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Playing by new rules: board games and America's cold war culture, 1945-1965

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PLAYING BY NEW RULES: BOARD GAMES AND AMERICA'S

COLD WAR CULTURE, 1945-1965

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

Matthew John Sprengeler

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the domestic culture of the United States during the first two decades of the Cold War, using popular games as an interpretive tool to expand our understanding of the changes that took place. Four board games which were popular during the 1950s – Scrabble, chess, Clue, and Risk – explain some of the anxieties and evolutions in mass culture. Scrabble illustrated the nation's growing respect for expertise and, along with game theory, the hope for intellectual solutions to the country's problems. Chess, often seen as a symbol of the Cold War, served as a proxy battlefield for the United States and Soviet Union to challenge each other. Clue reflected an increasingly domestic, suburban society that was struggling with fears of subversion and betrayal. Risk provided a safe battlefield for imaginary wars devoid of politics or ideology. The game of poker is also considered, as its fundamental connection to gambling and also its gender biases pointed toward places that American culture was going.

The work of historians such as Jackson Lears and Stephen Whitfield provide the theoretical foundation for this thesis, particularly Lears's concept of the culture of control and the culture of chance. Further analytical models come from the work of play theorists like Brian Sutton-Smith, who have examined the serious nature of children's games.

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This Study by: Matthew John Sprengeler

Entitled: Playing By New Rules: Board Games and America's Cold War Culture, 1945-1965

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts.

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Date   Dr. Michael J. Licari, Dean, Graduate College

Dedicated to my father, Robert Sprengeler

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

AMERICAN GAMES AND AMERICAN HISTORY

Games, like music, appear in every human society. Humanity has created an

enormous number of board games, spanning most known cultures and several millennia.

Game historian David Parlett lists approximately 500 games in the index of his reference

book *The Oxford History of Board Games*,[1] and he notes throughout the book that his list

is far from complete. People want – and perhaps need – to play. The games that they

choose are a window to their hopes and fears, both individually and on a cultural level.

This territory, however, has not been explored in much detail by historians. An

examination of domestic American culture during the early Cold War years will show

that the games people played were a reflection of how they saw their world.

The theoretical structure that has emerged around this topic centers on the idea of

"play." This is important, but it is a very high-level perspective that usually examines

human behavior as one broad category. By concentrating on the level of "games" instead,

looking at the specific activities rather than the general phenomenon, the focus can be

narrowed to a particular group of people in a specific time. Several games became

popular in the United States during the two decades after World War II. They did so in

part because they spoke to the anxieties of the time in a safe, controlled way. Brian

Sutton-Smith, a well-known scholar of play, said "[t]he key point is that although play

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[1] David Parlett. *The Oxford History of Board Games* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 375.

generates simulations of existential predicaments, it does so generally (but not always) within relatively safe packages."[2]

This connects to a key concept put forward by the historian Jackson Lears, who examined the interplay of control, chance, and American culture in his book *Something For Nothing*. Lears wrote: "Debate about gambling reveals fundamental fault lines in American character, sharp tensions between an impulse toward risk and a zeal for control."[3] This idea extends to all manner of games, whether or not they involve wagers. The early Cold War was a period sliding from certainty into chance. Games were a way to exert control, however symbolic, over a society that had left behind the perceived order of the New Deal and was navigating increasingly uncertain times. International nuclear tension was paired with a domestic culture evolving into something very different than what it had been before World War II. Alongside this came the rise of experts – scientists, politicians, home economics specialists, professors – promising guidance through the turbulence. Several of the period's popular games connect to this changing culture. In addition to whatever merit they have as pastimes, they allowed their players to exert control over challenges that mirrored situations in the real world. Scrabble mixed intellect with guesswork, in much the same way as the newly-popular game theory did. Chess, often used as a proxy for the actual Cold War, was the quintessential game of expertise. Clue brought a friendly kind of terror into the increasingly suburbanized

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[2] Brian Sutton-Smith. "Evolving a Consilience of Play Definitions: Playfully," *Play & Culture Studies, Volume 2*, ed. Stuart Reifel (Stamford, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1999): 244.

[3] Jackson Lears. *Something For Nothing: Luck In America* (New York: Viking, 2003): 2.

country's living rooms. Risk offered a bloodless exercise in war, one devoid of politics or nationalism. These four games show a changing nation. Of course, the change did not stop. As the Cold War continued to grind on, rational experts gave way to uncertainty and domestic patterns changed dramatically; our examination of games will conclude with a brief look at poker, the ultimate game of misdirection and questionable information.

America's Cold War history has been examined by many scholars. Lears's framework of chance and control provides one useful structure within which to balance the domestic cultural analysis of Stephen Whitfield, the media-oriented research of Cyndy Hendershot, the game theory explication done by Steven Belletto, and others who will be addressed in time. To understand the subject, it is also necessary to be aware of such work as has been done on the matter of play. Three researchers should be mentioned in particular. First among them is Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian whose 1944 book *Homo Ludens* was an attempt at finding the "play-element" in areas of human civilization ranging from war to legal systems to poetry. Huizinga saw play as a fundamental force in human development, writing "we do not mean that among the various activities of civilized life an important place is reserved for play... The view we take in the following pages is that culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning."[4] His view of play, however, was expansive and sociological. He paid scant attention to deliberate play such as board or card games, instead finding the shadow of play in a variety of other spheres.

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[4] Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. Johan Huizinga (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1949): 46.

A similar tack was taken by the French anthropologist Roger Caillois. He wrote in his 1961 book *Man, Play, and Games* that "what is expressed in play is no different from what is expressed in culture."[5] Like Huizinga, he was looking at a very broad idea of play and had little attention for games (with one notable exception to come). This does not invalidate either man's perspective on the social role of play, but it does point to gaps in the research and analysis. The third major scholar of play is the previously-referenced Brian Sutton-Smith, who has published extensively on many manifestations of play behavior. Sutton-Smith's understanding of play includes and expands on the cultural overlap discussed by Huizinga and Caillois. His multifaceted awareness of the subject extended into similar territory to that explored by Lears. Considering seven different "rhetorics of play" in his book *The Ambiguity of Play,* Sutton-Smith defined one of them as the rhetoric of fate, describing it in terms similar to Lears's control/chance dynamic: "In the twentieth century the notions of progress and scientific rationality are so pervasive it is hard to realize that most humans, in prior eras and in most parts of the world still today, are more preoccupied with fate than they are with progress."[6]

Indeed, the link between games and culture is not an exclusively modern one. Although mass production and the growth of commercialization have allowed a great many examples of this link to flourish, it greatly predates them. To understand how the games of relatively recent times interacted with their cultural context, it will help to review some examples of this phenomenon throughout American history.

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[5]Roger Caillois. *Man, Play, and Games* (Glencoe, NY: The Free Press, 1961), 64.

[6] Brian Sutton-Smith. *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997): 65.

One game that was commonly found in colonial and revolution-era America was the Royal Game of Goose (also just called Goose). Thought to be a product of sixteenth century Europe, Goose was a game that appears reasonably familiar to modern eyes. Players took turns rolling a pair of dice to move their pieces along a linear track from a "home" space to the end., while putting markers representing gambling-style stakes into a central pot. Certain squares were specially designated – pieces that landed there might be moved to different parts of the board, or the player could be required to add another stake to the pot. Mechanically, these special squares added a random element that elevated Goose beyond being an exercise in competitive dice-rolling. Thematically, they were named after things that would be familiar to a contemporary European: the Bridge that allowed players to pay a stake and move forward; the Tavern that required players to pay a stake and lose multiple turns; Death, which cost players a stake and sent them back to the start of the board.

The game's full name was an indicator of its pedigree. One of its first recorded appearances was as a gift to King Philip II of Spain sometime before 1617, and it was also reported as a pastime of King Louis XIII of France in 1612 (who was 2 years old at the time).[7] The Royal Game of Goose continued to be popular with commoners as well as kings for nearly 200 years. It is credited with spawning dozens of variants and imitators during that time, indicating that its fundamental nature appealed to a wide audience. These Goose variants generally kept its mechanical structure, with pieces moving around

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[7] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 95. The earliest known attempt at registering or copyrighting a version of The Royal Game of Goose came in 1597, although similar games are known to have existed a decade before.

a board while players added stakes to a central pot. However, over time many of the games added stronger thematic elements – while the gameplay was largely unchanged, the rationale behind moving pieces forward or backward took on new guises. Themes of history, morality, and geography were common. Thus one game might replace the Bridge and the Well with historical information about the English dynastic tradition; another would use the virtues and vices of its period to explain how players used their stakes. While Goose itself has become a quaint relic of earlier days, found in museums and historical reenactments, its basic nature informed a variety of popular games in a fashion that can be traced to the present day. As board game historian David Parlett put it, "The modern board-game industry may with little exaggeration be said to be built on the back of Goose."[8]

So why did Goose itself decline, even as it passed its 'genetics' to other generations of board games? It lost its connection to the culture around it. Over time, as Parlett pointed out, the gambling side of Goose became less interesting when compared to other, newer games that also involved wagers. He argued that many of these games were less childish to contemporary eyes: "Serious gamblers outgrew the need for mythic symbols and pretty pictures in the hard business of losing money."[9] Starting in the late eighteenth century, a time when commercial instincts and mercantilism were coming to the fore in both Europe and the Americas, Goose lost its hold on the popular imagination

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[8] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games,* 100.

[9] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games,* 98.

while games more concerned with profit were on the rise. As we shall see, it was not the last time that this happened.

Another noteworthy board game emerged within a couple generations of Goose's decline. In 1860, the Checkered Game Of Life made its debut. Created by a lithographer named Milton Bradley (namesake of the famous game company), this game shared the Goose mechanic of players moving pieces along a board from start to finish, and it had the virtue/vice theme common to many Goose variants. Bradley himself was involved in social reform movements of his time, notably the establishment of kindergarten; this perhaps explains why the Checkered Game Of Life lacked a gambling element like Goose's stake/pot dynamic. But it did have another novel advantage – portability. By this time printing and manufacturing technology allowed games to be produced on a mass scale, instead of being handcrafted like their predecessors, and the advances also allowed for more flexibility in packaging. So many soldiers who went off to fight in the Civil War did so with a copy of the Checkered Game Of Life in their pocket.

Interestingly, although this game followed the Goose model of players moving their pieces along the board after generating a random number, it and many of its contemporaries did not use dice. Many Americans at the time had religious views which held that dice were sinful to use, because of their connection to gambling. So the Checkered Game Of Life and many other mass-produced games instead used a top-like object called a teetotum. Much like a dreidel, the typical teetotum had several sides with different characters on them, in this case numbers. Players would spin the teetotum to see how many spaces their piece could move, instead of rolling dice. The probability curve of

a typical teetotum was somewhat different than the one generated by rolling two six-sided dice, but otherwise this mechanic served the same purpose. Both created a random number that dictated how far a piece would go – but because one implement was connected to gambling, it was deemed to be inappropriate for a respectable game. The prohibition against dice at this time was so strong, according to game historian Bruce Whitehill, that Civil War soldiers would leave their dice behind at camp when they went into battle. This way, if they were killed, the dice would not be among the personal effects sent home to their families.[10]

The Checkered Game Of Life was popular for a time, but like most games it did eventually fall out of favor. For many years the Milton Bradley company did not sell it, until the company decided to create a new version to mark the game's 1960 centennial. This version, simply called Life, has been a popular American game since then. However, the modern version had a different orientation than its predecessor. In this edition, the players compete to earn the most money and live in suburban comfort (reflecting the postwar context), a change that that was noted "with some regrets" by Milton Bradley president James Shea in 1973.[11]

His regrets were misplaced, or at least they came a century too late. Even as Civil War veterans were settling down to play the Checkered Game Of Life with their families, the popular taste in games had again reached beyond overt moralism. Poker – a game

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[10] Bruce Whitehill, *Games: American Boxed Games and Their Makers 1822-1992 With Values* (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Wallace-Homestead Book Company, 1992) :11.

[11]James J. Shea. *The Milton Bradley Story* (New York: The Newcomen Society in North America, 1973), 16.

which will be discussed further in Chapter 5 – emerged during the immediate postwar period. Its exact origins are unclear; it wasn't a proprietary game invented for the purpose of sale, like the Checkered Game Of Life, so there are no patents or trademarks pointing to its creators. In this sense it is a true folk game. Whatever its origin, it became popular during this time and variants spread across the nation, likely spread by people traveling the Mississippi River. A card-based game of gambling and bluffing, it had a much different appeal than the Checkered Game Of Life.

And poker wasn't the only gambling game to become prominent in the period between the war and the new century. One of its peers, the card game called faro, was perhaps even more popular at the time. Faro was a frontier equivalent of the casino game baccarat – players made wagers and then drew cards from a special box controlled by a dealer, winning or losing based on the draw.[12] It was very much a game of chance. And like poker, it could have an element of untruth. The outcome of a player's wager was supposed to be determined by the draw of a random card from the dealer's box. It often proved otherwise. Faro was an easy game for dealers to cheat. Boxes were easy to rig so that dealers could pick which card players would draw, allowing unscrupulous dealers to control the outcome of bets.

It was no secret at the time that faro was often a crooked game – and yet people loved to play it, particularly in the less-settled west, even if it wasn't the only game in town. Perhaps the idea of winning and losing fortunes on the turn of a card was

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[12] The game's history is much older, possibly going back to 17th century Europe, but it became well-known in the United States shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War.

connected to the gold rush fever and manifest destiny ideals of the 18th century. As the

nation rebuilt itself after a shattering war, one that permanently recast its social and

cultural structure by ending centuries of slavery, faro was immensely popular. Despite the

rampant cheating, despite the near-complete inability of players to control the outcome –

or perhaps because of these things – it was a game that people wanted to play. And

although poker was not as popular during this period, it was also widely played then. This

same period saw a decline in the sales of the Checkered Game Of Life, which had

printings in 1860 and 1866, but then no further reprints until a third (and final) run in

1911.[13] In the unsettled period after the war, games like faro and poker were what held

the national interest, with their reliance on chance and their lack of a moral overlay.

Indeed, both could be described as the opposite of moral, given their connections to lying

and cheating.

The course of American board games, however, isn't a simple slide from virtue to

greed. They have evolved in step with the broader culture. By 1900, games with moral

and educational themes were already sharing shelf space with games based on popular

culture, technological advances, and current events (like the greed-driven Klondike gold

rush).[14] One of the next significant games to emerge in the U.S. had no moral theme to

speak of, either positive or negative. In this and other ways, it was another good

reflection of its times. Mahjong, a Chinese game with a long history in its native country,

appeared in the United States in the early 1920s. By 1924 it was a national passion on a

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[13] Whitehill, *Games,* 73.

