



GAME THEORY

Win or lose, family game time serves up enormous benefits
By Jennifer S. Deayton

Ask any family and they're likely to have a beloved 'game' tale. A story of triumph or mishap, drama or comedy, that's told and retold around the dinner table: the epic Monopoly game, the crazy cat toppling the Risk board, the lucky sibling rolling a six just when he needs it.

In my family lore, there is the 'Old Maid' story. About four-year-old me on the brink of a meltdown when I ended up with the last card in Old Maid. My family had to think fast before I started crying, so they graciously convinced me that holding the Old Maid card was good – I was the winner!

Their generosity was short-lived, however, because as I grew older, game rules were not so easily broken. We were

a family of ferocious gamers, playing whenever and wherever, with varying degrees of luck and strategy, and, yes, a few more meltdowns.

Over time, the low stakes of our game-play taught me and my siblings about compromise and competition, taking risks versus being cautious, winning and losing, and of course: how it's always best to be the race car in Monopoly!

Multi-player, Multi-possibilities

Teachers, therapists, and other child development professionals have long endorsed card and board games as beneficial for both young and old. According to Ellie Dix, a UK-based writer, educationalist, and game reviewer and designer, board games

develop social, analytical, and problem-solving skills while helping to model appropriate behaviour, reduce stress, and improve family relationships. Children get to see their parents play but also experience 'family equality', where it's not just mom and dad rolling the dice and making decisions.

"When the playing field is level, the game could be anyone's," Dix says. "It's the sense of possibility, the opportunity of triumphing over adults, that can be so exciting and liberating for children. Of course, this doesn't work at all if parents are letting their children win at games."

As a lifelong board game fan, Dix writes extensively about the advantages of family gaming on her website (www.thedarkimp.com) and in her book,



The Board Game Family: Reclaim your children from the screen. She cautions against parents playing poorly for the sake of their child's emotions (even if it is a simple game of Old Maid!), however, choosing certain types of games and/or imposing some restrictions on adults can make games more competitive for younger players.

"It's actually quite hard to totally level the playing field," Dix explains. "The adult sense of logic and strategy is usually more developed than that of a child. But it is possible to find games where there are lots of different possible routes to victory. One player may take a very strategic path, planning moves carefully. Another may take a more tactical approach and make shorter-term decisions, but both methods of play

could each lead to victory. Light strategy games that give lots of opportunities for different ways to gain points are good for leveling the playing field."

Global Groundswell

In the last ten years, the variety and number of board, dice and card games has exploded. In 2019 alone, Dix writes, 4,000 new games were published. This enormous resurgence has been driven in part by the millennial generation's interest in low-cost, non-digital diversions and the corresponding rise of game cafes. While COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing have put a damper on public game playing, restrictions have only increased game sales as families search for ways to

simultaneously bond and escape at home. What better way to spend a shut-in than sailing off to the island of Catan or racing across America or Europe with Ticket to Ride. 'The real thing' also increases human interaction and takes children away from screens for a while to immersive and imaginative worlds.

The combination of these forces has inspired a new wave of game development and strengthened the tabletop and card & dice markets into multi-billion-dollar industries. With her own Dark Imp games, Dix has seen a significant uptick in engagement – on her website, via social media and with shop orders. She says the general feedback and interest has been excellent.



“The pandemic has put a lot of things in stark focus for lots of people. Many parents are realising that they don't normally spend lots of quality time as a family and are finding ways to rectify that,” she says. “I keep getting people sending me messages saying how surprised they are that their children sat down to play games with them for hours and what a wonderful time they've had.”

Newcomers & Classics

While old favourites like Monopoly, Candy Land, Sorry! and Connect 4 continue to dominate the best-seller charts on Amazon, new games are making inroads. Codenames, described as a ‘social word game’ and played by two teams, is fast-paced and easy to learn. Today's mystery games, such as Outfoxed! for kids and Hunt A Killer for older players, combine the whodunit premise of Clue with game environments that can be spooky, perplexing, violent and often realistic.

But when it comes to popularity, nothing tops chess, the granddaddy of games. Created almost 1,500 years ago in northern India, the cerebral two-person board game with its iconic pieces is played in every corner of the globe. Its current numbers are staggering: over 20 million users on chess.com; two different chess sets in Amazon's Top 25 best-selling games;

and, according to an International Chess Federation 2012 extrapolation, 600 million players worldwide.

Suitable for Young & Old

But whether the game is two-person chess or team Pictionary, choosing the right game for your family is crucial. As Dix explains, board games differ on so many levels: game time, strategy, logic, general knowledge, and teamwork. It's easy to turn people off games by putting the wrong board on the table.

