Move over “family game night.” It’s time to dust off those brain-teasing board games and grab a colleague because research shows that investing a little time “playing” before brainstorming, can pay dividends later.

BY BARRY KUDROWITZ
Play allows us to escape reality for a short time. It is a safe bubble in which we pretend, imagine, and create. It allows us to say and do things that we don’t typically say and do. It’s no wonder that many studies have found that playing makes people more creative. Below I analyze a few popular board games to demonstrate how their game play encourages innovative thinking.

**TABOO**

The game Taboo is about getting your partner to say a certain keyword without using a list of words that are commonly associated with it. For example, Player 1 would try to get Player 2 to say the word “toaster” without using the words “bread,” “appliance,” and “heat.”

At first glance, you might not see how this is creative, but it actually hits on some major creative thought processes. Player 1, in this case, is engaging in divergent thinking. This person is trying to envision everything that can possibly be related to toasters; he is making a mind map. For those who are not familiar with this concept, it is a non-linear way of organizing, visualizing, and/or generating ideas. A mind map typically takes the form of a diagram involving words and graphics that branch out radially from a central concept. In this case, the central concept is a toaster and the player is making associations around it such as bread, kitchen, breakfast, heating, etc. The creative challenge for Player 1 is to broaden his mind map to find closely associated words that are not the ones on the card.

Meanwhile, Player 2 is engaging in a very different creative process: convergent thinking. Player 2 is hearing a string of seemingly unrelated words and phrases (such as “food pops out of it,” “don’t put it in the bathtub,” and “it browns items”) and is trying to find the word that connects them all. Although Player 2 is not aware of this, she is taking part in a variation of a classic test of creativity called the Remote Associates Test (RAT). The RAT involves finding a connective link between a set of three seemingly unrelated words that have a mutually remote association. An example of a set of words could be: tap rain floor. The challenge is to find a word that can be paired with any of these three words in the set. For this given example, the word “dance” is an appropriate solution as in “tap dance,” “rain dance,” and “dance floor.”
APPLES TO APPLES
The game of Apples to Apples is about choosing a noun from a set of noun cards that best describes an adjective chosen by another player. For example Player 1 could be holding a hand of noun cards that includes things like “beauty pageant,” “the World’s fair,” and “Frankenstein’s monster.” If Player 2 turns over an adjective card that read “scary,” Player 1 would then choose a noun card from his set that he believes Player 2 would find most appropriately described as “scary.”

The heart of this game is the ability to empathize with other people. For those in the design industry, you may already be aware of how important empathy is for creating successful products and services. Designers have to understand their potential users; they need to tap into the emotional and physical needs and desires of their target audience. This typically involves extensive ethnographic research and observation. In the case of Apples to Apples, players who know each other well have a vast knowledge of each other’s preferences and opinions. The game gets more challenging when the players are not well acquainted.

In the aforementioned example, where Player 2 reveals the “scary” adjective card, Player 1 must draw conclusions about Player 2 based on whatever small observations he can make such as prior conversations, her personality, her dress, or her responses in the game. Is she the type of person that would be against beauty pageants? Is she interested in classic horror literature? Is she afraid of large crowds?

This game also involves a skillset where creativity and humor overlap: the ability to quickly find connections between seemingly unrelated things. In the realm of innovation this is called the Associative Theory of Creativity 7, in the realm of comedy this is called the Incongruity Theory of Humor 8. For something to be creative or funny, it needs to be unexpected but still make sense, in other words the association has to be distant enough to be non-obvious.

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but not so distant that it is confusing. In this example, when looking at a hand of noun cards, Player 1 is searching for any connections between these nouns and the word “scary.” In addition to trying to empathize with Player 2, Player 1 is likely trying to find a connection that is not too distant, but also not too obvious. A noun card that says “horror movies” might be too obvious of a play and therefore not creative, while a noun card like “pigeons” might be too distantly associated and therefore confusing. A noun like “Spice Girls” or “dirty diaper” may have moderate levels of association with “scary” to be deemed creative and/or humorous.

**SCATTERGORIES**

In the game of Scattergories players are given a time limit and a random letter of the alphabet and must come up with unique examples of items beginning with that letter that fit into a set of given categories. For example, if the letter for the round was “G,” Player 1 could write “Glue stick” under the category “School Supplies” or “Gremlin” under the category “Fictional Characters.”

What I love about this game is that it rewards two important elements of creative thinking: quantity and novelty. Many researchers define creativity as a combination of novelty and a secondary quality measure such as usefulness or appropriateness. Novelty and Appropriateness are exactly how to score points in Scattergories. To win, players try to have the most responses that are novel to the group, but are also still appropriate for the given categories. If any two players have written the same response to a category, those responses are invalidated.

In an idea generation session, the first ideas we think of for a given prompt/problem are typically going to be the same ideas everyone thinks of first, and thus not novel nor creative. If you ask a group of people to associate on the word “green” the majority of people will say “grass.” Scattergories discourages players from writing “elephant” or “eagle” for “Animals that start with the letter E.” Instead the game pushes players to think of the less common, more novel “egret,” “emu,” and “earthworm.”

In Scattergories the player with the most unique responses is the winner. It turns out that in the real world, the people with the most unique
responses are also winners. In my research, I have found that the ability to quickly come up with many ideas, is strongly correlated (r²=.82) with having many creative ideas.11

There are some speculations on why this might be. One theory is that people who are coming up with many ideas are bounding through the common thoughts allowing them to move on to the less common ones. Another theory is that people who come up with lots of ideas are less inhibited in their thought process and therefore the ideas they come up with are going to be less restrained. A final thought is that people who are good at making associations are going to come up with lots of ideas as well as lots of non-obvious associations. In any case, having lots of idea alternatives to choose from is bonus. As Emile Chartier said “nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it is the only one you have.”

E.B. White quoted “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”12 I hope that I have not killed your love of these classic games, but rather inspired you to play them again with a new perspective.

NOTE
These games (Taboo, Apples to Apples and Scattergories) have all received the Mensa Select award, which is given each year to five board games that are “original, challenging, and well designed.”

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REFERENCES

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