[14] Bruce Whitehill, "American Games: A Historical Perspective," *Board Game Studies 2*
(1999): 127.

scale large enough that Congress passed a law to standardize the names of imported

sets.[15] According to one observer, more Mahjong sets were sold in 1923 and 1924 than

radio sets. It was a game well-suited to this prosperous period. As an exotic Chinese

import, it was initially a sign that the player had interesting tastes; before the importation

craze, possession of a set was a marker of socioeconomic status. The action of Mahjong

revolves around the placement of domino-like tiles that have Chinese characters written

on them; different combinations of tiles award varying numbers of points. Albert

Morehead, longtime bridge editor at the New York Times and a student of games, tied

Mahjong to the period thusly: "They wanted a game with colorful and expensive

paraphernalia; with complex rules so that proficiency was proof of having spent money

on lessons; with multi-player provisions so that it could be played when all the girls were

invited for luncheon."[16]

Mahjong, like faro, had a short life as a mass entertainment. It is still played in the

U.S., but its popularity faded within a few years of its appearance and has never

recovered. This is a marked contrast with the final pre-Cold War game we will consider –

Monopoly. Although it was slow to catch the national imagination, Monopoly found its

moment during the Great Depression and has been a prominent part of American mass

culture ever since: movie-themed variants, a NASCAR version, the annual McDonald's

pull-tab Monopoly game, greeting cards, golf clubs, and boxer shorts are just a few of the

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[15] The name chosen by Congress was Mah-Jongg, which is still commonly found
       alongside the simpler Mahjong used here.

[16] Albert Morehead. "Games: Who Plays What and Why," *New York Times Magazine*,
       October 13, 1957: 238.

things that carry the Monopoly brand now.[17] It is worth considering this game in some depth, as its evolution illustrates some key elements of the link between games and culture.

While Monopoly is now one of Hasbro's "most popular brands"[18] and has spawned dozens of related items, it was invented more than thirty years before a game company bought it and published it. Monopoly originated in a 1904 game created by Elizabeth Magie. Originally called The Landlord's Game, it was intended to advocate a single tax system and to demonstrate that landlords had an unfair financial advantage over renters.[19] Her attempts to interest game companies in publishing it were unsuccessful, such as a 1920s meeting with George Parker, founder of the famous game company Parker Brothers.[20] But other audiences enjoyed Magie's work. As the game became what board game researcher Bruce Whitehill called a "folk game" and moved across the country, the single tax and anti-landlord elements were stripped out of it by most audiences.[21] Under the name of Monopoly it had spread across America, its street names changing to match the locations where it was being played. In this fashion

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[17] G. Wayne Miller. *Toy Wars: The Epic Struggle Between G.I. Joe, Barbie, and the Companies That Make Them* (New York: Random House, 1998), 316-317.

[18]Alfred Verrecchia and Alan G. Hassenfeld. *Hasbro Annual Report 2007*, 3.

[19] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 352.

[20] Philip E. Orbanes. *The Game Makers: The Story of Parker Brothers from Tiddledy Winks to Trivial Pursuit* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 97. Orbanes notes that Magie and Parker might have met twice that decade, with neither meeting resulting in Parker agreeing to publish the game.

[21] Whitehill, "American Games," 132.

Monopoly ended up in the hands of an unemployed man named Charles Darrow, who copyrighted it in 1933 and presented it to Parker Brothers the next year. It was rejected again.

The company changed its mind and bought Monopoly from Darrow in 1935, having noticed how rapidly the game was selling on its own. And the pace of sales skyrocketed when Parker Brothers took over – where Darrow had sold a few hundred games at a time, Parker Brothers was manufacturing 200,000 sets every week before 1935 was over.[22] And as noted, Monopoly's popularity has never waned. To pick just one example, in 1997 it was being sold in 75 countries and 26 languages, with customized versions for 30 cities; meanwhile, 19 other companies licensed it for their own products.

American board games clearly reflect the values and circumstances of American society. Sometimes the connection seems obvious – is it any surprise that Monopoly became popular during the Great Depression? People facing a crumbling economy undoubtedly enjoyed dreams of wealth (and perhaps the vicarious thrill of driving other people to ruin). Other connections require some thought, as when one considers the fact that Monopoly, which made its widespread debut almost 75 years ago, is still "the most popular proprietary game in the world."[23] Something about this game has allowed it to anchor securely in the world.

One clue perhaps comes from the way the game has evolved since it was created. It has always been a simple game from a mechanical standpoint – players roll dice to

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[22] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 353.

[23] Whitehill, "American Games," 133.

move pieces around a linear board with the option to "buy" certain spaces that they land

on, subsequently charging other players "rent" if their pieces land on these spaces.

However, the game went through a radical thematic change once it left Magie's hands.

Her strong economic message was stripped from the game as it passed from one

community to another. The version that became a worldwide favorite was instead a fairly

random game of capitalism and acquisition, with its didactic elements stripped away. It

grew as a folk game during the latter half of the Gilded Age, but its true popularity in the

United States came during the middle of the Great Depression, a time when play money

was the only kind of wealth that many people had. It was a time when labor activism and

American socialism were at a peak – but this didn't translate into gameplay. Magie's

original message might have had currency with people attuned to a certain kind of

politics, but the version that was successful lacked those elements.[24]

Since first being published by Parker Brothers, it has represented a cultural vision of

wealth and achievement – in the words of Caillois, "The game of Monopoly does not

follow but rather reproduces the functions of Capitalism."[25] This is, as noted earlier, a

change of emphasis from its progenitor, The Landlord's Game.

In the hands of teachers, the goals of Monopoly have been known to switch back

to something like its inventor's original vision. Variant versions of the game are used in

classrooms to demonstrate real-world economics; one example is the rule set published

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[24] It should be noted that as a privately-held company, Parker Brothers might well have preferred publishing a game lacking Magie's economic message no matter how it came to their attention. This doesn't change the fact that Darrow's version of the game, like many others, had already removed that message.

[25] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 61. Capitalization is in the original.

by professors Catherine Coghlan and Denise Huggins in the journal *Teaching*

Sociology.[26] Under the title "That's Not Fair!," Coghlan and Huggins offer a game that

attempts to mirror the different income levels in contemporary America. Unlike standard

Monopoly, where all players are subject to the same rules, this version treats each one

differently: each makes a different amount of money for passing Go, the player

representing the highest income bracket owns Boardwalk and Park Place at the

beginning, and so on. Coghlan and Huggins' stated goal is to show students that income

and opportunities are not distributed evenly in America, making it hard for people

earning the least money to succeed – and hard for those at the top to fail. Interestingly,

they even discuss the game's original purposes when explaining their own objectives.[27]

They are deliberately trying to use the framework of Monopoly to teach students about

American society. It is obviously possible for a game to not only reflect values from the

surrounding culture, but for it to display multiple sets of values with nothing more than a

few rule changes.

With their long history and their ubiquity, it is reasonable to say that board games

are connected to the cultures that create them. Caillois considered this question at some

length:

> One can go even further and posit in addition a truly reciprocal relationship
> between a society and the games it likes to play. There is indeed an increasing
> affinity between their rules and the common characteristics and deficiencies of the
> members of the groups. These preferred and widely diffused games reflect, on the

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[26] Catherine L. Coghlan and Denise W. Huggins, "'That's Not Fair!': A simulation
exercise in social stratification and structural inequality." *Teaching Sociology* 32,
no. 3 (April 2004): 177.

[27] Ibid., "'That's Not Fair!,'" 180.

one hand, the tendencies, tastes, and ways of thought that are prevalent, while at the same time, in educating and training the players in these very virtues or eccentricities, they subtly confirm them in their habits and preferences.... It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there. In fact, if games are cultural factors and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilization and its content may be characterized by its games.[28]

This can be seen in the wide array of themes and subjects that are displayed in modern board games. "Hardly any field of human endeavour has failed to be translated into a board game," as David Parlett put it, and he provided a list of themes that he had encountered including: fishing, astrology, the Black Plague, fire-fighting, contraceptive use, organized crime, and sheep farming.[29] People seem to have an interest in translating their experiences and their history into the board game format. Now we will turn to the specific ways that this happened during the early Cold War years.

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[28] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 82.

[29] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 348. Spelling is in the original.

CHAPTER 2

SPELLING IT OUT: SCRABBLE AND GAME THEORY

Consider, if you will, the troubles of Ann and Andy. This imaginary couple, hypothesized by sociologist Jessie Bernard in 1959, had a problem shared by many real couples – Andy wanted to have sex more often than Ann did. Fortunately for them, Bernard was ready with a solution, one that fit the mindset of the early Cold War years. She applied game theory to their conjugal woes.[1]

Game theory was created by mathematicians for business and military research. Bernard found other uses for it. For her hypothetical couple with the troubled sex life – and for a wide array of other common relationship problems – Bernard recommended using the mathematical techniques of game theory to find solutions. By categorizing various possible outcomes (one person wants sex, both do, neither do) and assigning point values to them in a matrix, Bernard said that it would be possible to find optimal outcomes for interpersonal problems. In this case, if Andy wanted to have sex and didn't know what Ann wanted, the matrix's suggested solution was for him to make advances 20% of the time and accept his frustration 80% of the time.

Math, structure, order – these suggested solutions for a sagging sex life were in step with their historical moment. In the words of historian Jackson Lears, "The post-World War II decades were the high point of the culture of control."[2] Game theory was one expression of that culture, and it was found in many places besides Ann and Andy's

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[1] Jessie Bernard, "Counseling Techniques for Arriving at Optimum Compromises: Game- and Decision Theory." *Marriage and Family Living* 21, no. 3: 264.

[2] Lears, *Something For Nothing*, 19.

bedroom. Businesses used it to try and gain competitive advantages in the marketplace; the military hoped it would give them an edge in possible nuclear wars. Ultimately, game theory was (and remains) an attempt to quantify something inherently unknowable – future human behavior – so that it could be controlled.

During the 15 years following the end of World War II, Americans faced change and disruption on many fronts – nuclear weapons, the Cold War, the rise of television, a growing civil rights movement, the Red Scare, rock-and-roll music, and on and on. The cultural fallout of the early atomic age was uncertainty. Americans tried to use rationality as shelter, deploying formulas and rules to keep uncertainty out. Game theory was one manifestation of this mindset. Another, at a different point on the "game" spectrum, was Scrabble, to which we now turn.

The word game, invented by an architect in 1933, was an obscure pastime for almost 20 years. Major game publishers rejected it; an hour's work every day assembled enough sets to fill the demand. But in the summer of 1952, Scrabble became a national craze, its popularity growing for the next several years. It was in many ways an ideal game for America in the early Cold War, and its rules reflect some tenets of game theory. Earlier popular board games like chess and Monopoly were "perfect information" games, in which all players have equal knowledge of the game's rules and can see the disposition of every player's resources. Scrabble is an "imperfect information" board game, one of the first modern American games in which each player's resources (i.e. Scrabble tiles) are kept secret until they are used. The game's board is often referred to as a "crossword," but it would be more accurate to consider it as a map studded with high-value territories

which players compete to control. Scrabble is also a game in which one's vocabulary is essential and one's spatial problem-solving skills make a difference — in other words, a game of education.

These characteristics made Scrabble into a board game suited to the early years of the Cold War. Scrabble is devoid of content beyond what the players create, so its meteoric rise in wasn't caused by an overt connection to the social and political events of the time. There were such games during this period, notably a slew of board games with themes related to popular TV shows, but these games did not have much staying power. Scrabble did require a kind of thinking that suited this period – a blend of logic and guesswork, an attempt to create meaning from fragments of information. Americans were dealing with what they perceived as a shadowy threat. Rivalry with the Soviet Union marked America's post-war actions, and the concern about communism got stronger when China was taken over by Mao's forces in 1949. This forms the commonly accepted backdrop for our understanding of the period. It is a good starting point, although the early Cold War's fear of communism has perhaps been overstated by both historians and by popular memory.

Historian Stephen Whitfield described anti-communism as the dominant force in American culture at this time, a "national fetish" that permeated society. The problem, according to Whitfield, was that the actual communist governments weren't something America could easily get rid of. Domestic anti-communism became a pervasive force, he said, because international communism was beyond attack: "With the source of the evil

so elusive and so immune to risk-free retaliation, American culture was politicized."[3] Whitfield's interpretation of anti-communism as the dominant force of America's early Cold War culture has been an important one; this book has become a standard text on America's 1950s culture. Although he acknowledged that anti-communism was not the only force working on American thought, Whitfield found its effects in movies, in religion, in sex, in the civil rights movement. It was, he argued, the heart of American culture during the early Cold War.

Looking more specifically at America's media during this period, scholar Cyndy Hendershot found that anti-communism wasn't everything it seemed to be. It was a common theme in movies and television shows but, in her argument, it was an ambivalent force. The actual threat being presented was generally not communism but subversion, not an ideology but an attitude of moral weakness. Foreign influence was portrayed as a danger in films, but the failure of Americans to do the right thing was even more dangerous. As Hendershot said of the period's science-fiction movies, "These films indicate then, by reflecting attitudes that the audience would not find objectionable, that hysteria over Communism has largely been a myth projected onto the Fifties."[4] In her analysis, anti-communism was used to package other messages and attitudes, many critical of the culture that formed them. This allowed creators to say subversive things without provoking the ire of audiences.

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[3] Stephen J. Whitfield. *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1996): 10.

[4] Cyndy Hendershot. *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2003): 65. Capitalization as in the original.

Of course, Hendershot's analysis doesn't entirely account for notable outbursts of what can only be described as anti-communist hysteria, of which the notorious actions of Senator Joseph McCarthy are perhaps the best-known example. He is remembered today for his participation in the anti-communist investigations of the 1950s. McCarthy's belligerent personal attacks on witnesses who appeared before his various committees caused observers to coin the term "McCarthyism" to describe a brutal, unfair hunt for possible subversives. This, however, does not encompass the entirety of the man's career in national office. During his first four years in the Senate – before his anti-communist crusade began in 1950 – he was already engaging in behavior that scholar Mark Landis described as "continual violation of Senate norms." Landis went on to say that McCarthy's disregard for the truth, misuse of evidence, and vicious personal attacks on his challengers meant that the senator "was quickly developing a reputation as a troublemaker."[5]

McCarthy's behavior had consequences from the start. For example, it cost him his seat on the Banking and Commerce Committee in 1949, at the insistence of the committee chairman. And once McCarthy's hunt for subversives roared into high gear in 1950, he became a frequent target for motions and investigations by other senators. His accusation that communists had infiltrated the State Department were found to be a "fraud and a hoax" by one subcommittee; an investigation of McCarthy's personal finances and his belligerent response caused another subcommittee to charge him with

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[5] Mark Landis, *Joseph McCarthy: The Politics of Chaos* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1987): 46.

