

Connect over a board game



By Randy Ray

Christmas 2009 is already a distant memory but part of it remains etched in my mind – the long hours my family spent playing a board game on Christmas night.

Once the dinner table was tidied, my wife, and two of our sons and I pulled out the game of *Sorry!* that Santa left under the tree on Christmas morning. What a hoot! We must have played a dozen games and I'll never forget the conversation, laughing and joking as we fought for strategic position and bumped and switched our coloured pieces around the board.

Are board games making a comeback?

According to one local aficionado, they're holding their own, a tough task considering the rise of video games, PlayStation systems and other entertainment systems such as Wii and Guitar Hero.

"Sales have remained consistent every year," says Eira Macdonell, area manager for Ottawa's Mrs. Tiggy Winkles toy store chain. "Considering how many kids are playing electronic games, the fact that board games remain significant and successful year after year is in itself a victory. Face it, most kids turn to computers before they roll the dice."

Like most families, we have computers, PlayStation and Guitar Hero, but after playing *Sorry!* I saw what our family has been missing all these years. Pull out the dice and pick your favourite game board piece and you'll soon see that board games are great fun and much more likely to generate social interaction among family members than many electronic/computer games.

I have nothing against games played on a TV screen or computer monitor. It's just that huddling around a computer can't match a congregation of the clan around the kitchen or dining room table. Without question, the dynamics of board games are totally different.

During a board game, you are face-to-face, you laugh and you talk and players are animated, whereas sitting in front of a television or computer often isolates players in a bedroom or den away from everyone else.

As one board games fanatic once told me: “The best part about board games is that you get a group of people around a table, you set the pace yourself and there is a lot of opportunity to converse. You can chat while you play and it doesn’t matter if the game slows down.”

Board games have long been praised for helping develop social skills and educate players, especially younger ones. Pull out Risk, Aggravation, or Snakes and Ladders, and even the most calm and collected kid is suddenly animated and chatty, says Eira Macdonell, area manager for Mrs. Tiggy Winkles toy stores in Ottawa.

“It’s a neat way for parents to spend time with their kids...and many games teach interesting facts that can broaden a child’s learning,” she says. “Many of these games make the players think outside the TV box and get them discussing elements of life kids today not always exposed to. Families can pull out a piece of cardboard and some plastic disks and generate family moments and an environment that cannot be captured on a computer screen.”

Macdonell says one of the best learning games for youngsters is *Junior Scrabble*, which is designed for kids five and up, and teaches letter recognition and formation of words. Others are I Spy Memory Game and Junior Monopoly, which teaches kids to count money and stay organized.

This may be a column to help parents work with their kids but let’s not forget that parents play games too. Popular for adults are *Settlers of Catan*, in which players create a settlement by buying land and building roads and buildings. Also big are the question-and-answer game *Outburst* and old favourites such as *Monopoly*, *Trivial Pursuit* and *Scrabble*, which my wife and I play most weekends.

I’m not suggesting you pack away the electronic games – as a matter of fact, I am a big fan of some, in particular Guitar Hero – but the next time you’re looking for a fun time, consider getting your family involved in a board game. It’s well worth it and I guarantee it will rekindle fond memories of life prior to the arrival of games that plug into the wall.

As you consider a favourite game, remember this: You may have the misfortune of losing big bucks to an opponent on the board but it won't cost nearly as much to bring one home from the store. Most cost between \$30 and \$50.

This article originally appeared in the February 2010 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper.