

A Gift Guide for Family Games

Let it be known that I write this blog with some trepidation as I know that the gaming community takes their fun (and their reviews) VERY seriously. While I may not self-identify as a “gamer”, I have always had a geeky love for games and puzzles. This love, and our penchant for strategic and creative thinking, drove the Junkyard team head first into the world of original board game design. Our goal: to orchestrate playful opportunities that encourage families to foster strong bonds through collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

The first step to develop our original Junkyard gaming experience was to play-test as many games as we could get our meeple-loving hands on...at work and at home...with family and friends. While on this mission, and in the name of research, I also took it upon myself to spread my love of games to my 5 year old son. He was mentally ready and I was emotionally ready. My husband and I used to play games regularly, but when we expanded from DINKs with a dog to the complete nuclear family, games were superseded by stacking rings and cups. As legos began replacing baby toys, we got a glimpse of leisure time that once again resembled (almost) mutual play. It was like a dim light at the end of a BPA free tunnel, one that could lead us back to game night.

Fostering my son’s love of games took some time - some carefully carved out and curated time with a commitment to keeping his toddler sister from going all Godzilla on the gameboard. Initially, the nostalgic side of me wanted to introduce him to the games of my childhood like Candyland, Chutes and ladders, and Life.

I learned something. As an adult, these games are mind-numbingly *lame*. Either Milton Bradley never played with obsessive kids (over and over and over again) or he hated parents because his never played with him. These games require zero strategy. There’s little incentive to “try.” In fact, there’s

really no logical way to. They're all chance, no thought, and if you really want to win, you figure out how to cheat. The game pieces are cheap choking hazards and at best they prepare your kid to understand the concept of a lottery ticket.

Luckily, there is a world of family-friendly games beyond the big-box store toy aisle. There are collaborative games that encourage you to work together, to celebrate your successes and commiserate in your losses. There are games with creative narratives that immerse you in a story where YOU are the main character. There are games with clever mechanisms that level the playing field so that while you might have decades of gaming wisdom, compared to your kid, the tables can suddenly turn and force you to rethink your next move.

To sum up our Hopper board game research phase, we discovered (and rediscovered) several games that both inspired us and reminded us of the beauty and ingenuity of well-designed rules (and instructions). We also learned that while quality games for families DO exist, there's definitely room for more experiences that bring groups together by engaging the mind AND the body. In 2019, The Hopper will launch its first original game: *Paths and Predicaments in the Kingdom of Quandary*. This fast-paced, collaborative game will challenge you to apply MacGyver-like resourcefulness and Unicorn-level creativity in order to survive a wicked wonderland.

Stay tuned for more details, but until then, enjoy the fruits of our research: our favorite off-the-shelf opportunities for a healthy dose of "smarter family time." The holidays are a season for togetherness, so turn off the TV and go battle some evil wizards or eradicate a world pandemic. And while you are at it, go toss Candyland in the nearest dumpster.

The Hopper's 2018 Gift Guide to Family Games

Crushing Candyland (3-6 years old)

Cauldron Quest

<https://www.mindware.orientaltrading.com/cauldron-quest-a2-GMC6.fltr?categoryId=90000+2890>

In this collaborative game, you must work together to collect the ingredients to a potion that can break a spell before the evil wizard destroys the kingdom! The great thing about collaborative games with younger kids is that they teach cooperation rather than competition.

Aquarius

<https://www.looneylabs.com/games/aquarius>

The simple card game is kind of like dominoes (only better). Aquarius features three types of cards: Elements, Goals, and Actions. Element cards are played kind of like dominoes and Action cards allow players to shake things up in different ways. The game is fast, fun, colorful, and easy to learn.

Race to the Treasure

<https://www.mindware.orientaltrading.com/race-to-the-treasure-cooperative-game-a2-GMC2.fltr?categoryId=90000+2890>

This is another collaborative game from Peaceful Kingdom. It challenges you to puzzle together a path that will help you beat the Ogre to the treasure. You must strategize, cooperate, and build the game board together.

Robot Turtles

<http://www.robotturtles.com>

Robot Turtles is a board game for younger kids that's both fun and educational. Kids don't know it, but while they're playing, they're learning the fundamentals of programming. The secret of *Robot Turtles* is that it let's kids control the grown-ups. The little programmers put instruction cards down, driving the turtles through the maze, but the grown-up is the computer, executing commands on the board.

Gobblet Gobblers

<http://store.blueorangegames.com/p/gobblet-gobblers-gobble-up-some-fun/ages-5-and-up?pp=8>

This tic-tac-toe style game is easy to learn and surprisingly fun. Gobblet Gobblers is the perfect first strategy game for kids. To win, line up three gobblers in a row before getting your gobblers gobbled up.