"contempt and disdain" for the Senate.[6] Other charges and countercharges filled the early years of the 1950s, leading to McCarthy's actions being investigated by at least four Senate committees or subcommittees. Some Democrats on the Elections Committee even tried to deny McCarthy his Senate seat before the 1952 session, although this partisan move failed for lack of support.[7]

At the height of his popularity, McCarthy was able to bully and abuse fellow senators with impunity. By 1954, though, things had changed. McCarthy's tactics were more often seen as "venom, distortion, and vicious counter-charge" by his contemporaries.[8] In July, Senator Ralph Flanders formally requested that the Senate censure his fellow Republican. The Senate voted to send the matter to a special committee created just to consider this censure resolution. As a sign that McCarthy's fortunes were on the wane, senators added a total of 46 specific charges of misconduct to the Flanders resolution, specifying McCarthy misdeeds ranging from lying about his military record to driving members of his own committees to resign.[9] In 1954 the Senate

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[6] Landis, *Joseph McCarthy*, p. 49.

[7] Ross K. Baker, *Friend and Foe in the U.S. Senate* (New York: The Free Press, 1980): 144.

[8] Francis J. Keenan, "The Censure of Senator McCarthy," *Commonweal* 61, no. 13 (December 31, 1954): 356.

[9] Senate Select Committee to Study Censure Charges, *A Resolution to Censure the Senator from Wisconsin, Mr. McCarthy*, 83rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1954, 1-8.

voted to censure McCarthy, a move that was approved in the major press of the day.[10]

This arc describes, in miniature, the trajectory of anti-communism during the period

Hendershot described. The public and its various power structures were afraid of

communism, both domestic and on foreign soil, but that fear was not all-consuming.

Waves of hysteria did wash over people, as at the height of McCarthy's power during the

early 1950s or during the Hollywood blacklist – but those waves also ebbed, as when

McCarthy was censured. The true historical picture of Cold War anti-communism has

more details than are perhaps commonly known.

The discourse on subversion has older roots that are worth noting today. Writing

in the 1970s, Jane De Hart Mathews considered how Cold War culture reacted to abstract

art. Speaking of domestic anti-communists, she said, "Their bête noire was modernism,

for the rejection of traditional forms and the commitment to abstraction that characterized

vanguard art seemed to impart to their highly structured world the quality of chaos and

the demonic that they so easily identified with communism."[11] The cultural fear wasn't

necessarily communism itself, but disorder in various guises. As De Hart Mathews put it,

"That they [anti-communists] responded with charges of communism is hardly surprising

when we recognize that communism itself had become for many a symbolic issue that

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[10] Technically, the Senate did not vote to censure McCarthy, but to "condemn" him. Historians and political scientists, however, have treated the two as interchangeable terms in this context.

[11] Jane De Hart Mathews. "Art and Politics in Cold War America," *American Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (October 1976): 772.

had less to do with a foreign ideology or even the realities of international politics than with the forces of change."[12]

De Hart Mathews' arguments still have currency. Her observations on change and disorder dovetail with Lears. In *Something For Nothing* he examined the subject of gambling in America (a matter closely akin to game theory and board games) and posited that two opposed social forces have competed through the country's history – a "culture of control" and a "culture of chance." The former relies on mastery of one's circumstances and environment, while the latter attempts to invoke good fortune, often by semi-ritualized interaction with a broader unseen world. Although he did remark that this postwar period was an apex for the culture of control, Lears also mirrored some of De Hart Mathews' observations on the art of the period. The modernist and post-modernist movements, he said, used the "aesthetic of accident," a deliberate erasure of the order which is at the heart of the culture of control. Looking more broadly at the paintings, music, and movies of the early Cold War, Lears described them as improvisational in character, both using methods and creating outcomes that were the opposite of controlled.[13]

The tensions found in Lears' arguments are worth exploring. He *labeled* this period as one of control and order, but *described* it in terms of chance and randomness. Perceptions of the early Cold War, in Lears' work, do not entirely align with the developments he described in the culture. Perhaps it is easy to look at this time and think

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[12] De Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," p. 787.

[13] Lears, *Something For Nothing*, pp. 282 and 294 respectively.

of the conventional images – *Leave It To Beaver*, everyone liked Ike – even when dealing with evidence that it was a more turbulent period. But these contradictions to the conventional narrative should not be ignored.

For example, Whitfield's work on America's early Cold War culture offers a thorough examination of domestic anti-communism in everything from movies to sermons. This is in keeping with a common perception of the time – Joe McCarthy running amok while average Americans were hunting for commies under the bed. However, while it is true that anti-communism was an important factor in society, it was far from the only one. Whitfield did an excellent job of finding it, but at the expense of other moods and modes in the culture. His work was narrower than its title suggests; Whitfield, like Lears, stayed on a track that followed a culturally dominant perception of the period and failed to follow paths that crossed it.

I propose to follow such a path, one which shows anti-communism as a single manifestation of a larger force: uncertainty. As Hendershot pointed out, subversion was a key societal preoccupation during this time, and anti-communism was used in the media as a cover for examining the culture. Both ideas point to a concern that things were not as they seemed, that during the early Cold War people did believe that they were hearing about the actual state of affairs. True motives were unknown, perhaps unknowable. These tensions are seen in De Hart Mathews' interpretation of the clashes over modern/post-modern visual art, where the essential conflict was over the erasure of meanings and boundaries. What troubled the years of 1945-1960 (particularly the 1950s) was not communism so much as it was uncertainty. The world after World War II was very

different than the world before it, and things stubbornly refused to hold still. The culture

of chance had a strong foothold in these times, and it should be recognized.

The rise of game theory and the popularity of Scrabble made sense in an

environment defined by uncertainty. Both attempted to impose order on chaotic

environments; both rewarded educated guesses in the face of imperfect information. As

Lears said of these postwar years, "The tension between the drive for statistical control

and the ever-present power of contingency was most apparent in the use of game

theory… this was the ultimate expression of the muddle of managerial thought –

apparently rational means in the service of wildly irrational ends."[14] A struggle to

maintain control is, in some sense, an acknowledgement that control has already been

lost. This is a key underpinning of American's early Cold War culture: things that had

sustained the country through a world war were falling apart, and it was not certain that

the new center would hold. Scrabble and game theory reflected this preoccupation.

Moving forward into contemporary accounts, it is worth remembering the words

of Caillois in *Man, Play, and Games*: "…to a certain degree a civilization and its content

may be characterized by its games. They necessarily reflect its culture pattern and

provide useful indications as to the preferences, weakness, and strength of a given society

at a particular stage of its evolution."[15] One of America's preferences in this period was

Scrabble. As noted earlier, although the game had existed since 1933, it rocketed into

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[14] Lears, *Something For Nothing,* p. 241.

[15] Roger Caillois. *Man, Play, and Games* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979): 83.

American consciousness in 1952. The popular magazines of the following year were full

of stories about this phenomenon.

Many of the stories followed a standard course telling the tale of the game, its

inventor, and its owners.[16] This course was a commercial one. The game's origin in the

Depression was noted; its inventor's life as architect looking for extra income was often

commented on; the transfer of ownership to another man was described, always

observing that the new owner was a social worker by trade; the sudden sales spike of

1952 was exclaimed over. Reports differed slightly as to how dramatic this spike was –

Life estimated that around 120 copies of the game were sold every week during early

1952, while *The New Yorker* reported weekly sales of 200 – but sources agreed that

weekly orders in the thousands were coming in by the end of that year, and they

continued to climb. A similar theme was sounded in *The Saturday Review* which, instead

of providing the standard biography, posited that someone stood to make a large pile of

money by marketing dictionaries alongside Scrabble.[17]

These articles connect to Lears' control/chance framework. This focus on money

and commerce, during a period in which people were trying to control the uncertain

world around them, brings to mind Lears' comments on money and financial markets.

"Wherever the market spread, one found an arbitrary measure of worth – money –

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[16] Three such narratives are highlighted here; two of them have anonymous authors. They are: Robert Wallace, "A Man Makes A Best-Selling Game – Scrabble – and Achieves His Ambition (Spelled Out Above)," *Life* 35 (December 14, 1953): 101-112; author unknown, "Gnus Nix Zax – Tut," *Time* 62, no. 3 (July 20, 1953): 19; author unknown, "Only The Beginning," *The New Yorker* 29 (May 30, 1953): 17.

[17] L.Z. Hobson. "Speaking of Scrabble," *Saturday Review* 36 (August 22, 1953): 5.

concealed by an appearance of order and system."[18] An orderly surface can cover

something much more ambiguous. Explaining the explosion of Scrabble in terms of

things that could be quantified – how fast it sold, how many different versions there were

in stores – can be seen as an attempt to gauge a cultural phenomenon by rationally

understanding something which had a non-rational origin. These popular-interest

magazines described Scrabble's sudden popularity by measuring things, a hallmark of the

culture of control. They did not attempt to analyze the chances that led to the Scrabble

craze. Beyond the *Saturday Review* briefly describing Scrabble as something appealing to

the "upper I.Q.'s of the nation," these articles made no effort to investigate the cause of

this popularity. The closest they came was in *Life*, which repeated a rumor that a member

of the family which owned the department store Macy's had played it, and then

demanded that Macy's carry it.

Another contemporary perspective on Scrabble deserves attention. An

anonymously authored 1953 article in *Business Week* lumped Scrabble in with other

"fads" of the period, like pet stores and paint-by-numbers pictures.[19] The article's

judgment of what constituted a fad was not perfect – both Scrabble and pet stores have

remained popular to the present day – but it contained some interesting cultural

observations. Unlike its popular-interest contemporaries, the *Business Week* article

considered several reasons why Scrabble had suddenly become popular, even as it

acknowledged that an absolute answer was impossible. It connected the rise of the three

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[18] Lears, *Something For Nothing,* p. 84.

[19] "These Fads Have Built a Billion-dollar Business," *Business Week* no. 1265
    (November 28, 1953): 78-86.

fads to a post-war increase in disposable income and leisure time, combined with an American unwillingness to be idle during one's leisure. Scrabble, the anonymous writer guessed, was something that Americans played because they saw it as educational. The article also quoted the game's manufacturer (the game company Selchow & Righter, now defunct) as saying that both the baby boom and the growth of television contributed to Scrabble's popularity – the former because the young boomers were reaching an age to start playing board games, the latter because people wanted ways to spend the hours between their favorite programs. Interestingly, this business publication paid little attention to the numbers describing Scrabble's rise. The audience which presumably best knew the value of money was the audience that got cultural speculation.

One other board game deserves brief mention here, a 1950s creation called Uranium Rush. In this game, players competed to earn money by finding uranium claims; the Cold War context was not spelled out in the rules, but it would have been obvious at the time. Like Scrabble, it utilized secret and random elements to generate the players' fates. The atomic culture scholar Michael Amundson explained Uranium Rush in a way that also made a clear connection to the culture of chance: "In fact, the seeming randomness of spinning a dial and selecting a card seemed to mirror the image that anyone could – with a little luck – discover uranium, preserve national security, and become a millionaire in the process."[20] Clearly, in casual play, chance was something to be invoked and capitalized on – something to be mastered. Scrabble was a game with a foot in both worlds, one that rewarded skill but was still rooted in chance. This dual

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[20] Scott C. Zeman and Michael A. Amundson, editors. *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado): 57.

nature suited the times. Although Scrabble let players' skill and knowledge take a more

prominent role than in games like Monopoly, it was still not as rigorously analytical as

chess. Uranium Rush is an example of how popular culture connected randomness with

the social environment. One of the keys to Scrabble's success in the 1950s was the way

that it linked this randomness with a strain of intellectualism. In a mirror version of

Amundson's point, the seeming control of placing one's tiles on the Scrabble board

reflected the idea that anyone could perhaps apply their brainpower to an uncertain world

and piece together enough answers to thwart the chaotic and mysterious actions of an

opponent.

Game theory, a more overt attempt at countering uncertainty by using numbers

and systems, was also discussed in the popular press of the day. A typical example can be

found in a 1953 issue of *Popular Science Monthly*, which linked game theory to more

casual game play.[21] An attempt at explaining game theory to an audience of non-

mathematicians, this article is also a window into mainstream perceptions during this

time. The article discussed how researchers used simple games to look for patterns in

human behavior, and it connected these experiments to game theory. When playing

games that involved both luck and skill, people behaved the same way that they did in the

fields of business and war. As the article put it, "In all these activities, there are good and

bad broad, general courses of conduct, which can be mathematically proved to be

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[21] Bruce Bliven. "Games Disclose Secrets of Success: Scientists are determining the best
     strategy in war and business by watching their students play cards," *Popular
     Science Monthly* 163 (December 1953): 125-128, 246. The article describes the
     use of card games, but some of them are clearly analogues of common board
     games like Monopoly.

such."[22] The article credits game theory with proving that there is always a single best strategy to follow in situations that mix skill with luck. It is hard to think of a better expression of the culture of control.

This relentlessly positive attitude, which used the power of calculation to banish human uncertainty, was often found in popular-market writings on game theory. For example, a similar tone was used in a 1955 article from *Scientific American*.[23] An analysis of human satisfaction was embedded in its thorough summary of game theory. Satisfaction was described as something quantifiable: "Isn't satisfaction an inner psychological phenomenon that defies numerical measurement? It turns out that such measurement is possible if one is willing to postulate that the individual will always try to make his decision so as to maximize the expectation [of happiness]."[24]

Having postulated exactly that, thereby neatly eliminating the element of uncertainty from human activity, the article went on to explore many different strategies that decision-makers could use to tackle uncertainty head-on. In all cases – from two people gambling to Columbus sailing across the ocean – satisfaction was found, as long as the proper columns were followed on appropriate charts for the selected strategies. This was a tremendous expression of the culture of control, an attempt to build cages from which uncertainty could not escape. From its opening paragraphs this article was

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[22] Bliven, "Games Disclose Secrets of Success," p. 126.

[23] Leonid Hurwicz. "Game Theory and Decisions: In which Smith plays a game with Jones and Columbus plays a game with nature to illustrate how this comparatively new mathematical tool can be used to grapple with problems involving uncertainties," *Scientific American* 192, no. 2 (February 1955): 78-83.

[24] Hurwicz, "Game Theory and Decisions," p. 80.

open about the battle with uncertainty, both on the personal and on the national level.

Again we see the New Deal idea that human happiness was something that could be

managed by rational means.

