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Playing during the Pandemic

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It is hard to believe that we are two years into the COVID-19 Pandemic. It seems like yesterday that we found ourselves locked down in our homes, scared for our lives, and wondering what we were going to do with all of the extra time on our hands. For our family, we spent some time getting used to working from home, making adjustments to being around one another, trying to continue working, and struggling to do our schoolwork.

As we settled into the realization that it wasn't going to be a two-week event to flatten the curve, but that we were going to be in lockdown for the foreseeable future. With two children at home, our son, Sophomore in Highschool and, our daughter, a Junior at the University of Kentucky, who decided to come home, since they had cancelled in-person classes, we started to realize that we had a lot of time on our hands. I am not sure about you, but we spent a fair amount of time catching up on some TV shows or watching movies that we had missed in the Movie Theaters earlier in the year. It didn't take us very long to get tired of this and start to look for other ways to spend our time. We searched Amazon and other online outlets for the last coveted puzzles and were lucky to find a few. But these didn't take long to piece together, and there we were, stuck in our home, looking for something fun to do to help pass the time and help take our minds off of what was going on in the world.

We opened up the game closet! I assume that you all have a game closet of sorts, maybe it is a cabinet, or a shelf, where you keep a stack of boardgames, cards, or puzzles. A place that is full of memories, and as you look through the stack, you could probably tell us when you first learned to play, or who taught you, or if you were a master at it or if you just never could play it very well.

I married into a great family. If you know my in-laws, you know that they are a very competitive bunch. Every family get together, we are all involved in some sort of competition, whether out on a court or course, or inside huddled around a game table. What is it about games? When did they become such a big part of our lives? Who invented them or even the idea of them? So I did some research.

In November of 1922, a magnificent discovery was made in Valley of the Kings, the lost Tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamen, or as I prefer to call him, King Tut. The best part about the discovery, what that everything was intact. Over the next eight years they were able to pull out all sorts of household goods. From pots, bowls, decorative furniture, and ornate thrones covered in precious stones. They uncovered four board games, one of which stood out. It had a veneer top made of ivory that sat on top of an oblong box with feline like legs with paws carved out of ebony, which were sitting on top of golden drums that were mounted on sleds. The board was divided into 30 squares of lattice, and it had a drawer with playing pieces and a small stick that looked to be thrown as modern day dice. They would call it 30 squares, and it would continue to show up in other ancient Egyptian archeological sites, with the latest one dating back to

3000 BC, and it was even found in archeological digs of Alexander the Great some which would prove that this game was being played for almost 3000 years.

The year 1922 seemed to be a big year for the gaming industry, or at least for the discovery of them. It wasn't only the Egyptians that were playing games. The same year, in the area of Southern Iraq, called Ur, another game was discovered. This one also had 30 squares but seemed to be a little older than the Egyptian version. It dated back to 4000 BC and was thought to be the most popular game for almost 3000 years. This would be called "the royal game of Ur", which was found all across the Middle East. This board game was shaped differently than the Egyptian 30 squares, it resembled a lopsided dumbbell, with each square consisting of shell plaques inlaid into wooden block and separated by strips of precious gemstones. This game came with its own instructions, listed in ancient script on each of the squares. It was a race game, where the players would work their way from left to right and would use some dice made from sheep knucklebones. As they progressed through the game, they would also discover their fortune, for example, they would land on a square which said, "you will find a friend", or you will become powerful like a lion. A theme for a couple of other modern games that we will explore in a few minutes.

The next game that would fit chronologically, would of course be Chess, otherwise known as the "Mad Queen's Game". The earliest versions came out of India in and around the Fifth Century from the Guptas. They were flourishing in the arts, literature, and the invention of new musical instruments. They would build hospitals and develop new surgical techniques. The Guptas would develop

decimal mathematics and the concept of zero. A very sophisticated society to say the least.

Chess was first developed out of an Indian board game called ashtapada. It consisted of sixty-four squares, and they would roll dice in hopes of getting their player pieces around the circuit. As it evolved, they would introduce a military flare to it, and would begin to use rajahs to lead their army of playing pieces. They would use pawns and horsemen. The game would travel with the tradesman and it would make its way to Persia. The Persians would improve on the game, and they would switch to just two players, and they would start in fixed positions and they swapped the rajah's with shah's. They would institute one of the familiar sayings that we use today, by declaring "shah mat" or the king is defeated, or as we say today, "check mate".

Chess would finally reach Europe in 711 when the Muslim army would cross the Straits of Gibraltar. The Europeans loved the game, and by 760 it would enter into France, being played by Swiss Monks and it spread all of the way to Scotland. With so many different cultures play, there was an issue of how to play it. Everyone had their own rules, and there was a need to standardize the game. Eventually the queen was given the most powerful position on the now checkered board. She could move in any direction, in as many squares as she liked. The Gupta's from India would certainly not recognize the game that it had become. And it we have now settled on the rules and the format with a set called the Staunton set, being named after the British chess player Howard Staunton.

