

The Impact of the Award „Spiel des Jahres“ on the Development of the Board Games Market in Germany

by Tom Werneck

There are many questions and misconceptions about the award “Spiel des Jahres” which literally translates as “Game of the Year”.

I'd like to clarify the intentions of the founders, the underlying rules and in particular the changes in the market stimulated by the award.

How it all started

In the early seventies, about forty years ago, Germany – *whenever I name Germany in my speech it should be understood that this includes Austria and the German speaking part of Switzerland* – Germany gamewise couldn't be called a wasteland. However, the gamers' paradise at that time was Great Britain. We used to pilgrimage to London once or twice a year to buy games. The reason for this prosperous production was a very intense market communication with high credibility. Information was provided not only by the manufacturers but above all by competent game critics who published their reviews in major newspapers. In addition to that the worldwide leading special interest magazine called “Games & Puzzles” was published in London.

For different reasons the fertile culture of game criticism disappeared more or less overnight. Games & Puzzles went out of business and most newspapers discarded their game columns. Shortly afterwards games in Great Britain lost originality and quality revealing the basic concept of business in a capitalist system: Unless forced and driven by competitors or other influences a manufacturer tries to achieve a maximum output with minimum input. Since competition was not strong and caustic critics didn't have a publication platform anymore the world of traditional family and board games shrank to a limited selection at a rather poor level.

At this time in Germany there were altogether less than one dozen game critics. On one hand we regretted the decline in Great Britain. On the other hand we analyzed the situation, which taught us that quality and variety are directly and inseparably related to an active, forcefully speaking culture of game criticism. As a consequence we established a network luring editors and journalists into the world of games. One or a few people will remember the annual get-together called “Journalistentreff” during the Nuremberg Toy Fair where contacts were made or intensified. The event became bigger from year to year because the number of journalists who reported about board games in dailies, periodicals, broadcast and TV had grown significantly.

The night before the opening of 1978 Nuremberg Toy Fair, Juergen Herz, one of my colleagues, came up with the idea of establishing an annual award.

An award should be quite open about its claims and credentials. Therefore as name and title he suggested “Spiel des Jahres” in combination with the addendum “Critics’ Award”.

- The wording “Game of the Year” should make clear that an awarded game does not claim to be “the best” game. The only claim was that a specific game deserved special attention.
- The additional statement “Critics’ Award” should point out that there is no objective evaluation involved. On the contrary the award is based on individual opinion and personal judgment of game critics. This is because games can’t be “tested”. You may test a dishwasher or a laptop. You may have a preference for either Beethoven or Mozart because you personally like one better than the other. But it makes no sense to rate Beethoven 7 points and Mozart 4 points. As cultural possessions board games are excluded from objective assessment. Furthermore “Critics’ Award” states a certain level of competence.
- From the first moment on we excluded votes of consumers since many of them do not have an overview on a year’s complete crop. Furthermore, many of them could easily be influenced by marketing and advertising. Both aspects are designed to impair the judgment.
- Last but not least we were aware that the credibility of a critics’ award indispensably required complete independence from the games trade and industry. Later we found a good example in one of our neighboring countries, which demonstrates the importance of this topic. In this specific country a critic award had been established. The jury was – and still is – distinguished by competence and integrity. In order to get a small contribution to the costs of their annual meeting the jury asks for an entry fee. The amount is hardly worth mentioning. But it has a strong effect since game producers are free to make a selection and to submit chiefly those games they put emphasis on in their marketing concept and which they want to be promoted. So game manufacturers can influence the decisions of the jury, but through the back door, that is, through the limitations of their selection.

After a while we developed a vision, which led beyond just coming up with a game award. The object of our efforts was to extend the acceptance of board games in family and society. The award should be a strong support of this intention, but by far not the only one. And we wanted to exert influence over the quantity and quality of new games.

Facts and Figures

An average board game with a retail price between 20 and 35 € is put on the market with an initial print run of 3000 to 5000. If such a game wins the award “Spiel des Jahres” circulation in the current year shoots up to 300.000 to 500.000 copies. This is a multiplying factor of 100. No relevant game producer can afford *not* to strive for this wonderful carrot.

And they all know the rules although it is a list of “soft” – which means in a way *insubstantial, impressionistic, imprecise* – criteria. A game is considered for

- clear and understandable rules
- an interesting original concept
- appealing presentation
- functional equipment

Of no influence on the decision making process are either sales or marketing activities or persons or companies involved. The award will *not* be given because

- *“an inventor deserves it”*
- *or “a producer has not been considered yet”.*

The fact that the jury has strictly pursued this line from the first moment on has resulted in acceptance and high credibility.

Each jury member receives roughly 400 new games a year. It is tempting to react on this huge amount by diversifying the award, for example by setting up categories like *“Two-player Game of the Year”, “Party-Game of the Year”, “Abstract Game of the Year”* and so on. However, instead of improving the situation the concept of the award would be watered down. The consequence is restriction and limitation.

It took us 20 years to decide to establish a second award called “Kinderspiel des Jahres” which translates as “Children’s Game of the Year” and an other ten years to introduce “Kennerspiel des Jahres” as a recommendation for the addicts. “Spiel des Jahres”, “Kinderspiel des Jahres” and “Kennerspiel des Jahres” are each particularly selected from a nomination list of three titles. There is a list of five to ten recommended games for the first two awards and some few titles for Kennerspiel, making a total of about 25 to 30 maximum. This sums up to less than 10 percent of the input.

The business success resulting from the “Spiel des Jahres”, “Kinderspiel des Jahres” and “Kennerspiel des Jahres” forces the game producers to invest in quality. If they don’t their games will end among the over 90 percent weeded out.

