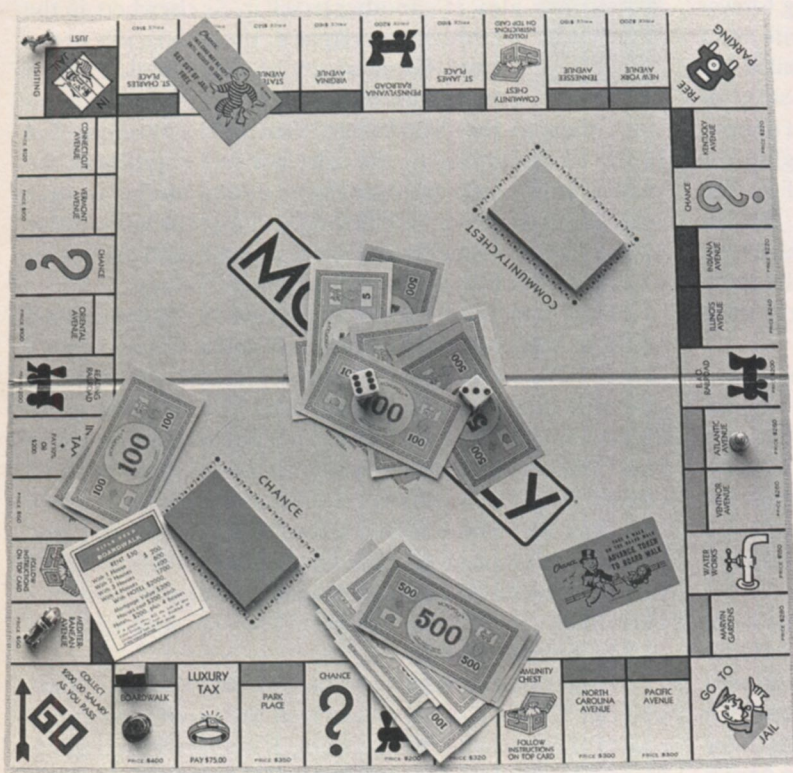
Scruples, even though the Games Gang itself produces one called Gender Bender.

So what's in? "Verbal, socially interactive games," says Longo, meaning ones that are powered by a pack of cards and generate a lot of conversation, like the ones the Gang already produces. Their topic should have broad appeal as opposed to attracting only naval historians, say, or lepidopterists. And the game must adhere to what is referred to around the office as the KISS principle—Keep It Simple, Stupid. Simple to learn, because no one has the patience to spend more than a few minutes learning a new game. ("Chess would not go over well now," Longo notes.) Simple to describe, because both retailers and potential consumers want to be able to grasp the game quickly. (This encourages the trend toward new twists on proven games; Pictionary, for example, can be characterized quickly as charades on paper.) And simple to manufacture. This means low tech, if not actually no tech: playing pieces such as dice, cards, paper and pencil—things that jibe with the board game's old-timey image. (As far as anyone can remember, only one electronic innovation has ever made it into an adult board game, and that was a computerized edition of Monopoly. It didn't sell.)

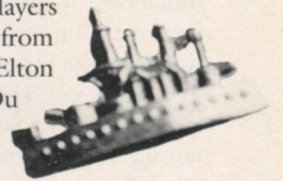
While Longo's games must all be fundamentally competitive—somebody has to win—they are far less competitive than board games were as recently as five years ago. Winning isn't the only thing in these games; it isn't even the main thing. The competition serves only to channel the players' energies into the game. The real payoff comes not from victory but from the expressions of creativity, wit, and brilliance the game generates. As marketing director Dave Gillies says, "Afterwards, no one remembers who won Pictionary. They just remember who drew the wildest picture."

The games are intended as a kind of amateur theater, really. Longo confides that his taste in games was shaped by his love for the theater. He has directed and acted in several plays at his local community theater, and he relies on his

games to provide the same sort of creative satisfaction. The old-fashioned board games toyed with this notion of the game as a play. I remember a game from my childhood called Masterpiece, in which each of the players could select a persona for himself drawn from the dazzling world of art auctions—V. Elton Whitehall, Esq., or Count François Du Bonnet. More famously, in Clue a player became Professor Plum, Colonel Mustard, or Mrs. White (names reflected in the colors of the play pieces) to solve a murder mystery set in a secluded mansion. The new-fashioned games eschew such explicit role-playing, but, paradoxically, they throw the player much further into a new role than the old-fashioned ones ever could. In Pictionary, for instance, one doesn't play



