

# My pick of the top 10 board games of the year

If you love nothing settling down at Christmas and playing a good game, then **Karl Webb**, an expert at Waterstones in Cambridge, has some ideas.

I'm always very excited to advocate and share the wonderful hobby of board gaming with others. Table-top board gaming is welcoming, engaging, and a social hobby away from the digital that occupies so much of our lives these days.

I feel more and more people are dabbling into this play space and I get fewer responses that "games are not for them".

There are many gaming opportunities in Cambridge including the games nights we do at Waterstones twice a month.

There is such a diverse number of experiences and game designs one can explore. It can be overwhelming as to where to start with so many choices available.

Some games lean more strategy, and others lean more social. It is my job is to narrow down the choices, either for themselves or as gifts ideas.

My focus with this yearly list is to present recommendations that are recently released, accessible to learn, and aim to play in under an hour.

I have had a good time with all these and feel there is something here for every game collection and audience.

**Waterfall Park (3-5 Players, Age 8+, 45-60mins, £37.99, 2025)**

Each year, I'm looking for a fun accessible game to introduce to families at Christmas, to take the place of the traditional *Monopoly/Scrabble/Cluedo* old favourite they would comfortably go to.

*Waterfall Park* is an attractive colourful game of money, trading, and deal making. A quicker, simpler, and more socially pleasant game than the bankrupting each other of *Monopoly*.

You are building up a theme park with various attractions of entertainment, shops, and rides.

The bigger and complete attractions pay out more income, but most likely you need either a tile or a plot from someone else to make those large attractions.

A skilled player in this game is going to need to evaluate and negotiate good bargains, learn when to extort and when to be more giving. All in a game that takes less than an hour to play.

**Castle Combo (2-5 Players, Age 8+, 20-30mins, £19.99, 2024)**

My best gift recommendation to buy a gamer while on a budget is *Castle Combo*. This is an excellent quick small-box strategy card game with lots of replayability.

In a game of *Castle Combo* players only take nine turns buying a character card from one of two rows and adding them to a 3 by 3 grid in front of them.

The artwork of the characters are

delightfully dorky and charming. The aspect that makes this game so interesting is that every card is unique and provide a bonus when buying the card as well as an endgame scoring condition making so much to discover within the two decks.

The combos you build in one game are unlikely to appear together in the next game making it so engaging to play again.

**Flip 7 (3-10 Players, Age 6+, 20mins, £9.99, 2025)**

Self described on the box as "the greatest card game of all time" is a bold

statement, however, it is an excellent fun parallel to *Uno* that I would suggest you try for Christmas this year.

This is a *Blackjack*-style push your luck game with some wacky cards thrown in there too.

Choosing between banking your score this round or "hit me another card" is the whole game, but the excitement and tension from it is very funny.

The high cheers of tremendous luck, and the humour of someone else's misfortune with a deck of cards is a great time in a tiny package.

**Trio (3-6 Players, Age, 6+, 15mins, £11.99, 2024)**

Another stocking filler choice this year is a little memory game called *Trio*. It crosses a *Go Fish*-style game with pairs as players take turns trying to reveal and collect a three-of-a-kind known as a *Trio*.

First person who collects three *Trios* wins. However, the only cards you can have access to reveal are the highest and lowest cards in people's hands or the face down ones in the middle.

And so it takes a sharp memory to retain where the cards might be.

This game feels more social and interactive than a traditional memory game, players may bait each other to reveal cards in other players' hands and not their own.

There are also additional game modes of playing in teams or winning for getting two specific *Trios* as well. It plays super-fast and feels traditional, but I have had a good time with it.

**Villainous Unstoppable (2-4 Players, Age 6+, 30-60mins, £27.99, 2025)**

Sometimes it's fun to play as the bad guy. For ages 6+, Disney's *Villainous Unstoppable* is my fav kids game of the year.

There have been previous "Villainous" games but those lacked accessibility and had challenging rulesets.

Unstoppable targets an audience wanting a Disney game while still



Karl Webb, the games department lead at Waterstones Cambridge  
Pictures: Keith Heppell

keeping strategies and slight differences between the characters you can play as.

I have been delighted to teach groups this game and then later seeing them get into the spirit with evil laughter.

The first player to progress their scheme four times in a game wins. The strategy is light but certainly present: replacing what traditionally would have been dice to determine movement and actions instead is in managing your hand of cards and power tokens.

A simple yet modern kids game with a good Disney flavour that even as an adult I can enjoy.

**Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring Trick-taking Game (1-4 Players, Age 10+, 20mins, £24.99, 2024)**

Following the success of another small award-winning cooperative card game called *The Crew*, this one is packed with different minigames that align with the chapters of Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*.

It presents different puzzles to work through using methods of trick-taking: playing a leading card, following suit, the ring cards are

trump suit.

I like how the story is depicted in gameplay. You can choose to play as different characters in the story in sequence, or maybe even replay those chapters you really enjoyed the most.

A good team of players can learn how to read the signals well in a limited communication cooperative game.

There is a lot to discover here, and the stained-glass inspired artwork is gorgeous too.

**Timber Town (2 Players, Age 8+, 30mins, £21.99, 2025)**

Maybe you are looking for a gift or game for just two players, then *Timber Town* is my pick this year. It is a tile-laying game of collecting buildings from a flowing river.

The river flows in the middle between their player boards and the puzzle presented is that the column in which you take a building tile is the column the tile is placed on your player board.

There are different types of

buildings that score differently and you need to match up bridges on the sides. It's a simple game that feels similar to other games like *Azul* or *Carcassonne* but much better designed for two players.

The buildings have variants too so you can setup a more complex and challenging game by changing the way they score making it worth revisiting.

**Offshoots (1-10 Players, Age 5+, 10mins, £24.99, 2025)**

Not all games need to be strategic or a puzzle. Sometimes a dexterity game comes along that I feel stands out and is worth recommending.

*Offshoots* is a balancing game of growing a tree. Players take turns adding leaf pieces to a standing tree trying not to make it fall, similar to not making a *Jenga* tower fall.

I like the ecology vibes, and a positive message through play, of being careful and appreciating nature. The pieces feel durable and tactile, and it's a product that doubles as a set piece or a toy as well.

A cosy zen game you could "turn your brain off a little to" while still engaging enough to have fun alone or with others.

**Cities (2-4 Players, Age 10+, 60mins, £34.99, 2024)**

*Cities* is a good demonstration of modern game design. It's got worker placement, set collection, scoring cards and shared objectives.

Yet it all comes together so well and easy to follow. There are eight rounds of taking turns placing a worker in an area within one of four rows on a central board, while visiting each row only once per round.

Meaning you will take a score card, an expansion tile, building pieces, and items. You choose the order you take them based on which you prioritise and reducing chances someone will take the spot you most wanted.

The game comes with a number of shared objective boards representing different real-world cities that focus different strategies.

**Tokaido (1-5 Players, Age 7+, 45mins, £29.99, 2012)**

This is an older game that has been a long-time family game

recommendation, but has recently come out again in a new edition.

In *Tokaido* you are on a journey through Japan, stopping at different places along the way. You can meet local people, capture the scenery, buy souvenirs and more.

The strategy comes from we only travel forward, never backwards and the next person to move is the player furthest behind at the back.

You may want to jump ahead for a particular action spot before someone else takes it instead, but doing so foregoes the actions you pass over for other players to take instead of you.

These actions score points, and at the end whoever scored the most points had the best journey. The presentation is very stark and zen, with pastel colours in the artwork.

The new edition even comes with a solo play ruleset that hasn't been in the game before.

I hope this list helps others both find gift ideas and highlight the entertainment available here.

Some of my best memories are with games and it delights me when I get feedback from customers who tell me they had a lot of fun with a recommendation of mine.

## Jenny Jefferies selects her top 10 cookbooks of 2025

**Soup Solution by Charlotte Pike MBE. Published by Hamlyn £20.**

Soup is indeed the solution; comfort food that soothes, consoles, reassures and to ultimately bring cheer to our tables, and with a chapter titled 'Just what the doctor ordered', we are in safe hands.

Charlotte insightfully muses "if you can make a soup then you can nourish yourself and others."

Colourful, glossy, eclectic, and wholesome, this cookbook is a must have guide for every style and season; quick, no-cook, budget, winter warmers, oven-baked, finishing touches and building blocks, Charlotte has got you covered with a soup for every moment.

**Seven Kitchens: A Culinary Journey through India's Culinary Heritage by Torie True. Published by Meze publishing £25.**

When you open *Seven Kitchens*, you open the door to Torie's heart. A true journey of integrity and discovery through India's culinary heritage is shared with the reader and you won't be disappointed.

A sequel to Torie's debut best-seller *Chilli and Mint*, *Seven Kitchens* echoes the seven distinct communities whose flavours have shaped India's cuisine, including Indo-Chinese, Anglo-Indian, Syrian Christian, Goan Portuguese, Tibetan Nepalese, Parsi and Mughal.