One other article on game theory, aimed at a more specialized audience, is worth

noting at least for its provenance. This 1952 article from *The Journal of Political*

Economy worked with game theory models, analyzing the implications of quantifying

"information" for use in these models.[25] These implications were entirely mathematical in

nature, and of little interest to the layman. However, they were presumably of interest to

one of the sponsors – the Office of Naval Research, which supported research of possible

benefit to the US Navy and Marine Corps. The article itself, like the other writings on

game theory, eschews all mention of the military or political contexts in which the theory

might actually be used.

This leads us back to Ann, Andy, and the 1959 Bernard article from *Marriage and*

Family Living. Although the problems addressed in this article were domestic rather than

military, they used the same framework for finding solutions. "Game theory demands a

clear-cut statement of all possible alternatives in any given situation; it demands a

prediction of the possible outcomes of these alternatives; it demands an evaluation of all

these possible outcomes," as Bernard said.[26] Nothing was to be left to chance when game

theory was involved; no uncertainty was allowed. This article applied that mindset to all

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[25] Martin Shubik. "Information, Theories of Competition, and the Theory of Games," *The Journal of Political Economy* 60, no. 2 (April 1952): 145-150.

[26] Bernard, "Counseling Techniques for Arriving at Optimum Compromises," p. 274.

manner of domestic problems – sex life, household budgets, whether to divorce, and so on. Again, relentless faith was shown in the human ability to control the unknown.

Looking at game theory as it was presented during the early Cold War, it is clear that uncertainty was a great concern, and that game theory was intended to answer that concern. However, although game theory was described as something to be used in broad fields like "business" or "the military," it was not being connected to specific issues like communism, or to the fight against subversion as described by Hendershot. It floated free of the day's controversies. Game theory was also detached from larger concerns – it purported to guide one's decisions, but it provided no guidance on how to *be*. Situational choices of action were to be considered; attempts to change or redefine the boundaries of situations were not. In the popular press, at least, game theory's methods were as immutable as the rules of a board game.

In this light, it is interesting to note an article of the period that connected game theory back to board games in general, and to Scrabble in particular. Writing for *The American Economic Review* in 1955, J.J. Polak attempted to apply economic principles to Scrabble in order to find strategies for winning.[27] He described his efforts as "diametrically opposite" to game theory. Rather than using simple games to create plans for economic actions, as game theorists did, Polak tried applying economic theory to come up with good Scrabble actions. The bulk of his short, lighthearted article is a dissection of the probabilities generated by the game's rules, with no further reference to game theory, but it still indicates the degree to which both were present in the

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[27] J.J. Polak. "The Economics of Scrabble," *The American Economic Review* 45, no. 4 (September 1955): 648-652.

consciousness of the times.[28] The irony of using the notoriously irrational field of economics to try creating a rational means of winning a game seems to have escaped Polak's attention.

A battle against uncertainty was being waged in America during this period. The prominence of game theory directly attests to it. So, in its way, does the sudden and sustained popularity of Scrabble. A society's games reflect on its larger preoccupations, as Caillois said. Observers in contemporary America were aware of this connection as well. The bridge editor of the *New York Times*, Albert Morehead, acknowledged that people often played games for deeper reasons: "A player's selection of a game depends on his purpose in playing… he nearly always has at least one unconscious motive, which can best be expressed in the psychologist's jargon: a card player uses a mock struggle as a substitute for the real struggle."[29] While his emphasis was card games, this line of reasoning connects to Caillois' observations, as well as to the financial and military purposes of game theory.

Starting in 1945, the United States was engaged in a new set of struggles – with the Soviet Union, with its new superpower status, with its return to prosperity, with the cultural impact of television. After a chaotic period of economic depression and world war, it would make sense that Americans wanted stability and order. It also seems that they didn't entirely have either. They ended up in uncertain times, when chance was at

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[28] For those who are curious, Polak's analysis was that letters worth 1 or 2 points should be played whenever possible; letters worth 4 or 5 points should not be played for less than double scores; and letters worth 8 or 10 points should usually only be played for triple scores.

[29] Morehead. "Games: Who Plays What and Why," 54.

least as dominant as control. The common perception, that the 1950s were a time of control, reflects that period's dreams rather than its reality.

Of course, it also reflects our current dreams about America's past. The master narrative of the early Cold War says that Americans spent the 1950s either watching *I Love Lucy* or answering Joe McCarthy's questions; both are passive options. Risks that people took, changes that people made – these are not what have been taken as symbols of this period. Today's culture remembers that time as white and uptight, and forgets that it was a period full of uncertainty.

The truth can still be found in the artifacts of the time, both physical and cultural. Games are a good source for this kind of insight. Although they are found nearly everywhere, people often underestimate the impact and relevance of games when compared to newer forms of entertainment. According to contemporary accounts, it would have been difficult to find a middle-class home without a Scrabble set by late 1953, and yet scholars have overlooked the ubiquity of the phenomenon. Millions of people suddenly turned to the game for recreation; it makes sense to try to figure out why this happened, both by examining Scrabble and by considering the times. Similarly, this period was when game theory blossomed. Although not as blatant as a black-and-white monster movie, game theory provides an allegorical commentary on the culture it inhabited. The picture thus revealed is sometimes at odds with mainstream perception.

Scrabble did not cause a major change in American society, but Scrabble is an indicator pointing to major characteristics in American society. Game theory never caught on as a solution to bedroom woes, but it did have some effect in boardrooms and

war rooms. As with its more casual board game cousin, this theory's popularity in the early Cold War speaks to the preoccupations of the time. People sought rational answers to uncertain situations. They wanted order and control, but not for the reasons that nostalgia now says – the times were chaotic. Across the nation and the world, nuclear weapons meant that everyone was living in a culture of chance. Through their play, both casual and serious, Americans were simulating the kind of control that they wished they really had.

CHAPTER 3

BLACK AND WHITE AND RED ALL OVER: COLD WAR CHESS

The heroes of the early Cold War had swagger. John Wayne, Vince Lombardi, the all-American agents of the FBI – they were rugged men doing rugged things. But for a few years, the weight of the United States seemed to rest on the thin shoulders of a finicky overdressed tantrum-throwing young man whose only skill was playing chess. Bobby Fischer cancelled matches if they started too early, walked out if he didn't like how spectators were watching him, and publically accused the Russian grandmasters of fixing the game. He was also a prodigy, a teenage genius who nearly single-handedly turned back decades of Soviet bloc chess domination . Fischer was an important symbol to Cold War America, one that was (and still is) imperfectly understood.

Chess forms the foundation of a powerful Cold War narrative, both in the past and in the present. The game easily lends itself to the idea of a bipolar struggle between similar contestants. In the Western world, at least, chess is widely regarded as an archetypal strategic challenge for two players.[1] For example, this 1958 *Newsweek* cover used chess to symbolize many elements of the struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union:[2]

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[1] The closest counterpart in the Eastern world would probably be the game of *go*. Its popularity in the United States, Europe, and Russia has been limited, however.

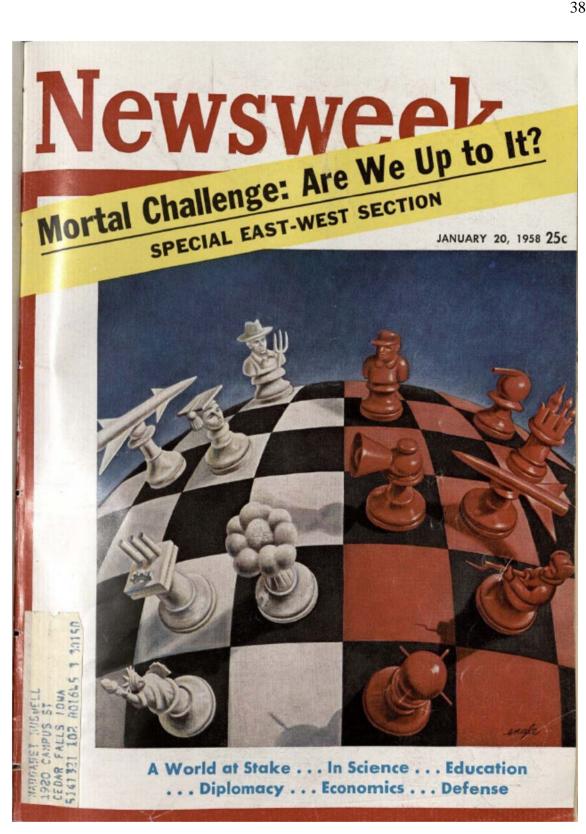[2] *Newsweek* 51, no. 3 (January 20, 1958).

Figure 1. Newsweek chess cover

The specific iconography of this cover is interesting and will be examined shortly, but at the moment it represents the many ways in which the Cold War was intertwined with the game of chess. Observers can easily draw connections between the two. Aside from the obvious dual-sided struggle in both, the characteristics of chess pieces connect to the different forms of pressure that the U.S. and the Soviet Union tried to exert on each other. In chess, each kind of piece moves across the board differently, and there are special rules for how the common pawns can capture other pieces or be exchanged for higher-value pieces captured by one's opponent. Different chess pieces do different jobs. In the same fashion, the years from 1945 to 1960 saw a proliferation of new military and quasi-military technology, notably the evolution of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. And the varying kinds of military hardware represented only some of the pieces in any player's arsenal. Economic influence, the power of persuasion, religion or the lack thereof – all kinds of things were on the board in the Cold War game.

For that matter, the chess board itself was a convenient parallel to the post-atomic world. Although two world wars had taken place in recent history, the introduction of nuclear weapons ushered in an age when the planet itself was thought to be at stake. Unprecedented destruction could rain down upon any point on the globe as the U.S.S.R. joined the nuclear club, followed by other nations, and as fission-based atomic weapons gave way to more powerful thermonuclear armaments. This world of borders, one that permitted no escape from the reach of nuclear weapons, resembles the chessboard. With its grid of black and white squares, the board is divided into specific territories just like any real-world political map; chess pieces can no more leave its boundaries than Cold

War citizens could escape the risk of mushroom clouds. To extend the metaphor a bit farther, the object of chess is to capture an opponent's king, an important but slow-moving piece. Victory might not be possible in a nuclear war, but the competitors would be sure to target each other's capitals and other immobile targets.

A close reading of the mechanics of chess shows parallels between the game and the postwar period, but such a detailed analysis isn't the only way to uncover similarities. People at the time used chess as a prism to refract their experiences. Leon Volkov, a former Soviet military officer who defected to the United States and became a writer for mainstream magazines, visited a United States Chess Federation event in New York City in 1954. The USCF was hosting a team from the U.S.S.R., and Volkov reported being repeatedly rebuffed by Russian "chaperons" when he tried to talk with his former countrymen. "The visitor to the New York tournament," he said, "will realize that for the Soviets even a chess game becomes a struggle between Communism [sic] and capitalism."[3]

Some elements of that struggle are obvious on the *Newsweek* cover shown earlier. Both sides have pieces representing military force and nuclear danger, from missiles to warning sirens. They also stand for other elements of civic life – farmers, someone in a mortarboard cap, a factory, a *sputnik*-style satellite, and even the Statue of Liberty. The chess game between these two nations was seen as one encompassing all aspects of the contemporary world. As *Newsweek* publisher Theodore Mueller wrote in that issue, "Chess is a game requiring patience, imagination, and intellect – the very qualities

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[3] Leon Volkov. "Russia's Captive Chessmen," *Newsweek* 43, no. 26 (June 28, 1954): 38.

demanded of the West in its mortal struggle with the Communist [sic] East."[4] And

American magazines weren't the only ones looking to chess as a representation of the

geopolitical situation. The images below, from a 1950 issue of *Time*, were said to show a

contemporary set of Russian chessmen that "symbolize the conflict between Communism

[sic] and capitalism" from the Soviet perspective:[5]

European

CHESS WAR

These pictures show a new set of chessmen, made in Russia, which produces the world's best chess players and most dogged propagandists. The new chessmen symbolize the conflict between Communism and capitalism. The capitalist king (*left*) is a skeleton wrapped in ermine and obsolete armor, while his anemic-looking queen stands with one breast lewdly exposed, holding a cornucopia from which pours money—probably dollars. The capitalist pawns are cowering workers bound by triple strands of chains. On the Communist side, a fine upstanding worker is king (*right*), the queen wears decorous Russian peasant dress, and the pawns happily swing their sickles. Obviously, before using the new set, the Russians would have to revise the ancient rules of chess, to make it impossible for the capitalist side to checkmate the Red king.
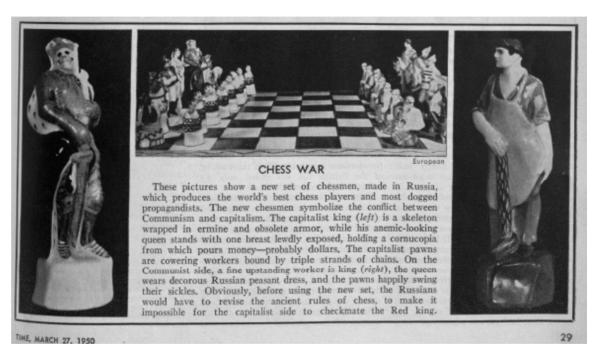
TIME, MARCH 27, 1950
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Figure 2. Soviet chess set

The skeletal king and his chain-wrapped pawns on the left were the forces of capitalism,

while the wholesome-looking workers and peasants on the right stood for communism.

[4] Theodore Mueller. Newsweek 51, no. 3 (January 20, 1958): 11.

[5] "Chess War," *Time* 55, no. 13 (March 27, 1950): 29.

Chess served more than a symbolic function during the early Cold War. The game itself was seen as a matter of importance, a chance for the finest minds of the free world to face off against their communist counterparts. These intellectual battles were important. As World War II ended, science and knowledge and problem-solving came to prominence in a new way. "Postwar America was the era of the expert," said historian Elaine Tyler May. "Armed with scientific techniques and presumably inhabiting a world that was beyond popular passions, the experts had brought us into the atomic age. Physicists developed the bomb, strategists created the cold war, and scientific managers built the military-industrial complex. It was now up to the experts to make the unmanageable manageable."[6] The work of experts had transformed the world in a fundamental way. Nuclear weapons – the province of highly-trained specialists, beyond the control and perhaps the understanding of the common man – were replacing rifles and cannons as the measure of a nation's military might. Atomic bombs were developed in secret, as were their thermonuclear replacements; learning these secrets was the provenance of scientists and spies. The U.S. struggled to maintain nuclear supremacy over first the U.S.S.R. and then a growing list of other countries.

