




Learning through games, play and sport

a historical and theoretical analysis
of what games are and what they
can tell us about humans, learning
and identity.

Oleg Dietkow



Learning through games, play and sport

What is a game?

The procession of technologies of
identity

How games shaped our view of
the world and us

The five revolutions in gaming

Elements of a game definition	Parlett	Abt	Huizinga	Caillois	Suits	Crawford	Costikyan	Avedon Sutton-Smith
Proceeds according to rules that limit players	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Conflict or contest	√					√		√
Goal-oriented/outcome-oriented	√	√			√		√	√
Activity, process, or event		√			√			√
Involves decision-making		√				√	√	
Not serious and Absorbing			√					
Never associated with material gain			√	√				
Artificial/Safe/Outside ordinary life			√	√		√		
Creates special social groups			√					
Voluntary				√	√			√
Uncertain				√				
Make-believe/Representational				√		√		
Inefficient					√			
System of parts/Resources and Tokens						√	√	
A form of art							√	

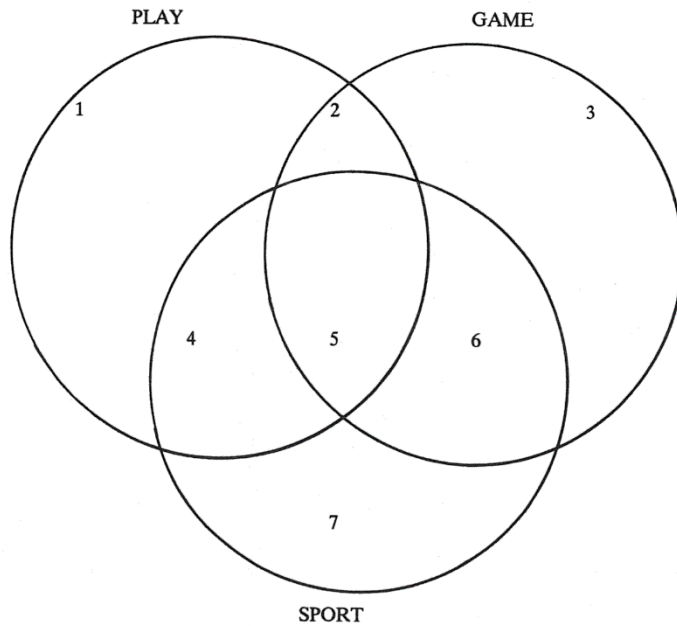
No one
agrees upon
a single
definition!

So I will give you what I
think 😊

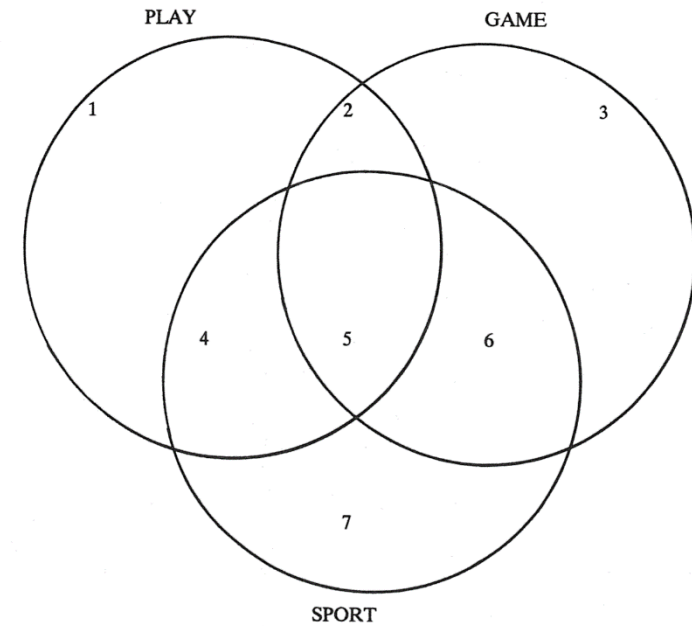
Salen and Zimmerman 2003

Suits 1988, What is a game?

The Designer/Developer



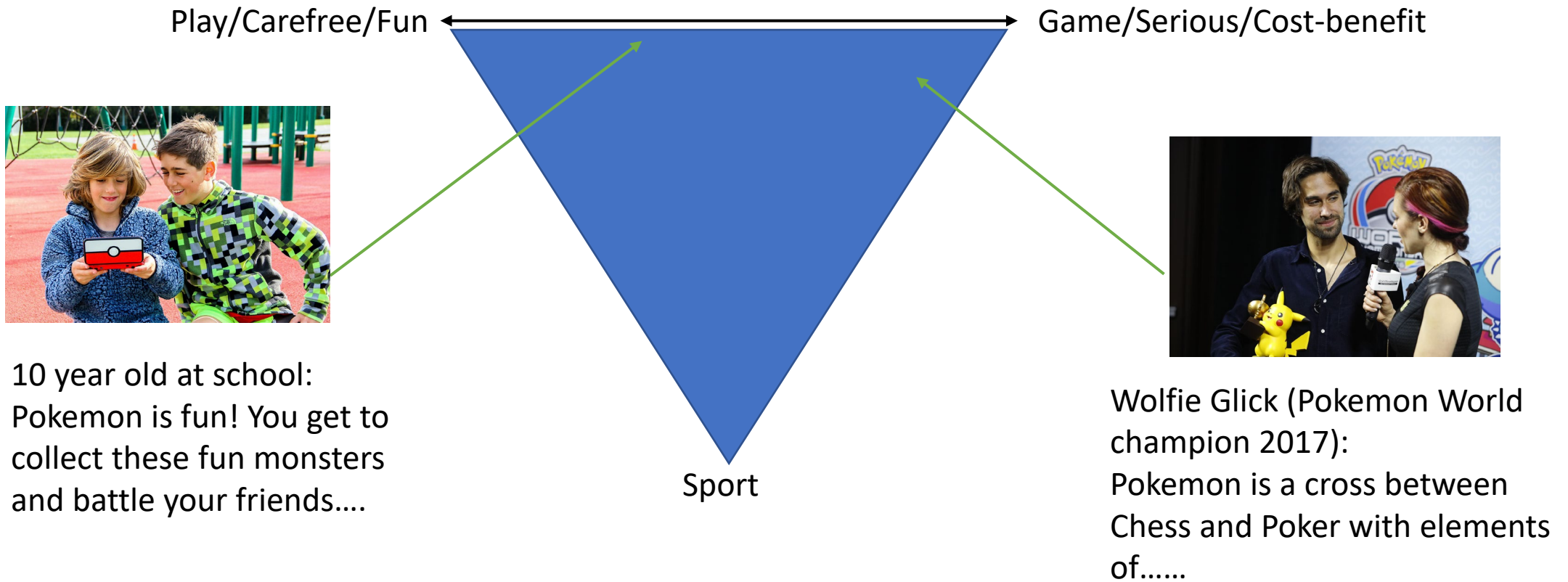
The player/gamer/athlete



Play/Carefree/Fun

Game/Serious/Cost-benefit

Gamefulness and Gamification from the player perspective



Suits – What is a game?

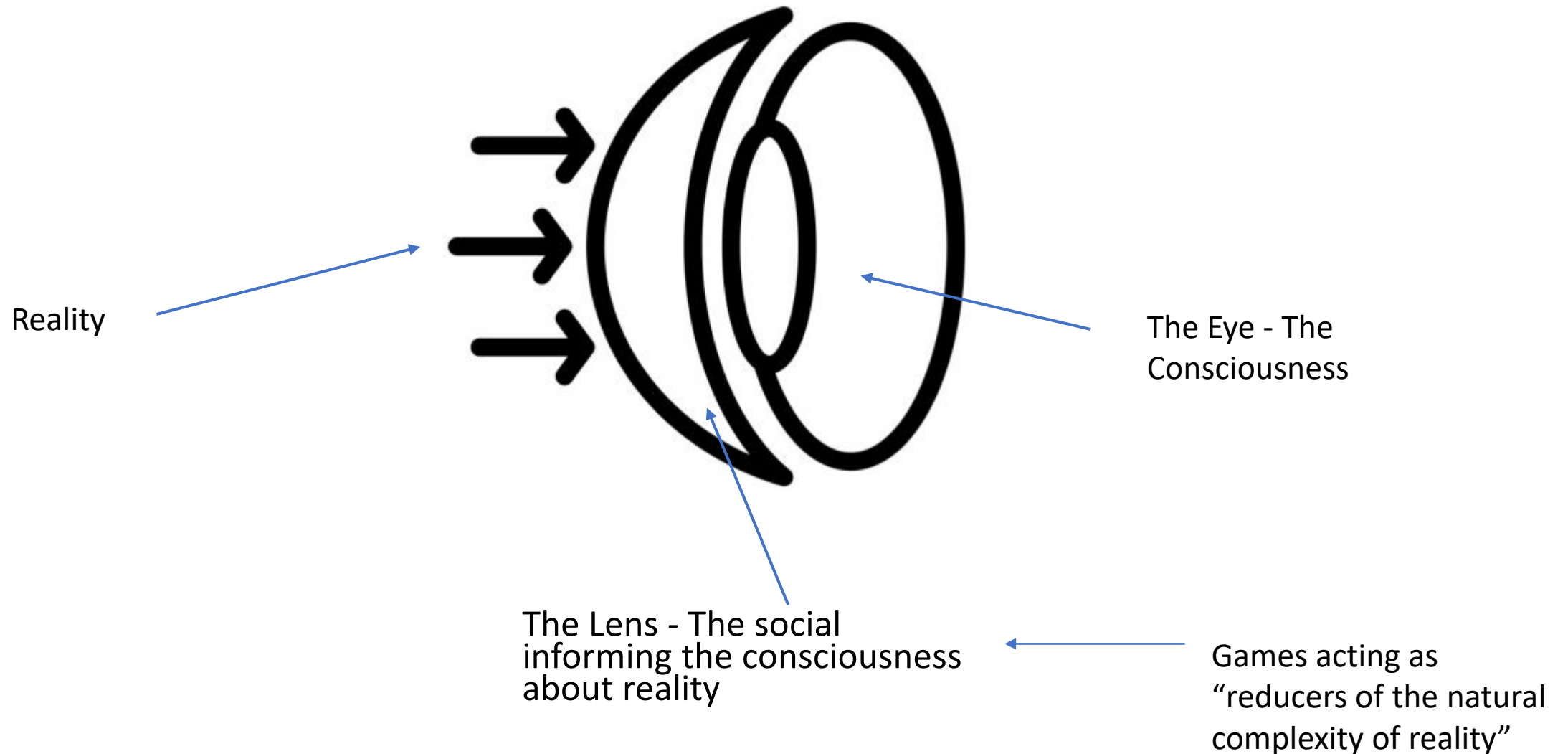
The Definition.

- “My conclusion is that to play a game is to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by specific rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity.”

Note that this is a bit dry tautological.

- I propose the following ontological addendum: A game is a reflection of a part of reality and the limits it imposes on players is part of how humans conceptualize reality. Limits are necessary for people to comprehend complexity. As our knowledge of reality increases, so does the complexity in games, but they are still simple compared to the latter. In short, they are the social trying to make the world more “fun” and comprehensible.

My view on what games are.



Humans always have conceptualized reality through games! Wargaming

Chester Nimitz, The U.S Admiral in command of the Pacific fleet remarked after the war in a lecture given at the Naval War College that:” The war with Japan had been enacted in the game rooms at the War College by so many people and in so many different ways that nothing that happened during the war was a surprise - absolutely nothing except the kamikaze tactics toward the end of the war. We had not **visualized** these”

The key in this quote is not the accuracy of the plans, which were neither predictive or reliable, but the way they trained the officer cadre to conceptualize reality as a game. Under stress, fog of war and chaos, they always could conceptualize the situation to resemble that of the map with boat figurines and act to the best of their knowledge leading to better decisions made on the field of battle.

This tradition dates back to the Prussians (18th century) and their wargaming tradition of Kriegsspiel. Wargaming is now a commercial product that millions around the world enjoy (Warhammer 40k board game as an example) demonstrating how games evolve from pure gamified reality to a game played by many for fun.

Chester Nimitz, NWC Lecture, 10 October 1960 audio archive:
https://usnwcarchives.org/repositories/2/archival_objects/65005



The technologies of the self – What is identity?

“Niklas Luhmann has called ‘**the problem of identity**’, or, in other words, the mind–society (rather than the mind–body) problem: In **how far can the internal (psychological) self and the external (social) persona be integrated into a unit?**”

Three different major paradigms of identity formation are distinguished from one another:

- a **sincere identity** is constructed through a firm commitment of the self to its social roles;
- an **authentic identity** is constructed through the creation of a social persona on the basis of one’s unique and original self;
- a ‘**profilic**’ identity, as we call it, is shaped by successfully presenting a personal profile under conditions of second-order observation as they prevail, for instance, in the social media, but also in other contemporary social systems.”



Prof. Hans-Georg
Moeller

Sincerity – The first technology of identity

Sincerity as identity is defined as the demand to commitment to roles. **The outside is real, and the inside must back it up honestly, otherwise it is considered a dishonest fake** (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2021 p. 31). This technology has been with humanity for the vast majority of our existence as a society. One's identity was tied to the role one played within society and any deviation from the expected behavior assigned to that role was seen as insincere and could lead to ostracization or even death.

**You are a father, husband, peasant, local man.
Act like it and dress like it – Sell the idea to us!**





The start of Homo Ludens – where it all begins

Although play does not tend to be systematically documented in the hunter-gatherer literature, sufficiently detailed descriptions of coalitional play were found for 46 of the 100 culture clusters: all 46 exhibited coalitional play using at least one of the predicted motor patterns; 39 exhibited coalitional play using four or more of the eight predicted motor patterns. These results provide evidence that coalitional play fighting:

- (a) occurs across a diverse range of hunter-gatherer cultures and habitats,
- (b) regularly recruits motor patterns used in lethal raiding, and
- (c) is **not an artifact of agricultural or industrial life**. This is a first step in a new line of research on whether human male psychology includes motivations to engage in play that develops the deployment of coordinated coalitional action involving key motor patterns used in lethal raiding.

Scalise Sugiyama, M., Mendoza, M., White, F. *et al.* Coalitional Play Fighting and the Evolution of Coalitional Intergroup Aggression. *Hum Nat* **29**, 219–244 (2018).





A mancala board by a granary circa 4000BCE, Axum, Ethiopia

Agrarian society and the development of gaming from play



Modern day people gaming mancala, South Sudan

- The main element needed for play to become a game is spare time (specialization of labour).
- For a game to be successful it must reflect the *real* (in this example farmers game with seeds for other seeds). Not only does it “kill time” while waiting in line at the local granary, it is self evident that the practice is rooted in the practical and can be seen as the gamification of seed sowing.
- Games are therefore artifacts of the social looking back at itself and trying to make itself “less complex”. How this is done is up to the designers and their subjective views and then this is mixed in with the players changing the game to reflect their interpretation of the social (time changes the rules and norms within games)



Race games -the metaphysical real

- Senet was the biggest gaming hit in ancient Egypt with people from all walks of life playing and even gambling on the outcome.
- As a race game, the fate of the player was decided by random outcome (binary randomness at first, later hexagonal)

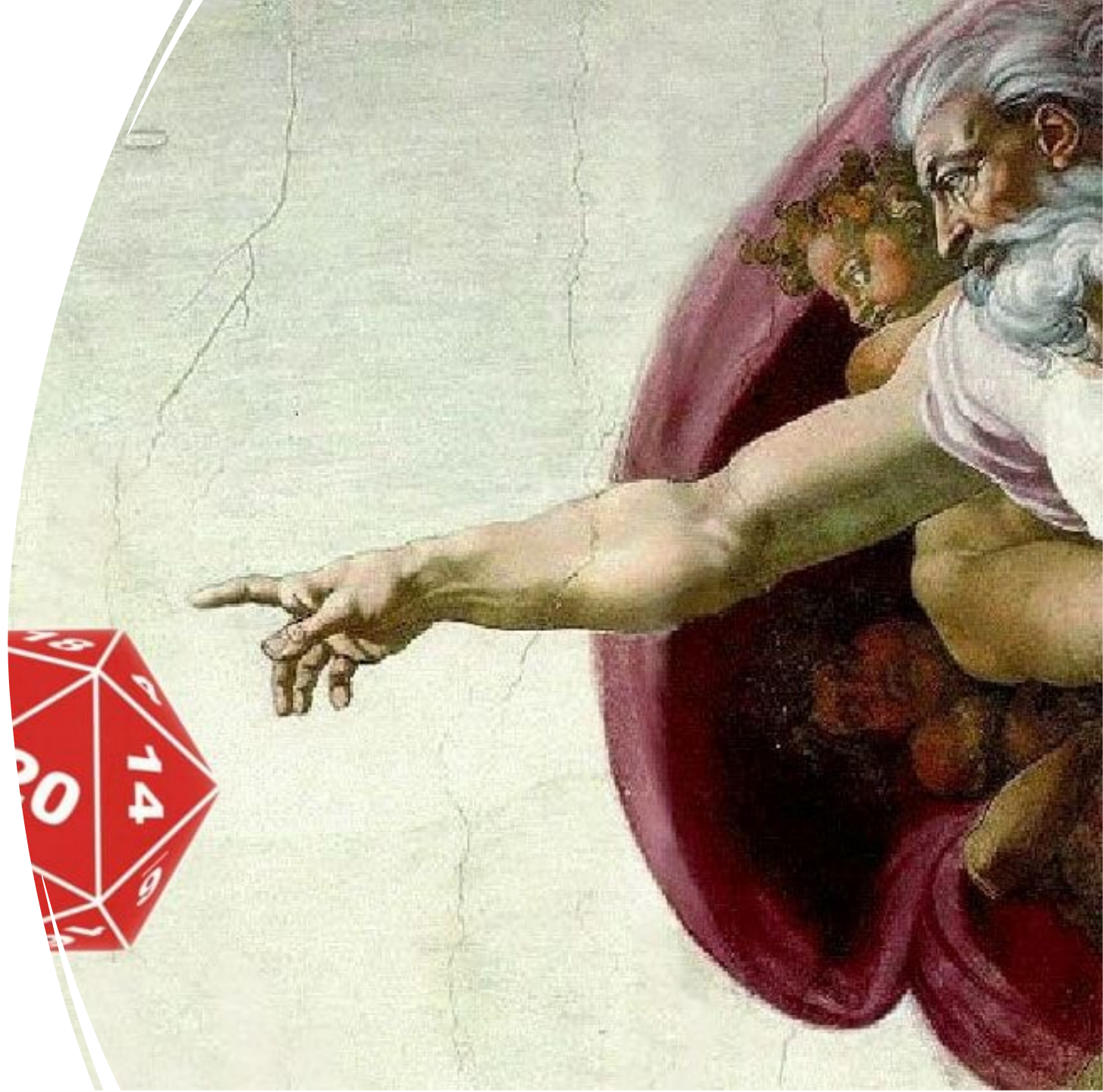




The problem with randomness

- Early dice were imprecise and were not fair (using statistical nomenclature)
- Prized dice which would favour good outcomes were prized possessions found in tombs of important people as cherished items to be carried into the afterlife.
- Cheating was forbidden with accounts of punishments for cheating, however the lack of knowledge of mathematics and probability made dice a mystical item

Randomness and the Divine



PIE Cultures and Randomness

- Fate is preordained
- Luck is a sign of virtue
- Your life is already set, you are merely a passenger along for the ride.

Game that didn't involve combat or abstract imagination of conflict were devoid of agency on a more sophisticated level. Agency in these types of games did not appear **until the 20th century!!**

Either they are pure objects of social interaction (a reason to gather people in a common area), which is unlikely as these artifacts have certain meaning attached to them (unlike tick tac toe for example whose predecessor was being played by Roman soldiers garrisoned in modern UK). The meaning had to play a significant role in their popularity.