“I often hear adults making sweeping statements that they 'don't like board games',” she says. “Usually someone thinks they don't like board games when they've only played ones that don't suit them. Fortunately there are so many new games on the market every year that there really is something for everyone. Take time to experiment and work out what games suit your family best. Maybe they'll like speed games—frantic but quick. Maybe they prefer a multi-player solitaire game with each person working on their own sheet. Maybe they enjoy deep strategy and the ability to 'grow an engine'. Or maybe they just want to have a bit of fun and a party game will hit the spot. Each family is different; it's really important to work out the games that suit your family best.”

And the last key decision is not to make decisions, for your children that

is. Once the board is open, the cards are dealt, and the pieces are in place, it's time for parents to let their young gameplayers have a go, on their own. Win, lose, try, fail, experiment, learn, and ultimately choose their own paths. “When a child wins,” Dix says, “having made their own decisions, knowing that their parents are also trying to win, the feeling is fantastic.”

Let's Play!

Looking for a new game to try with your family this Christmas? Here's a selection of favourites, chosen by our colleagues. “**Rummikub** is our family's favourite, we are extra sensitive to numbers and colours while playing it. My brother and I always argue about whether we can combine certain tiles together, and that's one of the fun parts of this game.” Andrea, Writer & Product Developer

“We love playing **Rummikub** with family and friends. Similar to the card game rummy. If you get more sets you can have multiple players involved. Really good for kids from 6 years and up.” Roopal, Writer/Editor

“**Dobble** is a great game to play with friends! Fun and fast, this game requires quick thinking and memory skills, great for kids and adults alike!” Natasha, Sales & Marketing Assistant

"We love **Spot It** (the American version of Dobble). It's a fast-paced card game we all play together. **Candyland & Monopoly Jr** are fun, quick games too." Tiffany, Writer/Editor

"**Dobble** is one of our family favourites. A card game which is suitable for all. I love that it is a simple, straightforward game (great for young children) and up to eight people can play. It doesn't take long to master and is a more enjoyable version of Snap. Sharp eye and quick reflexes required!" Riz, Sales & Marketing

"**UNO** – everybody loves UNO! It's been my family's most favourite card game since my daughter was five! We always enjoy the moment to say 'Last Card!'" Jennifer S, Curriculum Developer

"I love **Munchkin** and the **Resistance**. They create very fun and tense situations with friends and family, and Munchkin is great for younger kids too." Sophie, Designer

"We love to play Dice and everyone competes to bang their cup down hardest whilst maintaining a strict poker face. When enough beer has been consumed in that game, we move on to **d** – strictly adults only!" Jo, COO

"**Aeroplane Chess**, a local Hong Kong game, and **Chinese checkers**. I enjoyed playing with my friends and family when I was in primary school." Sharon, Senior Designer

"**Candy Land** used to be my favourite when I was young and my kids' favourite when they were all young! It's so exciting to land on the beautiful candies; it transports you to another world!" Shalini, Sales & Marketing

"**Mahjong!** My siblings and I learned how to play this 4-player tile-based game from our parents early this year, during the pandemic, and we're obsessed with it! Sometimes winning is about pure luck but most of the time it's about mindful calculation!" Tsoi, Designer

"**Cluedo** – a classic mystery board game for ages 8+. My kids love playing detective and would want to be the first to crack the case!" Kashish, Head of PR

"I really like **Dixit**. Not only because of its beautifully illustrated cards, but also because of how this game is played. Your task is to trick people, but at the same time, you need to make sure that you don't trick everyone! It is always fun to see how people interpret an image differently. Maybe you will be able you know more about your friends through this game!" Reita, Senior Designer

"**Blokus**, **Othello** and **Pentago** are the ones we liked playing." Keiko, Translation Consultant

"**Taboo** is a favourite amongst all my friends. The game is quick and challenging, requiring you to think creatively on your feet. Good for kids, families and friends." Athena, Sales & Marketing Assistant

"**Cards Against Humanity** – suitable for older readers of Playtimes! The new version for children is called Kids Against Maturity." David, Founder and Publisher

"**Ticket to Ride** has been a favorite in our house for years. Takes a couple of hours but really fun and you can

play individually or in teams. Good for children 8-10 years and older." Jennifer D, Managing Editor 

For families separated over the holidays, long-distance game play is still possible! Check out Ellie Dix's round-up of Top 10 Games to Play via Zoom: www.thedarkimp.com/blog/2020/06/22/video-top-10-games-to-play-via-zoom/

