

# Beyond Candyland

Games are an entertaining, educational, and inexpensive way for families to spend time together. They are great when the weather is bad and an excellent choice instead of TV when you need a break. In addition to the main upside of playing together while talking face-to-face, other benefits include:

- Learning to take turns
- Practice with colors, numbers, and memory
- Being a good winner/loser
- Patience
- Observation
- Following rules and directions

## Rating Scale:

- \* **I'll avoid this game**
- \*\* **I'll play if you want to**
- \*\*\* **I'll suggest this game**
- \*\*\*\* **I'll make you play**

## Part One

**Princess** \*\*\* (Family Pastimes, \$15.00)

2-4 Players, 4+, 20-30 minutes

Princess is a cooperative game in which the object is to rescue the princess, who is trapped behind several obstacles, before night falls. As you take turns moving around the board, you collect objects that can help in removing obstacles (good) or hasten nightfall (bad). For instance a boat (object) will let you cross the moat (obstacle). The interesting bit is that any mutually agreeable use for an object can remove the obstacle. So if you were to draw the horse instead of the boat, you may think of a way to use it to cross the moat.

I suspect I enjoy playing this game more than Kyla, and sometimes she tries to remember certain combinations used in the past. Deanna and I have to occasionally compare notes. "Did you suggest using the eyeglasses as a disguise so that you could sneak by the guard or did she come up with that?" I've also had to put the kibosh on repetitive use of the "I know, what if it is a magic \_\_\_\_\_ so we can get past the ." The components and artwork are a little rough, but the cooperative and creative aspects more than make up for it. My mind wanders less when playing this game than any other because I still have to think when it is Kyla's turn. It is definitely an appealing family game with high replay value.

**Max** \*\*\*\* (Family Pastimes, \$15.00)

1-8 Players, 4+, 20-30 minutes

This game is another cooperative from the wholesome Canadian company Family Pastimes. Here the object is to get the three small creatures (a mouse, a chipmunk, and a bird) safely home without being pounced by the neighborhood tomcat Max. It works with 1 to 8 players (yes, even solitaire). On your turn you roll two special dice - black dots advance Max while the green dots advance any of the creatures trying to make it home. You must then decide which creatures to move. You also start the game with four cat treats that you can use to lure Max back to his porch if he gets too close for comfort. Advice and discussion are encouraged throughout the game, but the person whose turn it is has the final say in what to do.

Max is a big hit at our house, and I have even played it by myself. The flexible number of players is a big bonus. Kyla almost always asks to play over and over, but will eventually lose interest. Taking a few turns in a row is no problem and play can continue when she is not focused, or conversely, she can take several turns in a row on her own when she is in the zone. Unlike other games, a partial victory is possible (e.g. you can rescue fewer than all three creatures). It does bring up the whole food chain concept and that Max is a natural hunter. A simple, realistic explanation followed by a few silly sound effects and everything is OK (quite unlike the "No you cannot have a treat now..." argument often created by Candyland).

**Dora Uno** \*\*\* / **Crazy Eights** \*\*\* / **Dominoes** \*\*\*\*

2-4 Players, 4+, 20-30 minutes

I've lumped together all of these games in which the winner is the person who first rids themselves of their dealt hand by matching. Once you have played one together, the others come quite easily. Dora was a favorite show when we first introduced this game. In the themed and simplified kids decks (which include wilds, skips, and draw one cards only), there are four suits in different colors where each card has a different character. If a young player is having trouble deciding what to do you can ask "Do you have and Boots or Yellow cards?" Dora Uno stayed in the purse for a long time and was the standby when we were waiting at a restaurant. It has subsequently been replaced by a regular deck where we play the

similar game Crazy Eights. The transition to the less exciting cards was eased by calling the clubs “puppy feet” and the spades “shovels”. Dominoes is by far my favorite way to play this type of game. You can get a fairly indestructible, brightly colored set of double six dominoes at Freddy’s for under \$5. The pieces are just plain fun to handle and play with: building house, chain reactions – the fun never stops. Dominoes are great for number recognition and counting.

**Cootie \*\* / Don’t Spill the Beans \*\***

**Ants in the Pants \*\* / Don’t break the ice \*\***  
(Hasbro, \$8.50)

These are a diverse set of games all from the same company. Don’t Spill the Beans and Don’t Break the Ice both require good intuition about physics and a little manual dexterity where Ants in the Pants requires lots of manual dexterity and a little intuition about physics. All three are fun games with imminently losable parts. Real beans are a fine substitute for the plastic beans that come with Don’t Spill the Beans and are even more interesting if you have a variety of sizes and colors. Don’t Break the Ice has a long setup time, but the little mallets are just plain cool. Ants in the Pants is really too hard for Kyla, but she loves chasing the ants around. One funny thing is that the assembled pants and cardboard dog won’t fit back in the box after you put it together. Cootie is a dice rolling, decision free game. (Well there are some aesthetic decisions about what your bug should look like). It has fun parts, but it can drag on forever as you try to roll sixes to collect the legs. We like to roll two dice at a time and pick which one to use (You get to go again if you get doubles).

**Candyland \* (Milton Bradley, \$9.99)**

2-4 Players, 3+, 30 minutes

There is no need to sugar coat it, I hate this game. I won’t turn it down if Kyla insists, and she seems to enjoy playing it. Maybe it’s the pre-destined outcome in the way that the cards are stacked up. Maybe it’s the over consumption and hyper-sugary theme. Maybe I’ve drawn Plumpy too many times when I was almost to King Kandy. I have trouble concentrating, and it seems like an exercise in saying “Kyla! It is your turn”. (Which leads me to believe she isn’t too engaged either.) A variant (rule change) that we use to make this game more tolerable is to play with a hand of three cards. On your turn, you choose which one to play and draw a new card to replace it.

**Rat-a-tat Cat \*\*\*\* (Gamewright, \$10.00)**

2-6 Players, 5+, 10 minutes

Rat-a-tat Cat is a card game from Gamewright. The object is to end the hand with as few points as possible. Each of the cards has a number between zero and nine. The low numbered cards have cats, and as the numbers increase, the rats become more prominent. Your hand consists of four facedown cards. In the full version of the game you get an initial peek at the two on the ends, but in the modified game for younger players the two on the end stay face up for all to see throughout the game. On your turn you may draw either the topmost face up card or from the facedown draw stack and use it to replace a card in your hand. There are also special cards that allow you to peek, swap, or draw two cards. The game ends when a player decides that they are in a good position and (while knocking on the table) calls out “Rat-a-tat cat!” Other players are allowed one more turn, and the hands are then tallied. In practice it works like a cross between memory and rummy.

This one has been high on the list in our house for a while. It is portable and good for trips and outings. Kyla has an excellent chance of winning even if we don’t hold back. The length of play is flexible. The rules are simple – Kyla has taught a babysitter how to play it by herself. The artwork on the cards is a lot of fun. Kyla likes the picture of the rat playing an electric guitar so much she has been known to keep it in her hand even though it hurts her score. This game also teaches lots of valuable skills such as memory, adding (Kyla can tally her own hand) and greater than and less than (facilitated by the cats vs. rat pictures on the cards).

**Galloping Pigs \*\*\* (Rio Grande Games, \$11.95)**

2-5 Players, 6+, 20-30 minutes

This German designed card game is published in English by Rio Grande Games. Although it is a card game, it plays much like a board game. Some of the cards are arranged in a circular track that five different colored pigs race around. The players are each dealt a hand of cards with pictures matching the pigs on the track. On your turn playing a card will advance a pig of that color one space, but if the space is occupied you leap over the occupant to the next available empty space. If the pig you moved is in the lead, you collect one of the vegetable cards. When you play your last card AND the pig you moved is in the lead, you get to keep all of the vegetable cards you have collected. (Note: we omit this rule for Kyla

– she gets to keep her veggies no matter what) After three rounds the player with the most vegetable cards is the winner.

I love playing Galloping Pigs. Kyla loves playing with the pieces from Galloping pigs. I admit the five little pigs that come with the game are cute, and that there are lots of things you can do with both the pigs and the vegetables that they like to eat. Can't one of those things be playing the game though? This game is probably a little too sophisticated for Kyla right now. It is really a hand management game in which you must make sure that the last card you play counts. Strategy is somewhat important, and it is critical to plan ahead. I really like the game and feel it is one that she will probably grow into a little later - just as long as she doesn't lose those five little pigs.

**Clue, Jr.** \*\* (Parker Brothers, \$11.99)

2-4 Players, 5+, 30 minutes

Clue Jr. is a scaled down version of the classic deduction game. The usual suspects are all here: Plum, Mustard, et al. In the "Case of the Missing Cake" you must move around the board to find out 1) which suspect ate the cake at 2) what time before dinner and 3) what they had to drink with it. The bases for the moving characters and the objects in the rooms hide the clues and replace the cards used in the full version of the game. Moving a character onto a white set of footsteps will let you look underneath the character to either eliminate a time or find crumbs underneath the perpetrator. A yellow set of footsteps lets you look under the object in the room (e.g. a plant or desk) and eliminate a possible beverage. The movement in the game is determined by rolling a special die. Most sides allow for regular movement while others are automatic shortcuts to the clues. Once you have all three pieces of information you make an accusation, and the first placer to accuse correctly wins.

This game is a little long and involved for Kyla. She can stay engaged for one entire game (~30 minutes), but we are both ready to quit after that. Movement in the game can be a little hard to master. In playing with an adult there is actually room for a good bit of maneuvering tactics and, if you keep track of what information another player needs, you can do a lot to slow them down. Kyla needs help with moving the pieces. Counting the moves and considering the possibilities are good for her observational skills and she gets better each time we play. This game also feeds her all consuming paper fetish. She gets to keep notes on her own piece of

paper with her own pen. It is a great introduction to the classic game of Clue if you have fond memories and would like to play as a family, but there are lots better kid's games out there. (Incidentally, if you like grown-up Clue, you should check out some lesser known grown-up deduction games like Mystery of the Abbey, Sleuth, or Coda.)

**Mancala** \*\*\*\*

2 Players, 5+, 10 minutes

Mancala is an ancient game from Africa. The board consists of six small bins on each side and two larger scoring bins on each end. Each player starts with four tokens (flattened marbles in our set, traditionally played with seeds) in each of their small bins. On your turn, you choose a bin on your side and "sow" the tokens counterclockwise, one in each bin. If your last token goes into your scoring bin you get another turn. If your last token goes into an empty bin on your side, you capture the tokens in your opponent's bin directly across the board.

This one is very easy to learn if you have a chance to see someone play. There is really no need to buy the game as you can play with things around the house (an empty egg carton with a bowl on each end works just fine), but there is a great look and feel for even the inexpensive store bought sets. It plays very quickly and is great for practicing counting. The strategy is a little too subtle for a preschooler because of the importance of planning ahead and considering an opponent's move. For games like these you can either start with a handicap (i.e. placing a few of your tokens in your opponents scoring bin before the game starts), help them with planning out their move, or let them choose how hard they want you to play (e.g. "Do you want this game to be easy, regular, or hard?"). At the end of the game, fill the small bins on your side out of your own scoring bin with four stones each. If you come up short you lost, if you have extra you won. The best part is that now the board is set up to play again.

If you enjoy playing games with opponents other than your preschool age children, you might want to check out a few more designer European games. Some top recommendations include Settlers of Catan, Carcassonne, Citadels, Lost Cities, Colossal Arena, and Mystery Rummy. If you like those, then you might want to try Tigris and Euphrates, Power Grid, Puerto Rico...

## Part Two

### **Guess Who? \*\*\*** (Milton Bradley, \$22.00)

2 Players, 6+, 20 minutes

Guess Who is a mainstream game available in most toy stores. Don't be fooled by the 6+ age on the box, most 3 year olds can grasp this game. Players have a tray containing 32 distinct faces. At the beginning of the game you draw one of the faces from a corresponding deck of cards which is your secret identity. The object of the game is to guess the other player's identity before they guess yours. On your turn you can ask any yes or no question. Such as "Are you wearing a hat?" Based on the other players answer you can eliminate certain possibilities and flip their portrait down. The winner is the first to guess correctly, but an incorrect guess is an instant win for the other player.

This one is quick, easy, and a lot of fun. It teaches logic (in the example above the faces you can eliminate depends on the other player's answer, and it requires some thought). It teaches observation in looking carefully at each of the faces. It teaches basic probability. The best questions divide the remaining pool roughly in half ("Are you wearing a hat?" is a bad question if there is only one face in many with a hat on, but a great question if some of the people have hats and about the same number do not). Kyla got a lot better at this game very quickly. Some of it was listening to the questions I asked and then using them against me, but she seems to have good intuition about it now. This one is comparable to **Battleship**, in that you have your own board and are trying to uncover hidden information, but it is a much more subtle and interesting game. There are also way fewer pieces to loose and setting up takes less than a second.

### **Hocus Focus \*\*\*** (Gamewright, \$6.00)

2-8 Players, 10 minutes

Hocus Focus is a quick observation card game. Each card has a different wizard on it. They come in three sizes and are attired in various colors of robes, hats, wands, and shoes. Twelve wizards are arranged face up on the table. A new wizard is turned face-up. The first player to find a wizard among the twelve that has no characteristics in common with the newly turned wizard gets to take the card. The newly turned wizard then joins the twelve.

This game is part of a series of 12-minute games from Gamewright (my favorite game by them is **Rat-**

**a-Tat-Cat** which I reviewed last year), and all of them seem to be fairly entertaining. This game is derivative of another more sophisticated game called **Set**, but this one is much more accessible for preschoolers. It is made more fun by saying "Kazaam!" or "Abracadabra!" when you find a match. In addition to observation and pattern matching, this game also teaches patience. Kyla was becoming overwhelmed with excitement and would shout out what she thought was a match before she had carefully checked it. We implemented a rule that says if you make a wrong choice and another player can point out a common characteristic then they get the card. When played this way it helps to learn being patient and checking your own work.

### **3D Labyrinth \*\*\*** (Ravensburger, \$21.00)

2-4 Players, 4+, 20 minutes

This is the simplest in a series of games that includes aMAZEing Labyrinth, Jr. Labyrinth, and a Labyrinth card game among others. Most of the games involve manipulating a moveable maze so that you can move to collect a certain type of treasure. Ravensburger is an excellent company that places a high value on the production of quality game and puzzle components. If you ever see one of their games at Goodwill or a yard sale, my advice is to snap it up. Although 3D labyrinth is a little too simple for me and basically comes down to luck of the draw, it is a good introduction to the series of games. aMAZEing Labyrinth is my favorite. Although the age is rightly listed as 8+ there are rule changes (variants) that make the game easier for younger players. It can also be played cooperatively. My favorite way to play is as a family, where Deanna and I both help Kyla but play individually. This one is great for spatial reasoning and visualization skills. It can be a bit of a brain burner, but is definitely my favorite if everyone is in the mood.

### **Chicken Cha Cha Cha \*\***

(Rio Grande Games/Zoch, \$37.95)

2-4 Players, 4+, 15-20 minutes

Chicken Cha Cha Cha is a memory game with great components. There is circular track made of tiles along which big wooden chickens race. Each tile has a corresponding tile that is face down in the center. In order for the chicken to move forward you must find the match between the space in front of your chicken and the facedown pool. If you pass another chicken you get to pull out its tail feather and add it to your own. The game play is identical to

**Dragon Tales Memory Game**, but the pieces are not the same.

The pieces are beautiful with artwork that looks fantastic. Kids love memory games and are competitive at them. This game is good for my kid's memory and observation skills. This game makes me feel like an idiot. Every single time I play I find myself wondering how early the symptoms of Alzheimer's can manifest themselves.

**The Secret Door \*\*\*\*** (Family Pastimes, \$14.00)

1-8 Players, 5+, 20 minutes

The Secret Door is also a memory game, but one I personally am much happier playing. It is played cooperatively as are all games by this small ultra-wholesome Canadian company (see reviews of **Max** and **Princess** in last year's reviews). Here the object is to discover which three items have been stolen from the mansion before time runs out. There are 12 pairs of facedown valuables scattered about with 12 facedown clocks. On your turn, you get to turn over two tiles anywhere in the mansion. If you get a match, you can eliminate that valuable from consideration. If you get a clock, you have to add it to the row at the top of the board. Unmatched valuables are then turned back face-down. Once all the clocks are turned over, you have to make a guess as to the identity of the three stolen valuables.

The components are a little rough – homemade art on thick paper, but I think the board looks nice. The cooperative nature of the game really takes the edge off for me, and this one doesn't make either of us feel dumb. We like to make up silly ways to remember where in the house things are hidden. The clocks add some tension to the game that makes it fairly exciting. It is definitely one of my favorites.

**Gulo Gulo \*\*\*\*** (Rio Grande Games/Zoch, \$37.95)

2-6 players, 5+, 30 minutes

Gulo Gulo is a dexterity game (a-la Jenga), and what a glorious dexterity game it is. The premise is that the players are part of a family of wolverines, and the youngest member of the family has been arrested by vultures for stealing their eggs. The object of the game is to rescue Junior, but along the way you have to steal eggs out of the vulture's nest. There is a re-configurable face-down track of tiles leading up to a wooden bowl (the nest) which is filled with colored wooden eggs. Standing in the mist of the eggs is post which serves as an egg alarm. To move forward you must remove an egg whose color matches a tile in front of you on the path without

setting off the egg alarm. If you do trigger the alarm by causing it to fall out of the nest, you have to move backwards. The first player to uncover the junior tile and successfully steal a special purple egg from the nest is the winner.

This game is one of my favorites. There is a natural handicapping for adults who can use all sorts of strategy and play to the best of their ability only to be put to shame by a four year old with tiny little tweezers for fingers. Even if you run into some problems, you can catch up quickly and are never out of the game. This game is my number one after-dinner choice if we have company over. It's a game that can be enjoyed and hilarious for any age player and accommodates up to 6. The pieces and art are top notch (it has the same artist as Chicken Cha Cha Cha). We decided to give Kyla this game for Easter last year (hey, it has eggs and it is not candy) and I hope playing it then will become a family tradition.

**Mouse Trap \*** (Milton Bradley, \$24.00)

2-4 players, 6+, 30 minutes

Mouse Trap is a classic game where players race to construct a Rube Goldberg type of mousetrap complete with rubber bands, rolling steel marbles, and a diving board. The player who successfully traps the other mice is the winner.

Don't get me wrong, Mouse Trap is a great toy. Every child seems to get a kick out of setting up the trap again and again. Mouse Trap is a horrible game. You roll the dice and don't make a single decision throughout the game. The pieces are great, but the only reason not to throw out the rules is that they have pictures of how to build the trap.

**Pick Picnic \*\*\*** (Rio Grande Games/Zoch, \$17.50)

2-6 players, 8+, 20 minutes

Pick Picnic is a bluffing card game set in a barnyard. The object of the game is to collect the most corn which comes in three different colors/values. To get corn you must play a fowl card that matches one of the sections of the farm. Added wrinkles include a quick negotiation (settled by a dice role if you are at loggerheads) if more than one person plays a fowl into the same section, and the ability to play a fox that will eat the fowl that are played.

Although the game lists an age minimum of 8, Kyla is able to play competently. This game gets much better as more players are added because the foxes and negotiation become more important. It is another great after-dinner game where you have a

mix of adults and kids who want to play a game they can all enjoy.

**Capt'n Clever** \*\* (Rio Grande Games/Zoch, \$27.95)  
3-4 players, 6+, 30 minutes

Capt'n Clever is another example of a game that can be fun for adults and kids. It has a fun pirate theme where the object is to be the first player to collect all of your treasure from different islands. To visit the various islands you have one boat under your control that you can move, but you can also use other player's boats without moving them. When playing with young kids the treasures are assigned randomly by card draw, but in the regular version of the game you pass cards to your neighbor. Figuring out where someone is going or manipulating the placement of their boat to your advantage is where the game really shines.

Playing Capt'n Clever with Kyla is fun because you can talk like a pirate and play with little wooden boats. Deanna hates this game because the simplified rules make it too much a matter of luck (she has had a bad losing streak and never won playing the game). Kyla is almost ready for us to switch to the regular rules, and I think it will be a lot more fun.

**Pass the Pigs** \*\* (Winning Moves/Hasbro, \$10.00)  
2+ players, 7+, 30 minutes

Pass the Pigs is a push-your-luck dice game with a gimmick. The "dice" you use in the game are actually two small plastic pigs. You roll the pigs and get points based on the way they land. Unlikely formations are worth more points. A pig standing on its feet is worth more than one lying on its side. A roll that leaves both pigs standing on their noses is worth a lot of points. You accumulate points until you either a) pass the pigs to another player and keep the points you have so far or b) "pig out" with the pigs landing on opposite sides, in which case you lose your points and your turn.

Pass the pigs is a fun risk management type of game. It is light, portable, and occasionally funny. Kyla likes the game OK, but she loves the pigs. They come in a little plastic case with spots molded for the pigs which are cute. For a reasonable price it doubles as a toy and a game that is nice to have in the glove box of the car as a "break in case of emergency" sort of backup.

## Other Games

Kyla has played a lot of kids games. Deanna and I like to play games. (Ok truth be told I love to play games and Deanna manages to have fun under many different conditions). With this in mind we have tried a lot of games together that are really intended for older kids and adults, but found that Kyla could enjoy many of them. Sometimes we have to tweak the rules, play in teams, or give a little help, but she usually manages to have fun. Some of the highlights include the following:

**Blokus** – a tile laying game reminiscent of Tetris with multiple players and less time pressure

**Bohnanza** – a card game about bean farming that involves a lot of trading and negotiation

**Coloretto** – a quick card game where you collect cards of various colors. The three colors you have the most cards in count in your favor, but other colors count against you.

**Elfenland** – a traveling salesman type problem where you try to optimize your route between cities in a fantasy kingdom

**Frank's Zoo** – a ladder type card game with zoo animals (similar to Presidents) where the object is to rid yourself of cards first

**Ingenious** – a tile laying game where you try to place a tile that matches existing symbols and your final score is the category in which that you did the worst

If you enjoy playing games with opponents other than your preschool age children, you might want to check out a few more designer games. In particular I would recommend **Ticket to Ride**, which has a train theme. Players race to connect cities and build routes across the US. The placement of trains is governed by cards in a rummy (set collection) mechanism. It is quick (~1 hr.), easy to learn, looks great, and accommodates 2 to 5 players. If you are interested in strictly 2-player fare then **Lost Cities** might be a good place to start. The theme here is archaeology where cards are played in one of five different expeditions. A player must balance playing enough cards to make progress with becoming overextended. This game feels something like a cross between rummy and solitaire and plays in about 30 minutes.

