

AWA Review

ABSTRACT

Games are the artefacts of our culture and as such help us to better understand and interpret the world we live in¹. Playing games supports the assimilation of new ideas and new technologies into society². And so it was with the development of radio broadcasting. This paper traces the rise of commercial radio over the first twenty years of broadcasting through a process of 'cultural archaeology'³, using as evidence the radio games of the period. Based on an analysis of the changing characteristics and symbols embodied in each of the representative games it is argued that the rapid commercialisation of radio can be clearly mapped. As a result we are better able to understand how commercial broadcasting became socialised as the accepted and predominant use of the new medium so soon after its inception.

From Iddy Umpty to Charlie McCarthy: Radio Games and the Rise of Commercial Broadcasting

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PRE-BROADCAST ERA (PRE-1922)

The development of the modern communications era arguably commenced with the introduction of the telegraph. By the 1850s the public's imagination had been captured with the series of attempts to lay a transatlantic cable which commenced in 1857 and culminated in the successful laying of a cable between Britain and the United States by the converted steamship *The Great Eastern* in 1866⁴. It is therefore not surprising that one of the earliest recorded telegraph games is the board game *Atlantic Telegraph* produced by the printing and map producer Charles Magnus and Company in the United States in the 1860s.

The general popularity of telegraphy-related games clearly emerged in the 1880s with the two most notable examples being those produced by McLoughlin Brothers known as *Game of the District Messenger Boy* (see Fig. 1) or *Merit Rewarded* (1886) and *Game of the Telegraph Boy* (1888). McLoughlin Brothers were one of the great games makers in the United States in the nineteenth century. Characterised by beautifully coloured and artistic box lids, the games were well made and used the latest in printing technology. *The A.D.T. Messenger Boy* by Milton Bradley dates from about 1915 and is also similar in content⁵.

Overall, these telegraph board

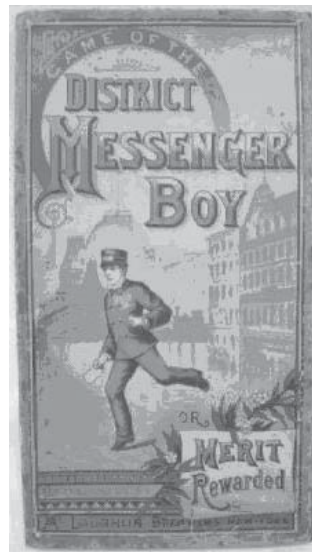


Fig. 1. Game of the District Messenger Boy

games did not focus on the technology of telegraphy but instead embodied a moral tale of hard work leading to success in modern industrial society. In these games the players follow the corporate journey as individuals who commence work as telegraph messenger boys. In one sense they reinforced the nineteenth century view of the 'American Dream'⁶ and were similar in theme to other games of the period.

Telegraph board games continued into the early twentieth century with at least one Parker Brothers board game appearing in about 1906 under the name of *Toy-Town Telegraph Office* (Fig. 2). In this game the child player took on the roll of running a Western Union Telegraph office. This game departed from the approach demonstrated in the 1880s telegraph games in that it focused on the child as being in charge of the technology rather than being its' servant as was the case in earlier telegraph boy board games.

The First World War itself gave a significant boost to the development of wireless technology and to public interest and participation in the new art. Wireless telegraphy had emerged during the War as a critical element in military strategy

and had advanced in both design and functionality. The direct link with the First World War is best illustrated by the card game *Iddy Umpty* which was produced in the United Kingdom by Thomas De La Rue & Company, who started manufacturing card games about 1920 (Fig. 3). The card game itself was based on simple telegraph morse code. The critical link with the War was the name of the game itself - *Iddy Umpty* was soldier trench slang for the Morse code dots and dashes and the name of army signallers – they were referred to as Iddy Umpties⁷. This indicates that the game was produced probably not long after the First World War.