While this was going on, the world kept changing in unexpected ways. The end of World War II led to the decline of colonialism around the world, redrawing the political map. China was taken over by communists in 1949 and quickly ended up waging a low-intensity war with the U.S. in the divided Korean peninsula. In 1957 another intellectual struggle heated up when the Soviet *sputnik* satellite was launched. And the perceived

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[6] Elaine Tyler May. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988): 26.

need for science and experts wasn't confined to the obvious areas of war, economics, and manufacturing. "The single educational trend which seems to me to be blocking the solution of those social problems that we call family problems," wrote University of Kansas professor Robert Foster in 1949, "is the almost total lack of scientific inquiry into family behavior and the influences affecting family life."[7] This concern is also obvious in Jesse Bernard's attempt to integrate game theory into family life, as discussed in our examination of Scrabble. Americans were turning to experts in all areas of life – although occasionally with some trepidation. Nuclear anxiety is a recurring thread running through this period; concerns were also expressed about the role of experts and technology in the domestic sphere. Writing as World War II was nearly over, domestic magazine columnist Nola Wibel expressed her hopes for the future: "I want a stable American home built on the family *life* within it, not on the material possessions which protect us from the elements of weather and time... it isn't that we are 'old-fashioned,' or desirous of holding back the world's natural progress. It's simply that there are certain time-tested values that no amount of machination or speeding-up can improve."[8]

Such concerns, however, did not stop the impulse toward intellectualization. One of the ways it manifested was the enthusiasm for quiz shows in the early and mid-1950s. A fashion that has crested and receded repeatedly since the dawn of broadcast media, the quiz show is both a display of intellect and a game. The typical form is a trivia contest

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[7] Robert Foster. "Social Trends and Family Life," *Journal of Home Economics* 41, no. 7 (September 1949): 359.

[8] Nola E. Weibel. "I Hope It Doesn't Happen Here!," *American Home* 33, no. 6 (May 1945): 26.

where one or more contestants attempt to answer questions from several fields of

knowledge in order to win money and prizes. The long-running TV show *Jeopardy!* is an

example of this genre; in its way, the popular board game Trivial Pursuit is also a part of

the quiz show phenomenon.[9] During the early Cold War, quiz shows were a popular

form of entertainment. People enjoyed watching contestants display their intellects,

whether they were unknown homemakers trying to earn $100 from Groucho Marx on

You Bet Your Life or college professors pursuing substantial sums on *Twenty-One*. But

this fascination curdled as scandals unfolded from 1956 through 1958. Quiz show

contestants, notably Herb Stempel of *Twenty-One*, went public with accusations that the

shows were rigged, with some contestants being fed answers in advance or deliberately

losing games at the instruction of producers. This grabbed public attention and, for a

time, ended the popularity of quiz shows. According to Stephen Whitfield, the scandals

had a particular impact because they reflected the period's push toward

intellectualization. He said "the sense that intellect itself had to be drafted into the Cold

War, which was one general consequence of sputnik [sic], may explain why the scandal

was so reverberant."[10]

Intellect was drafted into the struggle before the 1957 *sputnik* launch, as we have

seen, but the quiz show contretemps does indicate the unease that people felt when faced

with expertise that proved hollow. The great brains that helped win World War II had

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[9] Trivial Pursuit was created in 1979, putting it outside the reach of this project. Any
students of games, or of popular culture in general, would be well advised to
consider Trivial Pursuit in any discussion of the 1980s or later, as this game
quickly became a major success on the order of Monopoly or Scrabble.

[10] Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 176.

done so by unleashing weapons that ordinary people had trouble understanding or controlling. Even the experts were slow to grasp some of the implications of what they had done. The effects of radioactive fallout were not understood until many years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "For the price of a new car," the Americans of 1951 were told, they could have backyard bomb shelters that would absolutely protect them from the blast and radiation of atomic weapons.[11] The handyman's skill could be drafted to build a wooden A-bomb shelter in the basement, following plans provided by the Federal Civil Defense Administration and published in popular magazines.[12] This commonplace aptitude would turn out to be little help against radioactivity, ecological devastation, and nuclear winter. These feelings of control over the physical environment would be temporary. However, on a more abstract level, the symbolic overlay of chess atop the Cold War gave Americans another way to direct the global struggle.

Commenting on the use of chance as a palliative, Lears said, "This was the core of the performative conception of the truth: the seeker sought not to verify empirical reality through experiment, but to constitute emotional reality through ritual."[13] Scientific experts had unleashed a worldwide danger that they could not control. Technical and governmental experts were not coming up with solutions to the Cold War problem. Writing in 1960 on the matter of fallout shelters, James W. Altman observed that "the American public, by and large, has become convinced that it is finished as a society if

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[11] "Back-Yard Bomb Shelter," *Popular Mechanics* 96, no. 4 (October 1951): 112.

[12] "Wooden A-Bomb Shelters For Your Basement," *Science Digest* 34, no. 6 (December 1953): 90.

[13] Lears, *Something For Nothing*, 256.

there is a nuclear war. No efforts have convinced John Q. Public that he is not doomed."[14] And yet chess – a game that can be *won*, a pastime that does not end in doom – rapidly became (and has remained) a metaphor for the times. The two-player nature of the game, the clearly delineated board, and the game's reliance on brainpower all played into contemporary perceptions of the ongoing political struggle. By understanding chess, whether as a player or a fan, the Cold War citizen could influence the world. "It requires very little perception," wrote Edward L. Katzenbach, Jr. in 1963, "to se the relevance of chess to the strategic problems of our time – to raising standards of living, to guerilla actions, and to the resolution of the Cold War."[15]

In this context, chess was seen as serious business. It was an area where citizens of the U.S. could match themselves against Soviet representatives in meaningful yet non-lethal combat. These citizens were not just ordinary Americans, of course – they were experts, intellectuals, masters of an arcane mental discipline. But American they were as representative of their country as the Soviet grandmasters they faced. And they did so repeatedly, particularly after the death of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin in 1953.[16] These proxy fights were a matter of great interest to American audiences. Mass-market periodicals had regular stories and photo spreads covering the chess clashes; for a time,

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[14] James W. Altman, *Symposium on Human Problems in the Utilization of Fallout Shelters*, ed. George W. Baker and John H. Rohrer (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences – National Research Council, 1960): 166.

[15] Edward L. Katzenbach, Jr., "Poker, Pawns, and Power," *Saturday Review* 46, no. 12 (March 23, 1963): 25.

[16] Bernard Cafferty. *World Chess Champions*, ed. E.G. Winter (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981): 89.

even *Sports Illustrated* would follow these matches. This chess coverage at times put a human face on the Cold War, as with this 1954 *Life* magazine story about a series of games in New York City between American champion Larry Evans and Soviet player Mark Taimanov: "...Communism's rigid visage relaxed long enough to show Russian officials grimacing, fidgeting on their chairs and chewing their nails, like anyone else under tension."[17] A series of photographs showed various Soviet officials gnawing on their knuckles and making wry faces at the action on the chessboard. This echoes an observation made by Volkov at the USCF event. He asked a Soviet attendee whether chess had anything to do with politics and got the reply: "Of course it does! Remember, we are Marxists and Communists. For us, everything is political. Including chess."[18]

This is borne out by the Soviet attitude toward their native chess players during this time. The game of chess was of interest to Americans and was seen as a venue for politics by other means, but it was treated as a crucial matter by authorities within the USSR. It became a national interest not long after the Russian revolution of 1917, according to chess historian Bernard Cafferty, because of its potential to educate the general population. By 1948 chess was a full-fledged instrument of Soviet politics, he said, "and great claims were made for the so-called Soviet School of Chess. Far-reaching conclusions were drawn from chess successes to the effect that these successes proved

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[17] "Stress Over Chess: Risky play against U.S. alarms Soviet boss," *Life* 37, no. 2 (July 12, 1954): 39.

[18] Volkov, "Russia's Captive Chessmen," 38.

the superiority of Soviet society."[19] For the chess players, this meant a great deal of

scrutiny, especially when they were facing American competitors. The "chaperons"

mentioned by Volkov were one manifestation of this watchfulness, which came with

consequences. For instance, Russian grandmaster Boris Spassky was regarded as one of

the greatest players in the 20th century. However, when he wasn't playing up to the

standards of Communist Party officials, Spassky was denied permission to travel

abroad.[20]

It was rare, however, for a top-level Soviet chess player to perform poorly. While

the United States produced a handful of notable players during the early Cold War, the

USSR had bushels of them. The Soviets might have been "unrelentingly tense about their

chess," as an anonymous *Life* magazine writer described them in 1955, but they were also

"the best chess players in the world."[21] During this time the Russians had more world

champions and grandmasters than the United States (or any other country). The Soviet

attitude toward chess as a serious pursuit reflects an observation made by Brian Sutton-

Smith, a scholar of games and play since the 1950s. Sutton-Smith noted that cultures

engaged in subsistence-level agriculture and/or adhering to a fundamentalist ideology

tended to discourage play as something to be done for its own sake. When it is found in

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[19] Cafferty, *World Chess Champions*, 88.

[20] E. G. Winter, *World Chess Champions* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981): 111.

[21] Leonard McCombe, "Kremlin Beams Smiles to U.S.," *Life* 39, no. 3 (July 18, 1955): 26.

such cultures, he said, it tends to model useful adult behaviors and roles.[22] Standards of

living varied wildly across the Soviet Union, but many of its people were living at a near-

subsistence level, and it is fair to say that a rigid ideological core lay beneath the

government, which in turn actively worked to shape the broader society. The use of chess

both as a cultural pastime and as a subsidized showcase of intellectual prowess

demonstrates that it was more than a game to the USSR during the early Cold War, just

as it was to the United States. This formed the backdrop for one of the greatest Cold War

clashes – Bobby Fischer against the world.

Fischer was an American chess prodigy. Over the course of the postwar years, his

aggressive style of play and his headstrong individualism would make him a hero to the

public. At a time when the menace of collectivism was represented by a long string of

bland Russian grandmasters, Fischer defiantly followed his own path. His ongoing battle

with his Soviet counterparts helped Fischer's countrymen turn their Cold War anxieties

into a game.

By the time he was 15 years old, Fischer was a formidable chess player, winning

national titles and attracting attention. He was an intelligent young man with a variety of

interests, but chess proved to be his strongest enthusiasm. "Rather fortunate, that –

although like passions for Monopoly are not entirely unknown, they are even less socially

acceptable," observed chess writer Al Horowitz in a brief biographical sketch of

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[22] Sutton-Smith, "Evolving a Consilience of Play Definitions: Playfully," 249.

Fischer.[23] In the early Cold War, though, Fischer's chess mania was entirely acceptable, especially since he kept winning. His one-man campaign against the Soviet chess hordes – which continued through the 1970s – held the nation's attention. In this way, chess became a surrogate for the grimmer Cold War struggles underway.

Fischer was not the only American chess player to contend with counterparts from the USSR. The international rivalry pitted multiplayer teams from each nation against one another. Some of these clashes were dual-nation exhibition matches, while others fell under the auspices of multinational chess championships. Americans paid some attention to these gameboard clashes. Mainstream magazines, particularly *Life,* covered some of these encounters in the form of pictorial essays. American chess champions like Larry Evans and Samuel Reshevsky were mentioned, but these stories were about the chess tournaments themselves, rather than the men playing in them. The aforementioned 1954 *Life* story about the match between Evans and Mark Taimonov was a typical example of this, providing an elaborate play-by-play of two games while barely touching on the players themselves.[24] Public interest at this point was focused on chess itself, with Cold War subtext floating just beneath the surface of the reporting. The tensions being examined were those of nation-states; the chess players and their games, if you will, were seen as just pawns in this global game.

Bobby Fischer changed the American view of international chess. In early 1958, the 14-year-old Fischer won the U.S. Chess Championship, becoming the youngest

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[23] Israel Albert Horowitz. *The World Chess Championship: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1973): 179.

[24] "Stress Over Chess," 39.

national champion in American history. He began playing in international tournaments, often defeating players with decades of experience, and he was declared a grandmaster at the age of 15. He played on several American teams in the international Chess Olympiad thereafter, helping the teams to several top-four finishes. However, Fischer himself was not a team player but a solitary person with a penchant for doing things his own way, on the chess board as well as in his personal life. "Fischer's win-every-game approach is unique among post-Second World War players," said chess analyst Raymond Keene. "Even [Anatoly] Karpov, the only player to rival Fischer's supremacy in that era, is still often content to draw with Black against strong players."[25] As Fischer's career continued, the American interest in chess changed. The narrative, which had followed a US-vs.-USSR pattern, evolved into one of Bobby Fischer's struggle to become the world's greatest chess player. Nationalistic undertones were still present, but his personal story became the predominant theme.

"Creativity is unlikely to flourish where the tastes of officials matter," observed Whitfield in his study of America's Cold War culture. We observed one facet of this earlier in our examination of attitudes about domestic subversion. As De Hart Mathews noted, mainstream American culture was initially uncomfortable with the free expression practiced by abstract artists during this period. Nonetheless, this approach to the arts became a signature American style and in time was a point of national pride. On the other hand, in the USSR the tastes of officials mattered a great deal, and they deliberately

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[25]Raymond Keene. *World Chess Champions*, ed. E.G. Winter (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981): 120.
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enforced an anti-modernist style called "socialist realism" which allowed very little room for the creator's own expression.[26] And as we have also seen, Soviet authorities laid a heavy hand on the performance of their chess players. These things provided a foundation for contemporary American fears of faceless communist hordes preparing to overwhelm their own culture. Fischer's creative style of chess – always striving for the win when other players would draw, engaging in brash behavior unlike his restrained grandmaster peers – fed into the idea of the independent American character. Bobby Fischer became the human face of the Cold War.

He was not shy about clashing with his Russian rivals. His chessboard confrontations were headline news; Fischer also involved himself in the larger politics surrounding the game. Most notably, in 1962 he accused Russians of conspiring to unfairly win a tournament in Curacao, affecting the quest for the world chess championship. "By agreeing in advance to throw draws, or games, to each other after a few perfunctory moves, Soviet players, Fischer said, manipulate their scores, and make it impossible for a non-communist to break through to victory unless he wins almost every game he plays," explained contemporary writer Robert O'Brien. "American and English players have been muttering about this for the last ten years. But Fischer had the nerve to drop the bomb."[27] In fact, Fischer went so far as to complain about it in the pages of *Sports Illustrated*.

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[26] De Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," 775.

[27] Robert O'Brien. "Bobby Fischer: Best in Chess?", *Saturday Review* 46, no. 17 (April 27, 1963): 22.

"The Russians have substituted propaganda for money as the incentive for holding on to the title," he wrote.[28] At one time, world championship games were determined by whether champions and challengers could arrange mutually satisfactory prize amounts. Fischer's contention – in line with much Cold War thinking outlined here – was that chess dominance was so important to the Soviets that they would manipulate tournament structures to guarantee that only Eastern Bloc players would even have a chance at championship games. In his 1962 article, Fischer vowed to stop competing in these events unless the rules were changed. While the Soviets denied collusion, many chess authorities found Fischer's accusation plausible, and tournament structures were changed to make it more difficult for national teams to block out other possible winners. A few months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, Bobby Fischer provoked a staredown with the USSR and ultimately came out the winner.