## Part Three

**Ladybug's Costume Party** \*\*\* (Selecta Spielzeug, \$35.00)

2-5 Players, ages 4+, 20 minutes

Ladybug's Costume Party is a beautifully produced cooperative game by the German publisher Selecta. There are 8 ladybugs that start the game with 5 wooden "spots" of the same color on their back. The object of the game is to get each ladybug ready for the party by making her spots all be different colors. You have to do this before the ants arrive and spoil the picnic. On your turn, you flick the spinner in the center of the board. If you spin a leaf, you add an ant. If you spin a petal, you get a chance to trade spots with another ladybug. The ladybugs have a magnet in their nose, so when you bring them close together they will either attract and snap together or repel and turn away. If they attract each other you can swap spots and take another spin; if they reject each other you pass your turn.

This game has fantastic pieces, and the magnets really make it great. The ladybugs are rounded on the bottom so when you go in and try to match them up it looks like the dreaded "offering of the cheek" when someone goes in for a kiss. The wooden pegs for the spots are a little small and lose-able, but my set came with lots of extras. Because it is cooperative and involves only memory, it is one of those games even young kids can play by themselves. The rules are simple enough that you can play one game with the kids and then leave it to them. The perfect "play and walk away" game.

**Sequence for Kids** \*\*\* (Jax, Ltd., \$15.00)

2-5 Players, ages 3+, 20 minutes

Sequence for Kids is the junior version of the popular game Sequence where the object is to get four chips of your color in a row (like tic-tac-toe). You place chips on the board by playing cards from your hand that match the space. In the kid version the cards and spaces are animals rather than the playing cards in the grown-up version. There are 2 of each animal in both the deck of cards and on the board. There are also 2 fantasy animals. The unicorn allows you to put a chip anywhere on the board, and the dragon lets you take away any chip on the board.

This is a fun game to play and helps kids recognize patterns (especially diagonals). There is a surprising amount of room for strategy and clever play in this one. Although preschool age children

can certainly play this game, if you try your hardest you can usually beat them. Making other cards unplayable with the unicorn, noticing which cards have already been played vs. what cards you (or your opponent) needs in order to win, and creating multiple threats at the same time can give you a big advantage. To be honest I have a lot of trouble not bringing the smack-down when I play this game with my kids. This one plays from 2 to 4 players. For us, it usually goes better if another adult plays so that I have someone to pick on. "See kids, by playing here I force mom to choose between using the dog card to make her own row or using it to block me." To which she usually responds "Humph" and then promptly wins the game. Since this one is a mass market game and sold at Freddy's and Target, you have a good chance of picking it up at a yard sale or Goodwill -just try to make sure it has all 42 cards.

**Go Away Monster** \*\*\* (Gamewright, \$11.99)

1-4 Players, ages 2+, 10 minutes

Go Away Monster is my top pick for a child's first game. Each player (1 to 4) starts the game with their own board that is a cartoon drawing of a bedroom. A bed, lamp, picture, and teddy bear are all missing from everyone's room, and there is a silhouette of the missing objects on their board. You put nice cardboard pieces for all of these objects into a cloth bag along with eight monsters that have shapes similar to the things that go into the rooms. On your turn you reach into the bag and take out one of the pieces. If it matches one of the missing objects in your room, you put it there. If you already have one in your room, you offer it up to the other players for their rooms. There is no competition in this game and our family allows trading pieces once they are out of the bag so that everyone can color coordinate their decor. If you draw a monster out of the bag, everyone shouts "Go Away Monster!" and you set it aside. The game usually takes 5 or 10 minutes and is over when everyone has furnished their room.

This is a super simple and cute game appropriate for ages 2 and up. It teaches taking turns and cooperating. By carefully feeling of the piece while it is in the bag, a child can make sure they don't draw a monster. I really don't like games without meaningful decisions. It is hard to make a game for very young players where they are really making a choice (see my review of Candyland), and this one is the best I've played. The art is fun. The kids like to name the monsters, get silly, and play with the pieces. It hopefully teaches empowerment over the

monsters for children that are afraid (never an issue here - both my kids like monsters). It is hopefully not an insidious tool for teaching American materialism - get awesome stuff or the monsters will get you.

**Diamant / Incan Gold \*\*\*** (Funagain \$15.00)

3-8 Players, ages 6+, 20 minutes

The game Diamant was originally published in Germany. The same game with different pieces is published in the US as Incan Gold (Diamant has distinctly better pieces, if that sort of thing matters to you). This is a push your luck game where the theme is treasure hunting in a dangerous mine. There is a deck of tiles that contain either treasure or hazards. On their turn, players decide whether to continue further on their expedition or run away with what they have so far. If you are in the mine and turn over a treasure card, the gems are divided equally among the players; any that can't be doled out evenly are left on the card. If a hazard (poison gas, a cave-in, etc...) is turned over nothing happens UNLESS it is the second time the same hazard has been encountered. When a hazard shows up a second time all the players still in the mine must drop all of their treasure to escape with their lives (you lose all your stuff). If you choose to leave the mine, you are guaranteed to keep all the gems you have collected so far. You also divide evenly with any other players leaving that turn any gems that were left on cards during your descent into the mine. After five expeditions into the mine, the player with the most recovered treasure wins the game.

Although it probably needs to be played with a few older players this game can be played (and won) by preschool age children. It is one of those good "after dinner" games that can be enjoyed by adults and children. The kids can even learn about division and remainders using the gems as manipulatives. The game can be pretty exciting with an element of bluff as well. Dramatic events such as running away alone while scooping up a bunch of leftovers for yourself or being the last in the mine continuing to grab treasure after everyone else has chickened out are both possibilities.

