

# A REAL FUN JOB

Toy inventors often bubble with excitement at what they have created



Inventor Richard Fast shows off ZAPIT, a trivia game designed with the aim of making people talk to each other as they play.

BY LISA GRACE MARR

When you're reaching for *ASPIRIN* this week to deal with the waxes and whistles, bangs and whizzes that came from under the Christmas tree, know that somewhere out there is a happy toy-maker.

Sure, they have to worry about cost overruns, chemical formulas, computer software glitches, distribution networks and the technical expertise of their plastic molding plants in China.

But get them talking about what they do, the sheer joy of creating grins and laughter, and they sparkle.

Richard Fast, of Burlington, has been making games since 1984 when he was inspired by an Agatha Christie novel and the success of Trivial Pursuit's Canadian inventors to create *MindTrap* — a game which plays on our love of solving mysteries and riddles.

In the past 20 years, he's come up with the same number of games and toys, with a range of themes and concepts, including *Ice FX* in 2003, an award-winning table hockey game which uses a new technology to keep the puck moving.

This year he's launched a new game: ZAPIT, a trivia game for families based on a DVD unit to play together on a TV screen. It's a new category of toy: part PlayStation, part board game, part Jeopardy.

Fast, 47, has never married and doesn't have kids. He doesn't even play games that much. But all of Fast's inventions have been about the same thing: giving people a reason to play and spend time together.

Ben Dermer is director of inventor relations for Spin Master, a toy company based in Toronto which has quickly grown from small upstart to one of the top toy-makers in North America. Spin Master has built its success upon inventors who have passions similar to Fast of creating experiences. It's Dermer's job to find them.

It's not as easy as some might think.

The \$1.4-billion Canadian toy industry has had near stagnant growth for years, but not due to lack of ideas.

Dermer said Spin Master's toy inventors' panel sees about 4,000 products a year to find workable ideas. His team whittles those 4,000 ideas down

about 15 to bring to market.

"Sometimes we see everything from completely bizarre to completely offensive, to completely impractical and sometimes you see things that are completely ingenious that just aren't right for us," said Dermer.

Then there are the ones that are right. Just right, projecting Spin Master's growth into the double digits, impressive when compared to the struggles of toy giants Mattel and Hasbro.

Spin Master's toy inventors come from a variety of backgrounds: space scientists, movie stars, optometrists, business tycoons or a real estate developer who moonlights as a professional toy inventor.

It's all about the perfect marriage of great idea and new technology. That search this year has led to a discovery that has Spin Master's team beaming with excitement: Zubbles.

Harold Chitick, Spin Master's vice-president of global product marketing, can barely contain himself. "It's bubbles, colored bubbles that don't leave stains or marks. You blow a bubble and the colours are as rich as ..."

"Paint, it's like billiard balls floating in the air," interrupted Dermer as he gestures in the air with his arms. "It's the real-holy grail in the toy world to do coloured bubbles. The colour usually doesn't stick to the bubble, it usually drops and makes a big mess. These guys have found a way to bind the colour to the bubble and make a solid bubble. Once you do that, you've got to worry about the stain, I mean this is a big deal of pigment flying through the air."

But the American scientists solved the stain issue too and signed a blockbuster deal with Spin Master Dec. 16.

Fast's holy grail is ZAPIT, which was made possible by some "angel investors" who put up \$4.5 million to bring it to market this fall.

To him, ZAPIT does everything he wants a game to do.

"What goes on in ZAPIT is this: Simple rules; we want everyone to be involved all the time. We want it to be multi-media rich," he said.

"The idea is how do you get conversation going? The last thing we want is for four people to all around mind-numbingly hitting buttons staring at the television. That is not what this is about.

turn around and say, 'How did you know that? Well, you know ...' That's the magic, that's what this does."

Hooking customers up to the magic is the real trick. When it comes to really new ideas, not new ideas for old toys, there are few options for the toy inventor and it often takes years to develop some concepts.

Dermer said big toy companies mostly rely on brands such as Bratz, Barbie, and Hot Wheels. If a hot toy gets on the market via a small company, those large companies swallow it whole and make it their own.

Spin Master, on the other hand, has worked to differentiate itself, to work with inventors on product development rather than just taking an idea and making it their own.

"Our history is built on inventor products so ... we really respect that process. We invite them to be part of the whole process," said Dermer.

It also means being kind to inventors who come in with a new idea that's really not that new.

"We see a lot of bike accessories: a smoke screen for your bike, a light show on your wheel," said Dermer. "No company will do them because they're concerned a kid will get distracted."

"There are lot of different inventions we see all the time (like) spinning top dolls. For whatever reason, no one has ever done them. That's the reason (we see so many) is that they're all confidential, so no one knows I've seen it 500 times before."

However, winning ideas end up in a warren of Spin Master cubicles piled high at workstations. There, about 150 staff work at tweaking and fiddling, doing such things as reconstituting coloured sand for a new craft set, or re-formulating the zoomability of a remote control car.

In his Mississauga office, Richard Fast has developed some of that new technology, actually hiring a team of engineers to create a new computer chip, for his latest invention, *Fast*, who wants to give people a chance to play together, says the investing process is the same, no matter what the product. It's all about seeing a need and filling it. But unlike other inventions, what he and many others like him see, is our need for magic.

— TONY ZIMMERMAN, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR