

Learning to Play, Playing to Learn



Marcia E. Brubeck
674 Prospect Avenue
Hartford, CT 06105

860-231-1997
Mbrubeck@comcast.net

From ancient times to the present, games have offered people relief from the drudgery of daily routines. Play tickles the senses, fires the spirit, strengthens the brain, relaxes the body, spans the generations, and reinforces social ties and norms. That's a tall order!

Games are also good for your health. The ability to think one's way through a puzzle helps prevent Alzheimer's and improves memory. Skillful play generally brings a sense of mastery—or power—that counteracts anxiety. Laughter, part and parcel of many games, lightens our moods and is famously good for our health. Games ease social tensions as players agree on rules, show good sportsmanship, and cleverly parry each other's thrusts. Canny parents know that it's often easier to talk seriously with children during a game than during a face-to-face confrontation.

Competitive games—chess, for instance—simulate war but without actual injury or destruction. Monopoly offers relief from real-world distress (the hardships of the Great Depression) by inviting participants to suspend disbelief and imagine that they are rich. Diplomacy and a new generation of video games reproduce the world in microcosm, permitting a risk-free trial of solutions to different interpersonal, environmental, international, and even medical problems. Fantasy role plays allow participants to pretend that they are gods or that they have magical powers.

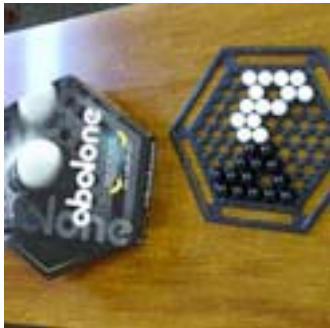
In America, little kids have traditionally favored games of chance, which level the playing field by giving sophisticated players no real advantage. Grownups often find such games tedious, though, especially when they take an hour or more to finish. In Europe, and increasingly in America, a number of fine strategy games now on the market can be mastered by a four-year-old and captivate smart players of all ages. Many of them take half an hour or less—and some need only a minute or two.

When I first began doing psychotherapy with children, I wanted to know which games they liked and why. Whenever children said “Wow!” I sat up and took notice. Over time, I compiled a list of the wow factors.

Good games

- are easy to learn; some of the best can be played in different ways as long as players agree on the rules (Carroms, for instance)
- have bright colors, interesting textures, and pleasing sounds, whether they are made of wood, plastic, glass, or something else (try Abalone)
- almost beg you to touch them; some of them (such as Cathedral) look like works of art you could put on your coffee table
- take less than an hour to play; fifteen-minute games (Othello!) can be squeezed into the busiest day (if time permits, you can have a rematch)
- challenge you to think in new ways (consider Quoridor, for example)
- span the generations, successfully connecting even very young and very old (Blokus is a case in point)
- promote cooperation (look at Pickup Snakes)
- make people laugh (check out Pit).

Well-chosen games create lasting memories and deepen friendships. My favorites, some of which appear below, are all readily available in stores or online.



Abalone

Two players try to push each other's marbles off the board—in all directions.



Alphabet Zoop

Colorful animal cards, two for each letter, come with instructions for some familiar games and tips for inventing new ones.



Blink

Two players try to get rid of their cards first by playing them onto face-up cards that share at least one of three design features.



Blokus

Up to four players try to fit all of their colored pieces onto the square board while preventing other players from doing the same.



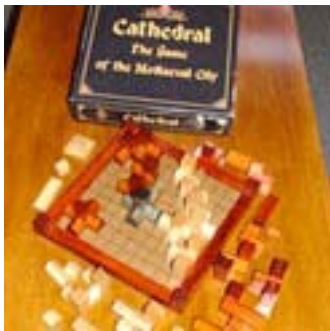
Boggle

Players try to make the largest number of words from scrambled letters before time runs out.



Carroms

In this form of tabletop pool, playable in a hundred ways, my favorite game involves flicking colored wooden rings into the corner pockets.



Cathedral

Each player tries to fit all of his wooden "buildings" into the square town around the cathedral while keeping his opponent from doing so.



Clue

Advance your token through different rooms in the house and try to guess, on the basis of cards in your hand and those of your opponents, who killed Mr. Boddy, in which room, and with which weapon.



Connect Four

Beat your opponent by making a row of four checkers in this game, once played by seamen using a chest with a slotted lid.



Gobblet

In a twist on Connect Four, players “gobble up” each other’s pieces—but if you move a piece that has gobbled, don’t forget what’s underneath it!



Imaginiff

If Aunt Nelly were a car, what kind would she be? A dump truck, a Model T Ford, a Beetle, or—? You ask the questions about people everyone else knows. Players who pick the most popular answer advance on the board.



Labyrinth

Tilt the board’s top to pilot the small steel ball through the maze without letting it drop through any of the holes.



MadGab

This game pits your ears against your eyes. What common phrase do you hear when you say “Ask rude arrive her”?



Make Five

The “maker” tries to place wooden discs in five rows of one color each; the “breaker” tries to keep it from happening. Then they switch roles.



Mancala

The board looks like an egg carton with the addition of a big hole, or kalah, at each end. Each egg pocket holds three to five stones, which the two players take turns distributing as each tries to get the lion’s share.



Mikado

A wooden box has a spring-mounted partition that holds red, blue, and yellow wooden discs in place. Players compete to see who can remove discs worth the most points before the partition shifts.



Othello

This variant on the nineteenth-century Reversi has two players sandwiching, and thereby capturing (and flipping over), each other's stones on a square board. It's hard to tell who will win until the game is almost over.



Pente

A fast-paced version of Go, Pente proclaims as the winner the first person who places five stones in a row or captures ten stones belonging to an opponent.



Pickup Snakes

The sinuous plastic rods are somewhat harder to remove without disturbing the pile than traditional straight pickup sticks would be.



Pinball

Several portable, battery-operated versions of the popular arcade game have remarkably satisfying lights, sounds, and action.



Pit

This hilarious game from the early twentieth century is best when bought with a bell, which players slap at the end. You try to trade cards with other players until you have all nine cards of one agricultural commodity (coffee, oranges, corn, etc.)—a corner on the market.



Quarto

This game of four-in-a-row, handsomely designed in wood, makes each player choose the piece to be played by her opponent.



Quixo

In a variation on tic tac toe, players pick one of twenty-five cubes from the board's edge, turn it to expose an X or an O, and replace it on another edge. The winner is the first to get five in a row.



Quoridor

To win this game, playable by two to four players, you must move your pawn and locate your "fences" so that you cross the board before anyone else does.



Rush Hour

Set up the plastic cars in a traffic jam as shown on a card (four decks are available), and then try to maneuver them so that one central vehicle can drive off the board.



Set

Players try to be the first to identify sets of three cards on which every feature (there are four) is different or every feature is the same. The greatest number of sets wins.



Shut the Box

In this traditional pub game, wooden keys labeled 1 – 12 stand along one side of a shallow box. One player rolls two dice, presses down keys in any combination equaling the value of the dice, and keeps rolling until keys can no longer be pressed down. The next player then tries. The lowest-scoring player wins the round.



Snafu

With or without the timer, you maneuver a steel ball through an elaborate and colorful plastic labyrinth.



Stare

An enormous deck of cards reproduces colored posters and other detailed images. Each player studies one card for ten or twenty seconds before another player tests his memory.



Stratego

Two players advance their competing armies. Soldiers with higher numbers defeat those with lower numbers, and the game is over when one army's flag has been captured.

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