**Sorry! Sliders \*\*** (Parker Brothers, \$30.00)

2-4 Players, ages 5+, 30 minutes

Sorry! Sliders is certainly worthy of mention as a mass market game that is a complete hoot! It is a dexterity based finger-flicking game that shares the shape of the pieces and the screw your neighbor ethos

of its namesake Sorry!. The game comes with shooting pawns that have a ball bearing in the bottom. You can configure the heavy cardboard course for the number of players and the type of scoring you want for a particular game. On your turn, you flick one of your four shooting pawns down the track in an effort to either leave it in a scoring position or knock an opponent's pawn off a lucrative spot. After everyone is flicked all their pawns, the positions are scored. Yes, it is shuffle board on your kitchen table.

I should be honest. I think I like this game a lot more than my kids. Preschool age children can certainly play it - they do a lot better with a finger slap motion rather than cocking their finger behind their thumb in a full-on flick. The pieces are great and really work well. They are heavy enough to give a very satisfying "thunk" when you hit them. If played with a light heart (and a healthy dose of vindictiveness) the game can be a riot. I have to be careful though, what might be pee-my-pants funny to me could make a preschooler cry.

**Hiss \*\*** (Gamenwright, \$10.00)

2-5 Players, ages 4+, 25 minutes

Hiss is a simple color matching game (like dominoes) where players build large snakes as they go. On a player's turn they reveal over a heavy cardboard piece that contains some part (head, body, or tail) of a colorful snake. They either add this piece to an existing snake or start a new one. In order for a piece to be added to a snake it needs to match colors where the pieces touch. The player who completes a snake by giving it both a head and a tail claims it for themselves. The player with the most claimed tiles at the end of the game is the winner.

This is a nice game that kids seem to enjoy quite a bit. They have to look over the entire table to find possible matches. They also need to count if they help scoring at the end of the game. There is a little bit of drama as occasionally a snake can get really long and everyone wants to be the one to complete it. One caution: make sure you have a big enough space to hold the game. The snakes grow in random directions and will try to slither right off the table.

**Enchanted Forest \*\*** (Ravensburger, \$20.00)

2-6 Players, ages 5+, 30 minutes

Enchanted Forest combines the classic game mechanics of roll-and-move and memory with a fairy tale theme. There are treasures hidden under the trees in the fantasy forest, and the object of the game

is to report to the king and correctly identify the location of these treasures. On your turn you roll two dice to move through the forest. If you land exactly on a blue space, you get to look underneath the tree next to it. If you land exactly on another player, you can send them back to the start. If you land exactly on the key space inside the castle, you get a chance to announce the location of the treasure the king is looking for. The first player to get three correct treasures wins the game.

This game looks great, and the 3D plastic trees are especially nice. Game play is good but moving can be a bit awkward. You roll two dice and can move in different directions for each one. An easier way to explain it is that you can move either the sum of the two dice or the difference between the two dice. The game can go on a bit too long for my taste especially if you try to delay others by sending them back to the start when you see them heading for the castle to talk to the king. With preschoolers I suggest the following changes: use fewer trees/treasures, don't let other players send people back to the start, and once a treasure card is claimed remove its tree from the board. If you can, play in teams with an adult and kid on each team.

### **Connect Four** \*\*\* (Milton Bradley, \$20.00)

2 Players, ages 4+, 10 minutes

Connect Four is a classic tic-tac-toe-ish game that is good to play with preschoolers. Because this one has been around forever you can probably get a used copy very easily. You play on a 7 by 6 vertical grid. On your turn drop a checker piece of your color into one of the 7 columns. The first person to get four of their pieces in a row (horizontal, vertical, or diagonal) is the winner.

The game is quick, simple to teach, and really easy to set up. Kids even like letting all of the pieces crash out of the board at the end of the game. It teaches planning ahead and pattern recognition skills. Preschoolers invariably forget about the other player and fail to see their threats. The key for young kids is patience and being careful before they move. If you have trouble holding back enough for your preschooler to have fun, I suggest handicapping the game. For instance adults have to get five in a row or get four in a row two or three times. Also Connect Four leads directly into Pente/Go-Moku (five in a row played on a flat 19x19 grid) which leads perfectly into Go, which is the best abstract strategy game ever (sorry Chess players). Anyone remember the 80s commercial? "Pretty sneaky sis!"

### **Hey! That's my Fish** \*\*\* (Mayfair Games, \$32.00)

2-4 Players, ages 6+, 20 minutes

Hey! That's my Fish is an excellent abstract strategy game with rules simple enough and pieces cute enough to masquerade as a kids game. The game starts with the 60 hexagonal tiles arranged randomly in a grid. Each tile has one, two, or three fish printed on it. Each player gets some penguins in their color (4 in a 2 player game, 3 with 3 players, and 2 with 4 players) and puts them on the ice flow. On your turn you can move any one of your penguins in a straight line. You pick up the tile your penguin started on and put it in your collection of tiles to be scored at the end of the game. Penguins can move any number of spaces but they cannot change direction, move through other penguins, or move over gaps in the ice flow. The game ends when no more penguins can move. The person with the most fish on their collected tiles wins the game.

This game can be cutthroat. There is a high probability the title will get shouted in frustration during the game. You can handicap the game by letting the kids take all the tiles they pass over (instead of just the one they start on), but that makes the game pretty short relative to the amount of time it takes to set up the board. We usually just help the kids make good moves (good moves that mess up everybody except them and me are my personal favorite). This one is a truly excellent little strategy game that flies under the radar. It was under the Christmas tree as a gift to my children. I take it to gatherings to "give the kids something to do". Please remind kids that, contrary to the way the rules work in this game, penguins can in fact swim.

