

**BOARD GAMES**

Chess is hand-to-hand combat  
between two labyrinths.

—André Breton, *Free Rein (La Clé des champs)*

Some of the earliest evidence of human play can be found in the board games uncovered in ancient burial grounds or depicted in ancient drawings and carvings. Initially, these games were simple folk objects made as needed out of earth, wood, or stone. But as play became a larger part of culture, the ruling classes joined in play as well, and extraordinary game sets for kings and pharaohs evolved. These boards were made of ivory, faience, and other precious materials. Later, the mass printing techniques of the industrial revolution enabled the huge variety of board games we know today.

Early game boards remain important to critical designers not only because they reflect cultural notions of a given time but also because their play patterns continue to influence contemporary design. Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett argue that play works because the magic circle of a game defines its space and makes participation in the action of a game voluntary. By convention, a game must limit the range of stimuli players need to take in. Play fields or boards establish what space and what relevant objects will be involved. “Within this limited spatio-temporal unit the player can abandon himself to the process, acting without self-consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> From the earliest times, board games have incorporated Huizinga’s “magic circle” as well as elements of both strategy and chance in their design.

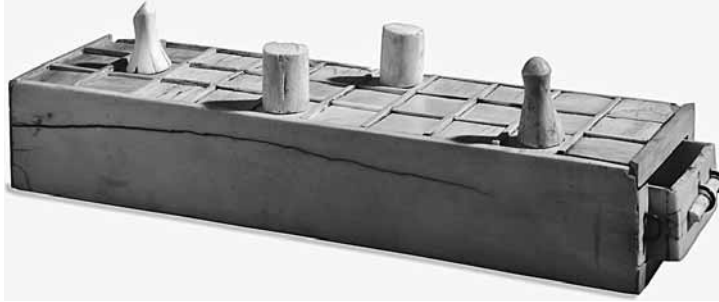
Yet board games embody fundamental differences in philosophy. Go and chess, for example, are abstract strategy games that feature “perfect information”—that is, all the information constituting the system of the game is visible on the game board at all times. Play in an abstract strategy game often unfolds as players move pieces on the board, creating a set of ongoing puzzles for other players to thwart. The earliest

board games, however, were based on an element of imperfect, or less than complete information. Many games incorporated chance. While we cannot delve into the complex nuances of the myriad game forms in existence, we can ascertain some archetypical features from prominent examples like mancala, Go, picture games, and, finally, chess.

The oldest games are found at sites of the world's ancient civilizations, Mesopotamia and Egypt, and in areas now known as Cyprus, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, and Jordan. These areas are the origin of a group of games known as *mancala*, or counting, sowing, and capture games. Other names for these kinds of games are awari, oware, warri, gebeta, qarqis, bao, and matara. Pallanguli,<sup>2</sup> or “many holes,” is a South Indian version of the game.<sup>3</sup>

“Mancala” comes from the Arabic word *naqala*, literally “to move.” The common Ghanaian name *oware* comes from a Twi legend that describes a man and woman playing the game together endlessly. To someday end all of their various games they married, hence “oware,” which means he or she marries or has a lifelong affair.<sup>4</sup> Originally, an oware or mancala “board” could be created from depressions in the earth. Later, stone benches and tablets were carved out. Moves in mancala are created as the player selects an indentation between the two rows of indentations, and, one by one, distributes a collection of beads, stones, or “seeds.”<sup>5</sup> While mancala seems simple, there are many global and regional variations, and different mancala traditions feature different rules for movement, capture, and objective.

Game play in mancala is usually symmetric, meaning that players use the same strategy and play by the same rules in order to win. H. J. R. Murray (1952) and Russ (2000) categorize these mancala types by describing the board, the number of rows used in the game, and the particular rules for capture; for instance, one may continue around the board, or stop in the storehouse. The oldest Neolithic versions of mancala were unearthed in Jordan, from the Beidha discovery in 1966 (dating from approximately 6900 BC). Nearly as old, the 'Ain Ghazal excavation of 1989 dated a game board from approximately 5800 BC.<sup>6</sup> While the boards have subtle variations in their number of holes, they are all believed to be mancala-style games. Another ancient mancala game was found in Western Iran (dating from approximately 6300–5900 BC). Rollefson argues that these finds prove that Neolithic people had leisure time and an interest in games of chance. The Neolithic period was a revolutionary era in human evolution, during which humans became recognizable *Homo sapiens* and developed an agrarian culture capable of reflecting on the whims of nature and fate. That mancala style games involve an action modeled on planting seeds or sowing



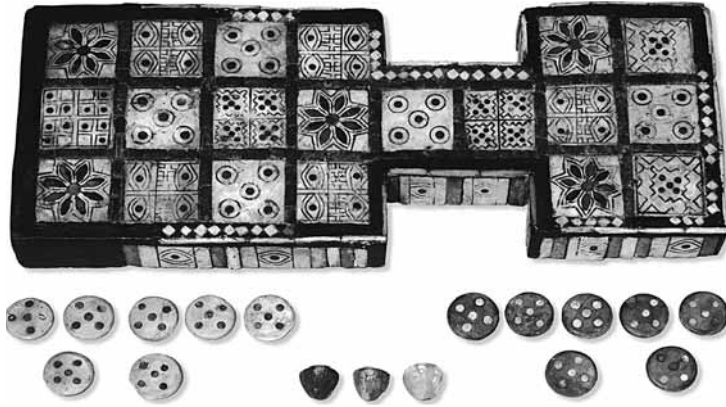
| Figure 3.1 |

Senet game, Egypt, New Kingdom, 1550–1069 BC. From the British Museum.

fields supports this claim. Mancala may be the most popular arithmetical game in the world.<sup>7</sup> In its simplest form, without counting the “seed” tokens, it can be played as a game of pure chance. Played along more complex lines, mancala is a game of strategy and, like chess and checkers, possesses “perfect information” in that all known pieces and options lie before the player.

Mancala, in being such early evidence of human play, resembles contemporary game boards by having territories (zones for play), actions (moving stones), rules (direction on board, number of tokens distributed), tokens (pieces that represent the player, the player’s team, or other types of subject positions), and feedback (amounts collected). The fact that these early mancala boards were developed and customized speaks to the aesthetic importance of games and how the *play experience* has, for thousands of years, been intertwined with aesthetics.

Both chance operations and beautiful game boards were evidenced in the ancient games of the Middle East. The Egyptian game of Senet (figure 3.1), also known as Thirty Squares, was discovered in First Dynasty tombs at Abu Rawash, ca. 3050 BC; later boards became even more decorated and ornate. The Royal Game of Ur, also known as Twenty Squares, is also beautiful, with spaces on the board exceedingly decorative, even if the exact rules are a bit of a mystery. Do the abstract symbols represent something about time or space? In H. J. R. Murray’s *A History of Board Games Other than Chess* (1952), Murray describes the Ur game found in a queen’s grave dated ca. 2600 BC. The board apparently models a race, and includes seven pieces for each player and seven tetrahedral dice, four of which produce throws with low numbers from zero to four. The game appears to provide places for capturing an opponent’s piece, as well as safe squares where players may avoid their opponents (see figure



| Figure 3.2 |

Royal Game of Ur, Ur, southern Iraq, ca. 2600–2400 BC. From the British Museum.

3.2). Squares seven and eight on the twenty-squared board are thought to represent a bridge, river, or canal that is a feature of ancient Akkadian and Egyptian game board designs.<sup>8</sup>

While Yale University archaeologist Robert S. Brumbaugh believed there to be too many “safe” spaces on this board to keep play exciting, he notes, “I have played the Ur game, and find it not too bad. (It seems to have been standard to gamble for a large stake, which of course would add some further interest to play.)”<sup>9</sup> A similar board was found in Knossos, Crete, and while Brumbaugh believed the game to be played for social and gambling purposes, Murray earlier had noted that Ur’s purpose or function was unclear.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it has never been universally established that gambling was associated with this game, but gambling is of course also intertwined with the history of play.

A board is mentioned in conjunction with the dice game to which the Roman Emperor Claudius was said to be addicted.<sup>11</sup> This game (and perhaps *all* board games) was referred to in Latin as *Alea*, and this is often mentioned in conjunction with *tabula*, hence, board game.<sup>12</sup> The material of Roman board games was usually stone or wood, or even ivory, depending on the wealth of the game owner. The Spanish documentarian Isidore also described a game called *tabula* as a Roman form of backgammon carrying the Arabic name of Nard.<sup>13</sup> Ovid described a board game, “*distans*,” as based on what would now be described as geometry.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the play pieces of Roman games were never understood as figures—that is, they lacked representational qualities of earlier games like hounds and jackals and later games like chess.

The Maori game of *Mu Torere*, said to be at least generations old, was originally played on an eight-rayed star-shaped outline etched into a piece of wood or bark. Play moves forward in a fashion similar to the British draughts or American checkers. Two players each have four *perepere*, or persons, who start on the outside of the points, and attempt to cross to the opposite side. Best (1917) posed several questions of the game and its origins. If it is an original game, not much is known of its history; if it is a modification on draughts or checkers, why was the star shape added to the play?

### The Spiritual Side of Board Games

While the focus of much humanities research in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has shifted to popular culture and, in particular, the struggle to legitimize a study of everyday life—here de Certeau, Lefebvre, and, more recently, Highmore should be noted—the study of games has lagged behind. But games are legitimate forms of media, human expression, and cultural importance, and the ways games reflect the norms and beliefs of their surrounding cultures is essential to understanding both games themselves and the insights they may provide into human experience. In this playculture approach to media, board games become one of several artifacts of material culture used to trace social practices and beliefs. Game actions and rules can be characterized as principal play features, and these foci are not unique to games but are also shared across language systems, social orders, and ties of kinship, law, and ritual.

Scholars of game history, including Murray, Brumbaugh, and Austin, have researched some of the lineage of particular games. For example, backgammon could have been influenced by both the ancient Egyptian game *Senet* and Mesopotamian *Ur*. For those trying to record how these games functioned, the rules are traced, the game pieces are codified, and the documents that reference game play are collected. What tends to be overlooked by many current scholars of games is their purpose beyond the pastime; in some cases, scholars may lose sight of the fact that certain games were not intended as pastimes at all. Even Murray, the noted and prolific twentieth-century game scholar, avoids, and even at time disparages, games' spiritual connections, noting that "it is difficult to see how the private operations of the magician could be adopted by the secular members of a tribe. I think that we must look elsewhere for the origin of most board-games."<sup>15</sup>

In the 1970s, anthropologists and play scholars Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett noted that games of chance "seem to have emerged from the divinatory aspect of religious ceremonials."<sup>16</sup> Games of chance and divination were closely aligned for many thousands of years, for humans have long sought guidance from the changeable,

powerful forces they believed may rule over one's destiny and control the probable outcomes for hunting, war, and successful harvests. Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett argue that divination brings to those who seek it a sense of possibility. Furthermore, a "man who engages in divination as a consequence feels that his available projects are more nearly able to cope with the possibilities impinging on his everyday life and as a result his experience is closer to play than to worry."<sup>17</sup>

There is evidence that ancient games involving chance often held spiritual and ritualistic importance. Senet offered board designs for two players and rules incorporating chance. Hounds and Jackals, or Fifty-Eight Holes, appeared in Egypt in the Middle Kingdom around 2000 BC and consisted of two parallel tracks of twenty-nine holes assembled in groups of five. In Hounds and Jackals, the tracks of the two players were rather independent and the goal was to simply win the race, not capture the opponent's pieces.<sup>18</sup> In a late example of a fifth-century-BC version of the game, the board is created from a sculpture of a hippopotamus, perhaps Taueret, the goddess of maternity and childbirth. The pieces shown, though not originally from this board, are topped with god-headed figures representing Anubis and Horus, and other pieces, in a fashion similar to the modern game of cribbage.<sup>19</sup>

Antiquities specialists have reconstructed the rules of the game by examining other examples of Fifty-Eight Holes found in sites from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (2040–1782 BC). To play this game, inset into the top of the hippopotamus figure in figure 3.3, players took turns moving their pin-shaped pieces forward along a path. At the tail and near the side, two special holes reversed the action, sending pieces backward on the board, and two holes at a hollow near the end offered the player an extra turn. This chance-based board game resembles games like *Snakes and Ladders* in that chance operations drive interaction, allowing fate to intervene in play.

The name of the Egyptian board game Senet (3500 BC) might also connote "passing" because it was to be played during the journey to the afterlife. The Senet board (with its metaphoric race against fate) was designed to involve chance. The examples all consist of rectangular boards of thirty squares with accompanying game pieces of clay and ivory. Two players toss wooden sticks to determine a number, and then move their game pieces around the long board in a snaking fashion.<sup>20</sup> While Senet is understood to be a social game, historical documents reveal its strong ties to rituals of Egyptian culture. Several paintings have been found that depict Senet players playing alone, or against a spirit opponent, suggesting that the game may have been played against Ra himself for the dead's fate. In this way, the game may have functioned as a spirit-medium connecting the living to the netherworld. Historians such as Piccione note that the game could be played recreationally or ritualistically.<sup>21</sup> Documentation from



| Figure 3.3 |

Senet game; Hippopotamus game, three jackal-headed batons (third intermediate period); Snake game (second dynasty). Wood, faïence. Musée du Louvre, Paris. N1605; E2710; N3043; N4265; E29891. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

the Book of the Dead depicts the player navigating what may be interpreted as various levels of death in the game.<sup>22</sup> All along, play had magical and ritualistic elements.

