

Oh come on, it'll be fun! 10 best parlour games

From *Kim's Game*, inspired by Kipling, to *Are You There, Moriarty?* the Queen's favourite: Gyles Brandreth chooses festive larks for the family

Have I got games for you? I have and you should be grateful because play is important. Don't take my word for it. Friedrich Schiller, the great German poet and philosopher, will tell you that "man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays".

And Johan Huizinga, the Dutch historian and author of *Homo Ludens*, the definitive study of the place of play in our culture, puts it like this: "Play adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity, both for the individual — as a life function — and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and cultural associations, in short, as a cultural function. The expression of it satisfies all kinds of cultural needs."

So now you know. And if you fancy putting the theory into practice, here are my top tips for good games to play to help satisfy all your cultural needs this Christmas. Like the Sam Mendes take on the James Bond franchise: they deliver more than you have a right to expect.

ARE YOU THERE MORIARTY?

Intellectual challenge ★

Suitability All ages if mobile

Equipment 2 rolled-up newspapers

Number of players 2 plus audience

Who is your favourite screen Holmes? Benedict Cumberbatch? Robert



Downey Jr? It's a generational thing: mine is Jeremy Brett. This game has been around since at least 1900 (the year in which Holmes first featured on film) and calls for two players and an audience. The game is a duel to the death between the world's foremost consulting detective and his arch-enemy, the elusive Professor James Moriarty, "the Napoleon of Crime".

The two players are blindfolded and made to lie flat on the floor, face down, each grasping the other's left wrist with his left hand. In their right hands they each hold a weapon: a rolled-up newspaper. On the command "Go!" the first player calls out "Are you there, Moriarty?" to

Acting out Adam and Eve and the Fall in charades

“**Players take it in turns to do the walloping**

which the other player must reply "Yes". As he does so, the first player will attempt to wallop the other with a single well-aimed blow from his rolled-up newspaper, judging the second player's location by where his voice is coming from. To avoid the attack, of course, an artful player will cry "Yes" in one place and quickly roll to another (without letting go of his opponent's hand).

Players take it in turns to do the asking and walloping and the replying and rolling. The player with the greater number of direct hits after a set time is the winner.

KIM'S GAME

Intellectual challenge ★★

Suitability All ages

Equipment Tray, tea-towel and props

Number of players 2 or more

This game takes its name from Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*. The story's eponymous hero, an orphan growing up in India at the end of the 19th century, plays the game as part of his training to become a spy. The game, essentially a test of memory and observation, requires two or more players and a bit of preparation.

The preparation: Gather up 20 different objects and place them on a tray or a table. The objects can be anything small and recognisable: an apple, an orange, a cup, a saucer, a thimble, a sugar lump, a £10 note, a pen, a pencil sharpener, an egg-cup, a bar of chocolate, a playing card, a xylophone hammer, a potato. The items are placed at random and then the whole is covered with a cloth.



The play: When the preparation is complete, everybody gathers round and the cloth is removed. The players have 30 seconds to study the collection of objects in front of them before the cloth is replaced. Each player is then given a pencil and some paper with which to list all the objects that they can remember. Players score one point for each object remembered, but lose a point if they list an object that was not there.

The player scoring the highest number of points is the winner. With the variation known as *Literary Kim*, the game's the same, but instead of 20 small objects, you put ten paperback books on the tray and the players score one point for every title recalled and one point for every author.

NEWSPAPER FASHIONISTA

Creative challenge ★★☆☆

Suitability All ages

Equipment Newspapers, sticky tape

Number of players 2 or more

This is a game that aims to bring out your latent Quant, Westwood, McQueen. Each player is given a newspaper and some sticky tape, from which to make themselves a fancy-dress costume. The players have only ten minutes in which to do this.

When the time has elapsed, the players parade around the room, hips thrusting, and the winner is the one judged to have made the cleverest, most amusing, or most original costume. Bonus marks are given for any outfit that evokes a specific designer's style. (Tip: a Hussein Chalayan transformer dress always does the business here.)

PICASSO

Creative challenge ★★☆☆

Suitability All ages

Equipment Drawing materials and props

Number of players 2 or more (in pairs)

Picasso said: "Painting is a blind man's profession. He paints not what he sees, but what he feels." In this game the words of the master are taken literally. The players are divided into pairs and each couple sit back to back. One of the pair is given paper, pencil and something to act as a drawing board; the other is given an object, such as a pineapple or a rubber duck. It can be anything, so long as it is interesting.

Without telling their partner what the object is, nor what it is used for, the player must describe it: its size, shape, how it feels, etc. The partner has to draw the object on the basis of the description, following the directions as best they can. At the end of the game, either the most accurate

or most remarkable illustration wins the prize. You may end up with a minor surrealist masterpiece. Or not. Either way, no worries. "Art is noble play," according to Picasso.

WHAT'S MY NAME?

Intellectual challenge ★★

Suitability All ages

Equipment None

Number of players 2 or more

One player chooses to be a famous person, and the other players must try to find out who he is by asking him questions which he must answer as he thinks the character would. For example if you were being Popeye and you were asked what you had eaten for breakfast you would have to answer "spinach" and would probably give the game away. If you were being Peter Pan and had to answer a question about your favourite pastime, you might answer "flying", which could lead your questioners to think you were Superman or Die Fledermaus.

The aim is to survive as long as you can. Whoever guesses correctly gets to choose the next character. This is a game where you need to play fair by choosing to be a character with which the other players are likely to be familiar — playing this with Granny and choosing to be Theon Greyjoy from *Game of Thrones* is cheating.

A modern alternative is for the rest of the party to decide which person you are. They then put a Post-it Note on your forehead with that name on it. You have to ask the questions to find out who you are.

NIM

Intellectual challenge ★★☆☆

Suitability All ages

Equipment Matches

Number of players 2

From its origins in ancient China to new beginnings as one of the first-ever

Princess Elizabeth, top centre, watches two men playing *Are You There, Moriarty?* Above right: children playing blind man's buff

number in between — but only from one row at a time. The player who picks up the last match is the winner. **Variation 1** The game is played exactly as described above, but the winner is the player who forces his opponent to pick up the last match.

Variation 2 The game may start with any number of rows, containing any number of matches. Try it with five rows containing 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 matches. Enjoy. (You can't fail to.)

BULLS AND COWS

Intellectual challenge ★★☆☆

Suitability All ages so long as

numerate

Equipment Paper and pencil optional

Number of players 2

For more than a century and a half the brilliant and creative (from Lewis Carroll to Stephen Hawking) have enjoyed this game of logical deduction. The aim of the game is simply to uncover a four-digit number.

The first player thinks of a four-digit number, eg 4711 or 9362. The second player guesses by proposing any four-digit number. The first player tells him how close his guess is by saying how many "bulls" and "cows" he has scored. A bull means the guess contains a correct digit in the correct position; a cow means that the guess contains a correct digit but in the wrong position. The second player continues guessing until he has enough information to identify the mystery number. Get it? Got it? Good.

Let's say the number thought of by the first player was 9362, then the guesses and responses might go like this: "1234" — "2 cows" (that means that two of the numbers are right but they are not in the right place) "2468" — "1 bull, 1 cow" (one of the numbers is right, and another is right and in the correct spot) "1580" — "nothing" "2436" — "1 bull, 2 cows" (getting closer, three are right and one of those is in the correct spot)

empire's decision is final. The empire also chooses the title of the story and can make it as challenging ("The Transgender Cinderella") or as predictable ("*Downton Abbey*: what happened next") as they please.

HIDDEN WORDS

Intellectual challenge ★★☆☆

Suitability All ages

Equipment Paper and pencil

Number of players 2 or more

Think of a long word such as ABANDONMENT or CONTRABAND or DUNDERHEAD or SERENDIPITY and make a list of all the words you can think of that can be formed out of the letters contained in the long word. Out of ABANDONMENT alone it is possible to create more than 40 other words.

To keep it challenging, each word must contain at least four letters; proper nouns and foreign words are not allowed; and a letter may be used in any word no more than the number of times it occurs in the starter word. The player with the longest list at the end of five minutes is the winner.

FANCY UNDRESS

Intellectual challenge ★★☆☆

Suitability All ages

Equipment None

Number of players 2 or more

A Fancy Undress Party is a Fancy Dress Party with a subtle difference. The guests are invited to come sporting not the clothes but the personality of a cultural icon of the age. Adam comes dressed as he is, but behaves like Russell Brand; Eve comes in a regular outfit but acts like she is Lady Gaga. At the end of the party (or after a set period: an evening as Jeremy Corbyn, Jeremy Clarkson or Jeremy Paxman will be too taxing for some) everyone must guess who everyone else has been — and why. **Word Play** by Gyles Brandreth is published by Coronet at £14.99

“An evening as Jeremy Corbyn or Jeremy Clarkson will be too taxing for some

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cover story



"4367" — "2 bulls"
"9362" — "4 bulls. That's it!"

If you're sufficiently brilliant, you can do it all in your head. If not, you can make notes as you go. When the mystery number has been guessed, the players change roles and the first player has to guess a number thought of by the second player. The player who requires the fewer number of guesses to identify the mystery number is the winner.

AD INFINITUM
Intellectual challenge ★★★★★
Suitability All ages
Equipment Paper and pencil optional
Number of players 2

computerised games, Nim has stood the test of time. If you have not yet discovered it, you have a treat in store. It's simple, so satisfying, and because it features in Alain Renais' *Last Year in Marienbad* has become the ultimate game for the bien pensant cineaste.

For simple Nim, take 15 matches and lay them in three rows: seven in the first row, five in the second and three in the third. Each player in turn has to pick up any number of matches from any one of the rows. They may pick up one match, or the whole row, or any

This game is the answer to your problem when the dinner party conversation starts to flag. The host or hostess acts as umpire and needs to have their watch and their wits at the ready. Each guest must talk for 30 seconds, without hesitation or repetition, and at the end of the 30 seconds their neighbour must immediately pick up the story and continue it, without ever bringing it to a conclusion. Anyone who pauses, repeats themselves or apparently ends the story is out.

The last person talking is the winner and, as their reward, can end the story in exactly the way they want. The umpire decides when a pause is not a pause, a repetition not a repetition, and an ending not an ending, and the