Let's move forward in time to the 19th Century to just before the Civil War in 1860 to the town of Springfield, MO. This is where a man by the name of

Milton Bradley was starting up a printing company, with a new state-of-the-art lithography press. His new business was not as successful as he had hoped and in fact, it was driving him into a state of anxiety and depression, probably similar to how we all have felt at some point over the last couple of years. His good friend, George Tapley, introduced him to a new game to try to help lift his spirits called the Mansion of Happiness. Being a devout Methodist Episcopal, he thought that these games were sinful and took away from the godly activities of work and prayer. He would develop his own game, a religious game, which he would call the 'Checkered Game of Life.'" It was a game, like a Sunday morning Sermon, that would encourage children to lead a good life. There were sixty-four squares, white and red, with the white ones depicting virtuous sayings and earning the player points, while the other squares depicted different vices that took away points. Each player aspired to reach the "Happy Old Age" space at the top right corner of the board.

Bradley would build several hundred copies of his new game, and head to the East Coast, where there were more puritan folks that might take to the good versus evil type of game, where the good prevail. It wasn't long after reaching New York, he sold every copy he had to the department stores and stationary shops. He would return from his successful trip to New York, and he would turn his new zeal for business to get back into printing.

He would put his printing press back to work, only this time, he would print portraits of an up-and-coming politician, Abe Lincoln. But this was a different looking Lincoln that we are so familiar with. His portraits were of Abe, with a cleanly shaven face. They were very popular and he would focus his energy and

resources on these portraits and abandon his new game. All was going great until, Abe received a letter penned by an eleven-year-old girl, Grace Bedell. She wrote, "Abe grow a beard, you would look a great deal better for your face is so thin,". "All of the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husband to vote for you and then would be President." Of course he took her advice, and Bradley would have end up returning his customer's money and end up burning his large inventory.

Bradley would have to get back into the game business, which turned out to be his saving grace. He would head back to the the Big Apple and New England, to sell his, "Checkered Game of Life". In early 1861 he would have sold over forty thousand copies, and The Milton Bradley Company would become the largest game manufacturer in the United States.

As time progressed, the religious game started to lose its momentum, and the other game companies were releasing games that were more modern and fun. In the 1888, there was an emerging company, lead by George Parker, he was leading this charge to develop games that were more fun, and away from the straight-laced religious messages. The Checkered Game of Life would soon disappear from pages of The Milton Bradley catalog.

This game was not dead though, but it more or less became dormant. Fast forward with me to the beginning of the television era into the 1950's. A creative and entrepreneurial businessman, Reuben Klamer, would introduce the United States to the Hula-hoop, or what he call the Spin-O-Hoop with a little help from television star Art Linkletter. From this success Klamer would continue to look for the next trend in entertaining our children. He heard about a crayon that The

Milton Bradley Company was producing, and he would visit the Springfield headquarters in hopes of cutting a deal for a new idea for a craft kit. The President of the company wasn't interested, but asked if Klamer would be interested in developing a board game to make the company's 100 year mark. Klamer agreed and asked to be able to look through your archives for some inspiration. He would stumble across a dusty box of the Checkered Game of Life. Not being familiar with it or even how to play it, he was struck by the word "Life".

As he flew back to California, he started to work on a prototype. With the emergence of plastics, he would incorporate three-dimensional buildings and scenery onto the game board. He would design the squares into a long winding road, which would pass mountains and end up in a lavish retirement area called Millionaire Acres. Instead of rolling dice, players would spin a rainbow-colored Wheel of Fortune. With Milton Bradley's conservative religious culture, he wanted to stay away from dice, and they certainly didn't want to use them like a game that was being produced by Parker Brother's called Monopoly.

Soon after the Civil War in the mid 1870's, the country was once again divided, this time, between the workers and the ones which they worked for, like John D. Rockefeller, who owned the Standard Oil Company, or J.P. Morgan, who created the US Steel Company. He looked like a banker, dressed in a tuxedo, had a handlebar mustache, and walked with a cane, a soon to be familiar character. The rich seemed to get richer, and the workers seemed to have to work harder.

During this time, an economist published a book called "Progress and Poverty". It was a new single tax plan, where the landowners would pay a land value tax, which would allow for the government to abolish personal taxes and

then the wealth gap would be narrowed. It would raise the incomes of the workers and the wealth would be spread more evenly among the US citizens.

One of the people fighting for this new plan was Elizabeth Magie. She was a woman before her time. She was an independent who didn't need a husband to get along. Elizabeth was an inventor. At the early age of 26, she would invent a device that allowed paper to be more easily fed into a typewriter, which would be one of a very low percentage of patents filed by women at that time. She read the new popular book, and quickly became a disciple.

Soon after the turn of the century, Elizabeth designed a board game that would illustrate the affect that monopolistic landlords had on society. You have probably already guessed how the game worked, but players would buy up Railroads, utilities and lots of land as they traveled around the path of squares, buying up supplies and paying rent as they landed on their competitor's land. During their trip around the board, the players would land on the corner square marked "Labor upon Mother Earth produces wages", where they were given one hundred dollars. Or they could also land on the opposite corner, marked "No Trespassing, Go to Jail". She would go on to patent this new game in 1904 as the Landlord's Game. After traveling the country promoting her game and the single-tax movement, she became tired of the game and pitched it to Parker Brothers, who was not interested due to it political nature and the complexity of the game.

On a side note, she gave copies of her new game to the residents of an experimental town in Arden, Delaware. This was a town created with this new single tax system, where the residents would not own the land, but pay rent on it based on the value and all of the money would be reinvested back into the

community. I only mention this because, I grew up very close to this town, or what we would call a neighborhood. One of my best friends growing up, Doug Lieberman, lived there as well as a number of my classmates throughout my childhood.

One of the residents of Arden during this experiment was a professor from the University of Pennsylvania. He would use the game in his classes and the game became popular among the students. The students would start creating their own version of the game. The modifications included lumping the properties together so that they could charge double the rent, dropping the “buy necessities” squares, and changed the city park, into “free parking” with the insurgence of the automobile, and the “Mother Earth” square was replaced by, “Start or Go”. One of the students, Daniel Layman, would bring it back to his hometown of Indianapolis, and would convince a local company to produce his new game, which he called Finance.

As the game became more popular, it ended up in Atlantic City, where it would continue to morph and the land would take on names like: Baltic Avenue, or Boardwalk, and Marven Gardens. A budding entrepreneur, Charles Darrow, would get his hands on a copy and he would go on to convince a cartoonist friend of his to bring the board to life, he would call it Monopoly. Due to its early copies being made on a shoestring budget, it didn't even include player pieces, the rules would encourage the players use common household objects such as thimbles, coins and charms from their bracelets. He was successful selling it to Wanamaker's a large department store in Philadelphia (another childhood memory of me hiding in the clothes racks from my mother in our Wanamaker's

location in Wilmington, Delaware). He would also sell it to F.A.O. Schwartz and they like Wanamaker's they would sell out of their 7500 copies and order more.

With this new success, Darrow would get invited to Parker Brother's headquarters in the Flatiron building in New York. It was Parker Brother's this time who was doing the selling and pitching the idea of buying the game from Darrow. They asked if he was the sole inventor of the game, which he assured him he was, and they struck a deal. Parker Brother's would make their enhancements to the game. They would now include die cast player pieces, which included: a battleship, a cannon, a flatiron, a shoe, a top hat and a thimble. The game would become a huge success for Parker Brother's, and they decided to file for a patent, and soon realize that Darrow was not the sole inventor after all, in fact, he didn't even know who had invented it. Due to the success of the game and the value to the company, George Parker decided to personally visit the owner of the original patent, Elizabeth Magie, to convince her to sell the game for \$500, with the agreement that they would continue to produce her earlier version of the Landlord Game, and the rest is history.

As I begin to wrap up my time with you this evening, I would be remiss to not at least mention some of the other classic games like: Checkers, Backgammon, Clue, Sorry, Chutes and Ladders, Candyland, and on and on. Each of these games was probably invented by someone like Elizabeth or Milton Bradley, and all have entertained our families over the years.

So as I took you from 4,000 BC to modern day with a few games, I want to bring you back to where we started tonight. The last two years have brought my family a little bit closer. We put our phones away, turned off the TV and began

spending some good family time around a game board, or a new card game, or a new version of scrabble called Banagrams, or a good ole game of Clue. We also were introduced to a new game that does not involve a board, in fact, we are going to play it for a few minutes tonight.

I need a volunteer from each table to act as the captain. You will need a smart phone and have the ability to get to the internet and follow the instructions on the screen. Each table can work together to answer the questions and vote for your favorite answers as prompted. Each team will need to come up with an alias name so that we don't know which team is which.

Play the game....

To wrap this up in a nice bow, I think as long as humans have been on this earth, we have all had to deal with a lot. As we did as a family during this Pandemic, let me give you the (8) eight reasons why we should all play games, according to an article from Bead Game:

1. Board game playing increases brain function
2. It brings laughter and decreases stress
3. Board game playing create more happiness
4. It brings people close and strengthens relationships
5. It reminds what it's like to live in a real world
6. Playing board games lowers blood pressure
7. It teaches how to set goals and be patient, and
8. Board games enhance creativity and self-confidence