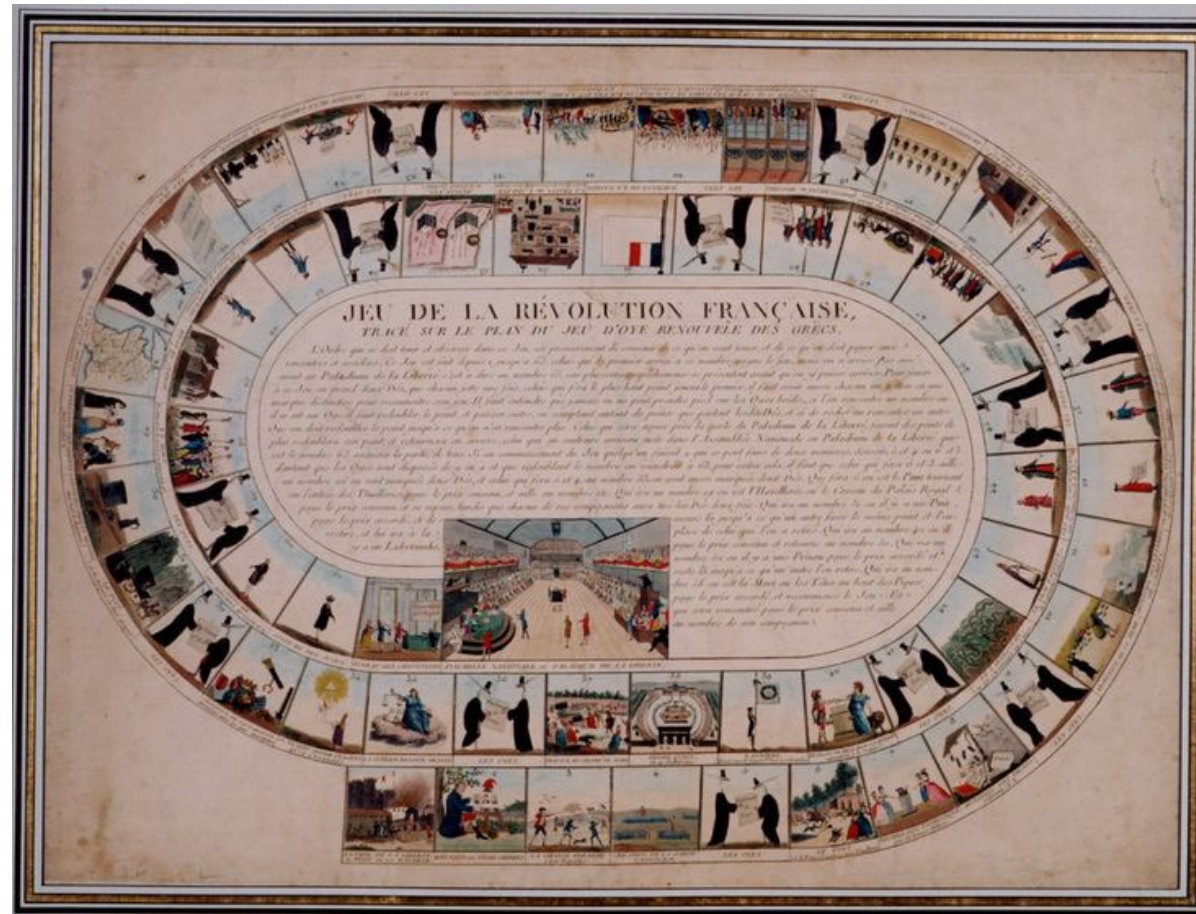


Gyan chauperljnan chauper (the game of wisdom) – or snakes and ladders

The goose game 16th century



How to be a good citizen of the revolution

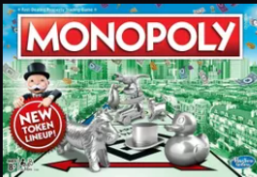


How to be a good Victorian



Race games and modernity

- Originally a warning against capitalism, the landlord's game was using race game mechanics to show that under capitalism, the poor had no agency and were subject to the whims of the “bank”
- Monopoly is considered today as an example of a “bad game” i.e. the better player does not have an advantage (fate wins).
- Why is it so popular – it is not gamed! Most forum respondents say they use it as a means to gather friends and family around the table for social reasons (whimsical, carefree and fun).

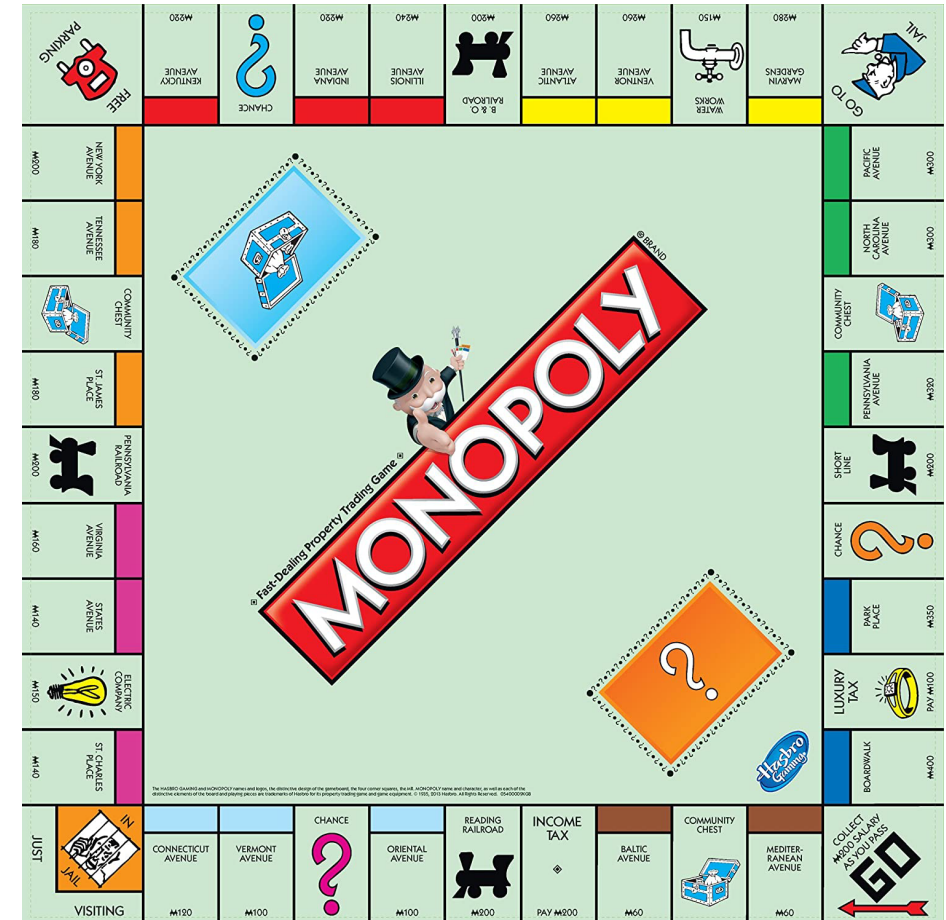


REIMPLEMENTS: FORTUNE, THE LANDLORD'S GAME
REIMPLEMENTED BY: MONOPOLY CITY + 15 MORE

RANK: OVERALL 22,209 FAMILY 2,376

4.4 **Monopoly (1935)**
In this competitive real estate market, there's only one possible outcome: Monopoly!

31K Ratings & 7.2K Comments · [GeekBuddy Analysis](#)



Chess and Go – The first gaming revolution

- Games like Mancala and the Royal Game of Ur (which later became backgammon) are widely accepted as “good games” yet their complexity is fairly limited as they originate from the PIE era (circa 4000 BCE).
- Early medieval society was significantly more complex thus new games appear that aim to reflect that complexity. They are made for the court, not the average person and reflect the conceptualization of reality from a courtly perspective.

All you need is a chair, a probe and a pylon.