Board games based on wireless telegraphy also emerged in the United States in the early 1920s. *Radio Flash* was a board game based on wireless telegraphy manufactured by the National Bindery and Game Co., Inc. in New York and was copyrighted in 1922. This game is based on wireless telegraphy



Fig. 2. Toy-Town Telegraph Office



Fig. 3. Iddy Umpty Card Game

and contains no evidence of voice communication. The language used refers to the conventions of ship to shore communications (i.e. 'ships', 'Radio Message', 'Recognise'), the game is based on the navigation of a vessel to the North Pole and it relies on International Morse Code as the basis of communication.

Three board games from the early 1920s produced by the Wilder Manufacturing Company and Milton Bradley respectively are illustrative of a transition from wireless telegraphy based on point-to-point communications to the voice communication of the radio broadcasting era. This transition was not a precise process – some games mixed elements and symbols of the wireless telegraphy period with later references to broadcasting throughout the 1920s. Each of these games also reflected the critical role that wireless amateurs played in popularising the new technology. Unlike the earlier high quality board games produced by McLoughlin Brothers in the 1880s, the radio games produced in the early 1920s were relatively cheap to produce and were manufactured in large numbers, making them

widely available for purchase by working families. As a consequence the games received a much wider audience and played an active role in promoting and socialising the new radio technology.

The Wilder Manufacturing Company was a mid-Western United States game producer that came to prominence in the 1920s. Wilder followed the visual tradition established by McLoughlin Brothers, favouring colourfully illustrated box lids. *Radio Game* produced by Wilder (branded YLDR) in the United States dates from the early 1920s and is a checkers-like board game based on point-to-point voice communications between players. The box lid of this game carries an illustration of a radio ham operator sitting in a wireless station using a microphone to communicate with ships in a harbour. The operator is in uniform, suggesting his role as a wireless operator in paid employment (Fig. 4).

The original Milton Bradley, like many who entered game making in the nineteenth century, started life as a lithographer. His first game was the famous *Checkered Game of Life*, first produced in 1860. In



Fig. 4. Radio Game (Wilder)

the twentieth century the Milton Bradley Company became the successor to McLoughlin Brothers and in fact took that company over in 1920. *Radio Game* (#4548) by Milton Bradley accurately reflects the transition period for wireless. This game has two players represented by “The Broadcaster” and “The Receiver”. In contrast to *Radio Game* by Wilder, the box lid illustration of *Radio Game* #4548 shows a land based radio transmission mast, a seaborne ship and a very young man receiving signals through a wireless set (Fig. 5). The young man may not be an employed operator but rather one member of the new generation of wireless amateurs. Like *Radio Game* by Wilder, this game suggests the point-to-point communication more typical of the amateur wireless era. However the Milton Bradley *Radio Game* also introduces the notion of the ‘Broadcaster’ more typical of the broadcast era.

Conversely *Radio* (#4884) by Milton Bradley carries a box lid illustration of a ships’ wireless telegraphy operator working inside a radio room suggestive of point-to-point voice communications (Fig. 6). However the board game inside

is clearly based on broadcasting. The game is also one of the first to use a map as a critical element in linking the United States by radio.

THE DISTANCE FIENDS (1921-1926)

Perceptions of the notion of time and space had changed rapidly in the 30 years preceding the end of the First World War. New technologies such as the telephone, the phonograph, the automobile, the aeroplane and wireless telegraphy had forced society to reassess a range of widely held beliefs. These ideas were pursued more broadly in a cultural context ranging from H.G. Wells’ exposition on time travel in *The Time Machine* (1895) to Picasso’s cubism movement in early twentieth century painting⁸.