Spot It!

<https://www.amazon.com/Asmodee-SP411-Spot-It/dp/B0039S7NO6>

Spot it! is a simple pattern recognition game in which players try to match an image on two cards. It's a great way for little ones to hone in on their observation and categorization skills. One deck can be used to play several variations of a fast-paced version of eye-spy.

Beyond Battleship (8-12 years old)

Catan: Junior

<https://www.catan.com/game/catan-junior>

Catan: Junior introduces a modified playing style of the classic *Settlers of Catan*, giving younger players a perfect introduction to the *Catan* series of games (a must have for any strategy game enthusiast). Kids as young as 6 could learn and enjoy this version of the game.

Samurai Sword

<https://www.amazon.com/Vinci-Bang-Samurai-Sword-Card/dp/B00AF81YYS>

Samurai Sword is a game based on the proven *Bang!* mechanisms and set in feudal Japan. In this game, the familiar features of *Bang!* are enhanced by more dynamic and fast-paced game play, and thanks to a new scoring system – based on honor points and resilience points – there is no player

elimination. Everybody gets to fight to the very end! Also, weapons and attacks are fused into a single card.

Ticket to Ride Junior

<https://www.daysofwonder.com/tickettoride/en/first-journey/>

Similarly, *Ticket to Ride: First Journey* takes the gameplay of the *Ticket to Ride* series and scales it down for a younger audience. Players collect train cards, claim routes on the map, and try to connect the cities shown on their tickets. Kids as young as 5 can learn and enjoy this game. The original ticket to ride is another classic for gamers.

Munchkin

<http://www.worldofmunchkin.com/game/>

Go down in the dungeon. Kill everything you meet. Backstab your friends and steal their stuff using strategic game playing skills. Grab the treasure and run. Admit it. You love it. This game definitely isn't just for kids. My husband and I have been collecting the hilarious expansion packs for years.

Move Over Monopoly (Teens and Adults)

Pandemic

<https://www.zmangames.com/en/games/pandemic/>

This was my first taste of collaborative games and I still love it. In *Pandemic*, several virulent diseases have broken out simultaneously all over the world! The players are disease-fighting specialists whose mission is to treat disease hotspots while researching cures for each of four plagues before they get out of hand.

Space Team

<https://www.playspaceteam.com>

Space team is a frantic cooperative card game that involves shouting at each other in attempts to find the necessary parts to repair your spaceship before time runs out. Kids old enough to read complex words like the chaos of this game. It can play up to six players, so it is also good for larger families or when the kids have friends over.

Dominion

<http://riograndegames.com/Game/278-Dominion>

This game has a lot of rules, but once you wrap your head around them, it sucks you right in. Each player starts with an identical, very small deck of cards. In the center of the table is a selection of other cards the players can "buy" as they can afford them. Through their selection of cards to buy, and how they play their hands as they draw them, the players construct their deck on the fly, striving for the most efficient path to the precious victory points by game end.

Carcassonne

<https://www.zmangames.com/en/products/carcassonne/>

Carcassonne is a tile-placement game in which the players draw and place a tile with landscape on it. The tile might feature a city, a road, a cloister, grassland or some combination thereof, and it must be placed adjacent to tiles that have already been played, in such a way that cities are connected to cities, roads to roads, etc. Having placed a tile, the player can then decide to place one of his meeples on one of the areas on it: on the city as a knight, on the road as a robber, on a cloister as a monk, or on the grass as a farmer. When that area is complete, that meeple scores points for its owner.

Quoridor

<https://www.amazon.com/Gigamic-5203-Quoridor-Classic-Game/dp/B00001N1TXN>

Quoridor is a timeless strategic decision making game. It is beautiful in its simplicity and physical design, with high quality wooden components. The game play actually reminds me of a paper game that I loved to play as a kid - where you connect a grid of dots into boxes - with a greater degree of depth and challenge.

And finally, here are some tips for introducing new games to the family:

1. **Figure out the rules ahead of time.** You can still read them again outloud, but wrap your head around the game play first to make it easier to jump right in.
2. **Be present.** Find a time when all players are ready to focus. Put away your phones and, if necessary, put the toddler down for a nap.
3. **Encourage participation.** If younger kids are ready to play too, assign teams so that no one is left on the sidelines. Or pair younger children with a parent or older sibling so the expert player becomes a mentor.
4. **Encourage collaboration.** Foster cooperation between team members and, in a pinch, let opposing teams "help" one another. Create a spirit of friendly rivalry, not cutthroat competition.
5. **Be a good sport.** Help your kids by modeling how to play fair and follow the rules—and how to let go and move on after the game is over.