Elsewhere, divination is linked to some histories of the Chinese game Wéiqí. Called Go in Japan, the game is believed to have developed from divination practiced by emperors and astrologers in Zhou culture. There has long been evidence that the Shang Dynasty leaders (sixteenth–eleventh century BC) used cracks on turtle shells and in animal bones to predict agricultural harvests and weather. Divination was associated with the legendary “Yellow River Diagram” and the “Luo Record,” magic square diagrams said to have been fantastically revealed to the mythical ancestor Fu Xi while on the back of a dragon-horse and turtle.<sup>23</sup> The resemblance of these diagrams to a Go board is striking. According to game historian David Parlett in his *Oxford History of Board Games*, Go may be related “to a divinatory practice of casting black and white stones on a board representing the heavens, or earth and heaven, and interpreting the resulting patterns.<sup>24</sup> This is lent some weight by the cosmic terminology referred to by the board, which is defined along astrological or geomantic terms with the center called Tengen, or axis of heaven, the four quarters of the board surface

related to cardinal directions, and some eight specially marked points are called Hoshi, or stars. Citing the “Wang You Qing Le Ji,” or *The Carefree and Innocent Pastime Collection*, a Go manual from the early twelfth century, and one of the game’s oldest surviving documents, Fairbairn notes: “The number of all things in Nature begins with one. The points on the go board number three hundred and sixty plus one. One is the first of all living numbers. It occupies the polar point of the board around which the four quarters revolve. The other three hundred and sixty points represent the number of days in a [lunar] year. They are divided into four quarters which represent the four seasons.”<sup>25</sup>

The shift from Shang dynasty, during which divination diagrams were popular, to the Zhou dynasty, when yin and yang and other rational systems were emerging, may have helped shift an interpretation of the game from its roots in divination to its contemporary identity as a strategic game system.

If we situate the creation of early board games alongside the advent of other types of divination materials, the comparison points to a Neolithic shift in consciousness that agriculture brought to much of the world. For this generation of people, the shift was not only a technological change from food gathering to the sowing and planting of materials but also an intellectual shift, especially in the redefinition of space and time that this upheaval engendered. Agricultural planning, the saving of seeds, animal breeding and domestication, along with the abstraction of the heavens or rivers to create calendars all demonstrate new ways of understanding time. Separating hunting space into agricultural space, the division of land into fenced areas, and the invention of ploughs, irrigation, geometry, and mathematics made the abstraction of space a highly prized mental process. Board games appear to manifest these concepts and their effect on relationships, both social and physical, by presenting them in a safe, ritualized form. When encountered on a game board, challenge and competition are codified and explored within particularly strict bounds. So too were the functions of religious or spiritual rituals, including magic, shamanism, and divination. Scholars who have proposed this type of approach to the interpretation of ancient peoples and games include noted anthropologist Gary Rollefson.<sup>26</sup>

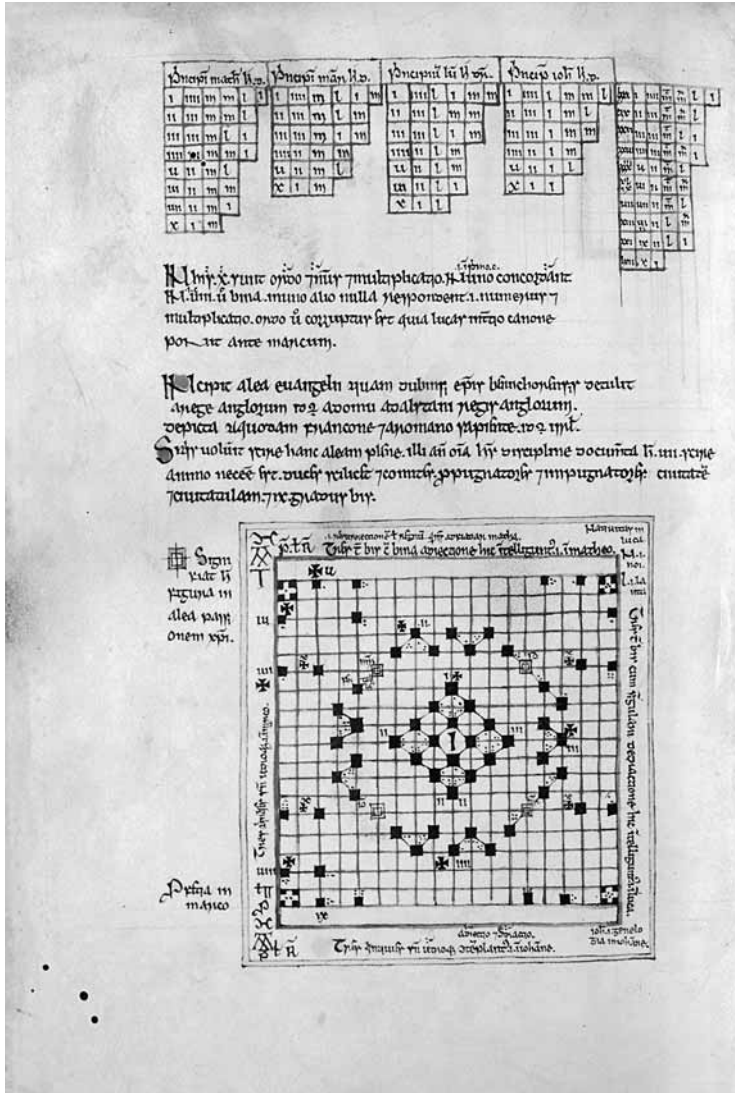
As game scholar H. J. R. Murray has noted, it was not until the early centuries AD that European scholars paid much attention to games, and not until the thirteenth century that European writers began to describe games as they were played in their respective countries.<sup>27</sup> In Europe, these activities generally date back to Roman or Celtic influences.<sup>28</sup> The most significant genre of historic European board games is



“Tafl” (table) games. Vikings considered the successful play of Tafl a valuable attribute and mention this as such in the Sagas. An abstract strategy game with perfect information, no chance, and multiple—though generally two—players, the Old Norse term *tafl* denotes a family of games usually played on a checkered or cross-shaped board. Tafl features teams of uneven strength and themes of surrounding, or seizing, the king and his army. Often thought of as precursors to chess, some examples of Tafl are the tenth-century Ballinderry game and the Brandub games of Ireland. The game Tawlbwrrd, from Wales is documented in law as game play requires eight pieces on the king’s team, but sixteen on the aggressor’s. Tablut from Lapland<sup>29</sup> and Hnefatafl in Iceland were played across much of Northern Europe until chess supplanted them during the twelfth century.<sup>30</sup> Halatafl dates from the fourteenth century and is mentioned in the Icelandic poem the Grettis Saga.<sup>31</sup> The game is related to Fidchell in Ireland, Gwyddbwyll in Wales, Fox and Geese in Britain, Germany, and France, and Sheep and Wolf in Sweden. Believed to have been a game invented by the Celtic god Lugh, certain students of Celtic culture explain Fidchell as a demonstration of how one negotiates the wall between the physical world and the spiritual.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, there is evidence that Tafl was one of the first board-game genres important enough gain a place within the government and the church.

Evidence that the church in Europe had an interest in games is plentiful. In its time, tables, a game played with dice, was played on a backgammon board. While Europeans in the Middle Ages were captivated by the game, the church fought long and hard to forbid its play. In 1254, St. Louis IX of France forbade Tafl at court, calling the game “*inbonesti ludi*.”<sup>33</sup> Thus the battle between government or religious groups and games is at least as old as this event, if not much older. However, when faced with the uncontrolled popularity of Tafl-style games in Europe, the church finally decided to use the game to further its religious message. The twelfth-century Corpus Christ College Manuscript 122 housed in Cambridge describes a form of Hnefatafl called Alea Evangelii, or “The Board Game of the Gospel.” According to game historian David Parlett, Alea Evangelii dates from the Anglo-Saxon days of England (see figure 3.4). Played on an eighteen-by-eighteen square board of nineteen-by-nineteen points, twenty-four guards are pitted against forty-eight attackers.<sup>34</sup> The manuscript describing the game from the reign of Athelstan (924–040) shows a game board arranged as a religious allegory.<sup>35</sup>

Alea Evangelii marks one of the first uses of a board game as an ideological tool. Overall, however, the Tafl games represented a significant break from other Near Eastern and Mesopotamian games in that these games emerged primarily as pure entertainment. Their links to the spiritual realm were less well documented, or were



| Figure 3.4 |

A documented source for the game Alea Evangelii is in an Anglo Saxon-era manuscript at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, dating from 1140 AD. Corpus Christi College ms. 122 ("The Corpus gospels").

even purposely obscured. As chess emerged, new board games with different intentions developed and dominated cultural life.

### **Games of the Epic and the Everyday**

At different stages of human history, then, games have played varying roles. From assisting in the development of conceptual processes, to invoking ritual, to forging a connection with time and the future, players throughout history have struggled to gain agency and understand uncertainty through game play. As the popularity of the Tafl board receded, European games other than chess evolved and flourished, some growing out of the most commonplace sort of play.

Successful post-Renaissance games built on Goose, an Italian chase or race-themed game that was invented in Florence under Francesco dei Medici in the sixteenth century. Under the Medici recommendation, Goose was adopted by Philip II of Spain and rapidly spread to other parts of Europe. Later, Goose became a model for early board games in the United States as well as other European games such as *Snakes and Ladders*. Fox and Geese—mentioned earlier as a game related to the Tafl games and their Celtic counterpart, Fidchell—was known to be a favorite of Edward IV of England (1461–1483) as well as the nineteenth century’s Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.<sup>36</sup> In a category called “fox games,” a group of board games featuring unequal opponents, one player is the fox, or aggressor. Other players control or play the numerous geese, sheep, or prey the fox tries to eat while the fox attempts to avoid the traps his opponents set all around him. Fox games are characterized by an unbalanced set of game goals and a rather abstract board. These “unbalanced games” paralleled the popularity of chess, Go, and backgammon, and their rules of play were relatively stable. Abstraction provided a universal quality to these play experiences while allowing the games to spread throughout various regions, religions, and cultures. Other board games evolved in specificity and content through the addition of detail. Some examined depicted large social concerns, others quite mundane events.

In China, games took on many forms. Printing was invented in Asia and mass-printed board games originated in China and Japan. Chinese playing cards, for example, are recorded from the year 1294 AD. Yet historian Andrew Lo has argued that card games as we know them actually emerged from the West, for they overwhelmingly share Western rule sets.<sup>37</sup> Cards used in conjunction with game boards, however, arose far earlier in Asia. Lo examines the game of “leaves” and has determined that early board games of the Tang and early Song periods incorporated both cards and dice into the play experience.<sup>38</sup> Some games, such as that depicted in figure 3.5, used more unusual elements than would a game today, such as incense.



| Figure 3.5 |

Box with equipment for a Japanese incense game, eighteenth century, the British Museum.

Games were popular in Japan as well. Examples abound of games such as the complex eighteenth-century incense game from Japan. In addition to cards, Japanese nobility, in particular, women both designed and played *awase*, meaning “matchings” or “joinings.”<sup>39</sup> These *E-awase*, or image-based games (as seen in figure 3.6) generally consisted of two alike, or related, images painted on shells. Players would then arrange the pictures in pairs or triplets, a pastime intended to be a casual, conversational game, suitable for debate, comparison, and judgment calls relying on the artistic and aesthetic sensibilities of those involved. In *E-awase*-style games, chance facilitates social exchange.

There are numerous examples of very old printed board games, or “Picture Sugoroku,” from Japan. Sugoroku was a wooden board game played in Japan in the Middle Ages, but as printing technologies flourished, the games became narrative and portable. Early games were thematically Buddhist and featured religious doctrine. Papers were printed, then glued together in squares of six to eight sheets to form table-sized boards. The gameplay is similar to *Snakes and Ladders*. According to Kakuchi: “The player who advances through the labyrinth of adventure and mystery, often in the form of a map, and reaches the end first grabs the *agari*, or prize.”<sup>40</sup> The image boards may have emerged as early as the thirteenth century via the woodblock-printing innovations of the Edo period. Like other board games, Sugoroku claims spiritual roots, and, while historical research on the game is limited in the West,

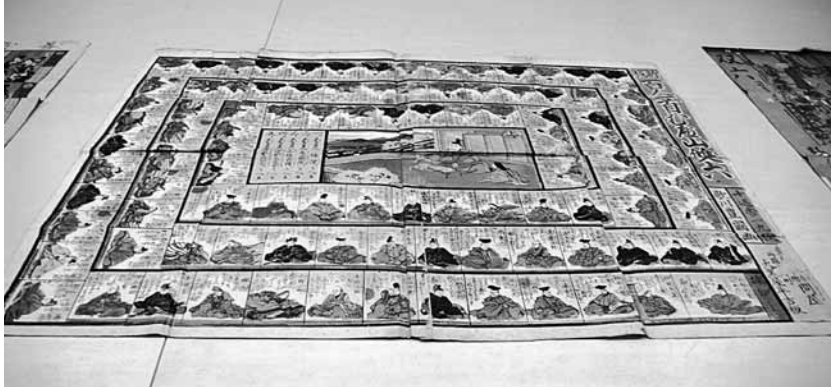


| Figure 3.6 |

Shell-matching game from the Heian period, 794–1192 AD, Tokyo National Museum.

image-based games such as Sugoroku may have been incorporated into the monastic life of Buddhist temples during the fifteenth century. There, priests used game boards to teach neophytes how the suffering that originated in human weakness could and must be conquered to reach purity and the higher goal of paradise.<sup>41</sup> Several hundred years later, religious versions of the game moved their focus to issues of everyday life, and travel to the famed city of Kyoto and other nations became game goals. Travel was a feature of *Famous Views of Edo* (1859), by the woodcut master Hiroshige II. The game depicts the city that would become known as Tokyo in beautiful miniature scenes. Game play is simple. Two or more players move counterclockwise around a picture game board to a final destination determined by a dice roll.<sup>42</sup> In another sugoroku, the player begins by leaving Japan on a journey to several Western cities, then returns to become a prominent official. In many nineteenth-century Japanese games, attaining the status of bureaucrat was a respected accomplishment.<sup>43</sup>

Noted Japanese artists of the time, including Utagawa, Hiroshige, and Hokusai, dealt with a range of topics and themes in these games, including fortune-telling.<sup>44</sup> These games remained popular during the Meiji period (1868–1912), often promoting educational themes such as world travel. Poetry served as subject matter in the board game *100 Poems by 100 Poets* (figure 3.7) by Utagawa Toyo Kuni, from the 1800s. Other game themes included religion, politics, actors, monsters, domestic life (figure 3.8), and even samurai accomplishments. In the nineteenth century, pornography



| Figure 3.7 |

A Sugoroku featuring *100 Poems by 100 Poets* by Utagawa Toyō Kuni, from the Edo period, 1603–1868 AD, Tokyo National Museum.

| Figure 3.8 |

A Sugoroku featuring everyday life, courtesy of the author.

and more found its way into *Board Game with Classification of Desirable and Undesirable Things* by Utagawa Fusatane.