In the United States the telegraph and its successor wireless telegraphy had encouraged the idea that new technology could unite the country by linking what were once isolated communities into a unified nation. Distance had long been a dominant theme in the board games of the United States since the nineteenth century. The antecedents to the radio games of the 1920s were the travel games



Fig. 5. *Radio Game* (Milton Bradley # 4548)



Fig. 6. Radio (Milton Bradley # 4884)

based on sea or rail which focused on spanning large geographically dispersed areas of the United States or in some cases the world. The idea of linking the United States by radio was to become a recurrent theme in the 1920s. In fact much of the debate in this period about how radio was to be used in society rested on transportation metaphors. References to the ether and access to it were riddled with metaphoric references to navigation, waterways, rules of the road and traffic police. Indeed Congressional debate in the United States drew heavily on both the transport analogy and industrial metaphors to describe how broadcasting would be regulated⁹.

A particular preoccupation of the early broadcast era was therefore distance. This first manifested itself through the DXing of the early amateurs and continued in the early years of broadcasting when receivers were measured in terms of their capacity (or otherwise) to draw in far away broadcast stations¹⁰. This fascination with distance manifested itself in the radio games up until

the mid 1920s. The key difference between the distance games of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the radio distance games of the 1920s was that the earlier games based rail or ship travel were always represented by physical travel. On the other hand listening to the radio unlocked the possibility of hearing and learning about far away places from the family living room in real time.

Board games of this period often took the guise of an actual or representational map of the U.S. (Milton Bradley # 4625 (Fig. 7), #4674, #4884, *Radio Ramble* by Selchow & Righter 1927) or the U.K. (*Radio – The Wireless Game*) (Fig. 8). These games represented a move away from the games of the early 1920s which largely focused on point-to-point communication (e.g. Milton Bradley *Radio* #4548, *Radio Game* by Wilder or the *Iddy Umpty* card game).

Other forms of games followed similar lines. The jigsaw puzzle *U.S. Radio Map Puzzle* (1926) manufactured by Inter Paper Goods Company was, as the name suggests, based on a map of the

Radio Games

U.S. identifying known radio stations of the period within each State.

Some radio games even contain metaphorical maps. The German children's board game *Radio* (1923) reflects a more complex view of radio than perhaps the simple premise of the ladder game upon which it is based would suppose

(Fig. 9). This game allows a child to take a break from listening to their actual radio and 'travel' to various places where people and animals are listening to radio.

The Alderman Fairchild Company produced two important radio board games in the mid 1920s. Harry O. Alderman and Elmer E. Fairchild had been producing land over tinplate wireless towers at the other end of a small tinplate play table representing broadcasting stations. Scores were allocated to each tower. The *Radio Tinker* combination toy and bank is a much more complex toy produced in Evanston, Illinois by The Toy Tinkers best known for their dowel and disk



