For the past 18 years, NAGC has sponsored an annual toy and game review, where junior reviewers are recruited to evaluate the latest toys and games just in time for holiday shopping. This year’s toy testers were 262 gifted and talented students from Science & Arts Academy, an independent gifted PreK–8 school in Des Plaines, IL, who played, puzzled, rolled, and strategized their way to selecting their top new toy picks for 2014.

Before the sample games and toys arrived from manufacturers, the school prepared itself for the task at hand by first polling faculty and staff as to how the greatest number of students could interact with the games. The process included:

• Working with faculty and staff in pre-review question-and-answer sessions, so they could make suggestions for ways to incorporate games into curriculum and instruction.
• Selecting a group of students from the Student Council to conduct pre-trial assessments of the games to determine appropriate age and grade levels of each game.
• Deeming May 2014 as “NAGC Game Month,” with each week designated to a particular group of testers.
• Creating a “Game-Time Sign-up” and in-house library system, so teachers could borrow games during specific classroom activities or breaks.
• Designing and developing age-appropriate rubrics, based on the unique attributes of the school’s constituent groups. Rubrics were created for Young Learners (Preschool–Kindergarten); Grades 1–3; Grades 4–8; and teacher-specific and family-specific rubrics. The youngest students were able to rate games and toys using an emoticon rubric system.

After classroom trials were completed, students and families were invited to check out the games for home use. These at-home trials not only created family game night opportunities, but provided a valuable source of feedback on the games.

During the 6-week review period, more than 35 toys and games were tested, with 515 rubrics completed from students, faculty members, and parents across all grade levels. These rubrics collected a myriad of data, including initial thoughts of the packaging, length of game play, overall feelings toward the game, and other metrics. Students were encouraged to play as many games as they could, with most playing 5 to 6 different games during their testing times. Games with the highest overall average scores based on multiple criteria were chosen as “top picks.”

As the trials drew to a close, one young student commented, “Instead of NAGC game month, we should have game year!” Students at Science & Arts Academy found that playing games fostered a sense of community, modeled cooperation and participation, and built creativity and resourcefulness in the players—proving that the pleasure of playing games goes well beyond the four corners of the board. Students were thrilled to obtain a behind-the-scenes peek at how games are developed and to provide

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Students at Science & Arts Academy in Des Plaines, IL, tested 35 toys and games in May 2014 for NAGC’s annual toy review program. Playing and evaluating games fostered community, cooperation, creativity, problem-solving, and fun at home and school.
Input on the future development of games for gifted learners. As an added bonus, the games and toys were added to the school’s library for continued year-round play.

“This article was authored by Science & Arts Academy’s Erica Loeve and Maria Michonski, who served as the driving force behind this year’s toy and game review. Together, they created a program with systems, processes, and rubrics that will serve as a suggested model for other schools in future years. Student photos courtesy of teacher Corina Vaccarello, Science & Arts Academy. Toy and game photos courtesy of manufacturers.”

**for young learners**

**Number Construction Activity Set**
Manufacturer: Learning Resources  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 4+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 3–5  
www.learningresources.com  
MSRP: $24.99

The Number Construction Activity Set was a huge hit. The tiles, made of durable plastic, easily snap together and offer a great way to practice number building and identification skills. Younger students spent time working on constructing numbers, while the older ones used them to work on number sequence. The only drawback is that the small pegs can be hard to take apart when stacking several of the same shape together. Thanks to our imaginative students, creating wasn’t limited to only numbers, but also included shapes, words, and anything else their imaginations would allow. Students used words such as “fun,” “challenging,” and “creative” to describe this set.

**Folkmanis Puppets**
Manufacturer: Folkmanis  
Mfr. Recommended Age: All ages  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 3–8  
www.folkmanis.com  
MSRP: Prices vary

Our younger learners could not get enough of these soft puppets. Teachers noticed that their classes became more animated when the puppets joined in the lesson. Children said they were “incredible,” “enjoyable,” “fun,” and “amazing.” Teachers said lessons were “more active and lively,” with one teacher reporting that the puppets were used to teach empathy and humor. From protecting the king and queen with the slaying of dragons to turning their classrooms into full-on productions, these companions stimulated multiple conversations around our school.

**for all ages**
**Get 4 & Score**
Manufacturer: Simply Fun  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 8+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 7+  
www.simplyfun.com  
MSRP: $32.00

Our students really took to this race-against-the-clock word game. The directions were easy to understand; students loved the ease of play. Teachers liked the game because it facilitates vocabulary building, improves memory recall, and grows with students’ learning. Testers referred to this game as “fun,” “wonderful,” “exciting,” and “challenging.” One student wrote, “Keep making this game!”

