

## 6 SOUTH AUSTRALIA

## Imagination conquers interactive world

Paul Lynch

IMAGINE this: you want a family or neighbourhood meeting at home — one in which you and a few other people get together, have fun, talk to each other, laugh, groan, compete while enjoying a world-class entertainment experience tailored for your personal enjoyment by the world's leading manufacturer of systems to help you do it.

Alternatively, don't imagine it: instead, visit the nearest major supermarket or chain store and hunt round for your own interactive DVD games.

There's a selection, and look for the word "interactive". Choose the one that most closely matches your family or group's interests, buy it and take it home.

You're in for a big surprise.

That surprise will come from Adelaide interactive pioneer Imagination Entertainment, whose founders invented DVD-based interactive entertainment.

Chief executive Shane Yeend isn't quite sure how many languages his products are produced in — it's a big number — but he's confident that he has 150 million products in the world market today. About 95 per cent of them have sold in the US.

Next year, Imagination hopes to move beyond boxed products into satellite-based interactive entertainment. People all over the planet will be able to compete simultaneously in satellite-broadcast games; and so will your family in your own home.

Meanwhile, Imagination will continue to pump out boxed products for families with no satellite links. The company has moved in 22 years from one person with an idea and a suitcase to knocking off the two northern-hemisphere giants in home entertainment (think Monopoly, Trivial Pursuit and other board games) as world leaders in the field.

The company closed down its website when it discovered that rivals were dipping into ideas it floated there. That its phone system doesn't make callers listen to "We Are The Champions" during call waiting suggests remarkable modesty.

Yeend estimates his company's sales might double this year.

All Imagination's programs are devised, produced and translated into foreign languages in Adelaide.

"Traditional board games make people interact where they wouldn't do that normally," Yeend said.

"All we've done is change forever the way that people play games at home. We've smashed all the business models, and last year we trimmed 13 per cent from the revenues of the largest board game manufacturer in the world, Hasbro."



**New era:** Kevin McLean and Shane Yeend are hoping to introduce satellite-based entertainment

Picture: James Knowler

Imagination's patent-protected technology uses entertainment electronics to get people to have fun together. You buy the DVD, put it in your DVD player, and control the game with only one tool — your DVD remote control. Challenges are comparable with those from earlier board games, but they come ornamented with colour video and surround sound. Some games allow pace changes so players considering themselves expert can race through in less time than new players.

A leading US parenting magazine recently voted Imagination products the best software of 2005 for the simple reason that parents and children speak to each other hundreds of times

when playing it. This is a marked change from the family TV tradition, when people watch the TV pretty much in silence, perhaps breaking into conversation and visiting the bathroom when commercials are on.

It's an even more dramatic change from the computer game environment, in which each player's relationship is with the screen rather than anybody else in the room.

Imagination games also control the experience, but the experience involves people taking to each other.

The Adelaide firm has close to 80 titles at present, ranging from the traditional Spin the Bottle (in which there are 500 dares) to trivia

games that have tens of thousands of questions electronically randomised so they differ from game to game, and in recent years, DVD game versions of Universal and Disney films. THE biggest new title is *Pirates of the Caribbean*, a contract won in competition with every other major electronic game manufacturer in the world.

The satellite era suggests a new game range: one-offs, available for short seasons, perhaps even only one day or night, and for global competition. The company already supplies interactive games for mobile phones, and to move revenues into higher gear it has enabled stores to display six games in the shelf space formerly required for one.