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FAMILY BORED? TRY SOME FAMILY BOARD(GAMES)

BY CHARITY BETH LONG

As the fall season wanes and winter descends, days grow shorter and party lists grow longer. Some holiday gatherings will be quietly intimate and others will bulge and bop with unfamiliar guests. Large or small, there is a place in every gathering for a game.

Long before we had cell phones to aide wallflower tendencies, party hosts would lead guests in spirited play in the parlor. It brings to mind the scene in A Christmas Carol where Scrooge looks in on his nephew's holiday party as they play Blind Man's Buff. Topper, obviously cheating, goes, "after that plump sister...tumbling over the chairs, bumping against the piano, smothering himself among the curtains, wherever she went, there went he...when at last, he caught her; when, in spite of all her silken rustlings, and her rapid flutterings past him, he got her into a corner whence there was no escape". Even Scrooge is amused by the gaiety the game produces and his change of heart shows.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHARITY BETH LONG

Victorians used games as ice breakers, to spur conversation and entertain guests. Gaming was certainly not a new concept, but Victorians, who had more leisure time than previous eras, took the pastime to a new level of frivolity. The tradition survives today. You're probably familiar with Charades or Fictionary, but might know them better as Cranium and Balderdash. Names have been changed, rules rewritten, but many parlor games are alive and well despite an abundance of electronic media. And the reason why is obvious: they lighten the spirit and bring people closer together.

My husband and I have always loved playing games, board, card, really any kind, so it was no surprise when we were given a book called "After Dinner Games" as a present. This title by Jenny Lynch contains 40 vintage party games that span from tame word play to rowdy competitions. Upon first read, I knew the games were winners, so when we were invited to a cabin retreat with friends, we took the book along. After all, a few days deep in the woods, housed in a rustic cottage with no television requires entertainment.

Thanks to this little book of games, it was a pee your pants funny type of getaway. The culmination of the hilarity was thanks to two games: Are You There, Moriarty? and Squeak, Piggy, Squeak. The first game involves blindfolding two participants, arming each with a rolled up newspaper and positioning the participants supine on the floor. They then take turns asking, "Are you there, Moriarty?" to which the other participant must answer. The goal is to be the first one to whack the other player. So hopefully you've cleared the room of valuables, because the contestants roll about while trying to thrash one another! And it's just as much fun to watch as it is to play.

In the second game, party goers sit in chairs placed in a circle while one blindfolded player is spun about in the center with a pillow. The dizzy player then ambles towards a seated person, places the pillow on their lap, gently sits down and says "Squeak, Piggy, Squeak". The seated person must squeak and the blindfolded challenger must guess who the squeaker is. Usually, the person being commanded to squeak is laughing so hard they are already snorting like a pig.

If this sounds like a party you'd like to throw, you're in luck. Lynch's book is available through online sellers, though it appears to be out of print. An internet search will readily turn up loads of parlor games for your amusement, but don't stop there because board games are enjoying a resurgence...and no, I'm not talking about Monopoly or Life.

You can find loads of new board games that are innovative and challenging while also being fun to play. Carcassonne, a tile-based game in which you build a medieval settlement, has become one of our favorites. The rules are easy to learn and the objectives are simple: earn the most points by building roads, cities, cloisters and farms.

Another favorite is Trans America, a railroad game in which players compete to be the first to connect five cities across a map of the United States. Game play is fast and the rules are simple, making it great for older children to adults.

I would love to introduce you to all of our favorites, from For Sale to Splendor, but there are so many awesome card and board games that it would take a dissertation. So instead, I will tell you about some resources for learning, acquiring and playing new games.

The first place to go is your local game store. These are specialty stores at which employees are well versed in the games they sell, usually hundreds of games. You can tell them what type of games you enjoy playing and they will help you find a game you'll love. It might sound simple, but there's a wide variety of mechanics to consider: while one person prefers a game like Forbidden Island that involves cooperative play, another likes a worker placement scheme such as Agricola. With about 50 styles of game play to choose from, you'll be glad to have some expert advice!

My favorite game store is the Family Game Store located in the Historic Savage Mill in Maryland. Employees are friendly, helpful and have introduced me to many fun games. What's my game criteria? I like games that take an hour or less to play. A favorite pick from Family Game Store is 7 Wonders, a card development game in which you build trade routes, military power, scientific discoveries and civic buildings to develop an ancient civilization.

The hubby (who is a more serious gamer than me) has a different fave: Huzzah Hobbies in Ashburn, Va. He frequently attends game nights at this location where they have competitions for X-wing and other miniature games. This store may be a little intimidating to the non-game geek, but the good news is they have opened a second store called Huzzah, Jr. for families.

Another way to learn a new game is to go to a game café. This is a fairly new concept, but the need for offline connection is spurring the trend. There's a fun place in College Park, Md., called The Board and Brew, where they serve up wine, beer, casual food and of course, games! For a minimal fee you can play as many games as you want for the day and they will teach you how to play them, too. It's an excellent way to try before you buy as well as a casual way to hang out with friends.

If you live in an area without specialty game stores and cafes, don't despair. The internet's got you covered. You can buy just about anything online now and you can learn how to play games online, too. There are game podcasts, YouTube game channels and even an online game show hosted by Wil Wheaton! (Yes, Wil and his band of geeky actor friends will introduce you to a new game each week in his show TableTop. The web series has spawned the "Wheaton Effect," causing games to rise in popularity or sell out after they have been featured on the show.)

Why so much excitement about games? They make you laugh! So, encourage your friends and family to do the "phone stack" and trade online time for real-world fun. Adding some vintage fun to your next party with games that will make the season memorable.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- Know your audience. Choose games that are age appropriate for the whole party to play together.
- Have basic game supplies handy. This includes pencils, paper, dice, a dictionary and a deck of cards.
- Board games tend to have limitations on numbers, so if you are expecting a crowd, breaking into smaller groups is advisable.
- If you want to serve snacks and cocktails while playing games, provide appetizer plates and lots of napkins. This will keep guests from accidentally dropping food on the game board.



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