An institution like “Spiel des Jahres” interferes with the standard attitude of minimum input / maximum output. Moneywise the output level can hardly be raised because the consumer’s budget and expectations set limits. Therefore the producers have to develop creativity to combine higher input with still workable business results. So the game producers are driven and pushed forward by the award as carrot and a stick in the shape of creative and innovative competitors.

Benefiting from this development was and is the consumer. Not only can he choose from a variety of interesting games, which is incomparable to the rest of the world. Just to give you a figure: The market for board games and jigsaw puzzles in Germany accounts for a turnover of over 400 Million Euro.

The consumer also gets many add-ons, which nowadays stand on their own feet but originated from the “Spiel des Jahres”.

The world of board games in Germany

It all began at an evening in a Bavarian restaurant in Munich. During the process of planning the award I discussed with my comrade-in-arms Dr. Bernward Thole an award giving ceremony of the highest possible profile. After we had excluded the Federal Chancellor we went through the list of Federal Ministers ending up with the Minister for Family Affairs. We offered her patronage. She accepted on condition that the event be celebrated in her constituency. It happened to be Essen.

From year to year the number of persons grew who stayed the day after the event to play games. Eventually we had to find a bigger location. The chief editor of “Spielbox” magazine, *the German equivalent of “Games & Puzzles”*, combined playing games with a small trade fair. This activity has grown. Today ‘Internationale Spielertage Essen’ is the biggest Games Convention worldwide claiming to count 150.000 visitors over four days.

Following in Essen’s wake many similar local events were established, as for instance Vienna claiming 70.000 and Munich counting 60.000 visitors. There are many smaller events of this kind as for instance at Berlin, Berne, Stuttgart and Ulm – *not to forget newly established Dau at Barcelona.*

In order to preserve the fast growing number of new games two game archives were founded. One was managed by Dr. Bernward Thole located in Marburg, which in the meantime has been integrated to the Nuremberg Toy Museum. I run the Bavarian Game Archive including over 20.000 games and a library of over 2000 volumes.

In Germany a games designer or developer or inventor will be considered comparable to the author of a book thus giving him visibility and attention. Two market places for game inventors were established. One event is the “Goettinger Autorentage” traditionally in June. The other one is called “International Game Inventors Fair” in Munich and takes place at the end of February or first days of March. The next event will take place in about two month from now on February 22nd and 23rd.

There are hundreds of public game evenings throughout the country. Just to give you an idea: The Bavarian Games archive runs five such events twice a month. If you take only the activity at Haar, a suburb of Munich, where I live: We had 470 game evenings. With an average of 40 visitors per evening we saw about 19.000 people playing board games.

Germany is the biggest market for board games worldwide. The market showed an average growth of more than eight percent over a period of ten years.

The obvious opportunities provided by such a business platform attracted many newcomers and lured in suppliers from other countries thus enriching and enlarging the offer to the game addict. Unfortunately Spain is one of the countries, which still has not yet achieved a strong position in this specific market.

There are many more activities, which could only be established under the umbrella of “Spiel des Jahres”.

But I think the focus on the highlights I have pointed out should be sufficient to give you an impression of the tremendous impact on the market initiated and maintained by the “Spiel des Jahres”.

What are the secrets of the award?

Worldwide you will find well over 100 game awards. But only the “Spiel des Jahres” has achieved recognition and influence. There are several reasons for this.

1. As a general experience it gives you a head start if you are number one. The “Spiel des Jahres” started as early as 1979, which was over 30 years ago.
2. The “Spiel des Jahres” reverses the standard distribution process. Game manufacturers traditionally show their products at the Nuremberg Toy Fair. The aim is to push the products into the shelves of the wholesalers. These push the products forward into the shelves of the retailers. The retailer has to push the product into the shopping bag of the consumer. This is a push-push-push-chain.

The award “Spiel des Jahres” on the other hand creates a demand. Attracted by the award the consumer asks for a product, starting a pull-pull-pull-chain via retailer up to the producer.

3. Total independence from trade and industry. The consumer is aware that the jury has a knee-jerk reaction to all attempts to influence the decision making process.

Membership of the jury can only be accorded to a game critic who is either a professional or freelance journalist with an income independent of that paid for his reviews. Any relationship to trade or industry as for instance as inventor, consultant, sales promoter, freelance editor etc. is a knockout criterion.

4. The consumer accepts the jury’s competence and good judgment.
5. The process of decision-making is transparent. However, the decisions themselves are unpredictable and always good for surprises and unexpected discoveries. The games industry cannot simply come up with products tailored to the supposed expectations of the jury, and this forces them to remain creative and innovative.

6. For the jury it makes no difference whether a game company is big or small. If an outsider or one of the “dwarfs” is given the award he will be approached immediately by one or another major player who will offer him production capacity and/or sales support.

Summary

A comparison of different board game markets reveals that competition among the game manufacturers does not necessarily lead to a large and diversified range of products. Markets dominated by only some few big players tend to lower the quality level.

A game award can strongly influence a market by adding pull to sales' and industries' push activities.

However, an award, which is established or driven or even only slightly influenced by sales or industry, has no value and no impact.

Consumers are not stupid. They are quick to realize whether integrity, independence and dedication stand behind an award.

Furthermore, an award with power and influence must necessarily be a painful thorn in the side of trade and industry.

This leads to a chicken-and-egg situation. There will be no convincing, powerful results

if an award is not based on a solid culture of competent, but independent critics. And the chances of achieving a critical mass of such persons are not good if there is no attractive and successful trigger.

To encourage existing juries in other countries to remove this hurdle and achieve a comparable standard the jury in Germany is willing to share experience, know-how and rules including a self-imposed code of ethics.

Thank you for your kind attention