Each year, NAGC invites toy and game manufacturers to submit their newest products for review by students. For this 17th annual NAGC Toys and Games review, more than 175 students from Sycamore School in Indianapolis, IN evaluated more than 40 toys and games during flex times, after-school care, and free time during class. The following toys and games are the students’ top picks for 2013.

“Free game. Fun for some, but not for all. P.S. Read instructions carefully.”

Familiar with the ominous note taped to the game box in Chris Van Allsburg’s award-winning fantasy Jumanji, our students anticipated the unknown adventure that testing new games would bring.

Board games are a staple in our school: Students often squeeze in a quick challenge during flex time, at lunch, or after school. A popular science teacher at Sycamore School organizes a weekend game-a-thon each summer to bring the community together. So, the potential threat of the school being overtaken by lions, monsoons, or other hazards seemed well worth the risk for the students willing to test drive new toys and games.

Students in grades Pre-K–8th unwrapped packaging, perused instructions, and eagerly began to play more than 40 games. Rooms quickly erupted with laughter, anticipation, frustration, and strategy, suggesting that Roald Dahl was right in saying, “Life is more fun when playing games.”

Toys were reviewed over a 2-month period. During the screening process, each student played at least three games and was asked to complete a feedback form that included these questions:

- What are your initial thoughts about the game?
- How clear were the rules?
- How does this game compare to others you’ve played?
- Would you spend your own money to buy the game?
- Which three words would you use to describe the game?
- What did you like?
- What didn’t you like?

Each game gave the kids something to think about, but after analyzing student feedback, several games surfaced as favorites.

### for younger children

#### Smart Fellow
Manufacturer: HABA
Recommended Age: 2–6
http://www.habausa.com
MSRP: $45.50

Young players will enjoy HABA’s wooden color and shape matching and building block set. With three degrees of difficulty, players strengthen brain and motor skills by replicating structures that match images on cards. Pegs look like faces; other parts help build trains, buildings, or castles. Players also have the freedom to create whatever their imaginations can conjure. One 2½-year-old played with the set for nearly an hour without a break. The warm, bright colors and various-sized pieces and shapes make it easy to reconfigure the blocks in endless ways.
for older children

**CrossWays**  
Manufacturer: USAopoly  
Recommended Age: 8+  
http://www.usaopoly.com  
MSRP: $24.99

“In CrossWays, players want to be the first to build a path of their pieces from one side of the game board to the opposite side, but to build they need to use the cards they draw and have in hand.”

Right away students described the box as something that looked like it contained something exciting. One sixth grader said he liked the game because, “it is semi-complex and requires strategy.”

**Dabble**  
Manufacturer: INI  
Recommended Age: 10+  
http://www.dabblegame.com  
MSRP: $24.95

Calling all wordsmiths! With a limited number of letters and even less time, players are called upon to use exactly 20 letter tiles to make between two- and six-letter words. This fast-paced, methodical game requires strategy and implementation. Middle school students fell silent as the tiles turned over, but exploded with excitement when time was up! This game is an excellent addition to any language arts curriculum as bell work, an anchor activity, or just plain fun. Kids who took the game home found it as enjoyable to play with their families as it was with their friends. The manufacturer recommends the game for kids 10 years and older, but our students thought that younger children would enjoy it as well.

**Kilter**  
Manufacturer: SimplyFun  
Recommended Age: 8+  
http://www.simplyfun.com  
MSRP: $36.00

A tangible game of the laws of physics, initially Kilter appears to be as basic as building blocks. However, upon pulling the “game board” out of the box, one finds two pieces of wood joined together much like a seesaw: Competitors must stack various sized/weighted blocks on the elevated lever of their choice.

One high school student described it as “simply difficult and totally entertaining til the end!” Another student said, “It is challenging for all ages, but still fun. I’ve never played a game like this!”

**Laser Maze**  
Manufacturer: ThinkFun  
Recommended Age: 8+  
http://www.thinkfun.com  
MSRP: $29.99

This is the perfect game for the visual-spatial learner who does not mind a little trial and error. Students loved the game’s concept, but not everyone had the patience. Those who did, however, found it to be an instant favorite. A one-player logic game, Laser Maze builds sequential reasoning and planning skills using mirrors and targets on a puzzle grid to reach a goal. To begin, the player draws 1 of 60 cards, and is then challenged to bend, reflect, and split a real laser beam to complete the maze. Kids quickly learned the colors and shapes of things provided codes but these codes only provided partial answers—the rest was left to problem-solving skills. With cards of varying complexity, these players were entertained for hours. (Warning! Kids who tested the game at home complained that their parents were often found playing it, so the kids had to wait their turn!)

**Sheepdogs of Pendleton Hill**  
Manufacturer: Stratamax Games  
Recommended Age: 10+  
http://www.stratamaxgames.com  
MSRP: $59.50

In Sheepdogs, three to five players use card play to herd and advance flocks of sheep up a hill. Flocks often include sheep from other players; children learn to strategize and cooperate with one another. It’s a great precursor to other strategy games, such as The Settlers of Catan. Although suggested for older players, second, third, and fourth graders also found this strategy game highly entertaining.
A combination of word play and persuasion, Snake Oil left players laughing during every round. Taking on the role of an inventor, each player is challenged to sell his or her product to another customer. From an adult perspective, the success of this game is its ability to draw upon high-level thinking skills such as evaluation, analysis, and creating. Kids enjoy the challenges of pitching their product to classmates. They found that innovation paired with humor was almost always the formula that sealed the deal!

One tester commented, “The humor of the game makes it much better than anything that might be considered similar to it.”

Originally based on the 100-year-old German game “Pim Pam Pet,” Tapple asks players to name things that fit into a particular category, as determined by a card drawn at the beginning of each round. Once the timer is set, the first player has 10 seconds to give a single word answer that fits within the topic, press down the letter key in a special electronic device that corresponds to the first letter of that word, and restart the timer. The next player must then think of a word for the topic that starts with a different letter, press down the starting letter, and restart the timer. For example, if the first word was “neighbor,” the player would push the “N” button down on the game board, and no one else that round would be able to use a word beginning with N. The flow of play parallels that of “Hot Potato,” while practicing skills of fluency and flexibility.

Student responses included: “I think that [this game] is good because it actually lets you think a lot! To describe this game, I’d use the words ‘brain-teasing,’ ‘awesome,’ and ‘fun.’” “I loved it way more than I thought I would. I loved the concentration and thought that you have to put into it.”

Looking for a quiet game? Steer clear of this one! Telestrations, as touted by its manufacturer, is like playing a game of “Telephone” with sketched drawings. Equipped with dry erase markers, boards, and card deck, 4 to 8 players are asked to draw a secret word that gets passed from player to player. From the moment the game started, laughter permeated everywhere within a mile radius of the school. What gifted kids appreciated most was the fast pace, as multiple words are floating around all at once that need to be solved. Connections that were unintentionally made between the words in each round helped strengthen skills of interdependence and association. This game was hands-down the favorite of our middle schoolers!

One student said, “I like the way the word changes as it goes through the game. It’s much better (than other games) because it is a completely different concept.”

Another commented, “I couldn’t stop laughing. This is better than most every other game I have ever played!”

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of teachers, educators, other professionals, and parents and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents, as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

Well-informed parents do make a difference. Membership in NAGC is the best way for you to improve the future for gifted learners, especially your own! Visit www.nagc.org to find out more.
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