Milton Bradley's much ballyhooed Trump: The Game bombed once the initial promotional blitz, including a fifteen-minute segment on "48 Hours," was over. Monopoly has hung on, Longo believes, not as a money game but as a piece of nostalgia—a means of sharing one's childhood with the next generation. Games set in outer space are likewise cash-register poison. "They're not real," Longo says. "You can't identify." So are sports games ("Kids would rather throw a ball than move a piece across a board from here to there"). Politics doesn't fly, either, after several failed attempts at an election game ("Women say politics is boring. Besides, it would sell only every fourth year"). And Longo is not too keen on the smarmy, embarrass-neighbor games that have flooded the market in the wake of Milton Bradley's modest success called A Question of



an artist, one actually *is* an artist. Longo was nervous about that—afraid that people would be reluctant to show off their lousy artwork—and he has found that, indeed, there are a few “watchers” in every crowd. But it is this very challenge that gives the game its appeal. Once the players have taken the plunge, they experience something of the theater’s transforming effect. Egged on by the group, they drop their narrow conception of themselves (“Oh, I can’t draw”) and act up for the sake of the game. That’s what makes all the noise: it’s the sound of wild abandon.

Longo goes into the kitchen to make some coffee, and I take advantage of the break to tell him my idea. He doesn’t seem to be listening at first, and as I talk I feel myself taking forever to come to the point. I tell him my wife and I sometimes play a parlor game with our friends called the Editing Game. Each player writes a fifty-word story or vignette on a sheet of paper, then passes it to the next person, who, keeping the original word order but changing the punctuation, edits the fifty words down to twenty-five. The next person pares those twenty-five words to ten. The last one reduces the ten to five. Then all the players retrieve their stories and read out the whole sequence. “It can be really hilarious,” I say, realizing immediately how lame it must sound. Longo looks interested, but only mildly.

What I have described lacks the critical competitive element. Quickly improvising, I suggest that the original stories be well-known passages from literature—Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” speech, the opening of Genesis, whatever. Team A edits those down and then reads the editions back, starting with the shortest, most skewed version. Team B sees how quickly it can guess the source of the original passage.

I brace myself for Longo’s response. He seems more interested in the coffee. He offers some routine compliments, pointing out that the game falls into the current popular category, in that it is verbal and interactive, and that it taps into the more educated segment of the market. Now the bad news: “But it demands too much.” Who knows Shakespeare from the Bible anymore?

He turns back to the stove, grasps the coffee pot, and pours out two cups. “But look, I’m also a games developer,” he goes on, explaining the D portion of his R & D job. He developed the idea of Scrabble, putting out a new game called Red Letter that allows proper names and includes extra tiles and cards with crossword-puzzle clues for bonus points. Currently, he is working up



a game called Bright Idea, in which players try to guess the function of outlandish patents that have actually been issued by the U.S. Patent Office. And he is considering a game based on the *Imponderables* books of David Feldman about such mysteries as why we itch, why we look up when we are thinking, and why we tie shoes onto newlyweds’ cars. Longo sees it as a bluffing game in which players try to fool their competitors into accepting their personal explanations as the true ones. “I’ll take your idea and put it in the back of my head, and maybe I’ll come up with something,” he says. “You never know. Every once in a while I wake up at two or three in the morning and say, ‘I got it!’”

It’s one thing to come up with a workable game idea. It’s another to sell it. As elsewhere in the American marketplace, the selling job at the Games Gang occurs at every level. First to Longo, then to the company, then to its salesmen, then to the distributors, then to the retailers, and finally to the buying public. The last step is probably the diceiest. It all seems to come down to one harried woman wheeling a shopping cart through a huge toy store. Dave Gillies has seen these choices made, and the sight drives him to despair. “It is such a fickle consumer,” he says.

He’ll sometimes loiter with his wife by the games shelf to try to influence the final decision in the Games Gang’s favor. “Oh, look, honey,” he’ll say to his wife when a potential customer comes into view. “There’s that game Pictionary we played over at Bob’s house that was so much fun!” With remarkable frequency, a hand will then reach out toward the game. A pair of eyes will scan the package. Gillies will then do some reinforcement: “Oh, it’s just the best game. I can’t remember when I had such a good time.” And just when he thinks he has overdone it, the game goes into the basket. “And I’ll go, ‘All *right!*’” he says, with a gesture as if he has just scored.