### **Feed the Kitty / Monkey Madness / Leaping Lizards** \*

I've lumped together all three of these games that have fun pieces and are appropriate for preschool age children. Feed the Kitty is a dice rolling game. Based on the results of your roll you either gain or lose little wooden mice. The last player left with mice is the winner of the game. In Monkey Madness you draw colored monkey statues out of a bag trying to draw all of your color first. In Leaping Lizards you move your lizard down a string based on how your secretly selected insect tiles match the tiles thrown randomly from a cup.

All of these games have great pieces and are well made. Both my kids enjoy playing all of these games. My beef is that, in all of these games, there are no significant choices. You don't need to think at

all. You don't need a plan. There is only drama, and the drama is: Who is the luckiest player? I'd classify these as activities, not games. Unless we are playing for stakes, I'll pass.

### **Cranium Cariboo \*\*\*** (Hasbro, \$20.00)

2-4 Players, ages 4+, 20 minutes

Cranium Cariboo is an excellent game for young children. The top comes off the box to reveal a big chest. You drop in six big bouncy rubber balls and shake up the game so that they are randomly positioned under one of the 15 windows that show one to three objects of the same type and color on them. On your turn you draw a card that has a number, color, or letter. You use a big plastic key to open a window that matches the card somehow (same number of objects, same color, or same starting letter). If there is a ball under the window you take it out and put it in a slot at the side of the board. Then you close the window. When you find all six of the balls, it releases the clasp on a big treasure chest which opens to reveal a gem inside. You win.

I have a real soft spot for this game. It has fantastic pieces, looks great, and teaches matching and memory skills. This is the first game Kyla (my oldest daughter) truly loved. More than anything else when playing games with my kids, I want them to have fun. Whatever I might think about the game, if kids like it and can have fun playing it, I'm willing to put in the time in hopes that they will grow up to be gamers.

I have a little space left here to talk about a few games that I enjoy that are not for preschool age children. **Dominion** is a great card drafting game where you build a deck of cards as you play the game. It is a great "gateway" game; everyone I have ever played with has asked to play it again. **Pandemic** is a cooperative game about fighting disease around the world. Because everyone plays against the game, it is fun with young and old, experienced and non-gamers. **Small World** is another excellent offering from Days of Wonder. It is a conquest game where each player controls a fantasy race with a special power. Who can resist a game with flying dwarfs or diplomatic rat-men?

## Buying Games

Unfortunately boardgames do not yet have the market in the USA that they enjoy in Europe, and some of the best games are hard to find.

For buying games online I suggest:

Thoughthammer (<http://www.thoughthammer.com/>)

Board-and Bits (<http://www.boardsandbits.com/>)

Funagain (<http://www.funagain.com/>)

Time Well Spent (<http://www.timewellspent.org/>)

The local game shops are:

Rainy Day Games (<http://www.rainy-day-games.com/>)

Guardian Games(<http://www.guardiangamesportland.com/>)

or you can find most of the games reviewed here at Finnegan's Toys and Gifts on Yamhill downtown or Grammy and Nona's in St. Johns

The premier site with a tremendous amount of information about games is BoardGameGeek (<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/>).

The Goodwill store on Lombard usually has a pretty good selection of games for kids, and they are usually priced under three dollars. You should always check, but if you get a game that is missing rules or pieces please drop me an email as I've had lots of practice coming up with game bits. Another great place to find games is our house. I'd be happy to lend them out or have you over to sample a few.

If there is a game you are your kids enjoy I'd like to hear about it!

If anyone has questions, comments, or would like to borrow a game, I can be reached at [cantrell.kevin@gmail.com](mailto:cantrell.kevin@gmail.com)

# Halloween Special

For this special Halloween issue I thought I would review some scary games. They are scary because they are German language games, or out of print games you have to buy on eBay, or role playing games like the awkward geeks from high school used to play - not scary because of the cute little ghosts.

## **Ghost Party \*\*\*\***

2-8 Players, ages 4+, 30 minutes

Ghost Party (also known as Midnight Party) is an out of print game by Ravensburger that is still available on Ebay. Players are the guests at a party in a haunted mansion. At the start of the game the players take turns putting their figures onto the board while a cute little ghost named Hugo lurks in the cellar. After all the figures are down (the number of figures per player varies with the number of players) the players take turns rolling a special die. If they roll a number they move any one of their figures still in the circular hallway the number of spaces shown on the die. If they roll a ghost icon they must move Hugo exactly three spaces. Once Hugo gets out of the cellar and into the hall, players can begin entering rooms on their turn. Each room can hold only one figure and some that give you a bonus must be entered by exact count. If any figure is ever overtaken by Hugo, they are sent to the cellar where they count against you. Figures that are captured early give more of a penalty than those that evade Hugo further into the game. The game is over when no figures are left in the hallway or all of the rooms are occupied. The player with the least penalty points then wins the game.

I love the theme and the tension in this game. Although sold as a children's game this one is quite a good light-strategy game. It scales beautifully and plays well with any number of players from 2 all the way up to 8. This game will be at every Halloween party I ever throw. It reminds me of the joke about the two guys out hunting in the forest talking about bears. "I don't have to outrun the bear. I just have to outrun you."

## **Spooky Stairs (Geistertreppe) \*\*\*\***

2-4 Players (2-6 with expansion), ages 4+, 15 minutes

Spooky Stairs is a memory game with ghosts. Each player chooses a colored pawn and begins his journey up the stairway. On your turn you roll a special die. If you get a number (1 to 4) you move that number of spaces. If you roll a ghost you can turn any player into a ghost. When you turn a player into a ghost you cover their colored pawn with a cute little white ghost. A magnet in the top of the pawn holds it firmly inside the ghost shell. Once all the players are covered with a ghost then rolling a number means you move any ghosts and rolling a ghost icon means you exchange the positions of any two ghosts. Because the first pawn to pass the finish line is the winner, the trick is remembering which pawns are under which ghosts (they all look the same as ghosts).

