

New game's developers think they smell a hit

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A new board game created by a pair of Columbus gamers really stinks. And its designers couldn't be happier.

Called P.U. the Guessing Game of Smells, the game challenges young players to race through a Candyland-like board that requires them to choose various scratch-and-sniff cards. Those cards release a range of smells from roses to dog poop.

The object of the game is to identify the smells, thus keeping Stinky the skunk from ruining the town fair.

The game was created by Russell Pinto and Dale Harris, both immigrants to the U.S. — Pinto from India in 1991 and Harris from Trinidad in 1989. They opened their business, Unknown Games, in 2004.

P.U. is sold in 50 retail stores, as well as online. The makers hope the game catches on with enough players to attract the attention of a larger toy manufacturer such as Hasbro or Mattel.

"To be successful, a game has to be simple, yet fun," Harris said. "And we believe that we've created a game that fits that notion."

Pinto and Harris created the concept for the game after starting a small venture to offer scratch-and-sniff direct-marketing cards they would offer to companies as a way to advertise a company's products.

Their children — Pinto has two and Harris has six — were intrigued the cards, and the idea for a board game was hatched after watching how much their kids enjoyed playing with them. After two years of designing, marketing and creating a prototype of the game, Pinto and Harris found a small group of investors to get the game produced.

The concept was appealing to several small retailers, including Larson's Toys and Games. The independent toy store in Upper Arlington began selling the game, which retails for \$19.95, three weeks ago. So far, the store has sold 19.

"That's pretty good for a new product," said Rick Meyer, a buyer and manager at Larson's. The appeal of the product, Meyer said, is its use of olfactory senses to play the game.

"They are a little game company, and we wanted to give them a chance," he said. "Plus, there's really nothing like it on the market."

"It's not an easy process," said Carol Rehtmeyer, president of the Toy and Game Industry Foundation. The Chicago organization connects toy inventors with toy producers, buyers and other industry professionals.

"There's a fair amount of competition out there, so it's harder for a one-product company to get their product in the stores," Rehtmeyer said. "Independent toy stores and smaller operations are more generous to work with smaller toy companies, because the stores like getting unique products to give them a niche.

"If (a new toy company) produces their own product and are able to gain strength in some retail stores, then a company could gain a better foothold to be noticed by the secondary toy market," she said, referring to larger toy producers such as Mattel.

To that end, Pinto and Harris have invested \$320,000 so far to get the game in the stores of several Midwestern retailers. They've also distributed 2,000 games to area schools, daycare centers, churches and recreation centers to generate buzz among kids to get them interested in and talking about the game.

So far, the strategy seems to be working.

"I love it," said Haleigh McClure. The 16-year-old Dublin resident said she and her friends have played the game a couple of times and thought it was great.

"Even though it's a younger kid's game, we had a lot of fun playing it because there's not many games out there that have that kind of interaction," McClure said. "Most board games just have you rolling a dice or spinning an arrow, but this game is really cool because it has an unusual twist to it."

Some parents seem to appreciate the learning capacity of the game's unusual tasks, too.

"The smells are true to reality and challenging in some cases to figure them out," said Melanie McGwire. The Northwest Side mom said she bought the game for her 10-year-old daughter, who loves to play it with her friends. "They genuinely seemed to have a lot of fun playing it."

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The P.U. game board