While other consumer products can be sold with an out-and-out TV blitz, adult games lend themselves to gentler means of persuasion. For one thing, it is difficult to communicate the pleasure of a game on a TV commercial, which typically resorts to showing people hopping around excitedly, leaving the viewer wondering what all the fuss is about. While those kinds of advertising campaigns have worked for some games, they seem to work only as long as the ads are on the air. They don’t start any ground swells. It is significant that none of the major hits of our time have been the beneficiaries of mass-market ad campaigns. And the Games Gang takes comfort from this fact, since it can’t afford to mount such campaigns anyway.

On the rare occasions when

the Games Gang does TV, it sticks strictly to low-budget affairs. This Christmas season, for instance, the Gang is running ads for Pictionary. But, unlike the usual commercials, their ads don't extol the product in any direct way. Instead, the ads are public-service spots that don't appear to be selling anything at all. In one of them, a safe and a saxophone are drawn in cartoon style on a black screen while a gaggle of voices tries to identify the pictures, finally settling on the ad's message: safe sex. Only the closing caption suggests that this has anything to do with Pictionary.

The best board-game sales technique is the test drive, since the pleasure of a game is truly communicated only by playing it. Word of mouth runs a close second, but it cannot be counted on for a coordinated national campaign. For a new game to explode nationally, it takes an accident—the sort of accident that publicists kill for. Scrabble took off after Dorothy Kilgallen mentioned in her newspaper column what fun she had had playing the game. More recently, A Question of Scruples started to fly out of the stores after Johnny Carson played the game during a slow moment on

Toys "Я" Us

When the Games Gang salesmen go calling, they pay particular attention to one account: Toys "Я" Us, the phenomenally successful retail chain that has transformed the toy-and-game industry. Through its 420 massive stores coast to coast, Toys "Я" Us sells nearly a quarter of all the toys and games in America.

Unlike the department stores and specialty shops that it is rapidly replacing, Toys "Я" Us operates as a discount supermarket, each store a vast warehouse packed floor to ceiling with everything small children could need or want, from diapers to video games.

Founded by Charles Lazarus, Toys "Я" Us evolved rather slowly for a breakthrough operation. Lazarus's father had owned a used-bicycle shop in Washington, D.C., and Lazarus's first move upon inheriting the store was to start selling children's furniture, and then to add toys when his customers kept asking for them. In 1957 he decided to open a bigger toy store, modeled after the self-service supermarkets then becoming popular. The company grew to four stores in ten years, but the expansion was expensive; short on working capital, Lazarus had to sell out to a large retail conglomerate called Interstate Stores. When Interstate went Chapter 11 in 1974, Lazarus persuaded the bankruptcy-court judge to let him run Interstate himself. He liquidated most of the conglomerate's non-toy holdings, and brought Toys "Я" Us back from the dead. A darling of Wall Street, Toys "Я" Us has grown twenty percent a year for the last five years. Its sales this year are expected to top five billion dollars, more than twice that of its nearest competitors, Childworld and Lionel Kiddie City. It has expanded outside the

U.S., with seventy-four international stores, most of them in Canada and Great Britain, plus a smattering in the Far East. And it has added a subdivision for children's clothing, Kids "Я" Us, which has 164 stores of its own.

Toy-and-game merchandising is a volume business. With its computerized inventories, Toys "Я" Us always knows what is selling and what is not, and it is not reluctant to pull the plug on a losing item. In fact, a few unkind words from Toys "Я" Us killed a \$20 million investment by Hasbro in a home video-game system called Project Nemo that was intended to rival Nintendo. After a look at a prototype, Toys "Я" Us executives had declared the \$250 to \$300 Nemo too expensive, and not as much fun as Nintendo.

Such moves do not go unnoticed by gamesmen.

"A lot of people in the industry think of Toys 'Я' Us as the eight-hundred-pound gorilla," says Lee Gelber, the Games Gang's national sales manager. Toys "Я" Us dominates sales for board games along with everything else. Each of its stores displays more than a hundred board games, shelved flat along a side wall in alphabetical order, from Ad Liners to Yahtzee. Gelber takes consolation in the inherent fairness of it all. "It's as



equitable as anything else," he says. "Whether it's our own Balderdash or the ZZ Top game, they all get an equal shot." Since Toys "Я" Us has no floor salesmen, Gelber makes sure that each game has enough customer information on the box and that the titles are clearly visible from ten feet away. "I'm a real stickler about that," he says. "I want our packages to be seen."

