

Depression – Good for Go, but not Enough

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Scrabble was created in 1931 by A.M. Butts, using some analogy with the fashionable game of rummy. Monopoly (after several versions with limited diffusion) was first produced by Parker Bros. in the spring of 1935 and they: “by autumn were taking on extra staff and running week-end shifts to meet the demand for 200,000 per week”.¹ This is just to mention two classic games which somehow derived their fortune from the Depression.

What has this in common with Go and its history? Nothing apparently. However, it would be a fine subject for an author of fiction to write a history of Go on the assumption that Go sets, instead of Monopoly, had then been sold by the million. Now fantasy is required for supposing that the trade of Go sets and accompanying rules were so successful during the Depression, but it is no fiction at all that such attempts were actually made, and precisely in the same 1931-34 years.

To begin with, the Parker Bros., which spread Monopoly everywhere, “marketed a Go game set during the fall of 1934. The Parker Brother’s Go set was neatly packaged in a cardboard box with a folding board. It was a total non-success in marketing and the New York University Chess Club purchased about 10 sets at \$1.50 each”². It would be very interesting now to see a specimen of this Go set; in particular, I would like to read the accompanying booklet of game rules.

However, the Parker Bros. set was just one of several attempts. Other makers had already tried to enter the market with our game. Not surprisingly, we find among them Milton Bradley Co., by then Parkers Bros. chief competitor in the game market – now they have merged under Hasbro. We read in a bibliographical list of American Go pioneer W. D. Witt: “Sloman, Aage. *I-Go. The National War Game of Japan*. Copyright, 1931. A pamphlet of 53 pages, published by Milton Bradley

¹ D. Parlett, *The Oxford History of Boardgames*, 1999.

² AGA 1995 *Historical Book*, p. 6.3.

Company, of Springfield, Mass., and supplied with sets of Go-stones and board which they sell. An elementary instruction book”³.

Here again, I would like to see a specimen of the game, but for the booklet I was more fortunate since I obtained a photocopy of it from Theo van Ees. I could thus study both the booklet and its author. Note that the booklet had to describe not the usual Go game but I-Go. We know that this spelling actually corresponds to the true Japanese name of the game, but in this context its use was hardly motivated by the aim of better reproducing the original game; on the contrary, here it was intended as some kind of registered name, a trademark for the specific Go set produced and sold by the company.

On further inspection, we find that this author soon found himself in good company – none other than Edward Lasker in person was supporting a ‘twin’ game, the 13x13 Go, rather common among beginners, which at Milton Bradley Co. became Lasker-Go! The set on sale was accompanied by rules written by Lasker himself, or at least printed under his name: *Official Lasker-Go*. Springfield: Milton Bradley, 1934, 8 pp. Unfortunately, both games marketed by Milton Bradley were not successful enough. Again in *AGA Historical Book* we find: “(WDW 5/13/1935) Milton Bradley marketed I-Go on a 19 line board and Lasker Go on a 13 line board. Both were discontinued because of the lack of sales”.

Besides the two leading companies, other makers tried to spread Go sets in the early thirties, with a similar destiny. In *AGA 1995 Historical Book* p. 6.2 we read “(WDW, 01/15/1934) Marshall Field & Co. in Chicago produced a Go game with a 19 line board made out of cardboard and a small case of stones for \$7.50. The game included Aage Slomann’s booklet *The Game of Go*, published by Milton Bradley. Marshall Field & Co. sold the game for \$3.50 in order to get rid of it in the summer of 1933”.

In conclusion, we have encountered no less than four different Go sets, sold as if it were a game worthy of a worldwide spread, as we have known for Scrabble and Monopoly. I would be grateful for any indication as to where to find one of these sets today.

It should be easier to gather some information on the authors of the corresponding instruction manuals. Thus, for Edward Lasker we have a lot of biographical details, since he is acknowledged as one of the most

³ *AGA 1995 Historical Publication Album*.

important players and authors in the history of Go. In these years he published his masterpiece *Go and Go-Moku*, which is still in print among the Dover editions. The original hardback first edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1934) was printed in many copies and even today is not hard to find in the antiquarian market.

More puzzling is Aage Slomann. That Milton Bradley did publish and use his text (which was also used by another maker), is for us a kind of guarantee – we can trust that it was clearly written and suitable for any beginner. In the book he is stated as living in New York but in those years we do not find him recorded among the local Go players – Lasker included – who gathered at Lee Chumley’s Restaurant. However I did find his Copenhagen address among the subscribers to the *Deutsche Go Zeitung* in 1931⁴.

In the case of the Go set marketed by Parker Bros., I am still lacking not only any information on the author of the accompanying booklet, but also on the booklet itself. Anybody knows?

⁴ *Go-NYT*, No. 111, 1999, pp. 6-8.