This game is fantastic with enough players. We have an expansion that adds enough pieces to accommodate six players along with a bottle you can use in a variant to trap ghosts. It is a simple memory game with cute pieces, but it is easy to get confused and accidentally start moving someone else's piece. While writing this review I found a version available on Amazon called "Boo Who?" for only \$14. Although the pieces don't look like they are magnetic like my imported one it seems like a good deal for a fun Halloween game for a bunch of kids.

## **Nacht der Magier \*\*\***

2-4 Players, ages 4+, 20 minutes

Magician's Night is a dexterity game with a twist. The object of the game is to push your cauldron into the ring of light in the center without knocking off any of the other wooden disks or trees off the board. The twist is that it is played in the dark and only some of the pieces glow. In the dark you use your wizard to push the cauldrons in a single motion. Because you can't see a lot of the pieces on the board things don't move in a straight line, and your turn ends when you hear

the "think" of a piece falling off the board. Sure the game is a gimmick, but what a great gimmick. It's got wizards and cauldrons and it glows in the dark. That is enough for me.

## **Schloss Schlotterstein \*\***

1-6 Players, ages 5+, 20 minutes

Shiver-stone Castle is actually a collection of a few different games that all use the same pieces. The box itself is fully decorated inside with art associated with a haunted mansion. There is a powerful magnet attached to a wooden stick (the Germans seem to try for a magnet in every kid's game) and another cute little cloth ghost with a magnetic base. Many of the 7 games in the "spook Olympics" revolve around moving the ghost through the mansion using the magnetic wand. It is more a toy than a game, and many of the games get a little thin if you play them much. I keep it packed away until the Halloween party each year to keep the fun alive. (Get it? It's a game about a ghost. Keep the fun alive. Never mind.)

## **Ghostbusters \*\*\*\***

2+ players, any age can play for as long as you want

Although all of my other reviews have been about board or card games, I can't resist the opportunity to talk about this fabulous role playing game from the mid 1980s. Yes, I said role playing game. The genre spawned by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's Dungeons and Dragons. I am a huge fan of these types of games which are still quite alive and doing well in pencil and paper format despite the popularity of computer MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games like World of Warcraft). I only play games face-to-face.

West End Games got the Ghostbusters license after the 1984 movie and they produced a simple light hearted RPG that anyone can enjoy. One player takes on the role of the gamemaster (GM) while the other players assume the role of ghostbusters like Venkman (Bill Murray) or Stantz (Dan Aykroyd) from the movie. Player characters have a total of 12 points spread over the four traits of Brains, Muscle, Moves, and Cool. The GM describes the situation and the player characters say what they want to do. Any time there is some doubt involved as to your success or failure, you roll the dice. The number of dice depends on your score in the most applicable trait (the better you are at something - the more dice you roll) and you simply add up all your dice and compare it to the numerical difficulty of the action. The added wrinkles of the ghost dice (if you roll a "ghost" it counts as 6 and you get to roll again) and brownie points (rewards for success or entertaining roleplaying) keep things interesting. Ghostbusters is a brilliant game that proves anyone can understand and enjoy a game where you write a story together in which you are all the main characters.

I can't say enough good things about pencil and paper role playing games. When done well with the right group they are like a summer blockbuster movie or adventure novel that you and your friends/family write together. The array of genres is immense: from kid oriented games about fairies and superheroes to traditional fantasy, horror, science fiction all the way to more mature and serious fare on the edge between performance art and psychotherapy. RPGs are great for stimulating the imagination. I tend to favor the storytelling games myself. If you have never played before, it can be a bit intimidating to run a new RPG for kids from scratch. I suggest going with something familiar to you and the kids. Use a Choose Your Own Adventure book, or adapt a favorite movie or cartoon as a model for your first adventure.

Ghostbusters is very kid accessible and any age can play. Other kid friendly RPGs with simple rules are Faery's Tale and Marvel Superheroes RPG. Kyla (9 yrs.), Sydney (6 yrs.) and some of their friends are now playing a FATE game I've modified to fit the Harry Potter universe, and it has been a blast so far. Draco's son Scorpio has stolen some magical Egyptian artifacts while on a school field trip with their teacher Hermione Granger to the British Royal Museum. Although the Monroe girls have been framed for the crime, it is still up to them to stop the Malfoys from using the Rod of Osiris to abuse the muggles of the world...



**Setup:** Kids should draw, color, and cut out 3 trick-or-treaters and 1 witch. Make sure the trick-or-treaters are all different colors. Color each of the 3 pairs of pumpkins at the ends of a double arrow to match one of the trick-or-treaters (for example: a red pair to go with a red trick-or-treater, a blue pair to go with the blue trick-or-treater, and a green pair to go with the green trick-or-treater). Put all 3 trick-or-treaters on the space showing them, and the witch on the first space (the haunted house). You'll also need four tokens (pennies work well) and two 6 sided dice. If you are OK drawing on the dice, color three faces on each with a black Sharpie to move the witch. If not, 1-3 moves the witch and 4-6 moves the trick-or-treaters. If you don't have dice you can use two coins. Heads move the trick-or-treaters and tails moves the witch.

**Rules:** Each player takes a turn rolling the dice (or tossing the coins). You move the witch or trick-or-treaters forward one space on the board for each matching throw. You can move in any order. Each trick-or-treater has one shortcut. You move directly from the first pumpkin that matches your color to the next pumpkin that matches your color (it doesn't count as a move). The witch can only take a shortcut if she ends her move on the first colored pumpkin, in which case she moves directly to the pumpkin of the same color. If the witch and the trick-or-treater ever occupy the same space, the trick-or-treater is out of the game. You can use one of the four tokens BEFORE YOU ROLL THE DICE to make the witch move back to her haunted house. The more trick-or-treaters that reach the Happy Halloween space the better you did.