Another game board depicts the *Process of Wearing Armor* by Utagawa Yoshikazu (Edo period, nineteenth century). In yet another sugoroku, the theme supports the idea of the *National Diet* (1852), and incorporated a board and cards that one draws along with the action of dice. The game of *Snow, Moon, and Flower* by Shosai Shugetsu (1885) depicts popular Kabuki actors with accompanying history and folklore scenes, while early twentieth-century examples depict naval officers and soldiers. According to curator Taro Nitta of Tokyo, the rewards displayed in sugoroku illustrate how a simple game becomes a tool for nationalist hopes: “The game is respected for its aesthetic beauty and also its historical value. For the Japanese, sugoroku, unlike most other board games, became a life experience because the game evoked national passions.”<sup>45</sup> Even everyday living became a subject of Sugoroku (see figure 3.8).

That board games could arouse national passions, become sites for social critique, or provide platforms for religious instruction may seem surprising, but these uses were typical, and as the Japanese printing revolution showed, easily made portable through the development of mass production. In the United States and Europe, the mass production of games emerged in the nineteenth century, far later than in Asia. However, commercially produced games of the period provide a window on the values, hopes, and beliefs of a country facing immigration, urbanization, and the rise of industry. The middle class, with growing incomes and expanding leisure time, encouraged children to play games to develop thinking skills and for moral instruction.<sup>46</sup> Chess, which was often recommended, will be discussed later in this chapter.

### American Games

In the United States, intact examples of nineteenth-century games are rare. The reasons for this vary, but include low print runs, wear and tear, and an unfortunate cultural devaluation that judged games as a toys and unworthy of preservation. Each of the three major North American board-game archives, the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, the New-York Historical Society, and the University of Waterloo, Ontario, contain only about two hundred games, a small sample of the rich diversity of game production in North America. In the United States, board games originally emerged from small companies or groups. Historian Margaret K. Hofer has noted in *The Games We Played: The Golden Age of Board and Table Games*: “The games that entertained Americans from the 1840s to the 1920s offer a fascinating window on the values, beliefs, and aspirations of a nation undergoing tremendous change.”<sup>47</sup> Given American play history as sketched in the last chapter, it is no wonder

that the first significant mass-produced board game in the United States also focused on domestic life. The earliest games created by the major game manufacturers focused on home and religious and moral instruction before moving on to economics, war, and the more abstract parlor and language games. The earliest nineteenth-century games, particularly games designed for children, were expected to have some instructional value and preferably some moral value as well.<sup>48</sup> As the country shifted from a rural to an urban industrial economy, the home was no longer a place of work, but the site for education, entertainment, and the instillation of values. The rise of new printing and shipping technologies made the mass production of games commercially viable. Most of the middle class could afford the games that typically ranged from twenty-five cents for small boxes of card games to as much as three dollars for games with boards and movable pieces.<sup>49</sup>

By the 1880s, the rise of game companies such as Parker Brothers, known for *Tiddlywinks* (1897), *Post Office Game* (1897), and *War at Sea* (1898), and the McLoughlin Brothers, which offered *Pilgrim's Progress* (1893) and *Soldier Ten Pins* (1890), made board games commonplace. Other popular games were *The Game of Playing Department Store* (1898), *Monopolist* (1885), *Mariner's Compass* and *Ten Up* (1885), *Advance and Retreat* (1900), *Game of the Little Volunteer* (1898), and the Grandmama's series of games including *The Sunday Game of Bible Questions* (1887). The Milton Bradley Company was known for *The Checkered Game of Life* (1860–1861), *Anagrams* (1910), and *Logomacy* (1889). J. Ottmann Lith. Co published *Jim Crow Ten Pins* (1910) and *Commerce* (1900). Selchow and Righter were the makers of *Parcheesi* and the maze game *Pigs in Clover* (1880).

*Mansion of Happiness* (figure 3.9), created in the 1830s and published in 1843 by the W. & S. B. Ives Company in Boston, was the first mass-market board game in the United States. According to game historians, it was developed by Anne W. Abbott, the daughter of a New England clergyman and a Salem, Massachusetts, native.<sup>50</sup> Abbott also invented the card game *Authors*.<sup>51</sup>

*Mansion of Happiness* was based on British, French, and Italian games like *Goose*.<sup>52</sup> However, the goal in the American version is distinct: players compete to be the first to reach “happiness,” or heaven, a large square in the center of the board. Progress is attained through good moral conduct in the context of the home. Here, good deeds lead children and their play pieces down the path to “eternal happiness” and players must beware of landing on spaces that interject, albeit through chance, the setbacks of “vices” such as cruelty and ingratitude.<sup>53</sup> In other words, game rules dictated that the household was, at least at the metaphorical level, the battleground of good versus bad behavior. A player spins the spinner to move along a path where more than half



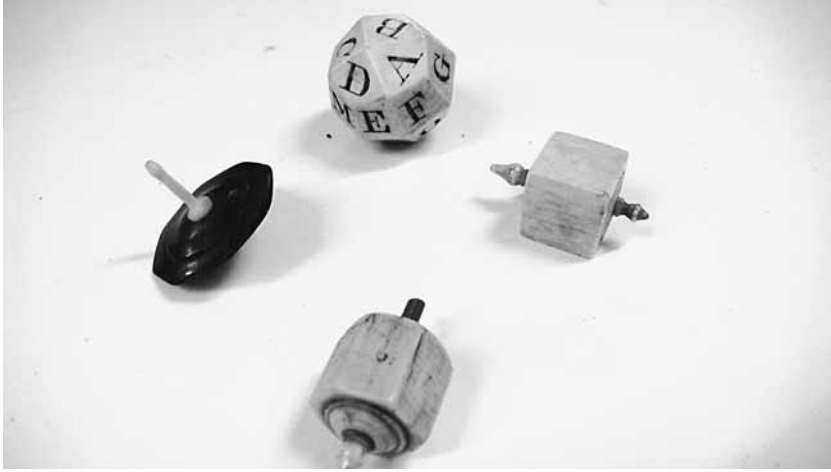


| Figure 3.9 |

*Mansion of Happiness*, 1843, 1864, print from W. & S. B. Ives Company, New York State Historical Society.

the spaces are illustrated with virtues and vices. According to the game rules, when a throw places the player in a space marked “idleness” he has to go back to “poverty.” In like manner, “pride” throws the player back to “humility.” In short, every vice is punished by an appropriate penalty and virtue is duly rewarded.<sup>54</sup> Success is attained through honesty and charity and players are wise to avoid idleness, breaking the Sabbath, and other lapses in judgment. The game’s message is clearly laid out its directions:<sup>55</sup> “Whoever possesses PIETY, HONESTY, TEMPERANCE, GRATITUDE, PRUDENCE, TRUTH, CHASTITY, SINCERITY, HUMILITY, INDUSTRY, CHARITY, HUMANITY OR GENEROSITY, is entitled to advance . . . toward the Mansion of Happiness. Whoever possesses AUDACITY, CRUELTY, IMMODESTY, OR INGRATITUDE, must return to his former station and not even *think* of Happiness, much less partake of it.”<sup>56</sup>

It was hoped that children would take these principles to heart and connect wholesome thoughts to the secular joys of competing for positions, projecting themselves into situations of good and evil, and enjoying the company of their playmates and family.<sup>57</sup> In reinforcing the high moral principles of its time, *Mansion of Happiness*, like many children’s games, was played with a spinner or “teetotum,” a type of top that, when spun, would “land” on imprinted numbers, to avoid associations with gambling that dice conveyed (see figure 3.10). The “boards,” published in the same manner



| Figure 3.10 |

Various teetotum, and a rare alphabet die, New York State Historical Society.

as maps of the era, were flexible sheets of printed paper backed with glued linen for stiffness.<sup>58</sup>

It is interesting to note that when Parker Brothers republished *Mansion of Happiness* in 1894, when the game was sixty-four years old, they removed the vices and vice-related space labels of Immodesty, Passion, Ingratitude, Cheat, Robber, Perjurer, Road to Folly, and Summit of Dissipation. Parker Brothers also replaced the women pictured in the “house of correction” with men, removed illustrations of women practicing vice, and added poverty to the list of vices.<sup>59</sup>

In 1860–1861, Milton Bradley created the morality-based game *The Checkered Game of Life*, which likewise rewarded good deeds and punished bad ones. Where *Mansion of Happiness* explored virtues and vices exclusively, the player in *The Checkered Game of Life* was expected to collect points for achieving a variety of habits, including personal virtues and business sense, one goal being a “Happy Old Age,” worth fifty points.<sup>60</sup> It took 100 points to win the game. Wealth, the second-highest point space, was worth ten points, Perseverance, Success, Happiness, Honor, College, and Fat Office brought five points, and Matrimony and Truth were pointless. Other notable board games from the period include *The Yankee Pedlar*, or *What Do You Buy?*, released by John McLoughlin in 1850 as the phenomenon of the department store rose to prominence. Parker Brothers’ *The Game of Playing Department Store* (1898) asked players to purchase the most goods possible during a shopping trip.<sup>61</sup> Alongside

dolls and paper playhouses, these mass-produced board games were played in a grassroots or homespun fashion. Play for children centered on the home as the heart of both morality and economic consumption.<sup>62</sup>

Other early games used social interests and capitalist fable in their design. Take, for example, the McLoughlin Brothers' 1883 game, *Bulls and Bears: The Great Wall Street Game* (figure 3.11). As Hofer notes, "By the 1880s, wealth had emerged as the defining characteristic of success in American games, as in life."<sup>63</sup> Players took on the roles of speculators, bankers, and brokers and the game incorporated caricatures of railroad magnates William Henry Vanderbilt and Jay Gould as well as the investor Cyrus Field. Political cartoonists of the time lampooned the three as a critique against monopolistic railroad policies that prevented market competition and raised national costs for shipping.

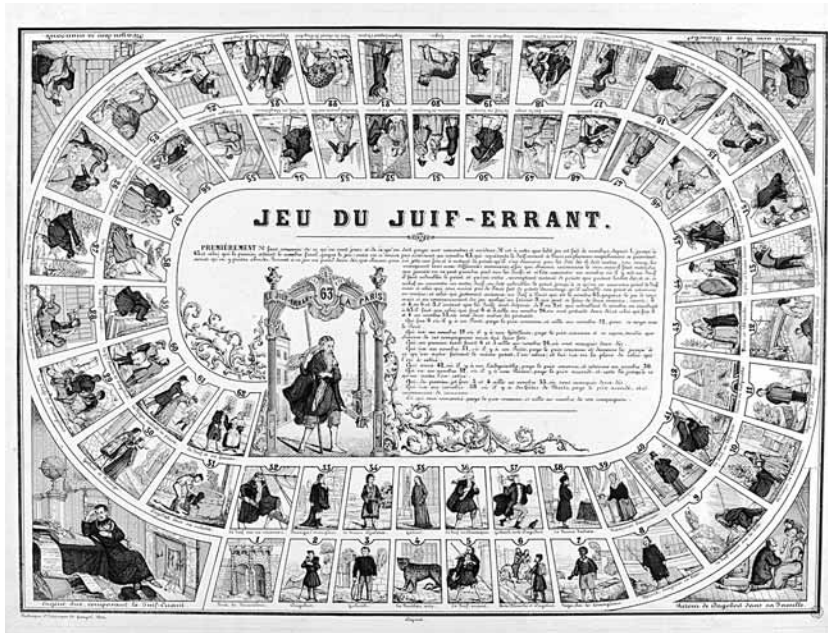
While games in the United States were focused on morality and behavior, many European board games recounted folktales and historical events. Encounters with Carthophilus or Ahasuerus, the mythological "Wandering Jew," were purported by Christians throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. According to a folk tale, this Ancient Mariner figure insulted Jesus on his way to the cross, and became an immortal due to a curse from Jesus. Sightings used to occur across Europe, particularly in the Middle Ages, with documented visits from Moscow and every Western European city, including London.<sup>64</sup> By the nineteenth century, most sightings of the Wandering Jew were associated with the mentally ill, but the legend became celebrated in cultural forms. Author Eugène Sue wrote his own version of the anti-Semitic tale, *Le Juif Errant*, which was serialized in 1844–1845. In his narrative, the Wandering Jew (whose name to Medieval Jews was a reference to a fool) and his sister are bound to protect the Rennepont family, for if this family leaves the earth, both the Wanderer and his sister will lose their immortality. The Jesuits have persecuted the family, which has grown and its members dispersed to become generals, an Indian prince, a workman, and even a Jesuit missionary in the Americas. Meanwhile, there is a large fortune to be gained by the remaining members of the family, and the Jesuits and their henchmen are hiding all around, attempting to acquire the funds. The immortal Wandering Jew and his sister help the family at crucial moments such as when they are about to be "scalped" by the Native Americans, or have been sentenced to prison. The serialized narrative has plenty of obstacles and adventure while reinforcing cultural biases.

Sue's sensationalist narrative was taken up in the game *Le Juif Errant*, or *The Wandering Jew* (1852–1858). Around the game board (figure 3.12), players encounter the Wandering Jew and events from the novel. This game is similar to "Round the World" games. In it, the Jew figure appears looking like stereotypical versions of Moses, with a



| Figure 3.11 |

*Bulls and Bears: The Great Wall Street Game*, 1883, from the McLoughlin Brothers. New York State Historical Society.



