Tabletop Games in a Digital World

By Dr. Carolyn Ragatz and Zach Ragatz

Toddlers and teens can be found entertaining themselves in front of screens playing a wide variety of games, from *Angry Birds* to *Super Mario* to *Minecraft*. In this digital world we live in, is there still a place for tabletop games? Games of strategy and skill challenge the mind and bring peers and families together.[1]

Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson created the earliest contemporary role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons & Dragons*—commonly known as *D&D*—in the early 1970s. Since then, there have been reprintings, revisions, and additional handbooks, as well as other systems and story lines written, and the creation of online versions. These games are complex systems of rules and guidelines, within which players create characters that interact and survive (or not) through an adventure or quest. The main characters in the hit Netflix show *Stranger Things* play *D&D* and often refer to the game strategies as they fight their real-world foe.

Why a Board Game?

Why encourage children to play board games? In the increasing disconnect of our digital lives,[2] playing games provides a way to connect and relate with others on a human level. Strategy and role-playing games provide intellectual challenges and stretch creativity to keep the gifted mind engaged in solving problems. At the same time, the players must communicate and collaborate face-to-face. As a result, there are a host of skills that gifted children learn while playing board games.

Read for detailed information. Functional reading—reading printed material that is specifically intended to convey information—is a skill that all children must master. Many gifted children read quickly for the big ideas and may miss the small details in informational reading. What better way is there to reinforce functional reading skills than to practice them in a role-playing game setting? When your "life" depends on the information in the manuals, players tend to read them carefully. In role-playing games, there are books full of character descriptions that the players must read in order to get started. These guidelines are specific and must be followed throughout the game.

Practice addition, subtraction, and more. In many of these games, math computation is constantly used. The characters' abilities are based on a number system. These values are used during the game to determine the outcomes. During the adventure, the party will have to make decisions and then proceed along that course of action. The outcome of an action is determined by rolling dice and then applying the appropriate mathematical computation to the modifier assigned to the character's race and/or class. These complex systems keep the game sessions interesting and challenging to those that play.

Collaborate to solve problems. Each scenario focuses primarily on problem solving. Whether you are the Game Master setting up the story and providing obstacles along the way, or a member of the party trying to accomplish your quest, you are working to solve problems—both individually and as a group. Sometimes, the group members do not have the same personal goals, leading to different desired solutions.

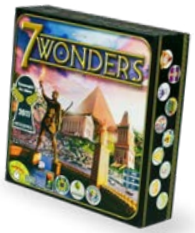
Communicate to share information and ideas. Effective communication skills are key to becoming successful in one's personal and professional life, no matter what career path is chosen. When gaming, players must effectively communicate with the Game Master, as well as with other players. They must clearly state their intent for their characters, so that play can continue smoothly. Often during the course of the adventure, game rules come under lively and passionate debate. Players must be able to state their interpretation of the rule in question and support it. Effective, clear, concise arguments must be made in order to persuade others that their opinion is correct.

Step into another's shoes. Looking at events through a perspective different than one's own is a complex thinking skill. It takes synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of where the other individual is coming from. A crucial component of role-playing games is taking on the value of your character and acting according to his background and perspective. For instance, as a Champion of Justice in *D&D*, a gifted child no longer gets to act according to the views and judgment of a modern 12-year-old—if she does, there will be negative consequences within the game. Many different game titles exist, set in different places, with a variety of scenarios and incentives. However, they all provide alternative perspectives that help to develop complex thinking skills.

Expand the imagination. Role-playing requires an incredible amount of creativity and imagination. The Game Master, for example, must come up with the adventure, which includes various settings, an interesting plot, challenging combat, and numerous evil villains. These must be described so that the rest of the players can visualize the adventure. Small figures and a grid are sometimes used to help visualize placement and layout, but most of it takes place in the players' minds. The players must be able to see and understand the story being told, then create their own responses to what is happening around them. Gifted children often love the complex world that fantasy and fiction provide. The fantasy in a role-playing game is an entire world where they can help create the characters and adventures.

Gifted kids like these games!

7 Wonders

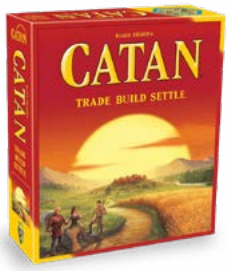


Ages: 10+

Number of Players: 4–5

As leaders of one of the 7 great cities of the Ancient World, players gather resources, develop commercial routes, and affirm military supremacy in this intricate strategy game that encourages critical thinking and coordination.

Catan



Ages: 9+

Number of Players: 4

Players try to be the dominant force on the island of Catan by building settlements, cities, and roads using resources like wood and grain.

Above and Below

Ages: 10+

Number of Players: 3

A mashup of town-building and storytelling, players compete to build the best village—both above and below ground. This game is a fun, imaginative way for students to coordinate and work together.

Dominion

Ages: 10+

Number of Players: 3

Players are monarchs, racing to acquire unclaimed land to build a dominion. It's a fast game that encourages efficient, fun competition.

Bruges

Ages: 10+

Number of Players: 3–4

Players assume the role of merchants, maintaining their relationships with those in power in the city while competing against one another for influence, power, and status. This game is geared toward the more experienced strategy players.

Dungeons & Dragons

Ages: 10+

Number of Players: 4–8

Players tell a story together, guiding heroes through quests for treasure, battles with deadly foes, daring rescues, and courtly intrigue.

Terraforming Mars

Ages: 12+

Number of Players: 3-4, or solo

Players work together to advance humanity throughout the solar system in a game that will draw in children interested in the cosmos and future technology.

Ticket to Ride

Ages: 8+

Number of Players: 3–5

Players collect cards of various types of train cars to claim railway routes in North America, with the aim of building long routes. With elegantly simple, yet strategic, gameplay, this game takes just 15 minutes to learn.

T.I.M.E. Stories

Ages: 13+

Number of Players: 4

A narrative game, T.I.M.E. asks players to take on characters to help the T.I.M.E. Agency protect humanity via trials and puzzles.

Many computer games are RPGs and offer many of the same elements as the tabletop versions. If a young person enjoys the digital version of the RPG, try a family or friend board game night, gathered around the table, and engage with others. You'll likely find your child creating, calculating, debating, strategizing, compromising, and communicating for hours—not a bad way to spend a Friday night.

Authors' Note

Carolyn Ragatz, Ph.D., has been teaching upper elementary students for 30 years, in both regular education and self-contained gifted classrooms. She is also an adjunct professor at Arizona State University. Her doctorate, from Arizona State, is in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in gifted education and using games in the classroom. Carolyn serves on the board of directors for the Arizona Association for Gifted and Talented and chairs the Education and Outreach Committee.

Zach Ragatz is a writer from Los Angeles, who graduated from Arizona State in 2015 with degrees in theatre and mathematics. His favorite board game is *Catan*, though he still plays *Dungeons & Dragons* every month with his friends.

Endnotes

[1] McGonigal, J. (2012). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world.* London: Vintage Books.
Gobet, F., De Voogt, A. J., & Retschitzki, J. (2012). *Moves in mind: The psychology of board games.* Hove: Psychology Press.

[2] Kardaras, N. (2016). *Glow kids: How screen addiction is hijacking our kids—and how to break the trance.* New York: St. Martin's Press.