This was not the last time he would clash with Soviet chessmen. Another memorable encounter came in 1966 at a tournament in Havana, where Fischer not only played several leading Russians, but had a match with Fidel Castro. According to Fischer's teammate Larry Evans, writing later that year, "Castro learned to play chess just recently and wants the country to share his enthusiasm."[29] As part of that enthusiasm, the Cuban dictator played both Fischer and reigning world champion Tigran Petrosian, a top

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[28] Bobby Fischer. "The Russians Have Fixed World Chess," *Sports Illustrated* 17, no. 8 (August 20, 1962): 18.

[29] Larry Evans. "Bobby Would Rather Fight," *Sports Illustrated* 25, no. 23 (December 5, 1966): 91.

Soviet player. Again we see the importance of chess to communist leaders.[30] It was

clearly a matter of interest to their people as well – Evans described the Cuban public as

rooting for Fischer to win his matches even as he was edged out of first place by the more

cautious Petrosian.[31] (In a similar vein, O'Brien described Fischer as "probably better

known and more widely appreciated abroad than at home. In Russia... he is easily as

popular as pianist Van Cliburn."[32]) Tales of Fischer's prowess at the game were matched

with assurances that he was popular overseas – the same kind of popularity that would

prompt American media to cover his tournament play in the first place.

Over the course of Fischer's career, the public picture of chess changed. People

were always interested in the game as a symbol of the Cold War struggle, whether or not

they followed the play itself. During the 1950s, before Fischer's ascent to fame, chess

was a broad lens used for viewing the struggle between nations. Magazine writer Leon

Volkov's attempts to interview his countrymen, documented earlier, were a typical use of

chess as a tool to illuminate the gulf separating the US from the USSR. This abstract us-

and-them perspective gave way to tales of Bobby Fischer, the eccentric genius who

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[30] To be accurate, what we see here is an American press writing about its countrymen winning at chess, while simultaneously describing chess as something of vital importance to its Soviet rivals. Given the contemporary evidence that chess was in fact important to the government of the U.S.S.R., it is not unreasonable to assume that the American press was at least partly correct, but the complexity of the situation deserved to be noted.

[31] Evans, "Bobby Would Rather Fight," 92.

[32] O'Brien, "Bobby Fischer," 22. Van Cliburn had struck a blow in the cultural Cold War himself in 1958 when, at the age of 23, he won an international piano competition in Moscow despite widespread belief that the Russian judges were under orders to award the prize to one of their countrymen.

singlehandedly battled the Soviet chess machine. Fischer would be a symbol of American

intellect through the 1970s, when he went into a period of retirement that would outlast

the Cold War. His geopolitical importance did not diminish over the years. In 1972

Fischer was involved in a multi-game world championship match with Soviet

grandmaster Boris Spassky. Early on, Fischer abruptly abandoned the series, only to

return with little explanation. According to chess historian Horowitz, "later it was

revealed that [Fischer] had had a phone call from Henry Kissinger, foreign-affairs adviser

to President Nixon, pleading with him to continue the match."[33]

Fischer's mercurial behavior helped drive the enthusiasm for chess. Not only was

he an unpredictable genius at the chessboard, he was a riveting spectacle away from it.

Openly accusing the Soviet players of conspiring to fix games, refusing to play matches

before noon, observing a mysterious "holy day" every week during which he refused to

even discuss chess. "He has gotten religion," noted teammate Larry Evans, "though no on

has been able to find out which religion it is, or whether it has a brand name.[34]" Fischer's

behavior during the early Cold War years was flamboyant, perhaps unsportsmanlike, and

definitely individual. This propelled public interest in chess into the stratosphere.

America's champion was not only among the greatest players in history, he was

resolutely himself, a go-it-alone genius facing down the interchangeable grandmasters of

the Eastern bloc. Fischer stood for more than just national pride; he gave Americans

someone to identify with, thereby helping propel chess out of the realm of eggheads and

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[33] Horowitz, "The World Chess Championship," 269.

[34] Evans, "Bobby Would Rather Fight," 91.

making it at least temporarily something appropriate for the *Sports Illustrated* crowd to follow.

Chess was clearly important to the Cold War. It served as a symbol, a metaphor, and even a personalization of global tension. In that light, it is worth considering one of Robert O'Brien's observations about Bobby Fischer: "The outstanding quality of Fischer's style is that he plays all out to win, always. Most critics regard this as a weakness, the mark of a gambler... Fischer plays his heart out in every game, and fights to the last pawn."[35] Here we return to the juxtaposition of chance and control – a gambler's ways are something to be avoided in chess, a game of icy cerebral control. Yet chess, one of the overarching images of the postwar years, is a game of perfect information and honorable draws. The Cold War itself, a time when the possibility of nuclear launches affected daily life and subversives lurked in shadows, was not being fought to a draw. The contenders wanted to win.

Chess was, in many ways, an idealized version of the situation that Americans faced during the early Cold War. It reflected a reality they wished to be true: a two-player game, tightly governed by understandable rules, that could be mastered by the mind. The game of chess was a good model of a rational world. It fit the needs and anxieties of the time. This same desire for control manifested elsewhere in the popular mind as game theory, as the hunt for domestic communists, as a reluctance to discuss exactly what activity was producing the Baby Boom. Lears observed that "virtually every culture is a confidence game: an effort to provide people with a feeling of confidence, with a

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[35] O'Brien, " Bobby Fischer," 23.

conviction that they have a meaningful place in the universe and can influence the forces

that shape their fate."[36] The continuous contemporary use of chess as a symbol for the

times fits Lears' description. The structure of the game itself, combined with the ongoing

US-USSR rivalry for dominance at it, reflected the Cold War in a harmless and

controllable way.

However, a close reading of chess shows it to actually be a poor fit. It may have

showed a version of the Cold War that Americans wanted to see, but several fundamental

characteristics of chess were, at best, perpendicular to the reality of the times. Chess is a

two-player game, for example, which fit the us-versus-them attitude that we have seen

demonstrated in the period's American popular culture. However, more than two actors

were present on the world stage – the actual Cold War was a game with many players,

and they did not neatly align themselves into two sides. Cultural analyst Steven Belletto

suggested that the contemporary popularity of game theory, with its bias toward two

players, influenced Americans to view their situation as a dual-player conflict even as

they struggled to influence a 'Third World' whose very name indicates that other players

were at the geopolitical table.[37] Poker, he suggested, was a game more suited to the world

as it existed.

Another problem with the chess metaphor is that it has three possible outcomes –

win, loss, or draw. Two players can agree to simply end the game rather than play it out.

Writing in 1957, Robert Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa used game theory to analyze

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[36] Lears, *Something For Nothing*, 99.

[37] Steven Belletto. "The Game Theory Narrative and the Myth of the National Security State," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June 2009): 354.

their setting in very similar terms: "One might be tempted to take war as the most extreme example of interest conflict, but at the global level it is probably not strictly competitive since both factions presumably prefer a draw to mutual annihilation."[38] Unfortunately for that kind of evaluation, a draw only happens at the end of a game. Although the Cold War as a U.S. – Soviet contest may have ended, the ongoing nuclear game has continued to the present day, with an expanding number of players.

The final problem with chess as a metaphor is that it is a game of perfect information. This may have represented the aspirations of Americans wondering where the enemy was and what it could do, but life lacks the clarity of chess. Using it as a lens to view the Cold War was (and is) inaccurate. Of course, the presence of so much uncertainty may well have made chess a more comforting symbol than more accurate options like poker. The achievements of the New Deal, victory in World War II, the rise of experts and intellectuals with solutions for the world's problems – all of these were now in the shadow of a mushroom cloud. As Lears noted in his consideration of the phrase "the age of anxiety" and the early Cold War, this was not necessarily a time of nervousness, but one in which people became aware of their own human failings.[39] A two-player game with no secrets, one that could be mastered by the human mind, may have been more appealing than a direct reflection of the world as it was.

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[38] Robert Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa. *Games and Decisions: Introduction and Critical Survey* (New York: Wiley, 1957): 59.

[39] Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 309.

CHAPTER 4

PLAYFUL KILLING: CLUE, RISK, AND VIOLENCE

Scrabble and chess were not the only significant games of this period. Mass-market board games were a popular form of entertainment during the postwar years, as they fit into the new domesticity of the increasingly urban/suburban nation. Many of them were short-lived. Various cultural preoccupations provided the themes for these mayfly games; television shows were particularly common. Television's explosive popularity in the postwar period –for example, from 1946 to 1955 the number of television sets in the United states went from 20,000 to 30.5 million[1] – was reflected in the large number of TV-related games produced at the time. This represented a significant shift in the mindset of American game companies. As Whitehill put it, "a business that once hoped to sell an item that would be a staple in the company's line for decades was now making a product that would be obsolete as soon as the program on which it was based went off the air."[2]

Many of the games based on TV shows are valuable to collectors and hobbyists today, but they failed to have lasting appeal. Connection to a popular pastime wasn't enough to guarantee a game's place in the broader society – and neither was a link to common existential concerns. A variety of board games during this time reflected the Cold War in some way. For example, Uranium Rush was one of several mid-1950s games that capitalized on the public fascination with nuclear materials. According to

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[1] Gary R. Edgerton. *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 103.

[2] Whitehill, *American Games*, 18.

historian Michael Amundson, Uranium Rush was "most lifelike" and served as a good

symbol of how public perceptions of uranium were changing during this period. The

game itself was driven by a set of fairly random mechanics, involving the use of a spinner

to move pieces around the board and collect cards that affected the player's supply of

game money; many of the cards had a national security motif.

"In fact," wrote Amundson, "the seeming randomness of spinning a dial and

selecting a card seemed to mirror the image that anyone could – with a little luck –

discover uranium, preserve national security, and become a millionaire in the process."[3]

And this is certainly one way that Uranium Rush and games like it could have connected

to the culture around them. Like Monopoly, it offered vicarious wealth on a random

basis, making it easy for a less-skilled player to beat their competitors. But Uranium Rush

also points back to Lears' idea of the culture of chance. Uranium was a key that opened

the door to nuclear annihilation. The threat of war with the Soviet Union was

omnipresent, and this potential was seen as very different from its predecessors –

individual soldiers would not make a difference. The outcome of war was out of their

hands, and in the hands of chance. Victory or defeat would depend on impersonal

uranium-powered weapons launched from unknown places. Playing Uranium Rush put

people in control of this dangerous substance for a little while, if only in their own minds.

Again, however, games of this nature did not last. They might have connected

with short-term fears, but when those fears failed to become real, the pastimes that

reflected them were consigned to the trash. Such is the pattern of the commercialized

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[3] Amundson, *Atomic Culture*, 56.

postwar age. This disposable culture did, however, produce some enduring games. Two

of them – Clue and Risk – remain popular to this day. Like Scrabble and Monopoly, both

games have evolved into brands, with all of the variant forms and merchandising

opportunities that branding implies (this became standard operating procedure in the

game industry during the 1990s, according to corporate historian G. Wayne Miller[4]). And

also like their popular cousins, Clue and Risk shed light on the deeper concerns of the

people who played them.

Clue is not technically a product of the Cold War – it was invented in England

during World War II – but the postwar period is when it first came to the United States.[5]

Like Scrabble, it was a natural fit for the intellectual atmosphere of this period. Clue is a

game of imperfect information and problem-solving. Although it has a board, the

positional element of the game is minimal (Parlett described it as "more of a card game

than a board game,"[6] and some later variants have done away with the traditional roll-

dice-and-move mechanics). Instead the action centers on what each player knows about a

murder that has been committed. Cards that show locations, weapons, and murder

suspects are dealt to everyone at the start of the game; each player also takes the role of

one of these suspects. Everyone tries to figure out which cards their opponents hold,

using a process of elimination to figure out which suspect used which weapon in which

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[4] G. Wayne Miller, *ToyWars*: 262.

[5] The game was invented under the name Cluedo, which is how it is still known in
England. The word Cluedo is a play on Ludo, the British name of a board game
that most Americans would recognize as Parcheesi.

[6] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 356.

location to commit the murderer. The first player to announce the correct combination is the winner; a false accusation removes the accuser from the game. Interestingly, the person playing the role of the murderer doesn't know that they're the guilty party. They have to deduce it along with everyone else.

The rules for Clue were created in the mid-1940s by English legal clerk Anthony Pratt; the board was designed by his wife Elva, an amateur painter.[7] Clue was purchased by English game company Waddingtons shortly thereafter, and within a few years it ended up in the hands of Parker Brothers. Wartime material shortages prevented the game from being produced in large quantities until around 1950. It wasn't the first detective-themed board game, but it has been the most successful over the last six decades, in many ways defining its category. Unlike Monopoly or Scrabble, similarly archetypal games that took years to reach broad popularity, Clue was quick to find widespread success. It could be argued that this happened because Clue was sold to a major publisher shortly after its creation, allowing it to be produced and distributed on a mass scale, while Scrabble and Monopoly had both taken decades to attract publishers.

However, that argument has a chicken-and-egg quality. Having the support of Waddingtons and then Parker Brothers was undoubtedly important to Clue's success – but neither publisher had anything to do with the game's creation. They simply bought something in hopes that it would sell, which it did. Consider again that Monopoly took roughly 30 years to land at a major publisher, with several rejections along the way, and

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[7] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 356. Mrs. Pratt's first name is not documented in any of the standard sources, but is given as Elva at www.theartofmurder.com, a Clue website maintained by Michael Akers.

that Scrabble followed the same road for almost 20 years. These two games always had the mechanical and thematic fundamentals that underlie their success. They were fortunate enough to last until their cultural moments came along. Clue was even more fortunate. Created by a British couple in need of diversion from the World War II air raids thundering outside their home, Clue was suited to the multitude of American families spending the Cold War in their own homes.

It is significant that Clue's gameboard is the floorplan of a house. The traditional version is a stately manor reminiscent of an Agatha Christie novel, with more conservatories and ballrooms than the typical suburban bungalow. Nonetheless, it is a house, and the game's action takes place entirely within its walls. Consciously or otherwise, this was bound to appeal to the new postwar American domesticity. Home life took on a new importance in this period. Phenomena like suburbanization and the Baby Boom were creating a new set of concerns, some positive and some negative. Clue was remarkably positioned to address them, starting with ideas of domesticity itself.