Fig. 7. Milton Bradley # 4625

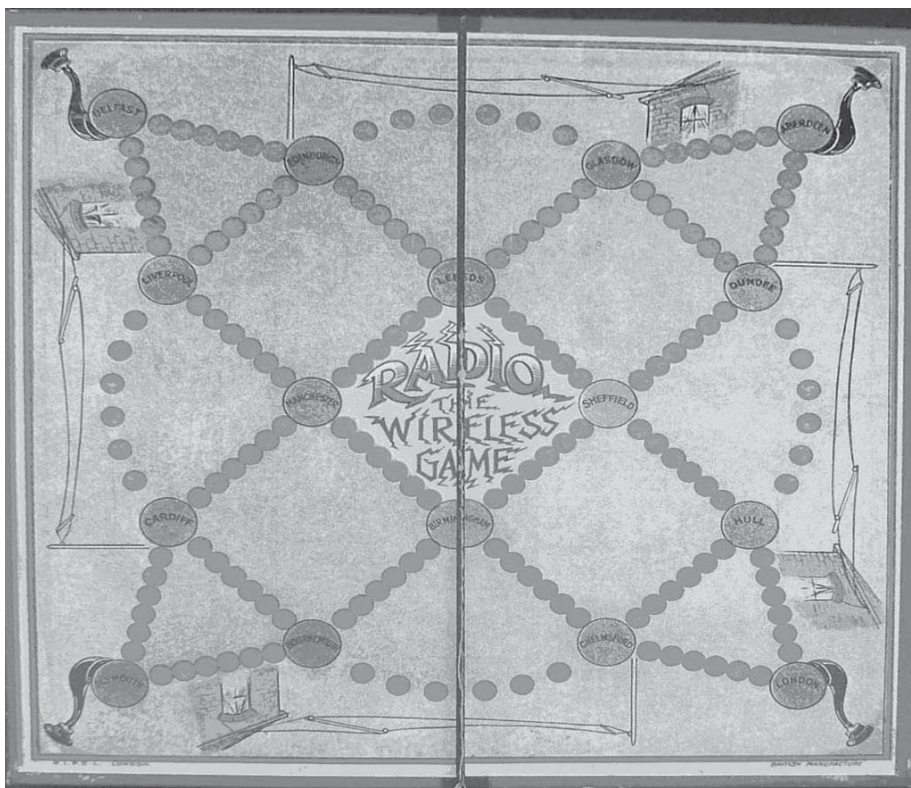


Fig. 8. Radio - The Wireless Game



Fig. 9. Radio

boxes and novelties in Rochester, New York since 1900 and commenced manufacturing games in 1922. Games marketed under the All-Fair logo used detailed illustrations, vivid colour and covered contemporary themes as was the case with both *Toon-In Radio Game* and the *Radio Game for Little Folks* which were produced by the company in 1925 and 1926 respectively.

Toon-In Radio Game is one of the best illustrated radio board games ever produced (Fig. 10). Lavish use of colour is combined with imaginative board layout and a superb attention to detail including the use of miniature horn speakers as board counters. *Toon-In* is a relatively straightforward circuit game in which up to six players race each other from station WWJ Detroit to Arlington.

Radio Game for Little Folks is a board game specifically targeting younger children. It is characterised again by vivid use of colour, a creative board layout and even

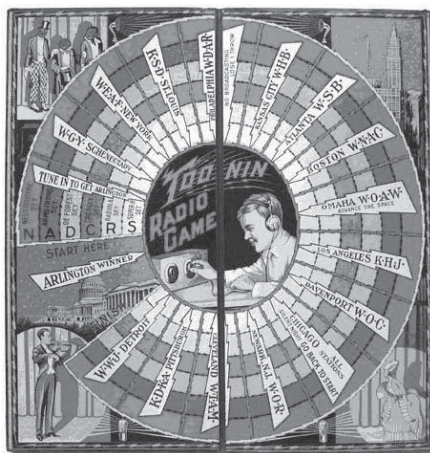


Fig. 10. Toon-In Radio Game

smaller horn speakers as counters. Progress around the board is occasionally impeded, through storm, 'silent night' or static, all too common problems associated with radio reception in the mid 1920s.

Tin toys of this period also incorporated radio-based games as was the case with the *Radio Shot* game, *Radio Ring* game and *Radio Tinker*. *Radio Shot* was an early bagatelle style game based on firing a small ball or marble through the air into a horn speaker that caught the ball or marble and distributed it to various cities on the tin board of various point values (Fig. 11). This game was manufactured by AAA Toys and Novelties of Brooklyn New York and carries the stamp Educational Type No. 15. Two versions are extant with only slight variations between them. These variations are either a tin or copper horn speaker and on one version the rules of the game are printed onto the pressed metal base.

The *Radio Ring* game was a more complex variation on *Radio Shot* and was manufactured by the American Game and Toy Corporation in 1926. The game consisted of a spring-loaded catapult mechanism that fired a rubber ring into the air which was intended to