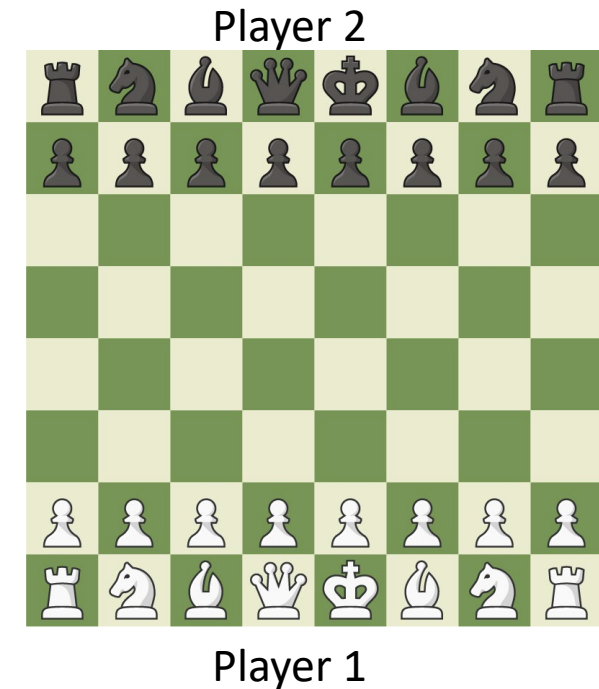


Sean "Day9" Plott
Former US Starcraft
Champion

Gamer culture revolves around two core tenants that are militantly protected and separate "good games" from "bad games":

- All are equal at a starting point (life/game/etc).
- All stratification has to be based on meritocracy (skills and knowledge gained not inherited)

The core beliefs of gaming became proliferated and internalized

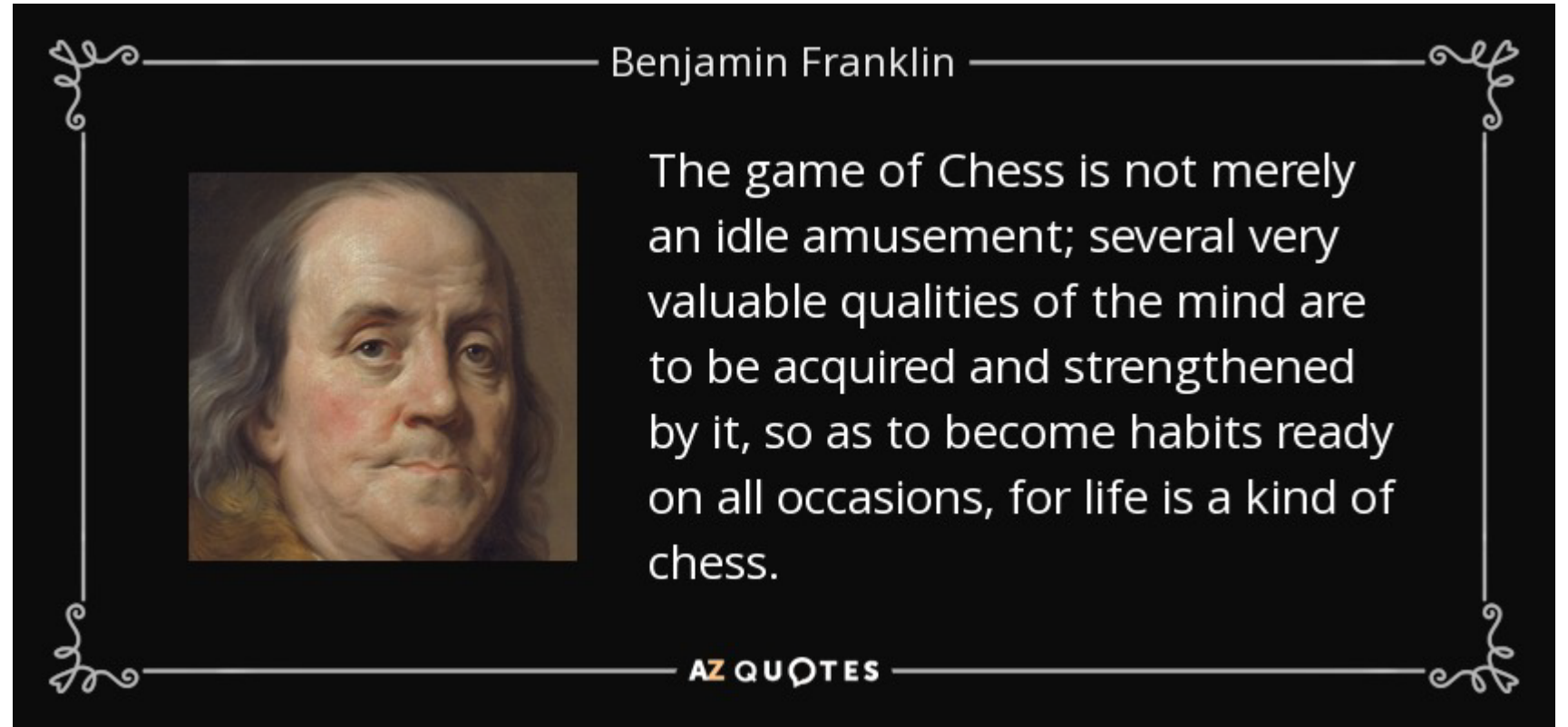
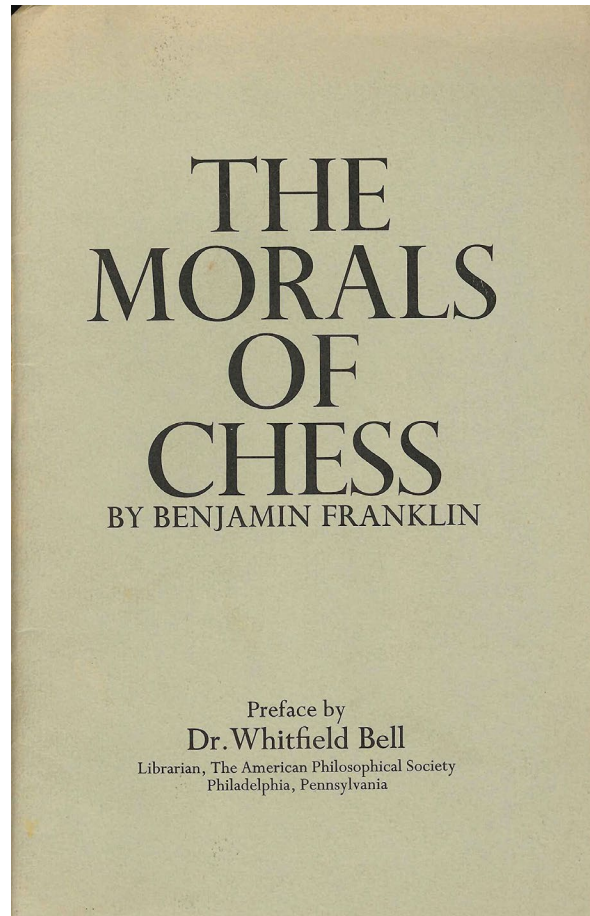