**High Tail It!**
Manufacturer: Simply Fun  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 10+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 6–9  
www.simplyfun.com  
MSRP: $34.00

Hop around the board and be the first player to complete the journey with all five kangaroos and win the game! Our students enjoyed the new spin on this “checker-like” board game. It teaches colors, problem-solving, and how to follow directions. Younger students took to this game more than older ones, and found it was most fun in groups. However, all students enjoyed this game with some fans calling it, “the best game ever!”

**Speed Bump**
Manufacturer: Fat Brain Toy Co.  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 6+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 6–9  
www.fatbraintoys.com  
MSRP: $24.95

Speed Bump is a fast-paced racing game where players must spin, switch, and swap the tiles in front of them to match the pattern challenge card. Players race to hit the “speed bump” buzzer to alert fellow players they’ve completed the challenge. Level 2 incorporates roundabouts, bridges, tunnels, construction zones, ponds, and traffic signs to increase visual/spatial reasoning, interaction, and quick thinking. For some, the buzzer was a bit bothersome. One student described this game as “something I need to go tell my parents about.”

**IQ Steps**
Manufacturer: Smart Toys and Games, Inc.  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 8+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 7+  
www.smartgames.eu/us/  
MSRP: $9.99

IQ Steps helps develop logic, visual, and spatial perception skills. Like the rest of the IQ family, the goal is simple: Fit all the puzzle pieces into the game grid to complete one of the 120 available challenges. Our student testers referred to this puzzler as “interesting,” “strange,” and “addictive.” Seems great for solo time and is compact enough to bring along on a road trip. Students were eager to challenge their friends and themselves.

**Last Letter**
Manufacturer: ThinkFun  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 8+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 8+  
www.thinkfun.com  
MSRP: $12.99

This fast-moving letter game improves listening skills, reflexes, and concentration. Players yell out words from the illustrated card that starts with the last letter of the word previously called. Highly verbal student reviewers especially loved it, stating the game was “fun,” “awesome,” and “colorful.” Card illustrations are detailed, so there’s always something new to find. A typical game takes less than 5 minutes, which our Language Arts teachers thought made for a great all-group classtime warm-up or activity break.
play, puzzle, and roll!

for older children

**Geek Out! Pop Culture Party**
Manufacturer: Playroom Entertainment  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 10+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 10+  
www.playroomentertainment.com  
MSRP: $20.00

Squeals of delight and laughter could be heard rolling down the halls of Science & Arts Academy when the students played Geek Out! Pop Culture Party! It’s a wild game that reveals which player is the most knowledgeable about favorite pop culture subjects, TV, movies, music, and literature. Players draw cards asking them to list things that fall under a certain category, and try to bluff their way through. “It’s hard and you have to think a lot… but it was awesome!” said one student. Students suggested the game be stocked with a timer and note cards, but it was determined as a great game overall.

**Say What You Meme**
Manufacturer: Playroom Entertainment  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 8+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 10+  
www.playroomentertainment.com  
MSRP: $30.00

Say What You Meme is a hilarious game where players create their own memes and choose the funniest. Just like popular memes found on social media sites, families can now join in on this pop culture phenomenon at home. Students had a lot of fun with this game, with one student saying, “It’s something that works well for our generation, and a great way to stimulate creativity.”

for kids & adults alike

**Quadrillion**
Manufacturer: Smart Toys and Games, Inc.  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 7+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 8+  
www.smartgames.eu/us  
MSRP: $19.99

Whenever a game is considered challenging at Science & Arts Academy, it’s a keeper. Quadrillion is a fun solitaire game for anyone who likes to solve packing problems. After clicking together four magnetic grids to make a personal game board, gamers need to fit all the puzzle pieces on the grid. With thousands of endless possibilities, our students said this game was “mind-bending,” “logically appealing,” and “interesting.” Another said, “It’s almost hard to stop playing!”

**L-Sixteen**
Manufacturer: Kadon Enterprises, Inc.  
Mfr. Recommended Age: 6+  
Testers’ Recommended Age: 7+  
www.gamepuzzles.com  
MSRP: $59.00

With this game, the holes mean a lot! The goal is to create shapes, color designs, or continuous paths by using 16 L-shaped tetromino tiles with holes and placing them in an 8-by-8-inch array on a framed tray. The challenges are endless. Students rated the game as “stupendous” and “magnificent,” and liked it for the many ways it can be played. This little white box has more to offer than its packaging. According to one student, “It is full of awesomeness!”

about National Association for Gifted Children

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of teachers, educators, other professionals, 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 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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