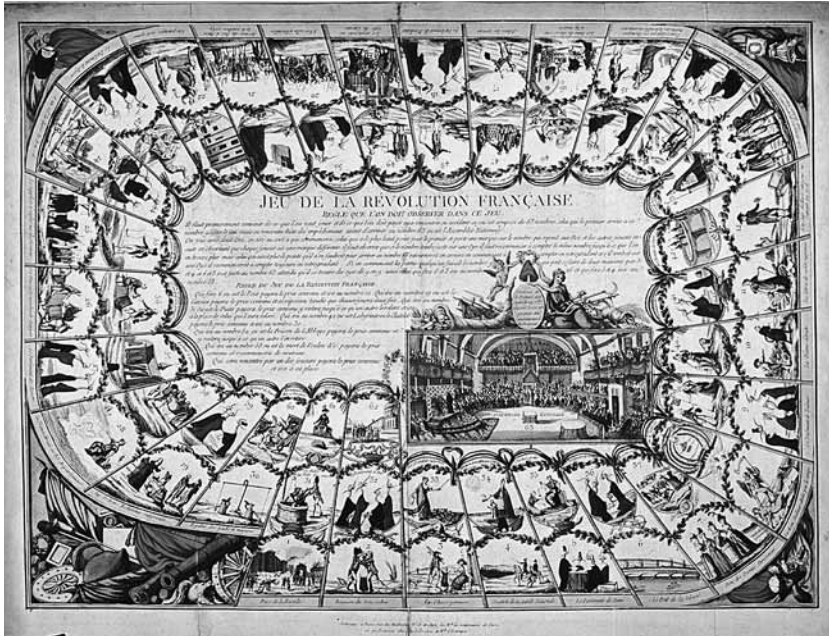
| Figure 3.12 |

*The Wandering Jew game, 1852–1858. 44.5 × 53.6 cm. 53.86.3155D. Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, Paris. Photo: Thierry Le Mage. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.*

windswept cape and long hair. He appears like a ghost at castles, in the middle of a war zone, and other locations while the various nonwandering characters lounge about in classic French drawing rooms. The Wandering Jew also came to represent the cholera epidemic—wherever he goes, cholera comes in his wake, and this must have something to do with the design.

Similar in structure, the French game of *Jeu de la Révolution*, or *The French Revolution Game* (ca. 1850s), is a variation on the well-known *Jeu de l'Oie*, the French version of *Snakes and Ladders*. The players move along a path made of squares, and move ahead using a die thrown alternatively by each player (figure 3.13). The first player to reach the end of the path is the winner; on the way, if a player lands on the “jail” square, he or she must wait there until another player is jailed, replacing the player. In *Jeu de la Révolution*, the end of the path is the National Assembly.

The use of game design as critique took hold among game designers, though some of their productions would embarrass and offend audiences today. *Stanley's March Across the Dark Continent for the Relief of Emin Pasha* (1890) is a board game

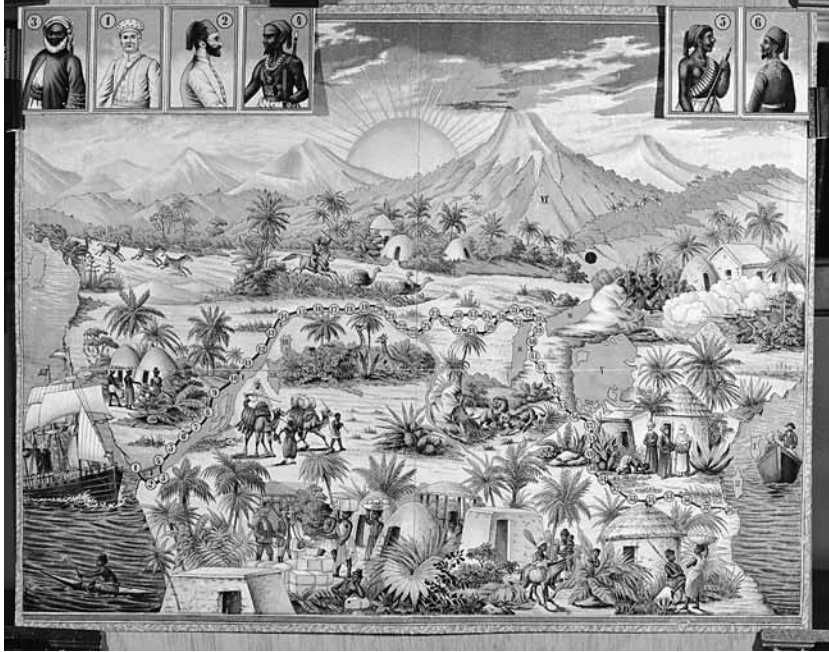


| Figure 3.13 |

*The French Revolution Game*, ca. 1850, Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Photo: Agence Bulloz. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

that depicts the journey of British-born Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904) down the Congo to Lake Victoria in Africa (figure 3.14). Stanley was known as a ruthless explorer who traversed Africa looking for ways Europe could pillage the continent during its colonial incursions.

The game box depicts Stanley with a chain of African people trailing behind him, carrying his bags, and includes playing pieces representing a white officer leading a group of black porters. Here the classic morality game or travel game has been reskinned to foster racist beliefs and a justification for colonialism. Contemporary journalists noted of the game: “Innocent fun when it was created, it is loaded with different meanings today.”<sup>65</sup> But like most problematic media representing racial stereotypes, in fact the game was not innocent when it was released. Since the rise of pictorial board games, they have been used to educate and inform, from a particular point of view, through their play; game scholar Ian Bogost uses the term “persuasive” in this regard. Games clearly can embed racial and cultural bias under the guise



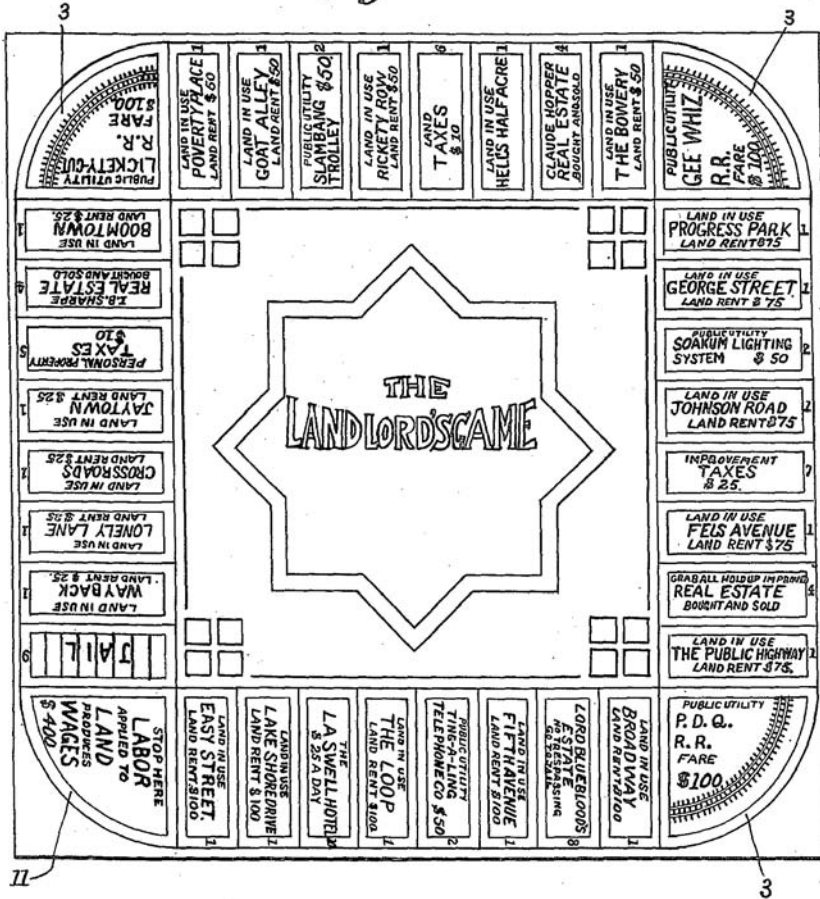
| Figure 3.14 |

*The Conquest of Africa*, board game based on the travels of Sir Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904) and David Livingstone (1813–1873), color engraving by French School, nineteenth century. © Private Collection/Archives Charmet/The Bridgeman Art Library. Nationality/copyright status: French/out of copyright.

of innocent play, and they must be continually examined for this ugly tendency. Too often, play is used as a “loophole” for media, a place where racism, sexism, and classism appear in the hopes they will be tolerated as less problematic—since, after all, “it’s only a game.” Hopefully, a look at these historic examples sheds light on present-day, less-than-innocent representations in games.

*The Landlord’s Game* was the first game to be granted a U.S. patent, in 1904, by Elizabeth (Lizzie) Magie, a Quaker woman from Virginia. Magie invented *The Landlord’s Game* to promote the social ideas behind the Single Tax Movement (figure 3.15). Magie was a follower of political economist and San Francisco journalist Henry George. Disturbed by poverty in California in a time of otherwise economic prosperity, George wrote a book titled *Progress and Poverty* (1879), declaring the fundamental cause of poverty to be land monopoly. Instead of confiscating all land, George proposed a single, high, uniform tax be applied on all land, raw or developed. The belief

Fig. 1.



INVENTOR.  
*Elizabeth Magie Phillips,*  
 BY *John A. Stanley*  
 ATTORNEYS.

| Figure 3.15 |

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Magie was issued a patent in 1904 for *The Landlord's Game*, the precursor to the later *Monopoly*. This is her September 23, 1924, patent drawing of the board, with improvements to the game. Photo: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.



was that this “Single Tax” would discourage speculation, decrease land prices, and provide revenue for the state.<sup>66</sup> George positioned his system as a form of “pure capitalism” that would allow for free trade and fully and evenly competitive markets. The game based on George’s principles and designed by Magie encouraged player modifications depending on their city or region, and became a success.

In 1924, Magie brought *The Landlord’s Game* to a large commercial publisher, Parker Brothers game company, based in Salem, Massachusetts. But Parker was unimpressed, and told Magie her game was too complicated, too educational, and wasn’t at all fun. Worse, the game was also political, which to Parker meant high risk in the commercial market. Thus, the game was rejected for publication. But locally, the game endured (in the Midwest, Pennsylvania, and Atlantic City, New Jersey), was used by college professors and their students, and took on a cult following during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly after the great stock market crash of 1929.

Charles Brace Darrow played the Atlantic City version, created his own version with new graphics, and by 1934, was selling his boxed game at Wanamaker’s Department Store in Philadelphia. Darrow’s game, entitled *Monopoly*, is enormously similar to *The Landlord’s Game*. Each board offers a single path of forty spaces. Each has four railroads and two utilities, water and electric. Each offers rental properties whose values increase. Each board also includes a park space, a jail space, and a “go to jail” space. Darrow filed a patent on his modification, and sold his game to Parker Brothers, now under President Robert Barton. Later, Magie’s patent was also purchased (albeit for a low price) to acknowledge her prior rights. Parker Brothers released the first version of the *Monopoly* game in 1933. By 1935, half a million copies had sold.

*Monopoly* as a framework seems to breed a sense of subversion, perhaps because of its original intention. Economics professor Ralph Anspach invented *Anti-Monopoly* in 1974, packaged in a way that bore a strong resemblance to the original *Monopoly*. Anspach had effectively reskinned the game with new language. One space, for example, instructs players to “Go to Price War,” instead of jail. Rewritten, the game’s goal is to challenge the concept of monopoly that underpins the game *Monopoly*.<sup>67</sup> “I tried to find a game which would be just as much fun as Monopoly but would show the dark side of monopolies,” Anspach remembers. “After some students challenged me at my university, I decided to fill the gap by creating a game which is against monopolists.”<sup>68</sup>

*Anti-Monopoly* reverses familiar conventions. The board starts in a state of monopoly and it is up to the players to compete in a style of free enterprise to return the game state back to a competitive, free-market system. When *Anti-Monopoly* appeared, Parker Brothers claimed trademark violation. In 1977, the district court ruled in favor of Parker Brothers, and a series of legal reinforcements and reversals continued.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, Anspach settled out of court and continued to sell his game, maintaining the tradition of game as protest, much as Lizzie Magie had done years ago. Another *Monopoly*-based game, *Class Struggle* by Bertell Ollman, was released in 1978 to help “prepare for life in capitalist America.” In this game, Workers are those who produce (items such as shoes, cars, etc.) and Capitalists are the owners of the machines and factories with which these items are created. These two roles represent the Major Classes. As the Workers unite, they take power from other Capitalist players; if they do not unite, the Capitalist side wins. According to Ollman’s rules, “‘Class Struggle’ reflects the real struggle between the classes in our society. THE OBJECT OF THE GAME IS TO WIN THE REVOLUTION . . . ULTIMATELY.”<sup>70</sup>

### Artists and Surreal Games

Let’s get back to the early twentieth century. With the mass production of graphic materials, board games continued to grow in popularity. In the early part of the twentieth century, World War I, scientific developments, and the increasing influence of the writings of Sigmund Freud brought new interest in the unconscious and new experiments with play. Games became an important part of this exploration of the internal life, as games consistently reflect both the culture in which they were created and, through play, the present context as well. Artists have used game as a medium of exploration and expression for over one hundred years. Like art, games tend to reinforce larger cultural influences. Artists, especially those who followed the Surrealist and Fluxus movements, also tend to play games as a form of recreation and research. Furthermore, artists tend to be especially critical of the ways games are tied to social structures, economies, and ideas of their times.

In his mid-century study *Man, Play and Games*, the French theorist Roger Caillois lays the groundwork for the study of a range of play behaviors. Caillois argues that various play forms that emerged in the West have incorporated play qualities he describes as “a taste for gratuitous difficulty.”<sup>71</sup> Here, Caillois addresses games designed for the mastery of a special skill or activity, typically leading to the discovery of some sort of satisfactory conclusion. Even when fictional or abstract, puzzles, math problems, wordplay, board games, and particularly games of strategy seem to point to the satisfaction inherent in successful completion of challenges. The more radical and political twentieth-century artists, such as the well-known Dada and Surrealist groups, balked at these challenges. Though only a few board games were formulated, Dada artists, brought together by the upheaval of the world war in Europe, were playful and absurd in their questioning of tradition, culture, and the role of art.

Surrealists, however, emerging under the leadership of writer, artist, and organizer André Breton and others during the 1920s, explored games through two prominent lines of inquiry. First, the Surrealists emphasized the playfulness of Dada through the use of chance and juxtaposition. But Surrealists were also concerned with the internal workings of the mind and encouraged a deep focus on the subconscious. Relying on the work of Sigmund Freud, and recognizing the importance of human perceptions of things and events, Breton, who had studied psychology and worked during part of World War I in a neurological ward, wrote the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) and within four years published an unofficial case study of a mentally ill woman, titled *Nadja* (1928). After the now-famous inaugural manifestos of the early 1920s, several of the artists associated with Dada, among them the German-French sculptor Jean “Hans” Arp, moved on to participate in the Surrealist movement.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to writing *Nadja*, Breton worked with Philippe Soupault to coauthor the book *The Magnetic Fields* (1919), which some believe launched the Surrealist movement. With Louis Aragon, Breton and Soupault founded *Literature* (1919), the review that would become the standard forum for disillusioned intellectuals of the day. Within the pages of *Literature*, the Surrealists blamed the culture of the bourgeois as the primary cause of World War I.

Practices of automatic composition, game operations, and chance or aleatoric methods may have been used by artists before the 1920s; the Surrealists were aware of new trends in art and aesthetics like Futurism and Constructivism, but their focus on themes of the unconscious was novel, intense, and rooted in the budding field of psychoanalysis. In actuality, as organized civil society increases its “high” culture and sophisticated pleasures, the availability and intensity of daily pleasure appears to diminish. To twentieth-century critic Walter Benjamin, it is only through the intensification of everyday experiences that social change can occur. Play, in this case, could function not only to attract players from across the social spectrum but also to revolutionize culture by expressing what might otherwise manifest as dangerously repressed desires. It is precisely such psychic needs that were explored by the Surrealists through gaming operations and game methods. Surrealist art and literature stressed unconscious and irrational methods for creating art through processes of automatism, chance, and interruption. “Surrealism is not a poetic form,” wrote the Surrealists in their manifesto. “It is a scream of the mind finding itself again and it intends to desperately crush its shackles with artificial hammers, if need be.”<sup>73</sup> A fascination with play and how play invoked and evoked unconscious processes was the focus of much of Surrealist practice. In fact, members of the “Bureau of Surrealist Research” believed they could



| Figure 3.16 |

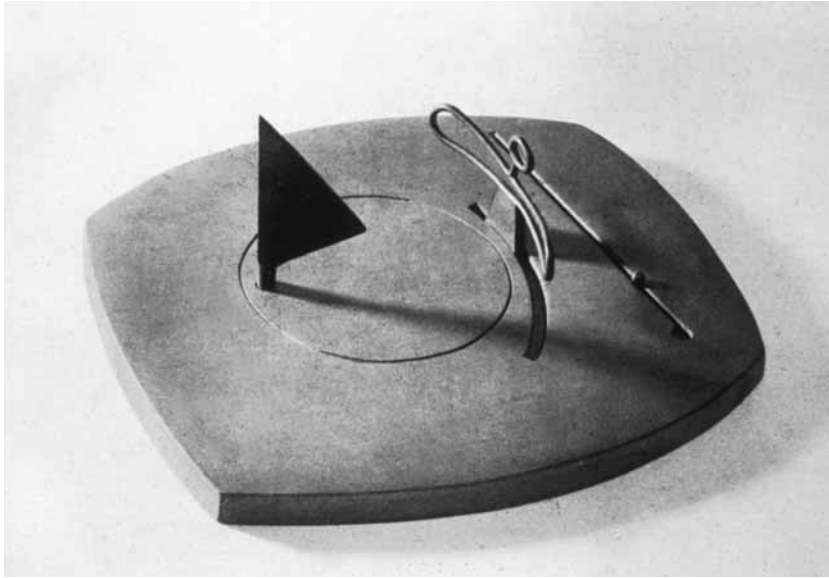
Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), *Circuit*, 1931. Wood, 4.5 × 48.5 × 47 cm. AM1987-557. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Photo: Adam Rzepka. Photo credit: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY. © ARS, NY.

achieve the “total liberation of the mind” through interactivity and multidisciplinary investigation.

Critical play, then, became the creative goal of diverse groups of artists and thinkers linked in the Surrealist artists’ network.<sup>74</sup> Game-like images proliferated in Surrealist works. For example, in the paintings of Kay Sage, landscapes take on properties of board games as though alluding to chance and strategy as significant components in human nature.

With the goal of systematizing art in ways that psychoanalysis had achieved in science,<sup>75</sup> Surrealist artists sought to unite the worlds of fantasy and dream with that of everyday existence through an artistic interaction that was obsessed with music, film, and, in particular, games. Like the ancients, who saw games as a way to connect with the powers of fate, chance, and the afterlife, Surrealists believed that games might help everyone—artists, scientists, politician, even farmers, tap into the spiritual realm and the human unconscious. “I believe,” Breton once said, “in the future resolution of the states of dream and reality—in appearance so contradictory—in a sort of absolute reality, or *surréalité*.”<sup>76</sup>

Several artists engaged with Surrealism made artworks related to board games. Two prominent examples are Joseph Cornell’s *Jouet surréaliste* (1932) and Charles Shaw’s shadowbox game *Montage* (1935). *Montage* incorporated playing cards, clay pipes, and ivory discs, all housed in a wooden box.<sup>77</sup> In a series of game-board



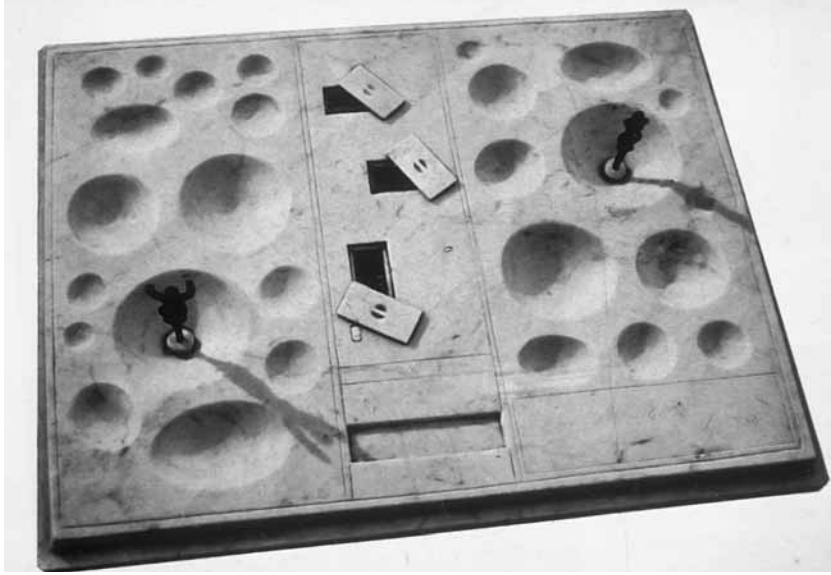
| Figure 3.17 |

Alberto Giacometti, *Man, Woman, Child*, 1931. © ARS, NY.

sculptures created at around the same time the portable pinball machine was developed, Alberto Giacometti showed an early kind of “conversation” between art and the popular culture’s interest in play.

Giacometti’s work *Circuit* (1931) was among the first of these board-game artworks (figure 3.16). The game board consists of a simple platform with an ellipse-shaped groove carved into it. A ball is placed on the groove, and can therefore roll continually around the path inscribed on the board. The board contains one more element, however: an indentation, or a possible goal, which is located outside the circuit the ball traverses. This possible end state, or destination, is alluded to, but designed to be physically unattainable. The ball’s trajectory is endless and insatiable, operating within a closed system. Giacometti’s *Man, Woman, and Child* (1931) can never be on the same interactive plane (figure 3.17); *Point to the Eye* (1931–1932) was another game-influenced work expressing ideas of frustration—in this case, the suspended state of near-torture. Permanently poised near a skull, pointing right to the eye, is a large, sharp spear.

Beginning in 1931, Giacometti wrote for Breton’s Surrealist periodical, *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. He, like other artists of the time, tested the ways in



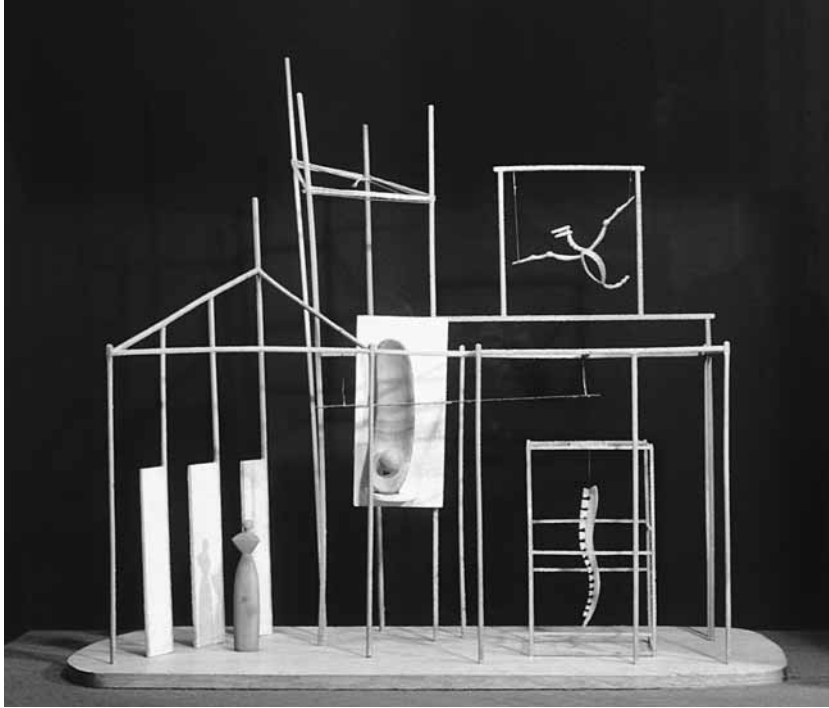
| Figure 3.18 |

Alberto Giacometti, *No More Play (On ne Joue Plus)*, 1932. © ARS, NY.

which games could access the nature of being human. His topographic boards, with their limited moving parts and constrained trajectories, can be read as statements on the closed system of art and on the closed nature of the larger system referred to as the human condition. The stunted possibilities and frustrating distances that frame these works cast the game concept of agency in a pessimistic light.

Through Giacometti, it is easy to see the dark and macabre side in play environments. In *No More Play* (1932), death is the theme, but this theme is played out in the landscape of the game board (figure 3.18). The title in French is *On ne Joue Plus*, which means that one is no longer playing.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the board resembles more a war zone than a puzzle game. Thin human figures hover amid the larger of the holes on either combatant's side. *No More Play* (1932) goes far to juxtapose the whimsical board game and the macabre theme of war. The bombed-out “no man's land” dominating the center of the board opens to reveal human graves.

Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) curators have lauded Giacometti's *The Palace at 4AM* (1932) for its “cage-like” sculpture, and cite this piece as his most Surrealist work (figure 3.19). Not only does the sculpture step between actual space and the imagination, but the process Giacometti used in its creation was equally surreal. It was only



| Figure 3.19 |

Alberto Giacometti, *The Palace at 4AM*, 1932. © ARS, NY.

after the fact that works like *The Palace* represented “the tangled simultaneity of events in our memories.”<sup>79</sup>

These game boards represent the last of Giacometti’s Surrealist games. Beginning with his “disagreeable objects” in the 1920s, historian Christian Klemm and others suggest that the artist’s playfulness gave way to darker and more sinister ideas. These later pieces become less abstract and focus instead on “real terms as sections of a board game or mechanical constructions.”<sup>80</sup> These works use the idea of games as systems for critical thinking or as systems that explore the folly of human choice, incorporating friendly, childlike doll-play paradigms with war, imprisonment, and death. But Giacometti’s game boards also reflect domestic play and the popular games of the time. The Surrealists’ fondness for games could have, at least in part, been related to the long waiting periods experienced by European artists applying for visas to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Mexico in their flight from war. Improvising

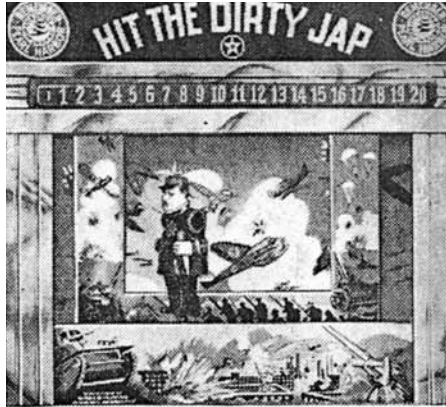
chess sets out of found materials, amusing themselves through language games—these activities recall the uncanny relationship of artist to prisoner during the early twentieth century. Surrealists took their play seriously, but their games could have been a means of survival from catastrophe.

### Games and Hard Times

While Giacometti was developing his game boards, and the Surrealist artists were honing their play performances, the popularity of games continued to rise around the world. Part of what makes play meaningful is the social and cultural context in which a play takes place. In *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman state, “*Meaningful play* occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both *discernable* and *integrated* into the larger context of the game.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore, changes in any larger social situation, such as a severe economic depression, may signal profound changes in games. Sales of board games such as *Monopoly* increased dramatically during the Great Depression in the United States, while the game pachinko was a favorite abroad in countries such as Japan during those same hard economic times. It seems the more that economies struggled, the more the sales of games increased.<sup>82</sup>

Pinball gained widespread popularity in the United States, United Kingdom, and France, mass-produced as a popular pastime for military men. Writes Roger C. Sharpe: “Pinball is like making love: It demands the complete concentration and total emotional involvement of the player. Nothing else will do.”<sup>83</sup> The game was invented in the United Kingdom in 1871 by Montague Redgrave, who added a coiled spring, plunger, and inclined play board to a game previously known as Bagatelle. After 1942, manufacturers such as Bally, Gottlieb, Genco, Exhibit, Keeney, and Stoner equipped their factories to create gun parts, communications technologies, and other defense products instead of producing pinball games. Existing game machines, however, were updated with paint and new graphics that reflected wartime themes. One example was Genco’s conversion of *Ten Spot* (1941), where the company reskinned *Ten Spot* to become “*Smack the Japs*,” a “Victory Game Conversion” (June 1943). There were several conversion units for sale for the Seeburg game company’s shooting range games. Seeburg sold *Chicken Sam* and *Jailbird* gun games. These were shooting games that used a “ray-o-lite” from a toy rifle to “shoot” moving figures and targets, which were housed several feet away from the player. As seen in figure 3.20, the typical wildlife featured in the original game is replaced with a changeover unit to make the game politically relevant during the Second World War. Touted in advertising as “life-like” and “realistic,” the buck-toothed toy figure that is supposed to look like the enemy moves back and forth, ready for participants to aim and fire through a glass lens that





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| Figure 3.20 |

A game conversion for a Seeburg *Chicken Sam* game, 1940s. Various manufacturers jumped into the "game conversion" business during the war, for several types of arcade style games.

allows light to pass through the toy body. “This Jap is so mean looking you just can’t help shooting at him,” notes the advertising small print in one *Trap the Jap* conversion ad. Another of the changeover units is called *Keep Tokyo Bombed*.

As this conversion of *Chicken Sam* shows, even a simple, old fashioned arcade game—games that seem to focus far more on the mechanisms of play over any content—can in fact become political. This was true even for Parker Brothers, which released a series of reskinned board games such as *War at Sea* and *Little Soldier Boy*. Games often became political, some designed and even reskinned to reflect the necessary “patriotic” theme of the moment. As shown, in wartime, racial slurs are one of the commonplace ways a population articulated its fear of the other and its taking of sides.

### Games and Contemporary Artists

Hundreds of artists of varying disciplines have appropriated board games in their work, finding the space of games and the game metaphor not only something accessible to audiences but also a disciplined frame for creation. In a further insight, the avant-garde artists of the Fluxus group in the 1960s to 1970s saw the forces of critical play—unplaying, reskinning, and rewriting—as the most urgent quality of art itself. Much like the earlier Dadaists, Fluxus represented an international web of artists who connected to each other and their followers through every type of medium and discipline imaginable. Games, bound by limited information, an emphasis on play, and a manifestation as either closed or open systems, struck Fluxus artists as a natural path for the creation of a vocabulary based on, or explicitly outside, popular cultural rules and expectations. Fluxus artists were quick to see that games lay between the rational and the absurd, between mobility and fixed trajectories, and between logic and chance. Furthermore, Fluxus artists understood games as processes as well as outcomes, capable of disseminating even the most elusive of Fluxus ideas. Opposed to seriousness and the ossification of art as object, Fluxus artists sought a new art practice, one that was open to humor, intimacy, player agency, and various aspects of performance. “Because games lend themselves to humor, often require physical participation, and undermine the seriousness of art that certain Fluxus artists opposed, they were a perfect medium for Fluxus expression and experimentation.”<sup>84</sup>

Often, Fluxus games, and games by non-Fluxus contemporary artists, stemmed from performative events sometimes called “happenings” (discussed in chapter 5) or took the form of Fluxkits: boxes holding play items and, possibly, instructions. These were a range of inexpensive, even disposable, interactive game-like works, and Flux games were performed at Fluxus events. The Fluxkits offered players an assortment



| Figure 3.21 |

George Brecht (1926–2008), *Water Yam*, Fluxus No. C, 1963, wooden box containing paper cards. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; gift of Dr. Abraham M. Friedman.

of playing instructions that were often described as scores. Game pieces, everyday objects, and altered existing games such as new card decks, most of which are impossible to play in any predicted way, were other typical features.

Artist George Brecht made many collections of scores, instructions, and game boxes including his *Games and Puzzles—Swim Puzzle Box Game* (1965). Its instruction or score advised players to “arrange the beads in such a way the word CUAL never occurs.” Paradoxically, the box contained no beads or letters, only a seashell, making the score impossible to execute. Either players cannot play this game, or they have already won this impossible challenge. One common Fluxus game form was the design of a rule set that left both the realization of a game and its outcome entirely up to its players.

Brecht’s *Water Yam* box (1963–1969), one of the most famous of the Fluxkits, is another box filled with instructions and event scores that provided open-ended tasks and performances one can select and perform (figure 3.21). The success of each task or performance is really up to the performers, the group, and the intervention of chance. With about seventy event scores in the box, Brecht’s Fluxkit provides another example



| Figure 3.22a, b |

George Maciunas, American (1931–1978); Eric Andersen, Danish (b. 1943); George Brecht, American (1926–2008); Ben Vautier, Swiss (b. 1935); John Cavanaugh (unknown, twentieth century); Willem de Ridder, Dutch (b. 1942); Robert Filliou, French (1926–1987); Vera Spoorri (unknown, twentieth century); Roland Topor, French (1938–1997); Albert M. Fine, American (1932–1987); Ken Friedman, American (b. 1949); Hi Red Center, Japanese, founded 1963; John Lennon, British (1940–1980); Frederic Lieberman (unknown, twentieth century); Claes Thure Oldenburg, American (b. 1929); Yoko Ono, American (b. 1933); James Riddle, American (b. 1933); Paul Jeffrey Sharits, American (1943–1993); Bob Sheff, American (twentieth century); Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi, Japanese (b. 1938); Stanley Vanderbeek, American (1927–1984); Wolf Vostell, German (1932–1998); Yoshimasa Wada, Japanese (b. 1943); Robert Watts, American (1923–1988), *Flux Year Box 2*, 1966. Five-compartment wood box with objects by various artists. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund.



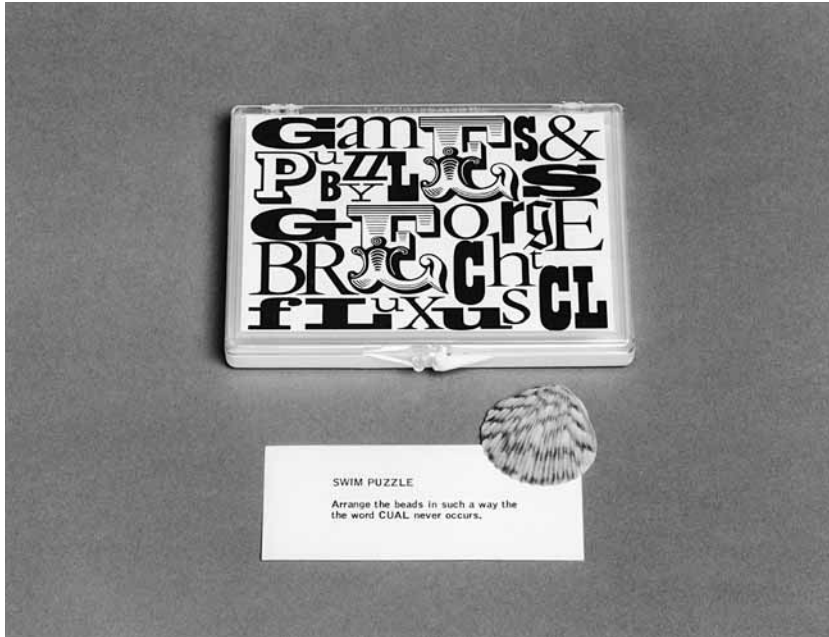
of how a Fluxus score creates a performance, an art object, and an evocative physical situation:

*George Brecht: "AIR CONDITIONING" (from WATER YAM)*

( move through the place ).

*George Brecht: "CHAIR EVENT" (from WATER YAM)*

on a white chair  
a grater  
tape measure  
alphabet  
flag  
black  
and spectral colors



| Figure 3.23 |

George Brecht (1926–2008), *Games and Puzzles—Swim Puzzle Box Game*, ca. 1965. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; gift of Dr. Abraham M. Friedman.

*Water Yam* contains other cards, like “Piano Piece,” which tells players: “A vase of flowers on(to) a piano.” On the card for “Two Vehicle Events,” one can read “Start/Stop.” Brecht also contributed to international Fluxus group projects such as the *Flux Year Box 2* (as seen in figure 3.22), and created numerous other Fluxkits such as *Games and Puzzles* (figure 3.23).

The cards of Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi’s *Events and Games* (created around 1964) contained “Music for Two Players II,” which tells its participants: “In a closed room pass two hours in silence.” Her work *Disappearing Music for Face* advises: “Smile/Stop to smile”; this was made into a slow motion black-and-white film as well. Similarly, Robert Watts’s *Events* (ca. 1965) offers this: “Mailbox Event—open mailbox/close eyes/remove letter of choice/tear up letter/open eyes.” In “Winter Event,” we get: “Winter Event—snow.”<sup>85</sup>

Fluxus artist Alison Knowles (b. 1933–), a painter by training and one of the founding members of the Fluxus movement, was a major force from its onset, collaborating with other Fluxus artists, documenting works by others, and performing in

collective works. While also working in experimental book arts and printing, Knowles wrote Fluxus scores that focused on mundane, everyday objects and ordinary domestic events. Several Fluxus artists created games as interventions to open everyday life to more careful examination, rendering social moments as acts of exchange or opportunities to critique larger political situations. In fact, the Fluxus practice of making games or instruction cards to create situations that are indeed artworks is said to have originated with the American composer John Cage (1912–1992) in the courses he taught at The New School for Social Research in New York from 1956–1960. Play, to Fluxus artists, undermined the seriousness of high art, and pointed irreverently instead to intentionally creating everyday actions and experiences instead of sanctifying a pristine art object. Drawing inspiration from Cage and others, instead of producing the shocking spectacles her male counterparts were prone to create,<sup>86</sup> Alison Knowles's Fluxus events furthered the habitual investigation into everyday matters, championing the performative potential of everyday objects, foods, and organic products as Cage championed the operations of nature, "making my responsibility that of asking questions instead of making choices,"<sup>87</sup> Knowles said. She would frequently set up a table or situation in which to share food, a celebration on the pleasure of the mundane. In her *Events by Alison Knowles* (1962–1964), the following events were devised:

*Proposition*

Make a salad.

1962

*Giveaway Construction*

Find something you like in the street and give it away. Or find a variety of things, make something of them, and give it away.

1963

*Variation #1 on Proposition*

Make a soup.

1964

The work of Brecht, Shiomi, Watts, Knowles, and others was joined by the artists of "Fluxus West" (1966), formed on the West Coast of the United States, and responsible for games like Jack Coke's Farmers Cooperative's *Find the End/A Fluxgame* (ca. 1969). Shiomi's *Events and Games* was created with twenty event cards, half in Japanese,

detailing game actions and offering performance instruction. Like other Flux game designers, Fluxus West encouraged audiences to unplay or rewrite these given scores in an “anyone can do it” attitude toward enactment. Most Fluxkits are impossible to play in any predictable way.

The approach of reconfigurability affects the work of Brazilian-born Swedish poet turned conceptualist, cartoonist, and theorist Oyvind Fahlström (1928–1976). Whether due to the toy-like nature of his work, or the line of politics, narrative, folk art, and humor included in his approach, until the recent surge in political game art, Fahlström’s work was not celebrated for its innovation, or taken into the artistic canon. Critics considered Fahlström a “throwback to Surrealism or Agitprop at worst.”<sup>88</sup> A more careful examination of images shows Fahlström’s work goes further than mere confrontation in pieces ranging from dollar bills and pie charts to puzzles and games. Fahlström takes on politics with an intense, dark perspective. In *Notes 6 (Nixon’s Dreams)* (1974), a drawing depicts a man, blue in the face, “counting panthers jumping over a police barrier and an electrified map of South Vietnam (and) lying on a catafalque surrounded by gold bullion.”<sup>89</sup> In the work *Notes 7 (“Gook”-masks)* (1971–1975), Fahlström draws on U.S. pop-culture references of the 1970s, sketching out the faces of Smokey the Bear, Angela Davis, and Uncle Sam, as well as referring to Hiroshima and South Africa.<sup>90</sup>

Fahlström’s *Monopoly*-influenced “variable” paintings consist of over two hundred painted magnetic elements on a painted metal board, dealing with issues such as world trade, U.S. foreign policy, the CIA, and various world revolutions. They can all be played, according to the rules inscribed directly on the paintings, as variations of the game *Monopoly*, which is in turn described as “the game of capitalism: a simplified but precise presentation of the trading of surplus value for capital gains.”<sup>91</sup> While acknowledging the simplification of very complex realities in his games, Fahlström notes that the works still emerge as basic game diagrams of political, social, and economic phenomena. By choosing sides and strategies, players become involved with miniature “political psychodramas.” One of the variable paintings is *Indochina* (1971), a game whose various charts and graphs and *Monopoly*-like spaces bear labels like “Saigon/US Embassy,” “Tiger Cages,” and “Refugee Camps.”<sup>92</sup> Since Fahlström wanted his reskinning to extend to his players, elements of these art games are fixed by magnets, allowing participants to “manipulate the world.”<sup>93</sup>

Fahlström’s performative objects and changeable paintings also invite viewers in to “choose strategies.”<sup>94</sup> In addition to his *Monopoly* games, there is *Kidnapping Kissinger* (1972), in which game squares on a board are cut as though a silhouette had emerged



from a part of the play area. Simple icons of people, machines, buildings, and cars are arranged on the board. Fahlström also made puzzle-style variable paintings, such as *Night Music 2: Cancer Epidemic Scenario* (1975) and *Night Music 4: Protein Race Scenario* (1976), and matching card-styled works, including *120 Improvisations (for Chile II)* between 1973 and 1974. These simple black-and-white pieces contained abstract shapes—states? territories?—that one could match. A significant part of Fahlström’s work relates to the coup in Chile on September 11, 1973.

Like the Japanese Sugoroku games, Fahlström’s pieces include a great deal of text, which can be read compulsively. Fahlström seems to understand the pleasure in this process of decoding, and looks at text as a way to play with and subvert notions of narrative suspense and structure, narrative resolution, and conflict. The eventual goal of the artist was to mass-produce the games, an aim yet to be realized.

Gabriel Orozco, the Veracruz-born Mexican artist (b. 1962) who has referenced games and recreated game artifacts, asks questions about play, games, and culture in his work. Initially, Orozco reframed obsolescence through found objects, such as an East German motor scooter or fruit. Several of his game-related works were produced for an installation called *Empty Club* (1996), commissioned by the British group Artangel. The exhibition, shown at a posh London men’s club, critiqued the leisure lifestyle of the wealthy through sports photographs overlaid with geometry.<sup>95</sup> Orozco’s work *Ping Pond Table* (1998) offered a reskinning of ping pong, asking: if the space of the ping pong net were to be reexplored, opened up, made multidimensional, would the shape of the board wind up being different? Circular? Square? Lotus-shaped? Orozco’s *Ping Pond Table* emerges in its own space with its own dimensionality, with the net acting as a bridge between geometry and the physical world. The artist intends that the meaning of the work and its spatiality be infinitely interpretable when “put into play” by the viewer, so that the table opens up a new possibility for space:

The “Ping Pond Table” is connected to this idea of a new space, a new possible space. When you have a normal ping pong game you have a net which is enough space between two spaces. But when you multiply that space by four, instead of two people playing you have four people playing in four tables. You open that space so the net is also open. And what you have there is a new space because it didn’t exist before . . . the net, that space in between two spaces—I opened it up. And I have a tri-dimensional space now in-between four spaces.

That is the space that I'm interested in, the in-between space. . . . To activate that space. To activate means to fill it with meaning and connections so that we can think about it. We can connect with it and make it happen as a space and time in between things.<sup>96</sup>

Art historian Jill Bennett has noted that that Orozco's interests in games, including sports, in his work can be read as "gestures."<sup>97</sup> These serve as an operative method rather than subject matter. The idea of gesture opens these works to the larger interests in play and in the way play is codified by culture. Orozco's photograph titled *Pinched Ball* depicts a soggy soccer ball filled with water. In his *Oval Billiard Table* (1996), also known as *Carambole with Pendulum*, Orozco created a curved linear object that acts more like a scientific instrument than a play space. The pocketless billiard table holds two white balls, while suspended above the table is a red ball that hangs like a pendulum, tempting the viewer to play. Pool cues are located nearby. But with the familiar pockets that one would expect from such a table absent, what might be the purpose of the board, and the goal of this game? The temptation to hit the hovering red ball is easy to give in to, and viewers pick up the pool cues close by to "see what happens." Hitting the white ball so that it collides with the red ball spurs on the larger geometric events of nature. Once hit, the red ball flies from the table on its own trajectory, acting as pendulum sometimes in sync with, and other times crossing over, the elliptical shape of the unique oval billiard table. Rather than a comment on the game of pool, the work looks at larger assumptions of movement, natural laws and physics, and the assumed agency in playing a game.

Orozco insists on a passion for political engagement in his work, even though the work tends to operate at a conceptual level. It seems clear, however, that he is concerned with chance encounter, physics, and agency. Art historian David Joselit has noted that Orozco's work has much in common with Paul Virilio's notion that contemporary politics, power, and collectivity must be understood not in terms of property but routes and vectors of circulation.<sup>98</sup> If not moving, Orozco's works infer movement and, often, play. To Joselit, Orozco's literal vectors—his pendulum and ovals, his inferences and actual movements—become tools for social critique and social imagining. Orozco's games reflect larger philosophical issues:

Probably they are more like philosophical games. I believe that philosophy has to be a practice. Practical philosophy. It's like the way the Greeks used to solve philosophical and mathematical problems, by walking. Not sitting. It's easier to solve problems moving—when you walk and you talk—probably because you have better irrigation in the brain or just because you are breathing better. Because you are moving you have better chances

to solve complex problems. And also I think in a way it's an action thing. So I think philosophy is an action, it should be. And to play the games are part of it.<sup>99</sup>

### **The Most Popular Games Mirroring Conflict and War**

The metaphor of war, of captured territory, and abstract personal combat, has served as a foundation for many of the most well-known board games from the Chinese game of Go to chess and checkers. Go, or Wéiqí, was noted earlier as a game having possible roots in divination practices. Wéiqí was exported to Japan sometime during the fifth through eighth centuries. One sandalwood game was discovered dating from the time of the Japanese Emperor Shomu (701–756 AD). The game became very popular within the court culture of Japan's Heian Period (794–1195 AD), and it is said that samurai appreciated the ancient game for its ability to shape strategic thinking. Military in its overall metaphor, the game involves the elements of defense, seizure, and capture. In the Japanese manifestation, Go was given as a special gift at weddings and was a documented pastime of Zen monks, shoguns, and tea ceremony masters. In its entanglement with ritual, the game itself reflects cultural and social characteristics of the times in which it developed and changed.

Go is played on a nineteen-by-nineteen square grid. Two players, black and white, take turns placing pieces on the empty starting board in an attempt to “capture” territory. The two players use their respective stones to capture points, or intersections of lines, and to lay out a continuous area for ownership. The opponent invariably tries to invade the free area to capture territory. Players who start the game at different skill levels can handicap the game by shrinking the board and by allowing the weaker player more moves or more pieces.

The Chinese poet Po Chü-i (772–846 AD) describes the special qualities of playing Wéiqí:

Mountain monks sit at the Wéiqí board  
under the bamboo's semi-lucent shade.  
No one sees them through the glittering leaves—  
but now and then the click of a stone is heard.<sup>100</sup>

Here, a rare aesthetic is celebrated, and the game is identifiable through its noble sounds, its beautiful surroundings, and the engagement of ascetic men.

In a move toward critical play, several contemporary artists have used the game of Go to raise political and social questions. The artist Lilian Ball used the game as a template of sorts in order to foster collaboration and dialogue. Her interactive game



| Figure 3.24 |  
Lilian Ball's *GO ECO*, 2007.

project *GO ECO* is intended to illuminate differing perspectives on an environmental conservation project on Long Island, New York. In the real-world situation, wetlands, wildlife, and rare plant species were endangered by politics and real estate interests. In response, the artist initiated a community project to help preserve a twelve-acre wetland in Southold, New York. Ball's concept revolves around using the game iconography and mechanics to generate new perspectives and points of view among players who are interested stakeholders in the conflict.

*GO ECO* (figure 3.24) helps enlist players to capture territories, but with a rule change, to make the player experience one of collaboration, not competition. The physical game pieces are accompanied by images, which represent viewpoints of biologists, landowners, government officials, and neighborhood residents. The images of the native cranberries, varied wildlife, and the endangered *Iris prismatica* are generated alongside the Go pieces moving on the game board and tracked by a camera.

Rather than the usual two players, Ball imagines that odd numbers of participants are preferable in her "zen" version of the game so that players' turns are never fixed. In

this way, “cooperation is encouraged. One must see the other side’s point of view since everyone occupies another side on the next turn.”<sup>101</sup> The game is intended to encourage solutions in which all sides win or lose equally. Ball’s intention for *GO ECO* is to help players of many ages to “be empowered and to learn about the issues through an art experience that maps paths of action.”<sup>102</sup>

Like Go, the game of chess has influenced artists for centuries. Though historians disagree on the original details of the invention of the game, several well-regarded chess scholars have argued that texts in Pahlavi and Sanskrit support the idea that India was the site of development no later than the sixth century AD.<sup>103</sup> In Sanskrit, the game was called *Four Members (Chaturanga)*, which referred to the four regiments of the Indian army (chariots, cavalry, elephants, and foot soldiers). The Indian version of the game was played with realistically rendered pieces meant to resemble human participants. The game was introduced to Europe around 1000 AD by Arabs, who had played since the seventh century.<sup>104</sup>

Arab scholars noted that the benefits of chess included diligence, thrift, and knowledge, one example of how the game has faithfully reflected cultural practices in the locations in which it has been played. For example, after death of the Muhammad in 642 AD, chess followed an edict of the Koran that forbids realistic human depiction. Game makers avoided representational models, opting instead for abstract pieces.<sup>105</sup>

Artists have depicted chess from its beginnings in drawings, paintings, and tapestries, including work in the influential document *Book of Chess*, written by King Alphonso in 1283 AD. The book served as both a textual and visual record of many chess-playing scenes in Europe.<sup>106</sup> Chess and backgammon dominated board-game pursuits in Europe until the Renaissance. There are numerous depictions of chess in artwork. Paintings such as Lucas van Leyden’s *Chess Players* (ca. 1510 AD) or *A Game of Chess* (1906) by Bernard Louis Borione demonstrate that the game has frequently captivated artists in many everyday scenarios. Earlier, the Romanesque mosaic found in the choir of San Savino in Piacenza, Italy (dating from 1107 AD), included a floor mosaic that depicted both the playing of a dice game and a game of chess. Scholars now believe that the artist juxtaposed the two games to represent a polarity of two paths in life: man can either commit himself to the chance and the unstable forces of the world, allowing his life to become lawless, chaotic, and evil; or man may choose to live with virtue and intelligence, so that he may imbue to the world intelligence, law, and harmony.<sup>107</sup> The conflict between fortune and virtue was one that the medieval Catholic Church was ready to promote in favor of subjects’ compliance with the rules of virtue espoused by doctrine. In contrast to the power of worldly “fortune,” often personified as a woman, *Fortuna*, with the fortune wheel constantly changing, offered

little opportunity for stability.<sup>108</sup> Church officials used this dichotomy to symbolically shape the choices of the player.

Of significance is the study conducted by Marilyn Yalom (2004), who detailed the generational—even epochal—changes in chess. Yalom’s study of the queen piece in the game revealed that chess did not include a female figure on the board until the tenth century.<sup>109</sup> Even then, the queen was the weakest member of the cast, only able to move one square at a time. Yalom argues that the queen gained influence to become the most powerful piece on the board as cultural power for women gradually increased. A string of powerful queens in Europe during Medieval times, for example, influenced not only the piece’s representation and gender (in earlier manifestations, the queen had been the king’s vizier, a male figure) but also the piece’s actions. Paralleling the rise of powerful female leaders in Europe, namely Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen Ingeborg of Norway, and Queen Isabella of Castile, the piece moved from vizier to queen and was freed from the slow, one-square-at-a-time rule of movement to become the most powerful piece on the board. By the time of the famous Norwegian set, the Lewis chess set (1150 AD–1200 AD) (figure 3.25), the queen piece had an established place on the board.

While writing his treatise “The Morals of Chess,” Benjamin Franklin notes that players of chess may learn foresight, circumspection, and caution, that is, a habit not entirely hasty:

We learn Chess by the habit of not being discouraged by present bad appearances in the state of our affairs, the habit of hoping for a favourable chance, and that of preserving in the search of resources. The game is so full of events, there is such a variety of turns in it, the fortune of it is so subject to vicissitudes, and one so frequently, after contemplation, discovers the means of extricating one’s self from a supposed insurmountable difficulty, that one is encouraged to continue the contest to the last, in hopes of victory from our skill, or, at least, from the negligence of our adversary, and whoever considers, what in Chess he often sees instances of, that success is apt to produce presumption and its consequent inattention, by which more is afterwards lost than was gained by the preceding advantage, while misfortunes produce more care and attention, by which the loss may be recovered, will learn not to be too much discouraged by any present successes of his adversary, nor to despair of final good fortune upon every little check he receives in the pursuit of it.<sup>110</sup>

In their explorations of critical play, artists have been captivated by chess as a social system. The Surrealists Alberto Giacometti, Max Ernst, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp all referred to, or incorporated, chess into their work. Duchamp’s love

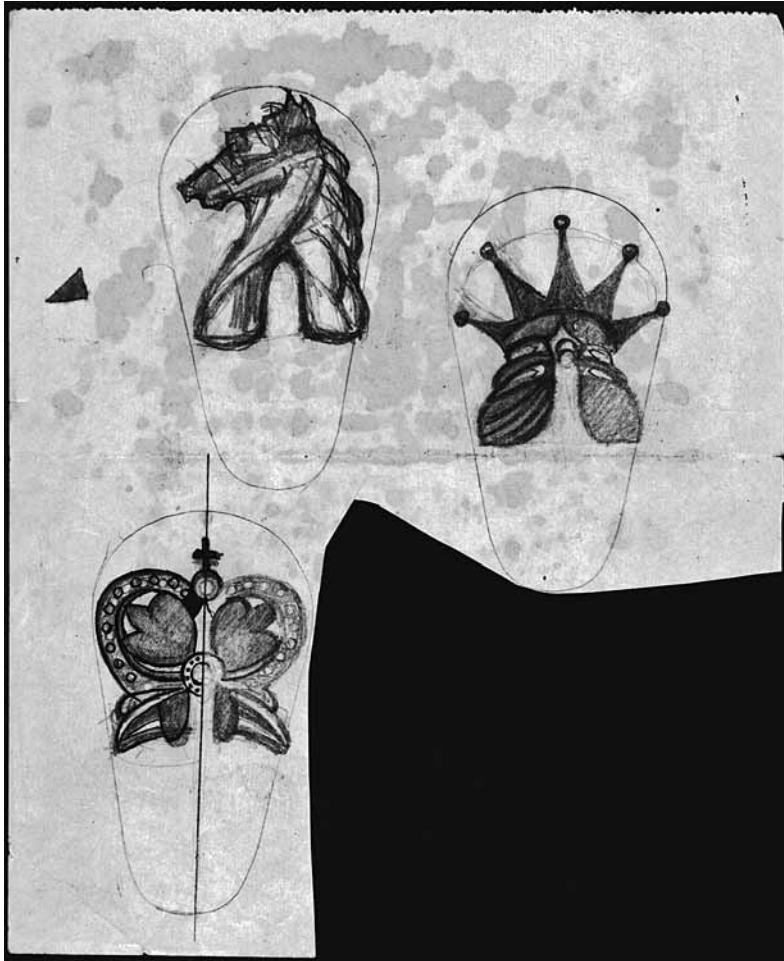


| Figure 3.25 |

*The Lewis Chessmen*, 1150–1175 AD, included queens in its formation. The British Museum.