“The Tonight Show.” Rob Angel promoted Pictionary by playing the game in various Seattle bars and then selling copies to interested customers from a stockpile he just happened to have in his car. The Games Gang’s own Balderdash took hold in Toronto when its two inventors, the actress Laura Robinson (she was on “Cheers”) and a former advertising copywriter named Paul Toyne (he’s now a restaurateur), determinedly rode the elevators in various city office buildings, chattering on about what fun they’d had last night playing a wonderful new game called Balderdash.

Armed with such anecdotes, the Gang resorts to similarly sly means of inserting its products into the public consciousness—guerrilla marketing, Dave Gillies calls it. The targets are college seniors and recent college graduates, whom the Gang has identified as the individuals most likely to go for their games and, through their rabid socializing, to spread the good word about them. They’ll tell their friends, then go home to tell their parents and siblings. By such means are national crazes started. To this end, the Gang was pleased when the Stanford University marching band played Pictionary on the football field during halftime a few years ago. And last year the Gang distributed sample packs of Gender Bender at a Daytona beach during spring break. They have enticed radio stations to play Balderdash with listeners over the air as well.

Dave Gillies is constantly thinking of ways to get his message to the young and restless. When a pizza deliverer expressed an interest in a Balderdash T-shirt the other day, Gillies had the idea of sending game shirts to every pizza deliverer in New York City, certain that pizza recipients were his kind of audience. “That’s just our kind of thing. A tiny budget and a big payoff.” He has yet to act on it, though.

W₄ hat you need is a handle,” Angelo Longo says. We’re back in his studio, where he has been thinking about my game. “What are we going to put on the box? Fill in this blank: The Editing Game, the game of ____.” I think hard. I feel, suddenly, that *this* is a game, and I’m losing. “The game of rude simplifications,” I say finally. Not good. “O.K.,” Longo says, “maybe you don’t try to do it in the name. But how are you going to market it?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe we can hook it up with another idea that’s out there?”

Unexpectedly, Longo brightens. He tells me he has recently received a letter from the New York Times licensing department offering the use of the Times logo if the Games Gang can come up with a suitable game idea. “How about the New York Times Editing Game?” he announces. “Ah! Now we have a market. And we’ve got a handle.” Wheels are spinning now, lights flashing, and my game score is mount-

ing. “Let’s take some stories from the archives of the New York Times, edit them down like in your game, and everyone has to guess what the news story is. Is it Nixon resigning? The Titanic sinking? Hitler invading Poland?” I like it, but Longo slumps back in his chair. “I’m not excited yet,” he says. “But at least we’ve got a little handle.” He thinks some more. “O.K.,” he says at last. “So we give them a bunch of cards that have the story and the dateline, and we give them an editing pen that’s erasable.”

“Ah,” I say. For some reason the idea of an erasable editing pen says Viable Game and Big Money to me.

“And varnished cards that can be wiped off,” he goes on. “O.K., now, say the story is the sinking of the *Lusitania*. One team has a card with the lead paragraph from the New York Times story, and the other team has to guess as many words on that card as possible—you know, words like ‘surviving,’ ‘torpedo,’ ‘captain,’ ‘high seas,’ ‘women and children.’ You have a minute to do it, and you get points depending on how hard the words are to guess.

“There, now you see?” Longo asks. Then he does a peculiar thing. He’s wearing a short-sleeved shirt, and he extends

his bare arms to me in a gesture I take to be almost holy. “Look,” he says. I follow his eyes down to his forearms. A patch of goose bumps has appeared on each arm, and his gray hairs are bristling. My idea has actually caused his hair to stand on end.

“Hey!” I shout excitedly.

“That very rarely happens,” Longo says, beaming, as he looks down at his arms. “I think we might have a little item here.”

I toy with the notion for the next couple of weeks, but I have trouble sustaining my excitement. I call Longo, hoping that he will say he has had another one of his brainstorms, to get me charged up again. But he is busy with other things. He wants me to come up with a finished prototype of the game, so that he can see if it is worth sending on to the whole Gang for play-testing.

I think about going to the library to copy out leads from Times stories, mapping out a board on a sheet of cardboard, borrowing some plastic pawns from my daughter’s Candy Land game, and generally getting the New York Times Editing Game together along the lines Longo envisioned. But I can’t quite bring myself to do it. For all Longo’s excitement, I like my original idea better, the literary version he says will never work. Part of me thinks, *That’s the kind of game that makes a million bucks!* But the larger part realizes that it’s the kind of game Angelo Longo returns to sender, with a little rejection note typed up by his wife. 