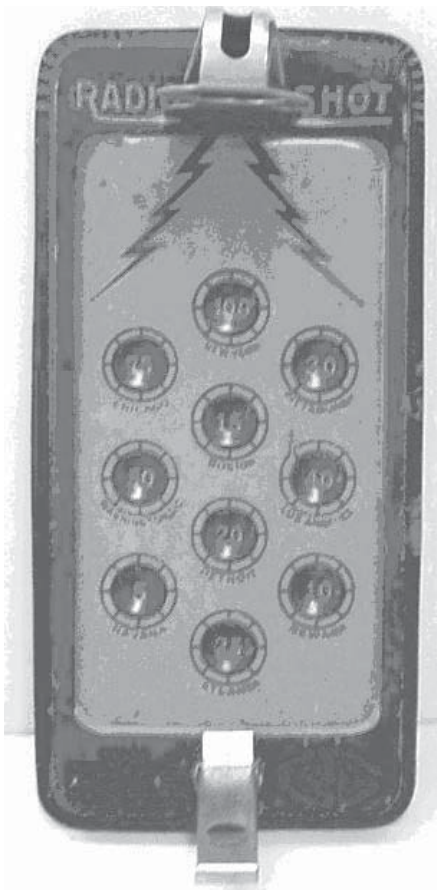


Fig. 11. Radio Shot

building sets first patented in 1914.

Radio Tinker combines five (5) activities covering a:

- 1) Radio coin savings bank,
- 2) Loud Speaker for “reproducing conversation or songs and imitating musical instruments” in the form of a child’s Kazoo,
- 3) Coupler to imitate the sound of “static conditions”,
- 4) Variometer to detect named cities (Portland, Denver, Chicago, Detroit and New York) on the dial and
- 5) Code Sender or telegraph key “to send Morse or International Code messages”.

The *Radio Tinker* is a remarkable toy in that it embodies the transition from wireless telegraphy

to broadcasting into a single toy. Whilst elements of the wireless telegraphy of the amateur era are clearly present in the Code Sender, the signature elements of the early broadcast era (Loud Speaker, Coupler and Variometer), the design of the actual radio (including two peep holes to observe lighted tubes and four sockets), and the identification of early broadcast stations point to manufacture in 1922 or 1923.

In their most basic form card games of the 1920s adopted some of the symbols of the broadcasting era to conventional playing card decks with a reference to wireless on the pack, on the Joker cards or in the card back illustrations as was the case with *Radio Whist* from the U.K. (Fig. 12) and *Wireless Playing Cards* from the United States (Fig. 13).

In other cases the reference to radio is incidental, simply acknowledging the phenomenal popularity of the new medium. Advertising or promotional materials often adopted a tenuous reference to radio in order to attract the potential buyer of goods or services. *The Radio Marvel* was a novelty card produced by Overland Motors in the U.S. in 1923 that claimed to ‘Answer Questions by Radio’ by turning a dial to a particular question and answering it by turning over the foldout card. Chevrolet also produced a similar card in 1923 known as the *Wireless Wizard* (Fig. 14). The same approach was taken by Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce in the novelty game *The Mystic Oracle* produced in 1924. *The Mystic Oracle* was also used in 1924 to promote the medicines of Lydia Pinkham¹¹. Whilst the origins of this game are unclear at least two examples claim patent and copyright by J.B. Carroll Co., Carroll and Albany Avenues, Chi-



Fig. 12. Radio Whist

cago in 1924.

Another puzzle known as *The Great T Puzzle* was based on assembling a number of trapezoid cards into the shape of the letter T. This puzzle appears in many forms up to the present day with one used to advertise the U.S. radio station WKY Radio Oklahoma in the 1920s.

Standard decks of playing cards accompanied by radio company advertising material were also widely available. In the U.K. in 1925 Waddington produced a stan-