for chess, one of the games furthest removed from his well-known affection for chance and found objects, was established long before he moved to the United States. Duchamp had famously taken to playing chess as a form of art, even playing himself as chess-player in an experimental film directed by the American composer John Cage (1912–1992). In 1963, Duchamp played chess with nude challenger Eve Babitz at his first retrospective in Pasadena.<sup>111</sup> Duchamp's love affair with chess, according to many of his scholars, came from the beauty of the game and the "language" of chess. He played competitively in the 1920s, and certainly enjoyed winning.<sup>112</sup>

Chess is a compelling "experiential instrument" for artists like Duchamp (who drew the pieces in figure 3.26) for a number of reasons. First, it is a highly symbolic game, one in which pieces have extra meaning. Its hierarchic structure, resembling



| Figure 3.26 |

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) autograph note for *Projects*: drawing of chess pieces (king, queen, knight), 1912–1968. Pencil, black ink, 19.8 × 16.2 cm. AM1997-98(205). Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Photo: Jean-Claude Planchet. Photo credit: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY. © ARS, NY.



an army, a court, a rank and file with its rows of pawns, models nearly literally a state at war. It is generally believed the Greeks played the first war games where strategy is involved without the intervention of chance.<sup>113</sup> In one Greek game called *Polis* (the “town”), two opposing players maneuvered a large number of gaming counters on the squares of a game board, to trap an opponent’s piece between two of one’s own to capture it. This strategy replicates the battle strategy of the “phalanx” formation, where the strength of a given offense lies in cohesive, unidirectional attack, a literal lineup of rows of men with spears that is difficult or impossible for an opponent to penetrate. The strategy was broken in chess, where the example of the knight’s move makes such a line less important.

This detail, the unique affordances of each game piece, calls to our attention the ways in which board games are taught, how expertise is passed down, and, most important, how the rules are interpreted and expressed. How does one, for example, explain how to play a complicated board game such as chess? First, there is the board itself, so familiar across cultures and used in many other types of games. This board provides a base understanding of “spaces” and “moves,” though these could be altered and modified on a game-by-game basis. Second, one would explore the abilities of the pieces. In detailing the moves of a chess piece—for example, this is a pawn; it moves forward and can only capture other pieces on a diagonal—abilities are mapped to figures. These figures represent functionality and player agency. André Breton wrote, “Philosophical freedom is an illusion. In chess as in all other games, each move is loaded with the indefinite past of the universe.”<sup>114</sup> Like other board games, if a chess set is missing a given piece, it is understood that something else may act in substitution for that piece. Thus, a lofty bishop might end up being played by an eraser or lipstick. In any event, the piece itself is viewed with its particular affordances and powers, having for both players all of the abilities and limitations of the rules that govern the piece. Using substitute objects in a game in this manner emphasizes that the transactions involved are so symbolically robust that the game’s rules and processes can allow for pieces to stand in for one another, for games to forge their own control over temporality, and consensus to be reached among players about how to interact. With these abilities, games produce not only cohesive rule sets but also cohesive worlds, and worlds that express meaning.

The elements of engaging in battle—determining how to isolate the enemy, keep one’s strongest pieces, make sacrifices, and identify and outthink the opposition—are abstracted and practiced in chess and are also the very elements that draw artists to use chess as a tool for social critique. The idea of battle formation and the conduct of conflict between opposing players characterizes much of the artistic intervention in

the game. Between 1961 and 1970, Fluxus artist Takako Saito produced a number of chess modifications that were sold and distributed by George Maciunas's Fluxus Mail Order Warehouse. Saito's chess sets were Fluxus art staples and sold to collectors in the United States and Europe. *Grinder Chess* was an interesting "industrial" reduction of the game. *Jewel Chess*, with gems in small cases, was a pretty variation on the game. Other Saito chess sets included the use of senses other than vision. *Liquid Chess* (1975) was created from vials of liquids that also emitted smells. These vials could also be used to determine which piece was which (through smell) and use this knowledge so that players have rules for play. *Sound Chess* or *Weight Chess*, featured in the collective work *Flux Cabinet*, consisted of opaque, white plastic boxes containing items to be identified by weight or sound when shaking. *Spice Chess* appeared in several different iterations and featured corked tubes filled with spices in a rack. Game scholar Celia Pearce notes that Saito's chess sets offer a particularly beautiful take on the aesthetics of play, as the works take into account many senses, exploring the nuances of sensory difference and the malleability of rules.<sup>115</sup> Saito produced a score of chess sets, which, according to Yoshimoto, "became the embodiment of the Fluxus philosophy in their merging of strategy and humor."<sup>116</sup> Along these lines, Fluxus artists, particularly women artists, were attentive to senses other than vision; Alison Knowles, Takako Saito, and Yoko Ono all created smell- and touch-based artworks.<sup>117</sup> These too took on performative game qualities. Ono's *Touch Piece* (1963), for example, instructs performers to touch each other.

Ono, like Saito, found chess provided a cross-cultural vocabulary to apply in exploring play systems and larger social and political entities.

*Play It by Trust* (1997), a game in which the board and the chess pieces are all white, is one of a series of Ono's chess investigations. Chess-related artworks that Ono has exhibited range from her version of the game itself, *All White Chess Set* (1966), to installation versions of *Play It by Trust*. When *All White Chess Set* was first exhibited at the Indica Gallery in London, it was comprised of a wooden chess table, a chess set, and two chairs, all of which were painted white. A brass plate on the underside of the table read: CHESS SET FOR PLAYING AS LONG AS YOU CAN REMEMBER WHERE ALL YOUR PIECES ARE.<sup>118</sup> White, the color of surrender in war, essentially nullifies the competitive and confrontational aspects of the game.

Like several of her pieces examining themes of balance, Ono's approach to *Play It by Trust* (or the precious balance between the real world and the painted instructions in her *Instruction Paintings*, discussed later) may be read as an exploration into the art experience through scenarios which encourage cooperation and collaboration. Both *Cut Piece* and *Play It by Trust* interrogate human relationships, focusing on trust and

the interdependency we all have with one another. Using everyday items like chess pieces, game boards, or scissors, Ono allows participants in the work to consider the marvelous nature of the everyday and engage with game-like concepts and processes in an endless queue of provocative situations. *Play It by Trust* emphasizes the ways in which serious issues might be tackled through games, and how multiple participants in games have equal opportunities and face equal stakes. Reskinning, or painting the work all white, eliminates the element of competition from the traditional form of the game.

One of the few Fluxus artists who used her whimsy and game-like constructions in the pursuit of political aims rather than merely challenging the predictable patterns of the art world, the stakes for Ono were clearly activist. Ono plays critically, using rules, symbolic meaning systems, the sociocultural context, and the inherent sense one has of game “time” to present pacifist aims.<sup>119</sup> This work goes beyond game to envision a “world-playground” and a wish for utopian solutions to social and political concerns.

Recent chess-based artwork compares favorably to Ono’s use of the game. In 2003, UK artist Damien Hirst created *Mental Escapology*, a chess set featuring a glass-and-mirror board displaying a biohazard symbol with accompanying silver casts of medicine bottles and etched silver labels, all housed inside a glass medicine chest.<sup>120</sup> Jake and Dinos Chapman produced a set that includes “post- apocalyptic adolescent figures” of white children with phallic noses on one side, while the opposing pieces are black children with afro-styled hair, all on a board inlaid with double skulls and cross-bones.<sup>121</sup> Perhaps one of the most significant sculptural pieces is by Gabriel Orozco, who delved heavily into chess with his work *Horses Running Endlessly* (1995) to examine the spatial materiality of the chessboard (figure 3.27). The result is a sculptural work comprised of an expanded chessboard—256 instead of 64 squares—and plethora of knights, also in four colors.

The configuration of the pieces in *Horses Running Endlessly* is exciting in that there are many potential positions and actions for the knight pieces. In a typical chessboard, the knight can in theory occupy all squares in sequence without repeating a position. There is something simultaneous happening among the knights on the board, as though all of the knights should be moving not in turn, but in formation. The result is a sense of infinite possibility. It is easy to imagine that a player or participant with this work would be free to modify the order of pieces as they wish. Like kinetic sculpture or a mobile by Xenia Cage or Calder, Orozco’s horses could be activated. This is communicated through color, shape, and place.

The reconfiguration of chess continues in the digital versions of the game. Ruth Catlow’s 2003 piece *Rethinking Wargames: A Chance to Remaster Conflict* was created in



| Figure 3.27 |

Gabriel Orozco (Mexican, b. 1962), *Horses Running Endlessly*, 1995, wood. Gift of Agnes Gund and Lewis B. Cullman in honor of Chess in the Schools. © 2008 Gabriel Orozco.

response to thinking about global conflict, and in particular, the context of the swift U.S. bombing of Afghanistan in response to the September 11 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001. Catlow investigated ways that games could be used to express different kinds of aggression or to teach negotiation or nonviolent conflict resolution. If it were possible to teach these principles, she surmised, it should therefore also be possible to make these principles available to a wider audience, using the Internet as a vehicle of distribution. The result was the work *Rethinking Wargames*, a version of chess designed for three players representing white royalty, black royalty, and the united force of pawn. Players take turns making moves. White's goal is to eliminate the black royalty, black's goal is to eliminate white royalty, and the pawns place themselves as barriers to the aggression, trying to "slow down" the violence like virtual protestors, so that negotiation between the violent warring factions might possibly take place.

This version of chess is remarkable for how different it feels to play the game. Unlike typical chess, where one or the other opponent plays only to win, the experience of play is changed due to the possibility that the royals, with their powerful pieces, may not succeed. The action in *Rethinking Wargames* moves far faster; the resulting

decisions by royalty are more aggressive and swift, and far less strategic, than in the usual version. The pawn player, knowing the pawns are relatively powerless except in sheer mass or numbers, intervenes by putting them on the line in the middle of violence, much as many protesters have done historically. The pawns act as “blocks,” and after five turns, if neither royal side has taken a piece, a period of nonviolence is counted and a piece of metaphoric “grass” grows on the game board. After five turns of nonviolence, grass will have taken over the fighting field. By staving off the aggression and overcoming the “hotheaded” part of the conflict, the pawns win. The idea is to allow more time for negotiation, rather than immediate reactions and attacks.

It is important to remind ourselves that while pacifism and nonviolence in this game may emerge as a larger game goal, *Rethinking Wargames* itself is quite dependent on the premise that chess itself is founded on: conflict and the taking of pieces; in other words, violence. The viciousness of the royals is matched by the passion for peace from the pawns. For all sides, *play implies action*, and even if one is trying to accomplish an activist aim or a societal critique, the idea is that one takes action, as opposed to nonaction, even if the action results in a block. The game demonstrates that negotiation takes slowing down, that peace can only come with negotiation, not reaction and rhetoric. To rethink the current solution, one cannot be on the defense or the attack, but rather in a meta-state.

Chess is interesting precisely because it represents many ideologies, the first of which is an easy duality between opposing forces. This is apparent as early as Huizinga’s critique of the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt, in *Homo Ludens* (1938, in Dutch). Huizinga notes that philosophies such as those purported by Schmitt provide a dangerous rationale for the oversimplified intellectual culture of fascism, in which social life is easily divided between “good” and “evil,” “us” and “them,” where nuance is dismissed and competition encouraged. Indeed, Huizinga argues this oversimplified line of thinking undermines the ethical workings, or “fair play” foundation of international law. Walter Benjamin also notes that competitive scenarios tended to oversimplify complex issues.<sup>122</sup> This critique is mirrored in Catlow’s work, as she seeks to add nuance and multiple kinds of outcomes to the game.<sup>123</sup> Thus the aims of Catlow’s project have much in common with many of the experiential chess games discussed in this chapter. *Rethinking Wargames* engages with the idea of choosing strategies. It interrogates the linear trajectory of time intrinsic to games, even with their interactive structure. It enhances the benefits of repetitive performance, mobility, and empowerment to make decisions through play. In these war games, players are empowered to make metaphorically large decisions through play.

Janet Murray defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.”<sup>124</sup> Artist-created board games use this theory to its fullest, providing table-based mini laboratories for the examination of choice, chance, and social interaction. Some works, such as Giacometti’s board games, offer a critique of even the possibility of agency, implying that playing or enacting the sculptural game boards would be futile, cyclical, a trap. Games, such as Catlow’s chess game, expose the possibilities of player agency in other ways: first, by empowering the pawns, thus imbuing traditionally conceived pieces/roles with new power; second, by opening up the possible outcomes of the game in terms of widening the possible win states, thus rewriting the original in visionary ways. Metaphorical or actual, the game design must embody action, and depending on how active a game feels, its critique may be more or less apparent. Artists may invoke game metaphors, as Giacometti did in his game boards, and as Ono did in *Play It by Trust*, or artists can produce contexts for play, empathy, and learning, as Ono does in *Cut Piece* and Catlow does in *Rethinking Wargames*. These are different types of experiences but all foster a critical type of play.

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