

15 Weird & Wonderful Vintage Games to Play at Your Next Party



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NEWSLETTER

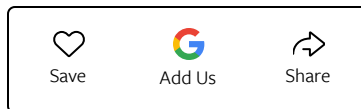


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Despite their prim and proper reputation, Victorians **knew how to party.** In 19th-century Great Britain and the United States, parlor games — **group games** played inside, and often in parlors — were typically at the center of those parties, which would rage into the early hours of the morning.

And, says **Jenna Jones**, a TikTok creator who has researched and created hundreds of videos on the Victorian age, they'd make just as fun **party games** today as ever. "It's a great way to connect," she says, especially in contrast to today's gatherings, "where people just kind of clump up in their own little groups. These games are a great way to break the ice and **meet new people**." For modern-day party hosts, she says, "turning a lot of these into drinking games would be very fun, because a lot of these games are very low stakes."

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These parlor games are also a cool way to bring some creative flair to your hosting. "You **have to be present** to play," says **Adam Shefts**, author of *Games That Time Forgot*, a detailed guide to hundreds of 19th- and 20th-century parlor games. "And not only that, but you get to be creative. Some of these games really force you to use your imagination. That's something that's kind of lost today."

Whether you're looking to host a **phone-free** evening of entertainment, **throw an unforgettable party**, or, let's face it, to find a socially acceptable way to flirt with a suitor, these 15 vintage parlor games are sure to get the party started.



Credit: Courtesy of Netflix

1. Are You There, Moriarty?

Also known as Moriarty, Are You There?, this **two-player game** is making a comeback after appearing on the Netflix series *One Day*. To play, two blindfolded players lie down head-to-head, holding the other person's hand in one hand, and a rolled-up newspaper (or paper towel tube) in the other hand. One player asks, "Are you there, Moriarty?" When the other player replies, "Yes, sir," both players attempt to thwack each other with their "weapon" until the winner successfully makes an agreed-upon number of hits. "Nothing makes me laugh more than thinking about a bunch of Victorians blindfolded hitting each other with newspapers on the head," Jones says. "It's almost like Marco Polo but out of the pool."

2. Kim's Game

This memory game was popularized by Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*, in which the titular hero plays the game while training to be a spy. To play, take a tray and place 15 unrelated small items — like "a domino, a golf ball, a small flower," Shefts says — and give players two minutes to look at the tray and memorize everything on it. Then cover the tray and give the players two more minutes to write down every item they can remember. The person who rightly recalls the most items wins. "It's so enjoyable," Shefts says. "You have families working together, or playing against each other, but it brings them together."

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3. Wink Murder

This early variation on Mafia is arguably harder: All players but one sit in a circle with their heads bowed. The remaining player, the "selector," chooses the murderer by tapping them on the head once and picks the detective by tapping them on the head twice. All players open their eyes and stand in a circle with the detective in the middle. (The "selector" does not play.) The murderer must try to "kill" other players by winking at them without the detective witnessing it, and players who are "killed" must die in a highly dramatic fashion. The detective has three guesses; if they guess incorrectly, the accused person dies. The game ends either when the murderer has killed all, or the detective correctly spots the killer. The perfect game for your *Traitors* **watch party!**

4. The Sculptor

In this classic game, everyone must stand still while one player, "the sculptor," moves each of them into whatever pose they'd like. No laughing or movement is allowed, no matter how ridiculous the pose; when a player breaks their pose or starts laughing, they become the sculptor.



Credit: From Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion, 1855, courtesy of Boston Public Library

5. Blindman's Buff

Still a famous Victorian parlor game to this day, Blindman's Buff is "a rather chaotic game," Shefts explains, noting that "it wasn't uncommon for there to be injuries or broken valuables or furniture" — so be sure to clear a large space before starting. To play, blindfold one person, spin them around three times, and set them loose to try and catch one of the other players, who are running all around. If the person catches someone, they have to try and guess who they caught. If they guess correctly, the person they caught now has to wear the blindfold; if they're wrong, they have to try to catch someone else and guess again.

6. Fictionary

Jones describes Fictionary as "just like **Balderdash**, but a lot easier to play." All you need to start is a dictionary. One player uses the dictionary to choose an obscure word and announce it. Everyone else makes up their own brief definition while the dictionary holder writes down the real one. The dictionary holder shuffles all the definitions together, real with the fake, and reads them out loud. Then everyone votes on which they think is the right one, gaining points for both correctly guessing or for writing the most popular definition. If there are no correct guesses, the dictionary holder gets a point.

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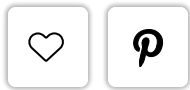
7. Squeak, Piggy, Squeak

It's no Boar on the Floor from *Succession*, but this bovine game may be equally humiliating (or fun, depending how much you have in common with Logan Roy). The "piggies" sit in a circle, while the blindfolded "farmer" spins around in the middle with a pillow. The farmer must place a pillow on a piggy's lap (without touching the piggy), say, "Squeak, piggy, squeak!" and try to guess who they've landed on while the piggy in question attempts to disguise their squeak. The game continues until the farmer guesses correctly and changes places with the piggy they've identified.

8. Change Seats!

This game is set up similarly to musical chairs, but you don't need to play music or remove any chairs. As Shefts explains, all players but one sit in a circle of chairs, while one, "the caller," stands in the center. The caller asks a seated player, "Do you love your neighbor?" If the player says "yes," their neighbors on either side can stay seated. If the player says "no," their neighbors have to stand up and compete with the caller to take a new vacant seat. The player can also say, "Yes, except one who was born in July," or

any other criteria. The players that fit whatever the description is have to jump up and change seats. The person who doesn't get a seat then becomes the caller.



Credit: [Mindie Ballard](#)

9. Forfeits

In many parlor games, players had to pay "forfeits." This system can be a game in itself by requiring everyone to "forfeit" one item — their phone, keys, wallet, bracelet, etc. One player, the judge, is blindfolded (or turned to the wall) while another player holds up someone's item and asks the judge, "What is to be done to the owner of this?" The judge has to then invent a task without knowing who they are assigning it to — whether it's 10 push-ups, singing a song, or taking a shot. This can lead to a lot of fun, and, as *Collier's Cyclopedia of Social and Commercial Information* noted in 1882, "The entire success depends upon the suitability of the penalties to the company and the circumstances." In other words, stick to "penalties" that are relatively easy, fun, and only a little embarrassing.

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10. The Minister's Cat

This parlor game is reminiscent of some modern road trip games. Players have to choose a new adjective for the minister's cat with each letter of the alphabet — so one player might say, "The minister's cat is agreeable," while the next player says, "The minister's cat is anxious," and so on, before moving to the letter B. Players are eliminated when they can't think of an adjective fast enough or if they repeat someone else's word. "For parties, [this game is] a nice way to break the ice and get people to talk about the game throughout the night with little inside jokes or callbacks," Jones says.

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Credit: From Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion, 1855, courtesy of Boston Public Library

11. Fox and Geese

This is an active game that you may want to play outside (unless your living room is as big as a Victorian parlor). You need an even number of people to play this one, so the players can stand in a circle of couples facing inward, front to back. These are the Geese. Two players will stand outside the circle — one is the Fox, and one is a Goose. Geese can run inside the circle and around it; the Fox can only run around outside the circle. To escape the Fox, a Goose must find a couple and stand in front of them inside of the circle, forcing the person on the outside of the couple (now the odd man out) to break away and run from the Fox into the circle to find another couple to join in safety. If the Goose is

tagged by the Fox as they break away from their spot in the couple or on their way to safety, they become the new Fox, and the game continues.

12. If You Love Me, Dear, Smile

Put your physical comedy skills to the test with this game, where one person ("It") must try to make everyone else in the group smile without saying a word. The "It" player must go around the table, one by one, and make funny faces or gestures to try and get their target to smile. "This was at a time when it was inappropriate to keep eye contact with someone of a different gender who you were not in a relationship with," Shefts says, "but this game allowed the unwritten rules to be broken. So it's thought to have led to many relationships because it allowed for open flirtation."

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13. Russian Scandal

This creative predecessor of "Telephone" is as difficult as you want to make it. The first player goes off in a room and writes down a short story (three to five sentences, depending on how challenging the group wants it to be). Player 2 enters and listens carefully as Player 1 reads out the story. Player 1 leaves, and Player 3 enters, listening to Player 2 recite their best recollection of the story. This continues until all players have heard some version of the story. Then everyone gathers and listens to the last player repeat the story from memory. Finally, Player 1 reads the original story off the page — likely comically different from the final version. Like other Victorian memory games, Jones notes, "when you've had a bit to drink, it's very funny to try and remember" complicated stories.

14. Poor Pussy

"This game really tickles me," Jones says. Players get in a circle, with one player, "pussy," in the center. Playing a cat, the "pussy" chooses a player in the circle and tries to make them laugh by meowing, pawing at them, and otherwise acting ridiculously catlike. Their victim must "pet" them and say, "Poor pussy, poor pussy," without laughing (it won't be easy). "Imagining your friends — or grown Victorian men — on their hands and knees pretending to be a cat is a very funny situation," Jones says.

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15. Pass the Slipper

To play this parlor game, players stand in a circle with one person in the middle, eyes closed. Everyone else passes a slipper (or another small, light item) rapidly around the circle behind their backs, keeping an eye on the center player. When the person in the middle opens their eyes, passing immediately stops, and the center player tries to guess who has the slipper. Another variation of this game called “Hands” can be played sitting around a table, where everyone passes a small object around and under a table from hand to hand until the guesser says “stop” and tries to guess who has the item.

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