Fig. 13. Wireless Playing Cards

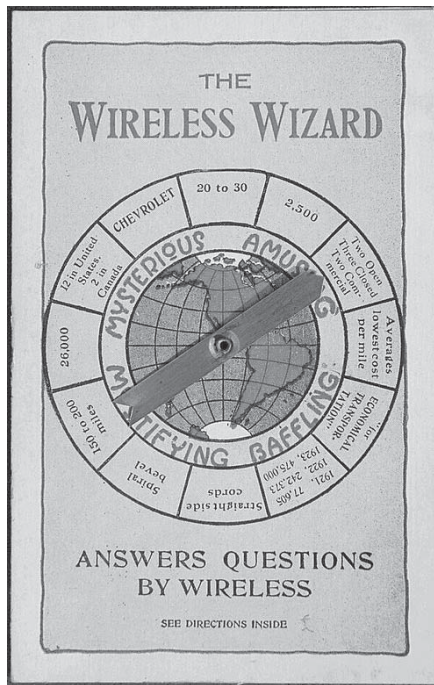


Fig. 14. The Wireless Wizard

dard deck of playing cards featuring an advertisement for Sixty Six Radio Valves on the reverse side of each card. Atwater Kent and RCA in the U.S. also produced standard decks of playing cards with reverse side advertising throughout the 1920s. The artwork on cards of this period was exceptional, often adopting the motifs of the art deco period (e.g. *Radio Whist*, *Sixty Six Radio Valves* (Fig. 15), *Atwater Kent, Kolster-Brandes*) accompanied by the stunning use of colour.

Some card games were developed specifically around broadcasting including both card decks and game rules made specifically with radio-based themes. An early example is the card game by Parker Brothers known as *Radio Game* that was produced in 1923. In this category three other card games entitled *Game of Radio* (U.S.) (Fig. 16), the *Round Card Game of 'Sparx or Listening In'* (U.K.) (Fig. 17) and *Radio Banker* (U.K.)

share similar characteristics. The *Game of Radio* was manufactured by the Radio Games Company in Peoria, Illinois. Two versions are extant, dating from 1924 and 1925 respectively. In the 1924 version a single Game of Radio is described in which a deck of 51 cards is used.

There are important differences between the 1924 and 1925 versions of the *Game of Radio*. Firstly, in the 1924 game only one playing option is given and no partner, progressive or paired variations are offered as was the case with the 1925 version. This indicates wider usage of the game as a party game for friends or family in the 1925 version. Secondly, the 1925 version of the game is more family-oriented with “Broadcasting” and “Radio Junior” clearly suitable for children. Family involvement in radio listening of course became critical to popularising the new medium and the image of the family huddled around the radio console became one of the iconic images of the later 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Thirdly, the three mutual consent station cards in the 1925 deck of *Game of Radio* recognised both the wide expansion of stations in

the United States and also allowed players to ‘localise’ the game. One complete surviving deck from 1925 has the call letters WLW, WHAM and WHEC pencilled in, indicating the owner of the game was probably from the Rochester, New York listening area¹². Local and national broadcasting was to become one of the key issues in the development of broadcasting in the later 1920s.

The *Round Card Game of ‘Sparx or Listening In’*¹³ was manufactured by the Chad Valley Company in the U.K. in 1925. Chad Valley had first started to produce card games in 1920 and these were distributed through the Woolworth’s chain of variety stores.

Radio Banker was promoted by the Marconiphone Company and was printed by John Waddington in the U.K. Based on the Marconiphone radio models 21, 31, 41 and 81 represented on the playing cards this game most likely dates from 1925.

These specialised radio card games embodied both the symbols and language of the new technology for adult and child card players in much the same way as *Radio Tinker* introduced such elements



Fig 15. Sixty Six Radio Valves Playing Cards

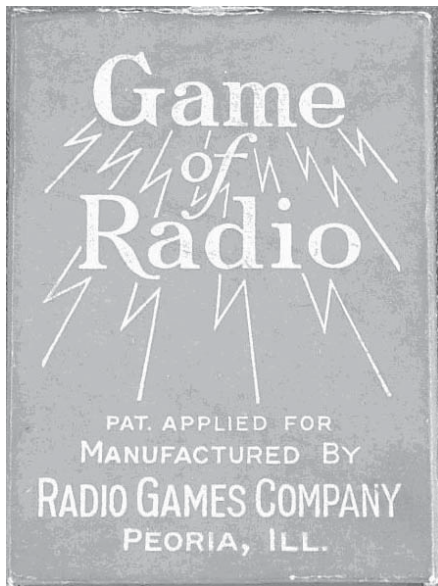


Fig. 16. Game of Radio

to children playing with a tin toy. Initially there was little attempt to disguise the broadcasting technology and its hardware, with many games being designed to look like radio sets (e.g. Milton Bradley *Radio #4674*, *Radio Tinker*, *The Radio Quiz*) or at least adopt the iconic horn speaker as part of the game (e.g. board pieces and box in the *Radio Game for Little*