"When we talk specifically about what has happened to American families," Robert Foster wrote, "we are concerned with divorce, delinquency, illegitimacy, crime, prostitution, child failure and maladjustment, mental illnesses, marriage rates, birth rates, sickness, unemployment, poverty, and other major items."[8] This list of calamities was hardly unique to Professor Foster's imagination. Writers in the popular press worried about how "the U.S. family, deep in the millrace of social and technological change, is

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[8] Robert Foster, "Social Trends and Family Life," 358.

itself deep in trouble"[9] and they considered how these families would confront the "bewildering choices and opportunities"[10] of the times. One writer in a family living magazine went so far as to ask, "What is the deadly virus that is eating at the core of family life in our nation – wrecking our marriages, corrupting our children's lives, filling hospitals with mental cases, courts with misfits, and jails with outlaws?"[11] Looking back on the times, historian K. A. Cuordileone noted that "fears of being... less than *normal* could strike deep emotional chords in a way that fears of materialism or secularism or perhaps even the bomb could not."[12]

These dire pictures undercut the conventional perception of postwar America. The early Cold War years are often remembered as a living *Leave It To Beaver* episode, a place where happy suburban families defeated commonplace domestic problems on a weekly basis; the complications of culture, race, economics, and politics were nowhere to be seen. Of course, this was and is a fantasy. The sudden explosion of television during this time, and the ongoing cultural power that it holds, has perhaps led observers to conflate reality with reruns. After more than 50 years, popular culture is not the only place where this period's television shows are being treated as reality. Academics and

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[9] "The American Family in Trouble," *Life* 25, no. 4 (July 26, 1948): 83.

[10] Lawrence K. Frank. "American Family," *National Parent-Teacher* 53, no. 2 (October 1958): 15.

[11] Louisa Randall Church. "Let's get down to Brass Tacks," *American Home* 38, no. 6: 25.

[12] K. A. Cuordileone, "Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960," *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (September 2000): 539.

politicians do the same thing even now.[13] However, many contemporary observers

clearly did think something was amiss in the family home. Recall that this period saw a

host of cultural changes that affected families – not just the Baby Boom, but fears about

juvenile delinquency and comic books; not just suburbanization, but the growth of a more

overtly sexualized culture that dramatically appealed to youth; not just *I Love Lucy* but

Elvis Presley's pelvis. At the moment when the single-family home was establishing

itself as the normal postwar state of affairs, contemporary observers feared that these

homes were on the verge of falling apart.

Games like Clue were seen as an antidote to the troubles of home and family.

These pastimes provided a model of good behavior. In the words of writer Marguerite

Kohl: "Your children will learn good sportsmanship. They'll discover how to lose quietly

and win gracefully. They'll find out how to get along with people. But, best of all, you

will all have a share in that intangible something which makes a happy family...".[14] Kohl

specifically cited Clue as a family game that was "a whale of a lot of fun" and then went

on to say "people everywhere are playing indoor games again."[15] Interest in games was

obvious at the time, and it was often linked to home and family. Writing in *House*

Beautiful magazine, Albert Ostrow spent several pages contrasting happy families that

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[13] William Douglas. *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 203): 95, 164. See also *Prime-Time Television* by Moore, Bensman, and Van Dyke, particularly page 120.

[14] Marguerite Kohl. "Games Are Good For You," *American Magazine* 153, no. 4 (April 1952): 117.

[15] Kohl, "Games Are Good For You," 31. It should be noted that in this article, Kohl also presents an inaccurate recounting of Monopoly's origin.

engaged in shared pastimes with other families that had no common interests and

therefore avoided each other. Recounting a friend's memorable childhood game of

checkers, Ostrow concluded that "nothing has shaken this central fact: Sharing good

times can do more for the morale and unity of the family and parent-child understanding

than any scientific rigmarole."[16]

So family life was a matter of concern at this time, and games were something

that observers saw as helpful to families. In a sense, Clue itself was a symbolic solution

to social worries. Some of the contemporary writers cited above expressed concern with

violence, particularly the kind committed by (or affecting) children and teenagers. These

family-centered worries were often put into a larger Cold War context. "A and H bombs,

rockets, chemicals, biological and radiological warfare are realities of our times...

Entertainment seems to exaggerate rather than mirror this world. It is replete with

physical assault," wrote psychotherapist and scholar Emanuel Schwartz in 1961.[17] The

early Cold War was a time of Westerns and gangster movies; the popular media

glamorized tough guys like detective Sam Spade.

Television brought these images and ideas right into the domestic sphere – by the

end of the 1950s, millions of American families had a TV set in the living room. Many

shared Schwartz's concern about the ideas coming into their homes. During this time,

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[16] Albert Ostrow. "Keeping the fun in the family," *House Beautiful* 94, no. 12 (December 1952): 214. A certain irony exists in this concern about "scientific rigamarole" being expressed at the same time that intellectual activities, from bomb design to board games, were increasingly appreciated.

[17] Emanuel Schwartz. "The Family in an 'Age of Violence,'" *New York Times*, January 22, 1961.

though, millions of people also had Clue in their living rooms. Consciously or otherwise, it provided a counterbalance to the hard-boiled nature of other popular entertainment. Clue is a congenial game. While *film noir* detectives lived in a world of shadows and murky morality, Clue draws on the clear and cerebral tradition of Sherlock Holmes. Any violence in Clue is always in the past tense, information is constantly shared between players, and players win by using their heads rather than their fists or their guts.

This contrast in styles was one that contemporary observers were aware of; in fact, some used it to make sense of the early Cold War world. In an article published in *The Saturday Review* in 1953 – only a few pages from an article on the growing cultural presence of Scrabble – John Paterson outlined the differences he saw between Holmes and Spade. Paterson, who would become a professor at Berkeley three years hence, wrote that "two worlds, two notions of society are represented in the detective fiction of our day...to understand them is to understand something of the social and cultural climate of our period."[18] The distinction Paterson drew followed the lines above – an earlier "transcendent" Holmsian school, with its order and its gentility, followed by a contemporary hard-boiled style of "disintegrated values where evil cannot be isolated and destroyed as it could be in the fairy-tale world of the transcendent sleuth."[19] In just such a fashion, the postwar America that made Clue popular was going through a reordering. As discussed previously, the early Cold War was a time when culture and politics and the economy and mass media went through tremendous changes. After one worldwide

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[18] John Paterson, "A Cosmic View of the Private Eye," *The Saturday Review* 36 (August 22, 1953): 7.

[19] Paterson, "A Cosmic View of the Private Eye," 31.

conflict with decisive winners and losers, the USA and the USSR were in a battle where isolating and destroying each other was much less certain. It follows that this would be reflected in popular entertainment.

However, that reflection shows more than one thing. Just as anxiety over an apparently ambiguous new world was demonstrated through the popularity of a newer style of detective, the attempt to cope with that anxiety manifested in the popularity of old-fashioned Clue. The game addressed many common preoccupations, starting with matters of family and domesticity. One obvious thing is that Clue – like other common games – was an activity families could participate in together. Family game nights have long been considered a healthy way for families to strengthen their bonds. And Clue was not only a potential answer to family problems, but also a microcosm of the domestic worries being expressed. As noted, it is set inside a house. Each player takes the role of a specific character, all of whom are linked by a common bond not unlike family members. Strains develop as players pursue their individual interests – in this case, winning the game before anyone else. Similarly, postwar American families found themselves pulling in more individual directions than before. Just as Clue players chased a solitary victory on a house-themed board, these Cold War families felt that contemporary life was changing their basic nature.

"Today the forces of social change have further broken down the family. It is now tiny – a husband, a wife and one or two children. Its members do little more than sleep and eat together," ran a typical postwar magazine story. "The outward pull of movies, automobiles, bridge clubs, and Elks constantly threatens what little family unity

remains."[20] Modernization was often blamed for this feeling of separation. The urban, industrial, professional postwar world was perceived as taking something away from its inhabitants. "When we moved from our former farm homes into the cities we lost something important," another writer lamented.[21]

We have already noted concerns about matters like juvenile delinquency and the rising divorce rate. And here we find some of the cultural elements that helped Clue not only become popular, but remain so for many years. On one hand its American release brought it into a country dealing with turmoil in its homes. The domestic themes of Clue, combined with its murderous storyline, created a controlled version of this tension. Not in a conscious sense – the game was invented to pass time during air raids, rather than as an exploration of the human psyche – but nonetheless its themes ran parallel to uncertainties of the age. Other popular proprietary games like Scrabble lay fallow until the right circumstances arose for them to become popular. Clue benefited from its timing; it was invented just as its ideal moment began. This is not meant to argue that Clue was a one-to-one mapping of cultural strains. But the game was structured so that it addressed concerns that were prevalent at the time, at least on a symbolic level.

It was also fun. This point is easy to overlook, but it is also crucial to explaining the success of any game. People play games because they enjoy the activity, not just to scratch some existential itch. Clue, like the other games under consideration here, allowed groups of people to spend time with each other. It is nearly unique in this group,

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[20] "The American Family in Trouble," 83.

[21] Frank. "American Family," 15.

however, as being a game that families could easily play together. In this sense it

addressed domestic worries in a concrete fashion. Parents, children, siblings could sit at a

table, competing in a friendly fashion to figure out whether one of them had committed a

dastardly (yet imaginary) crime. While television was a passive activity, Clue and other

games were interactive. Unlike the various solitary obligations outside the home, from

school sports to Elks club meetings, games involved bringing people together as a group.

This togetherness was in important part of the increased interest in domesticity during the

postwar years. Faced with an external world that seemed to change rapidly, individual

families treated their homes as "spheres of influence" as described by historian Elaine

Tyler May: "Within [the home's] walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new

age might be tamed, where they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which

postwar women and men aspired."[22]

One other element of Clue deserves attention. As has been alluded to, the years

following World War II were filled with American anti-communism. It was the time of

Joe McCarthy, HUAC, blacklists and red-baiting. The struggle over domestic

communism was partly a matter of politics, but it was also concerned with subversion as

Hendershot described. In her analysis of the period's popular movies, she said "these

films do not paint simple portraits of Red-Scare [sic] hysteria but, rather, display

ambivalence by blaming both a foreign threat and American weakness for social

disaster."[23] The same can be seen in mainstream magazines, TV shows, and books from

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[22] Tyler May, *Homeward Bound,* 14.

[23] Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America,* 53.

the times. As the Cold War became a fact of daily life, the concerns expressed in mass

media were less geopolitical than they were social. Ordinary Americans were less

worried about Soviet troops at the border than they were about domestic subversives in

the backyard and bedroom. It was, in Whitfield's words, "an era that politicized – and

idealized – the family as a haven against subversion and unwelcome social change."[24]

Domestic life was thus placed in opposition to communism and everything it represented.

The subversive, who tried to convert people to unwholesome beliefs, was a chief threat.

Finding subversives and exposing their wicked ways was a major concern, whether in

real-life events like HUAC hearings or in popular culture like the series of "I Was a

Communist for the FBI" articles that ran in the *Saturday Evening Post*.[25] This hunt for a

secret traitor is mirrored in Clue. Its thematic roots are in British drawing-room

mysteries, but its actual play fits the concerns of Cold War America.

At this point, it is useful to draw a contrast between Clue and a similar game

called Mr. Ree. The latter game actually came first, being published in 1937 by the

American game company Selchow & Righter, and it shares several important features

with Clue, notably that it takes place inside a "house" wherein one of the players commits

a murder. However, Mr. Ree is a footnote known primarily to game historians and

collectors, while Clue rapidly became a success and has remained so for decades. One

key difference between the games is how they portray subversion; this is an important

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[24] Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 184.

[25] To demonstrate how the hunt for subversives held mass appeal, consider that "I Was a
      Communist for the FBI" went on to become a book, a radio series, and a feature
      film, all during the early 1950s.

reason why Clue caught the popular imagination while Mr. Ree did not. Clue is

circumspect about the murderer's identity – until the very end of the game, nobody

knows who the guilty party is, even if it's one of the players. Everyone is working toward

the same goal, albeit in a competitive fashion; everyone wants to figure out who betrayed

the group. On the other hand, Mr. Ree gives its players control of the murder. They have

the ability to collect items and play cards that let them 'kill' other players, eliminating

them from the game. The difference is agency. In Clue, everyone shares the goal of

figuring out who has turned against the housebound group. In Mr. Ree, by contrast,

players win by deliberately turning against each other and secretly arranging for their

competitors' deaths. Players in Clue are part of an "us" while those in Mr. Ree have to

become "them" in order to win. One of the keys to Clue's success is that it never asked

its Cold War players to turn against their group or harbor dangerous secrets. During this

time when subversion was a worry, the game that endured was the one that reinforced

group identity and problem-solving, not the one that encouraged players to betray each

other for victory.

In a different fashion, concerns about war and subversion can be seen in Risk, the

other Cold War board game under consideration in this chapter. Risk is an archetypal

wargame, perhaps the most well-known one in the United States even today. Created in

France in 1957, it started being sold in the U.S. in 1959.[26] Its tagline has been "the game

of global conquest" or "the world conquest game" in various printings, and its board

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[26] Risk's inventor was French film director Albert Lamorisse, perhaps best known in the United States for winning an Oscar in 1956 for his short film *The Red Balloon*. The game's original name is La Conquête du Monde, which translates to "the conquest of the world."

bears that out. Risk is played on a map of the world; players compete to control continents with their armies, and victory goes to the person who completely eliminates all other players' forces. Viewed broadly, it seems like an analogue for Cold War tensions, with the battle for the gameboard standing in for the ongoing geopolitical struggle.

From a closer view, though, Risk's design and its ongoing American popularity undercut the narrative of a populace locked into existential struggle with the Soviet Union. One key element is the way that Risk's board is designed. It divides the world into the six habitable continents, each subdivided into several territories. Instead of setting up these territories along political lines – NATO powers opposing the Warsaw Pact or historic rivals Japan and China competing for Asia – Risk is heavily geographic. Players receive bonuses for controlling predefined areas of land, which were drawn without reference to the struggles of the day. In fact, one of the territories in the European continent is called Russia (variant editions of the game instead name it Ukraine), making it part of the same power bloc as many of its Cold War antagonists. The game of Risk is entirely about the physical control of space, with no ideological elements involved; even references to real-world political and cultural structures are limited.[27]

This close reading of the rules and the gameboard also connects back to Lears' control/chance dichotomy. Consider his summary of the two: "Cultures of control – as in the American Protestant or managerial tradition – dismiss chance as a demon to be denied or a difficulty to be minimized; while cultures of chance treat it as a source of knowledge

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[27] The most obvious political references are the territories named Eastern United States, Western United States, and perhaps Northwest Territory. Interestingly, the region that incorporates Vietnam, an area of ongoing interest to both France and the United States during this time, is called Siam.

and a portal of possibility."[28] This explanation takes on an interesting shape when placed over the framework of a game about world conquest. Chance, not control, is at the heart of Risk. When armies clash, for example, players roll dice to determine the outcome, and the outcome of the dice has a much larger impact than the number of troops involved. As a rule, randomness favors the underdog in games, and Risk's rules governing combat give small forces a disproportionate chance of holding off large ones. More tellingly, the reward for capturing an enemy-held territory is getting to draw a random card marked with the name of a specific territory and one of three symbols. Matching sets of these cards can be traded in for ever-increasing numbers of new armies. Careful use of these cards is a key to victory in a typical game of Risk – particularly since they can radically tip the balance of power in later stages of play by adding dozens of unexpected armies to the board. Victory in Risk often comes down to chance. A player who randomly draws the right cards can upend the careful strategies of any number of opponents; the reverse is much less likely.