There are over 100 recipes with an accompanying colour image for each dish; each and every one to make you smile and feel loved.

**Great British Seafood Revival by CJ Jackson. Published by Merlin Unwin Books £25.**

A terrifically concise, beautiful, and perceptive compilation of British fish and seafood recipes with pockets of wisdom throughout.

Alongside CJ's unique knowledge and understanding of our incredibly important and significant fish and seafood industry and communities, the photography, by Steve Lee, also helps to capture the heart of our coastal fishing heritage.

This cookbook will be sure to continue to embrace CJ as one of our national treasures.

**Silk Roads: A flavour Odyssey with Recipes from Baku to Beijing by Anna Ansari. Published by DK RED £28.**

A thoroughly exquisite and tangible storybook with recipes, intertwined with nostalgic family photos, antidotes and deep knowledge of her heritage, philosophy and food culture.

I just want to stay here forever with Anna, and caress the pages, delight in the rustic and very real imagery, and make her recipes for my family.

*Silk Roads* is a book "to remind us that borders are geopolitical constructs, and that authenticity and ownership can oftentimes be shared, fluid or imagined."

This is an important legacy and a timely reminder that food connects us all.

**French Classics: Easy and Elevated Dishes to Cook at Home by Matthew Ryle. Published by Bloomsbury £26.**

The foreword by Raymond Blanc OBE, who helped to inspire Matt to becoming a chef, is almost like a fond love letter and writes "you are truly carrying the torch of French cookery for the next generation".

From Le Manoir to Maison

Françoise, Matt takes us on a sincere and historical French culinary journey with just a brilliant repertoire of classic French recipes, beautiful photography and fun illustrations by Daniel Illsley that really lifts the cookbook above most others.

About the recipes, Matt says "often, all that's needed to elevate them to exquisite heights is allowing time and the cooking process to work their magic."

**One Pan Beans: Creative Recipes Using Beans, Chickpeas and Lentils for Everyday Meals by Claire Thomson. Published by Quadrille £20.**

The 'Bang in Some Beans' campaign is a new UK-wide initiative led by The Food Foundation and Veg Power to double the UK's bean consumption by 2028.

Claire, of *@5oclockapron* fame, is a powerhouse in cooking and published her 10th cookbook earlier this year and quite rightly observes "beans, and by extension pulses, are having a moment".

Recipes like chickpea fritters with yoghurt and feta, split pea and ham soup, Punjabi red kidney beans with caramelised onions, and pork belly with butter beans and sage are all colourful, spectacular and straightforward. Beans. They're good for the heart.

**Padella: Iconic Pasta at Home by Tim Siadatan. Published by Bloomsbury £25.**

Tim is a graduate of Jamie Oliver's Fifteen and was one of the first cohort of Oliver's students from back in 2002.

Tim has since become an incredible and generous chef, especially with this very cool and refined cookbook, an exemplary in its gallery of pasta mastery and authentic love.

As Tim says so himself, "There is a magic to cooking, as there is with farming or food production, and food tastes good when there's love and openness."

Serious 'iconic pasta at home' and a very proud adventure.

**Home Shores: 100 Simple Fish Recipes to Cook at Home by Emily Scott. Published by Hardin Grant Books (UK) £30.**

Lovingly powered by the sea and with a dedicated foreword by Nathan Oulaw, *Home Shores* provides the home cook with elegant and rustic, yet accessible fish and seafood recipes, including 'easy Thai mussels', a great tinned fish board with toast, pickles, fennel and red cabbage slaw, which is a real crowd pleaser, anchovy and thyme puff pastry straws for pre-dinner drinks or a picnic, and crab and Brussels sprout croque monsieur, which is just utterly divine in its simplicity and comfort. Emily was the first woman to cook for royalty and writes a bestselling newsletter *Shore to Shore* on Substack.

Jenny Jefferies is an award-winning author, food columnist, producer and campaigner. Follow her at *@jennyjefferies*.

**At Home in Provence: Recipes and Stories from Life in the South of France by Jeany Cronk. Published by Quadrille £25.**

Jeany offers us a refreshingly honest and au fait gift from her life in the South of France – her debut cookbook is a fine and a familiar balance between sentimentality and sophistication.

One suspects dedicated hard graft simmering beneath the surface as we enjoy a true glimpse into the fruits of her labour.

Tales from French markets, towns, picnics, village life and the sea are offered, along with 60