Folks, the *Toon In* board and board pieces, *Radio*, in *Radio Shot*, in '*Sparx*', and in the card-based *Game of Radio*). Many games of the period used the broadcasting transmission tower or mast as a symbol of the new technology (e.g. *Radio Game for Little Folks*, *U.S. Radio Map Puzzle No. 104*). This often combined with a stylised bolt of electricity or lightning in an art deco form (e.g. *Radio Shot*, *The Original Radio Game*, *Radio Ring Game*, *Game of Radio*, *Wireless Playing Cards*) to symbolise broadcast radio waves travelling through space. Games such as *Toon In* acknowledged the major commercial brands of the broadcast era as well as dominant circuits of the period (Crosley, De Forest, Radiola, Neutrodyne, Armstrong and Super-H) or promoted company specific products (e.g. *Radio Banker*, *Six Sixty Radio Valve Playing Cards*).

BROADCAST GAMES – THE BINGO ERA

Radio Games based on Bingo are notoriously difficult to date. Whilst many claim to date such games from the mid 1920s¹⁴, Bingo itself appears not to emerge as a distinct game until December 1929 when Edwin S. Lowe converted the carnival game Beano into the game Bingo we know today. Once created however the popularity of Bingo soared in the first half of the 1930s. Many variations were created, including games based on radio and cinema. One of the fundamental distinguishing features between wireless telegraphy and broadcasting was the capacity of the latter to send a signal from a single point to multiple receiving points. The radio games based on Bingo started to move beyond a preoccupation with distance to an acknowledgement of the power of



Fig. 17. Sparx or Listening In

radio to communicate with large numbers of people at the same time.

Bingo based radio games imply a sense of community, of radio bringing people together and fit into a broader debate about the role of radio in U.S. society that continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Bingo based games thus reflected the enormous social potential of radio. The Bingo based games emerged under a range of titles including *Pioneer Radio Game* (Fig. 18) and *The Original Radio Game*. Each was based on an adaptation of the Bingo caller and multiple players scoring against called numbers until they had completed a full card. The winner would call out R-A-D-I-O instead of B-I-N-G-O. These games reflect the enormous impact of radio during the period with some versions of the game allowing for up to 75 players at a time. The box cover of *The Original Radio Game* highlights that it is suitable “For the Card Party, For the Clubroom, For the Home” suggesting a wide social context in which the game could be played and underscoring the wide popularity of the new broadcasting medium. They also mimic ‘broadcasting’ itself by the caller signalling numbers to multiple receiving players.

TRANSITION RADIO GAMES AND THE SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE (1926 – 1931)

As society became more comfortable and familiar with the new technology the focus of radio games shifted. The previous emphasis on signal distance, technological hardware and stations was replaced with a desire to understand how radio could be used in society. A strong theme in the development of early broadcasting was the possibility that the

new medium could serve a useful educational and social purpose. This was counterbalanced with the need to fund the new stations and the emerging role of commercial broadcasting including the use of sponsorship in this process through the development of radio networks.