Another interesting element in Risk is the generic nature of its combat. The players use pieces called "armies," but these units are not distinct from each other in any way. Many other wargames use pieces that differ in some way, such as the familiar Battleship with its pieces of varying size. A similar example from the early Cold War period is a game called Armchair General. Played on a Battleship-style grid, Armchair General incorporated two different kinds of terrain and five separate unit types, each of

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[28] Lears, *Something For Nothing*, 7.

which had different rules for movement and firing.[29] Such distinctions are common to

wargames. Risk eschews them. Combat in this game is indistinct and impersonal, with no

significant differences beyond whether one is attacking or defending. Even the size of

these armies is undefined. In line with its non-political foundation, Risk is also

unconcerned with the nuclear arms race, despite being invented during a peak period of

that race. The original game had no special rules governing weapons of mass destruction,

although later versions have had official variants that incorporate such ideas, as part of

current owner Hasbro's drive toward branding.[30]

This depersonalized warfare and lack of emphasis on nuclear arms are another

element of Risk's success. As noted during the consideration of Clue, the psychotherapist

and author Emanuel Schwartz was concerned about how the "Age of Anxiety" was

turning into an "Age of Violence" as families lived under the constant shadow of

potential war. The connection between home and the battlefield was summarized in a

question asked by writer Louisa Randall Church: "What is the connection between war

among nations and family disintegration?"[31] Risk was created and then launched in the

U.S. at a time when worries about warfare and about nuclear weapons were rampant. One

series of surveys taken between April 1954 and March 1963 found that, while a majority

of Americans always thought it likely that hydrogen bombs would be used against the

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[29] W.H. Fulker, "Game Calls for Land-Sea-Air Strategy," *Popular Science* 153, no. 6
     (December 1948): 196.

[30] I am grateful here to Professor J.C. Batzner of Central Michigan University for sharing
     the rules he created on incorporating atomic/nuclear weapons into tabletop
     wargames like Risk and Axis & Allies.

[31] Church, "Let's get down to Brass Tacks," 25.

U.S. if another world war occurred, the peak of this fear came during the peak baby boom years of 1957 and 1958.[32] This speaks to a personal concern about war, not as an abstraction or a memory, but as a possibility in one's own future. In Risk, this war becomes abstract. Soldiers are not fighting, "armies" are. The only weapons being deployed are a set of six-sided dice, and because no player can roll more than 3 of them at a time to remove an opponent's pieces, the casualties come slowly even in large battles. This picture of warfare would appeal to people who were preoccupied with the specter of actual war. The bland territory-grabbing nature of Risk helped it outflank the cultural preoccupations of the Cold War. Risk helped its players, at least symbolically, manage chance.

Chance, after all, is what Risk is built on; even the name implies it.[33] Following the Lears model, we can see Risk standing in for the actual risk of war. Playing the game would not only pass time enjoyably, but it would symbolically help manage the danger – winning Risk would be a shadow of real-world victory, while losing would be free of war's horrendous consequences. Brian Sutton-Smith, the scholar of play, has said that "[t]he kind of existential threats that are most valued in society find expression in the appropriate forms of play."[34] Risk offered one expression of such a threat, and it has

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[32] Hazel Gaudet Erskine, "The Polls: Atomic Weapons and Nuclear Energy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1963): 157.

[33] A story often repeated is that when the game was licensed for sale in the United States, an American salesman suggested naming it RISK because those were the initials of his grandchildren. Although dubiously charming , the source of this tale is not documented.

[34] Sutton-Smith. "Evolving a Consilience of Play Definitions: Playfully," 249

continued in various forms for more than 50 years. Contrast this with the nature of game theory. As an ostensibly logical way to analyze situations, game theory attempted to impose control rather than propitiate chance. Its use during the early Cold War has been considered; at this point it is also worth considering how faith in game theory was far from universal at the time. Belletto offered up a critique of the idea that game theory was the precise, rational, statistical model that its proponents made it out to be. Instead of being a semi-scientific set of rules operating outside human perceptions, Belletto argued, game theory was a narrative that fit into a Cold War that was "chiefly a conflict of competing ideologies and their attendant narratives."[35]

Drawing on many examples of Cold War writers, directors, and other cultural figures who attacked or satirized game theory, Belletto demonstrated that concerns about game theory were widespread during the postwar period. Novels like Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952) and Philip K. Dick's *Solar Lottery* (1955) satirized game theory's tenets and proponents; the Stanley Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) briskly undermined the idea of controlling nuclear irrationality with any set of supposedly rational policies. In its quiet way, Risk contributed to this counter-narrative. It made war seem less terrible while portraying it as a matter of chance.

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[35] Belletto, "The Game Theory Narrative and the Myth of the National Security State," 333.

CONCLUSION

POKER AND CHANGING TIMES

Few twenty-year periods of American history have been placid, but the two decades following World War II were seen as a particularly confusing and frightening time by the people living through them. The ominous political situation and the nuclear threat have been considered here; a great deal more could be said about race relations, evolving gender roles, the disruptive effect of television, the consequences of suburbanization, and other topics. For now it suffices to say that the early Cold War years were uneasy ones. Games are a window into the ways that people deal with that kind of anxiety. Sutton-Smith observed that "the history of the human species, whether *homo erectus* or otherwise, is a history of considerable anxiety... [which] makes it not improbable that play and its variabilities have been selected over time to model and mollify this ever-present chaos."[1] Although board games have not received the same scholarly attention as other media, they do provide a window into the lives of the people who played them.

The four games examined here shared some important characteristics, notably the fact that each one became very popular in the United States during these postwar decades. Chess had experienced periodic rises and falls for many centuries; Scrabble took almost 20 years to become an overnight success; Clue and Risk both caught on within a short time of their creation. And all of them remained popular while fad games like Uranium Rush never caught hold, and ostensibly similar games like Mr. Ree failed to

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[1] Sutton-Smith, "Evolving a Consilience of Play Definitions: Playfully,: 244.

align with the interests of the mass audience. Whitfield observed that "the culture of the Cold War was by no means synonymous with the culture of the 1950s... [but] the Cold War also narrowed and altered American culture."[2] The artifacts that succeeded in this altered culture can be used to add new dimensions to our interpretations. What people do for fun, what they do with their spare time – these help us understand who they were.

One other common element of these four games is that they are all board games. Each was available in a box, complete with rules and all the playing pieces, often propelled by some kind of advertising campaign. Whether they were based on perfect or imperfect information, the games themselves were known quantities intended to be played in specific ways. This made them ideal for a family game night; they were played by a wide audience. There was, however, another game that was popular at the time despite having very different characteristics. Poker has a small resemblance to chess, in that it has a long history and variable popularity, but otherwise it creates a sharp contrast with the games thus far considered. It didn't come in a box, it didn't have one set of accepted rules, and it wasn't a game for the whole family. In some ways, poker illustrates the path that American domestic culture would follow as the Cold War moved past the mid-1960s.

One obvious difference is that poker is a game of betting. Under most circumstances, players are wagering their own money, based on the cards they chance to draw and also their skill at understanding what cards the other players hold. While there certainly have been professional poker players, most players are amateurs to whom

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[2] Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 12.

chance is more significant than skill. "Fate, with its emphasis on luck rather than talent, is the antithesis to the rhetoric of progress," Sutton-Smith observed. "As such it has been, and often is, an anathema to those who see life as manageable only in some rational or religious way."[3] The rational manager ethos that had emerged in the New Deal and turned into the Cold War fondness for experts and technicians was waning two decades after the war; luck began to displace talent. Certainty had persisted in the face of nuclear war and domestic upheaval, but nothing is permanent. What Lears described as the "gambler's willingness to reduce (or raise) money to the status of a mere counter in a game" shows a very different mindset than that which read global implications into chess matches.[4]

Another fundamental difference between poker and the four board games is that the latter games involve a group of rules that can be mastered, while poker is based on bluffing and psychology – in other words, hiding information and lying frequently. It is the classic game of imperfect information; in its traditional forms, every player's cards are concealed until all wagering is done and the hand is over. Poker is less a game of rules than a challenge to read other people's behavior. It has few certainties. The unfolding Cold War world, a multipolar nuclear-powered place that had not been mastered by human intellect and perhaps never could be, was no dry chess match. This was becoming a place for poker players, gambling lives and fortunes on their best guess at what the other guy was holding.

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[3] Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 69.

[4] Lears, *Something For Nothing*, 327.

And, during this time, "guy" was the appropriate word. Poker was deliberately used during that period to delineate sides in one of the oldest dichotomies known – the battle of the sexes. Poker was a man's game. In the same article where he examined how card games fit into game theory, writer Bruce Bliven discussed how typical poker games would be played by "the boys in the back room of Joe's Smoke Shop."[5] These boys, he posited, would be annoyed by the various quasi-scientific changes being made to their game by professors searching for the secret to winning at business, war, and other uncertain contests (i.e. game theory). In this sense poker was a conservative game. Altering its customary rules was something to be greeted with dismay in typically male bastions Writing in 1963, historian and poker aficionado John Lukacs said "poker is also a game of a thousand unwritten rules. It is a game of gentlemen, and for gentlemen alone; and by this I do not mean that it requires social class but only those unwritten and often hardly conscious social standards and codes of behavior that constitute the subsoil of certain historical cultures."[6] The poker game was an institution, and like all institutions it had its rules and traditions. Chief among those traditions was the idea that poker was a man's game.

Like many folk games (and card games in general), the origins of poker are unclear. A strong narrative tradition, however, has emerged to provide it with a perceived history. Riverboat gamblers, American slaves, European aristocracy – the reputed history of poker's creators was a swaggering tale that took place in domains controlled by men.

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[5] Bliven, "Games Disclose Secrets of Success," 125.

[6] John Lukacs. "Poker and American Character," *Horizon* 5, no. 8 (November 1963): 58.

Poker has a strong link to the Wild West in popular culture. It was indeed a widely-played game in that setting, but as we have noted, so were games like faro which have not endured in our memories. But it is poker which is remembered as the game of the cowboy, poker that Wild Bill Hickok was playing when he was gunned down in a frontier bar, poker that was the game of tough men. Consider the tale told by V.R. Montanari in a 1946 *New York Times* article: "In the days of the Old West poker players used to designate the dealer for each hand by placing a knife in front of him on the table. Knife handles were usually made of buckhorn... If you didn't choose to deal when your turn came, you could 'pass the buck' to your left." The buckhorn knife implies a masculine context for the game. Montanari's article, an examination of how poker slang had entered American English, also recounted the "dubious legend" of a cowboy using a stallion as collateral in a poker game, giving rise to the term "stud poker."[7]

Dubious or not, this illustrates the link between poker and the male identity, a link which was not limited to the cowboy era. In a 1945 analysis of the game of bridge, another popular card game of the period, writer Richard Frey examined a variety of other popular games, including both poker and mahjong. The latter game had failed to achieve long-term popularity, he said, because it was only played by women, while "poker had lost out to bridge because it was and is almost exclusively a man's game."[8] It is debatable

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[7] V.R. Montanari. "Webster's Holds a Full House," *New York Times*, September 29, 1946.

[8] Richard L. Frey. "Is Bridge Necessary?" *House Beautiful* 87, no. 11 (November 1945): 145.

whether poker ever "lost" some kind of inter-game contest with bridge, but it definitely was a game for men.

But even this gendered identity was no longer such a certain thing. An excellent demonstration of this can be found in a 1951 issue of the general-interest magazine *Collier's*. The article, titled "Bring Your Pink Eyeshades," is an attempt at satirizing the trends that author Perry Grant saw in the poker games of his day.[9] Starting with the complaint that "the only place you find real he-man, poker-face, blood-and-guts poker is in Western movies" and continuing through his distaste for playing without money, men who can bake cakes, and excusing himself from another hand with the false excuse that he has to wash his wife's stockings, Grant (within the reality of the essay) attacked the evolution of poker from a man's game into something too feminine for him to enjoy. In this way, poker shows one aspect of a society evolving into something new. Family structures and expectations changed during the postwar years.

John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman argued in their book *Intimate Matters* that this period was one of increased sexual expressiveness and "companionate marriage," a time when women were gaining personal freedom and men were drawn more into the daily business of domesticity.[10] Although many people have a sentimental view of the 1950s sitcom-style family as the "traditional" family, historian Stephanie Coontz argued, the reality of those times was far more complex. This style of family, with self-identity becoming rooted in one's parental role, was in fact a new development of this postwar

[9] Perry Grant. "Bring Your Pink Eyeshades," *Collier's* 127, no. 17 (April 28, 1951): 12.

[10] John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America,* 2nd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997): 265.

period, something that was recognized at the time. As Coontz wrote: "Such visions of past family life exert a powerful emotional pull on most Americans, and with good reason, given the fragility of many modern commitments. The problem is not only that these visions bear a suspicious resemblance to reruns of old television series, but also that the scripts of different shows have been mixed up…."[11]

The traditional gender roles that were disappearing from Grant's poker game, to be replaced by other roles that in turn changed and were lamented, illuminate another way that games helped people interpret their world. If poker ever had been a stereotypically masculine game, those days were already fading in the immediate postwar years, but it was still perceived that way. In much the same fashion, poker – with its rules for betting and bluffing, its ability to add and lose players between hands, its shifting stakes – represents the evolution of society during this time. The fixed certainties of a game board no longer described the world. The satisfying click of a Scrabble tile being placed on the perfect spot, the mathematical certainty that the killer in Clue would be revealed; none of these would endure. The board games were popular, but in the end they projected a world that people wanted rather than the one they had. As Belletto said, "If it is true that the twin specters of an accidental nuclear exchange and the psychic incomprehensibility of such an exchange were signal features of the early cold war

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[11] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 8.

experience, then the game theory narrative softened these dangers by treating an

unknowable, unnatural conflict as knowable and natural – as familiar as a poker game."[12]

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[12] Belletto, "The Game Theory Narrative and the Myth of the National Security State,"
352.

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