The first professional gamers appear

Chess was a possible road to social advancement as the case of Gioachino “Greco” Cusentino (c. 1600- c. 1634) illustrates. By his own account he “left home uneducated” to pursue a career in chess and by the age of 20 had published his first book on chess called “*Trattato Del Nobilissimo Gioco De Scacchi*”. While this most likely proves his background was not that of a commoner (writing and publishing a book by the age of 20 requires some form of education especially during the time period), his ability to make a living only of playing chess demonstrates the emergence of the professional gamer. While most likely not the first of his kind, as it is not difficult to imagine other minor nobles earning a living in courts through chess, his story shows the importance chess played in the lives of the aristocracy of the time.

Gaming Clubs: Café de la Régence



Social Stratification, Habitus and Gaming under sincerity

Games of the Elites

- Chess, Go (literacy and access to education, habitus of those who think/decision makers)
- Polo, Tennis, Jousting (examples of games reflecting the reality of elites and their profession – protecting the peasants and fighting wars)
- Race games (expensive, legitimising the status quo in favour of power)

Games of the Masses

- Football, Wrestling (games of the body – accessible to the habitus of manual labour)
- Fishing (a game made from labour)
- Tick tac toe/three man morris, hopscotch (“bad games” social games to induce social interaction)



Games of the masses vs Games of the elites

- Sasanid nobles (equestrian society) invent Polo
- Calcio Fiorentino originated from either the plebian game of harpastum or medieval football

The second gaming revolution – Laws of Probability 16th Century

Hey Blaise! I keep losing with my betting strategy! Can you help!



Seems rather easy and a waste of my time... but you paid, so fine...

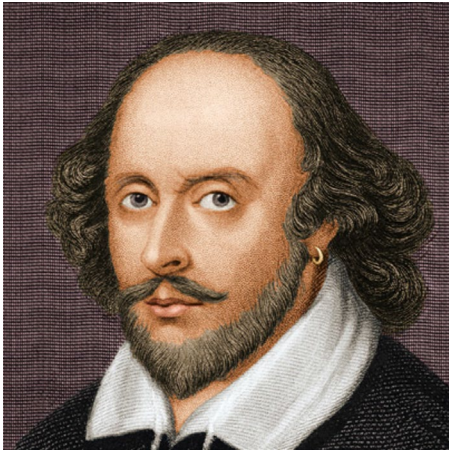


The demystification of randomness

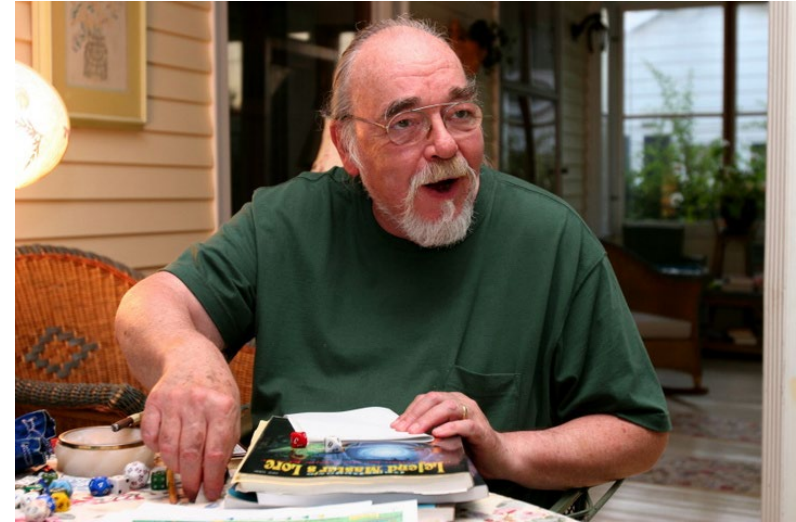
- The renaissance and later the enlightenment slowly moved god from the centre of the universe in Europe.
- Through mathematics, randomness had been understood and moved the possibilities within gaming forward.
- The Prussian Game of Kriegsspiel is a clear child of these times where randomness is part of life and the goal is to control it through knowledge.



The third gaming revolution – You can be who you want



Why did it take almost 350 years since the uttering of “all the world is a stage...” and the discovery of laws of probability for humanity to create the modern role playing game? Millions of people today pretend and act during games no differently than a professional actor.



Gary Gygax, the inventor of Dungeons and Dragons, created a game that required only paper, a pencil and some dice. DnD gave the gamer total agency in the game – what he/she wanted to do, even if it was nonsensical, happened.