Educational Radio Games. The radio games of the late 1920s perfectly reflect this tension. The educational value of radio is clearly reflected in a range of games including *The Radio Quiz* (c.1925), the *Knapp Electric Questioner* (1928-30), *Uncle Sam’s Electric Radio Questionnaire* (1928), and the *Radio Educator* (c.1928). The educational radio games of the late 1920s are the antecedent of the quiz shows and knowledge-based radio programs of the 1930s. The Radio Quiz Corporation, which manufactured in Biltmore N.C. and had its registered office in Buffalo New York, was active during this period and produced at least two radio games. *The Radio Quiz*, first produced in the mid 1920s, was

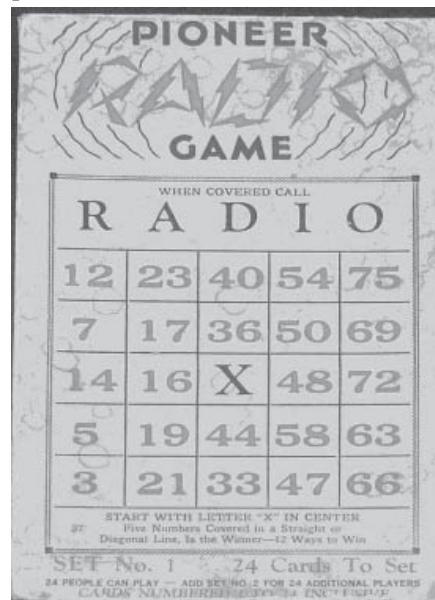


Fig. 18. Pioneer Radio Game

contained in wooden box in the form of the familiar coffin sets of the time.

A number of radio games from the late 1920s were known as 'electrical questioners'. They were battery operated and usually took the form of a question and answer game. These games consisted of cardboard sheets that were overlaid on a simple electrical circuit and required the player to match the correct question and answer in order to complete the electrical circuit. A correct answer was signified by a buzzer or a small light bulb coming on. The *Knapp Electric Questioner* was one of a series of electrical board games produced by the Knapp Electric Corporation of Port Chester, New York, most prominently between 1928 and 1930 (Fig. 19). It was this company that created the generic game that other electrical questioners would follow. There were at least four versions of the *Knapp Electric Questioner* with different box lids, including a junior version for younger children. The link to radio in the *Knapp Electric Questioner* is slight – transmission towers are depicted on the box lid of one version of the game no doubt intended to capitalise on the popularity of radio at the time.

Uncle Sam's Electric Radio Questionnaire was made by the Durable Toy and Novelty Corporation of New York and was copyrighted in 1928. This family oriented radio game consisted of an electrical circuit that was connected through a circular dial in the middle of the playing board. The game maintained a tenuous connection with radio in its title and by claiming on the box lid to "Flash the Answer by Wireless to Thousands of Questions".

Radio Educator is a unique combination of earlier board

games of the 1920s that were presented in the form of an actual radio (e.g. Milton Bradley #4674) and the battery operated games of the late 1920s (Fig. 20). Intricate and elaborate in design, the game was a representation of a single dial radio set typical of those available to the public in about 1928. This game was manufactured by the Radio Quiz Corporation of Buffalo New York. The *Radio Educator* is the most deliberate of the electrical questioner games to assert the broader social and

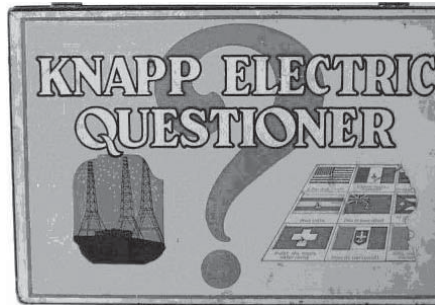


Fig. 19. Knapp Electric Questioner

educational purpose of radio from the late 1920s.

The tinplate children's world globe, branded as the *American Bosch Radio Explorers' Club*, clearly embodies educational values and has been dated to about 1931. This globe was produced by the Julius Chein Company of New Jersey. On the surface of the globe itself the routes of both Captain Lindbergh and the Graf Zeppelin are traced, giving some indication of the time of manufacture. The base of the globe records the short-wave frequencies of major stations throughout the world.

Commercial Broadcasting. The commercialisation of radio in the 1920s is best characterised through the development of program sponsorship supported by a range of largely anonymous performers who were closely associated with