

This is game time! With long, dark evenings and a chillier atmosphere out of doors, it is time to bring out the games that gathered dust all summer long. With no television, no interest in video games or “surfing the net,” we spend many hours reading. But, still, we find time for games.

It was always like this here on the farm. When we were children, we played card games, marbles, word games, and solved puzzles of various kinds. Most of those diversions are equally interesting to adults. Playing games is an area where age groups are often of little importance.

There are games, of course, that demand a certain degree of maturity and those that require concentration, and it is sometimes necessary for children to grow into games.

When we were growing up, we always had checkers, cards—both regular ones and Old Maid—jigsaw puzzles, a carom board, Monopoly, and lots of paper for any word games we might devise. Some of these were hybrids—games that we invented based on something we had seen or heard.

Sometimes, additional “family rules” for games and puzzles were the rule. Jigsaw puzzles, for example, followed a particular pattern. Before even two pieces that obviously went together could be joined, EVERY edge piece had to be put together properly. So, there was a border enclosing all the rest of the pieces. Only then could we start assembling the puzzle. I suspect that this might have been my idea. At least, even now, the idea of working on the interior of a jigsaw puzzle without every edge piece in place first seems just plain wrong!

Now, when evening has descended on our area, we bring out the Sorry game. This does not involve much strategy or serious thinking, but it is quick—usually—and has elements of surprise and risk in the way it works. We play three games. Then, if I can persuade Runo to play another game, I take out paper and pencils and five dice. Then, we play a triple game of Yahtze by our own rules, followed by a regular game, and another invented version. Only when the games are out of the way do we settle down with our books. Or, I get out my knitting and Runo takes down the electronic chess board he can hold on his lap and play at various levels.

One of my favorite word games when I was growing up was a paper and pencil activity we called “e.” My uncle provided us with this original name for a game that appeared out of somewhere long ago. He said that all he knew about the game was what he heard while his wife and another woman played. It would be quiet for a time, he said, and then one of them would say “e.” It is simple to set up, easy to begin, but excelling is not so simple. Each player draws a five by five grid on paper. So, there are twenty-five squares to fill in.

Taking turns calling letters, each player tries to fill in the blanks with words. They are scored across and down. A five letter word is worth twenty-five points, four letters are worth twenty, and three letter words are worth fifteen. Two letter words do not count. After all the squares are filled in, each player tallies her score.

“E” is harder than it seems. We usually had in mind a word across and one down that we worked on, hoping that the other person would call some of

the letters we needed. It was also good strategy to include some uncommon letters, especially toward the end of the game. If one had a place for a Q or Z, for example, it would probably be difficult for the other person to find a place for it after several squares were filled.

My father loved to read, but his eyesight was not good, so he needed other diversions as well. On many winter evenings, he sat at the kitchen table with a deck of cards, playing solitaire while listening to the radio and smoking a cigar.

These days, we sometimes head down the road a quarter of a mile to our nearest neighbors—my sister and brother-in-law. They bring out a deck of cards and we play a few—usually three—rounds of a bidding game called Pedro. My sister and I are partners in this bidding game, and we usually lose. Some might call it lack of concentration on our part, others might say we are not daring enough in our bidding, others could just call it bad luck. Personally, I have always wondered how much of our hands of cards are visible in the reflection in the window behind us. But, once in a while, we win—usually when there is a full moon.

It is depressing to think of people sitting and staring at a screen—television, computer, or telephone—all evening long. *National Geographic* recently quoted a Nielsen poll, that the average adult over eighteen years of age spends ten hours a day looking at a screen—and only seventeen minutes exercising. Instead, playing a game seems like a better alternative. These long fall and winter evenings lend themselves to sharpening our thinking processes while at the same time we are socializing with others—certainly also a necessary part of life.