

ABOUT JENGA

by Leslie Scott

THE DREAM

Having devised and published some 40 games over the past 25 years, I think I can claim, with some justification, that I am a seasoned and professional board game designer with some tangible experience in the toy industry. But back in 1982, when I left a good job with high-tech giant Intel and stepped into the world of play clutching my very low-tech game, a box of 54 wooden blocks, all I had was a dream—the dream that I could build Jenga into the best-selling game in the world. Yet I knew next to nothing about the business of toys and games.

Which is probably just as well. Frankly, I don't know if I would have attempted to launch Jenga if I had had even the slightest inkling of the (financial) risks I faced in taking my first game to market myself. As it turned out, I had already sold my house and my Intel shares (oh, how I was to regret parting with those gold-chip Intel shares) and had sunk the proceeds from both into manufacturing and promoting Jenga before it dawned on me that most toy retailers would not, could not, deal with a fledgling one-woman business that was selling a single unknown product with no traction.

It took longer still (and another sizable chunk of money borrowed from family and friends) before I realized that novelty could actually be a drawback when selling any product. Jenga had no obvious predecessor, and couldn't slip easily into any existing genre. That turned out to be a major marketing problem, not at all the great selling point I had naively assumed it would be when I introduced the game at the London Toy Fair in January 1983.

The funny thing is that it had taken me almost 10 years to realize that Jenga was a novel idea in the first place, so that this fact would count against it had simply never occurred to me the day I made the decision to take Jenga to market. But, before leaping ahead to explain how my pile of blocks did even-

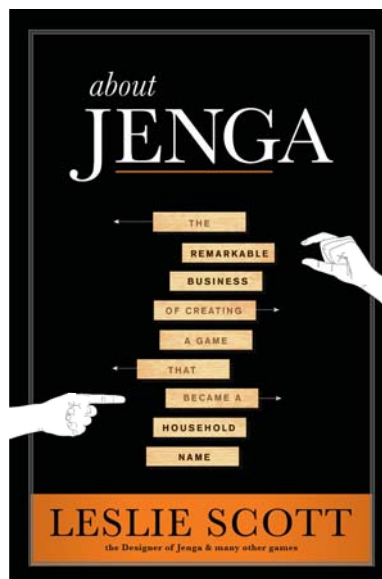
tually hit the big time, I think I should put Jenga's story in context by first giving you a brief potted history of how it came into existence in the first place.

THE EARLY YEARS

I was born in East Africa (Tanzania) and raised in first East and then West Africa (Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya, and then Sierra Leone and Ghana) before finally moving to live in England when I left school. I have three siblings, one of whom (my brother Malcolm) is 13 years my junior. When, in 1973, my family moved to Ghana, Malcolm was just 4 years old. Soon after our arrival, he was given a collection of hand-made wooden building blocks, fashioned from off cuts in a sawmill in Takoradi, the country's main port. At the time (before there was any global pressure to use sustainable wood) timber was a major export of Ghana. Vast numbers of huge tropical hardwood trees were logged up-country and sent down to Takoradi to be shipped out to the rest of the world. Not so today I believe, or at least hope.

Anyway, Malcolm's rather beautiful building blocks made from different hardwoods evolved into a simple stacking game within my game-loving family. We called

this game Takoradi Bricks (for obvious reasons) and played it with friends, many of who enjoyed it enough to ask us for sets of their own. When I moved to England, I took a set or two of Takoradi Bricks with me and introduced the game to friends in Oxford where I lived and worked—first for Intel UK for four years and then briefly for the design company Arena. During this period I had developed the game, changing the dimensions of the blocks and incorporating the idea of balancing on top of the tower the block a player had just removed. And slowly, slowly it dawned on me that not only did everyone who was shown the game love it, but also, more



surprisingly, no one shown it had played anything like it before.

Eventually, encouraged by an especially successful evening spent playing the game with some professional sportsmen at the Real Tennis Club in Oxford (real tennis, by the way, is the ancient forerunner of lawn tennis), I decided to start my own business to manufacture and sell my game.

First, I had to decide how to mass produce the bricks—which had been handmade up until that time—then how to package the game, what to name it, how to promote it and sell it, and finally how to finance the venture. In my book *About Jenga*, I discuss each of these steps in some detail. Here, with fewer words to play with, I will condense some 200 pages into a couple of short sentences and say briefly: I commissioned a sheltered workshop in Botton Village (part of the Camphill Community) to manufacture the wooden blocks; I packed 54 blocks into a transparent, ridged plastic sleeve, and I named the game Jenga—a Swahili word, which is the imperative form of the verb *kjenga*, meaning “to build.”

Growing up in Kenya, I, like the rest of my family, spoke Swahili—the beautiful language of the coastal peoples of East Africa, which had been adopted hundreds of years ago as the *lingua franca* of travelers and traders throughout the region. Though the word “jenga” has an appropriate definition in Swahili, I deliberately chose this word to name the game because it meant nothing in English (or any other language, as far as I was aware). I hoped that in due course the word and the game would become

synonymous. See the game, and people would think “Jenga.” See the word, and everyone would think of the game.

THE DREAM LIVES ON!

Again, if I had more experience of the marketplace back then, and had known how difficult it was going to be to promote a novel and untried product with a novel and meaningless name, I might have pushed for something a little more mundane as Jenga’s many imitators have done since. In fact, Irwin Toy of Canada had urged me to do so when they first acquired the rights to publish Jenga, after I had struggled with it on my own for three years. However, when I clung on to the name and refused to allow them to change it, Irwin tackled the perceived “problem” of Jenga’s “meaningless” name with great panache. The company re-launched the game in Canada in 1986 with an innovative and unforgettable TV commercial that undoubtedly put Jenga firmly on its road to success:

“JENGA JENGA JJJ JENGA... THE
GRRRRREAT GAME WITH THE
STRAAAAANGE NAME”

Irwin Toy wrote orders for more than 80,000 units of Jenga at that Toronto Toy Fair and, what’s more, caught the attention of Stephen and Alan Hassenfeld. At the time, Hasbro had just acquired Milton Bradley and was actively seeking new products to increase its already famous board game portfolio. So, a few months later via Irwin Toy, Jenga became an MB game in the U.S. and the rest of the world (bar

Canada until 2002) and I witnessed the dream I had for my game slowly become a reality—well, almost. I had set out with the vision of Jenga becoming the top-selling game in the world, and 25 years later, though it’s now a household name, it has yet to topple Monopoly.

But I can still dream, can’t I? ■

