

Getting on board

ps14A peninsula couple with an idea for a board game found realising their dream was far from fun and games. Now they are doing their best to help others. By **KERRIELYN SUTTON**



WHEN people used to ask Nathan Ruff and Nicole Johnschwager where they could buy their board game *Nitty Gritty*, the couple would smile and say, 'Available from all good games' stores'.

The Manly couple wasn't lying – it was in one or two games stores. But now the pair can use the line with confidence.

After just 11 months, *Nitty Gritty* is in hundreds of stores across the country, including Target – an impressive result for an independent board game.

Warned they wouldn't sell more than 500 games in the first run, Nathan and Nicole ignored the prediction and planned to produce 2000 games in the first year, thinking they'd sell 1600. They ended up producing 8000 games and have sold 6000 so far.

While the couple can feel justifiably proud of the speed with which *Nitty Gritty* has taken off, it has by no means been an overnight success or easy venture.

The idea for the game, which tests how well players know each other, was born when Nicole, now 33, was in her mid-20s working as a lawyer – a job she didn't like.

Back then Nicole cobbled together a makeshift board and scribbled questions on napkins before putting the game in a box in the cupboard.

When the couple moved in together Nathan discovered the box and was going to throw it out.

But over a bottle of wine or two Nicole and Nathan played the game and decided to give it a go.

The path from there was a mountain range of learning curves, finding a price-competitive manufacturer (they ended up having to look out of Australia), trawling through the Yellow Pages, cold calling shops, and eventually hiding the game in people's trolleys. Nathan, 28, offered the

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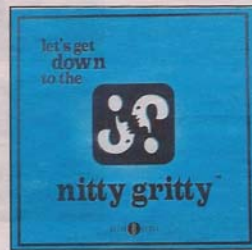
line jokingly, but the pair does admit to standing and spruiking the game in carshot of customers.

They were delighted to see the game on the shelves after first being sick of the sight of it – living and breathing *Nitty Gritty*.

Nicole said virtually the entire process had been a learning experience.

"The things that I didn't know were amazing," Nicole said.

"How to get a warehouse, how to organise freight from Taiwan, what the chain is – wholesalers, distributors, retailers – the nuts and bolts of the whole operation.



UP FOR A CHALLENGE: Nicole Johnschwager and Nathan Ruff (above) made a board game, then started a company that will help promote other Australian games such as Peter Kanellopoulos' *Psychic Challenge* (left).

"We were so ignorant and so naive but we didn't know how ignorant or naive we were, so in a way it didn't matter."

Keen to pass on their experience and repay the support they've been given with their own game, the pair has started a company called After Eight games, aimed not only at helping distribute other domestically created games but also at building some muscle against entrenched international competitors.

After some initial publicity, Nicole and Nathan's phone ran hot with calls from "barbecue entrepreneurs" at various stages of their own board game babbles.

"What we realised was there was no help, no support, no one willing even to give you a bit of inspiration and say 'give it a go' – everyone was really negative," Nicole said.

Nathan stressed that the domination by the behemoths of the industry was daunting for new players.

"The hard lesson to learn in this industry is that it is run 99 per cent by corporate American companies," he said.

"They're not very receptive to new ideas or creativity because it takes away from their market share."

Having made significant inroads into the Australian market, Nathan and Nicole are set to test the waters overseas, taking their game to toy fairs early next year in Hong Kong, London, Nuremberg and New York.

As well as *Nitty Gritty*, Nicole and Nathan will take games by two other local creators – Fox Evergreen's *Spin The Bottle* and Peter Kanellopoulos' *Psychic Challenge*.

Psychic Challenge uses the "scientific" technique displayed in Xener cards as its basis to test, train and improve players' psychic abilities.

Xener cards feature five different symbols, adopting the principle that chance dictates that there is a one-in-five probability of a nominated card appearing from the shuffled pack. People who routinely register a higher score are considered to have psychic ability.

The 16 challenges in the game are based on the same principle and incorporate four psychic

abilities: clairvoyance, telepathy, telekinesis and precognition.

While Peter believes everyone has a degree of psychic ability he said the game was not limited to people who were psychic.

"Everyone can play this game whether you're psychic or not – it's just a fun board game for the family," he said.

"You can either play it at a serious level or a non-serious level.

"I had been wanting to do a psychic test-type kit thing for a while and it eventually evolved into a board game and I thought that was the best way to do it; it's a lot more fun."

Edwina Crossing, co-director of Fox Evergreen, said *Spin The Bottle* emerged from a love of games and a desire to formalise the age-old party game.

"I think everyone recognises *Spin The Bottle* and can relate to it," she said.

"I don't think there's many people who could say they haven't played it in one form or other, and the game we have created uses that."

"It's a bit of fun, it's a bit naughty, a bit out there."

Like Nathan and Nicole, Edwina said she felt there was a renewed interest in board games.

"As a mother of two I love playing board games with my kids," she said.

"I think we're going back to board games. More people are having dinner parties these days and looking for something to entertain."

"This is a bit of a line that we have trotted out but I really do believe it – there's been some studies that have shown that board games' popularity have increased since early 2001 but then really after September 11 and of course with the war and the drop in the share market, everyone was a bit nervous and depressed and dismal.

"I think people like to connect with their friends and there was a period where people forgot to do that."

For more information go to www.nittygrittygame.com, www.spinthebottle.com.au and www.psychicchallenge.com.