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Board and logic

Games are things you play with a computer, right? That's wrong, says Steve Meacham.

IT MIGHT be an antidote to our fears of terrorism. Or a reaction against the materialism of the early 1990s. Even a fascination with the psychic and paranormal. Then again, it could just be "a great way of picking up chicks", or a legal way of taking your kit off in front of strangers.

Whatever the reason, Australia is witnessing a renaissance in board games. *Nitty Gritty*, *The Analyst*, *Spin the Bottle* and *Psychic Challenge* are rival games, conjured up by four different Sydney-based inventors. Yet they're all aimed at "adult" players, are "about relationships", and promise participants a combination of "flirtation and self-analysis".

Nicole Johnschwager and her partner Nathan Ruff founded After8 Games which distributes all four games, after discovering how difficult it is to get a new board game into Australia's toy shops.

A former lawyer, Johnschwager, 31, invented *Nitty Gritty* six years ago. She prepared 500 questions and got "an arty friend" to make a mock board. But it sat at the bottom of a bedroom cupboard until Ruff discovered it 18 months ago.

They "bribed friends with nachos and wine" to help them refine the game. But they were given no encouragement when they took it to games manufacturers. "We were told we would not sell more than 500 games in Australia," Johnschwager says. "That would never break into a market dominated by the large American games companies."

Undaunted, they tracked down a Sydney firm, Tree Toys, prepared to



Board brains ... from left, Adam Ferrier, Tim Pines, Peter Kanellopoulis, Nathan Ruff and Nicole Johnschwager. Photo: Steven Siewer

advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, was asked to come up with new product ideas for his company and suggested a board game. "I've always been interested in how adults interact. I wanted to develop a board game which used psychological techniques, to take what I had learnt on the couch into a dinner party experience."

The game he came up with, he says, is "hilarious, but it is also daring. You can say what you think about people and hear what other

people think about you, through the comfort of metaphor. Generally, people at a dinner party are nice to each other."

Obviously board games which revolve around attitudes to relationships also tell would-be partners a lot about each other in a short space of time. "White, 80 per cent of *The Analyst* is about picking up chicks or guys," says Ferrier, who is already working on two other games which, like *The Analyst*, will be funded by Saatchi & Saatchi.

Yes, says Johnschwager, flirtation and self-analysis are essential ingredients to all four games. "There's been a resurgence in interest in board games over the past three years. Put it down to the Iraq war, or September 11, but people want to feel closer to one another. It's also a reaction against the materialism of the early '90s."

"People now realise the most important thing in life is their relationships."

produce 1000 sets of their game. That was 11 months ago. And how many have they sold? "About 6500."

Soon three other Australian games inventors approached them, asking for help. Peter Kanellopoulis, 40, manages the workshop at the Spastic Centre of NSW and originally hoped a board game would keep his workers employed. His game, *Psychic Challenge*, promises "to unlock your mind to a universe of possibilities" and revolves around his interest in the paranormal. "Essentially it's a guessing game which measures your psychic powers," he says. He launched it at this year's Mind, Spirit and Body Festival but his big marketing push will be next year. As a psychic, he's predicting big things.

Tim Pines, also 40, patented *Spin The Bottle* with his sister, Edwina, when they realised the traditional childhood "touch or

clare" had never been turned into a board game. Their version is best played "between good friends or people who want to be" since it often ends in some form of nudity. Yet, Pines says, "the games are designed to promote private, in-depth conversation".

And conversation, declares Adam Ferrier, inventor of *The Analyst*, is what modern board games are about. They're part of a trend, he says, to "return to local communities, to take part in pub trivia nights".

"People are less interested in just getting pissed," he says. "They see board games as a way to substantiate conversation. It's as if people need an excuse to connect. Men in particular never just sit down for a chat. There's always got to be sport. Game playing is the structured way of having a chat." Ferrier, a psychologist who works for the