My theory states that it was not the physical technological limitations of the time that saw a lack of this type of game but the lack of more sophisticated technologies of identity. It is by no accident that Gary Gygax was most creative in the Hippe age – the dominant discourse was that of a fight against hypernormativity and sincere identity formation.

Authenticity – The second technology of identity

Authenticity is the opposite of sincerity – it demands the pursuit of originality. The inside is real, and the outside must be an accurate representation of it, otherwise it is considered a hypocritical facade. Thus, under an authenticity-based technology of identity, society and our roles within it become the oppressor, the labels that need to be disinherited in order to achieve a “true” identity based on how one feels on the inside. These two concepts of the technology of identity are familiar to those well versed with Luhmann and McLuhan. These identities are present and dominant within the current developed world and are still being curated by communities.



The idea of the “soulmate” aka someone who understands “the real you” proliferates.

Western RPGs vs Japanese RPGs

Authenticity in Gaming



Sincerity in Gaming



Profilicity



What Moeller and D'Ambrosio propose is that since the proliferation of social media past 2004 (when Facebook launched), a new technology of identity has been created. Profilicity, as they call it, demands the curation of profiles. **The outside is real, and the inside must be truly invested in it, otherwise it is considered a deceptive fraud.** What they are arguing here is that all forms of identification online are moving towards measuring oneself up to a standard set by our internal expectations of what others see in us. This has become even more pronounced, they argue, with the rise in popularity of influencers, hosts and social media celebrities but is not limited to their influence on individuals. **Rather, it is an expression of the collective will of others who comment, like, subscribe, upvote and so on. How one views oneself becomes focused on how others react to us, events and others based on online rankings.**

The fourth and
fifth revolution
– playing
against a
computer
opponent and
the internet

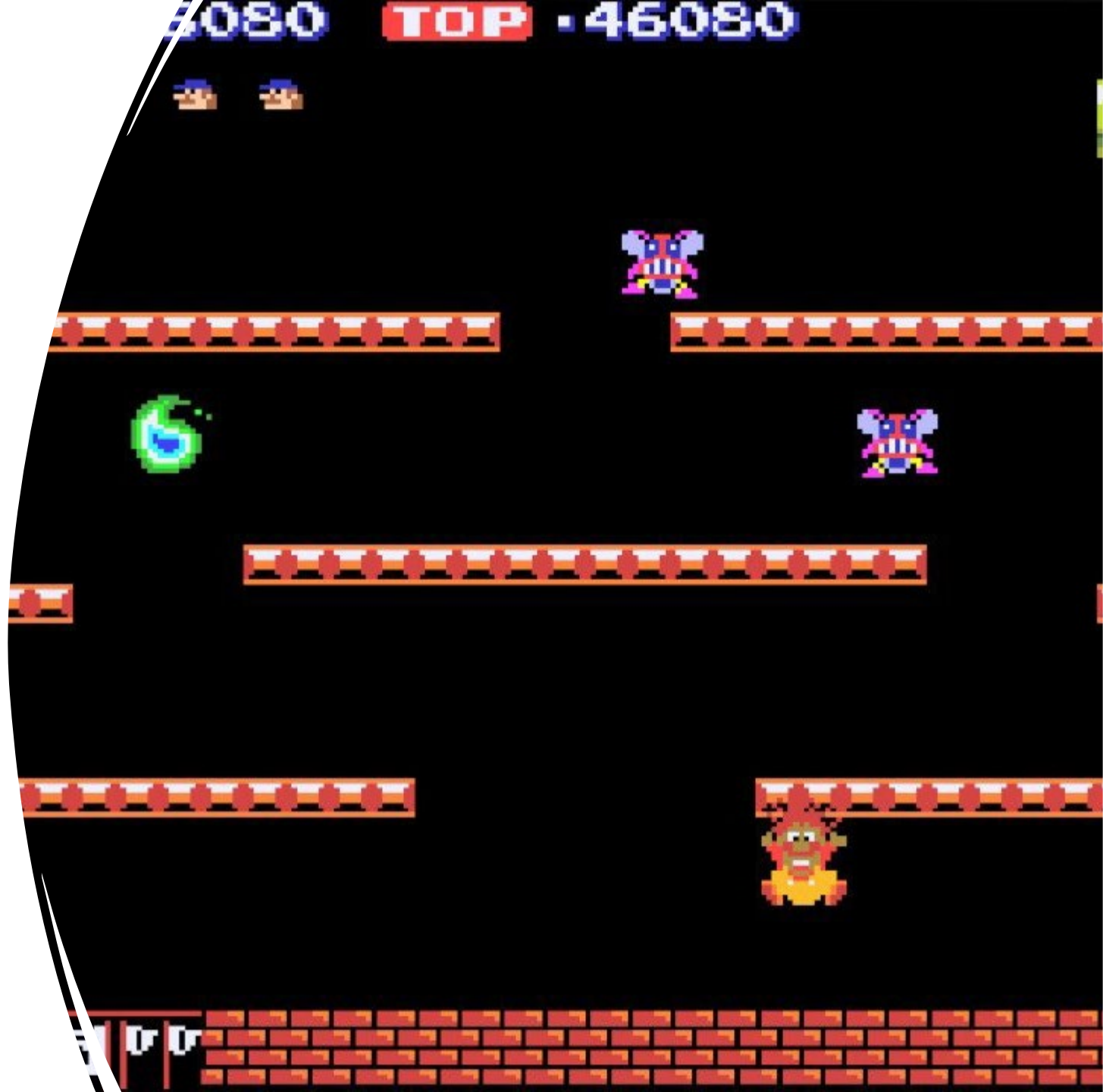
“I am a 2300 ELO Player”
(chess)

“I am a Diamond Jungler”
(League of Legends)

**“I am a Gand Master
Terran (Starcraft)”**

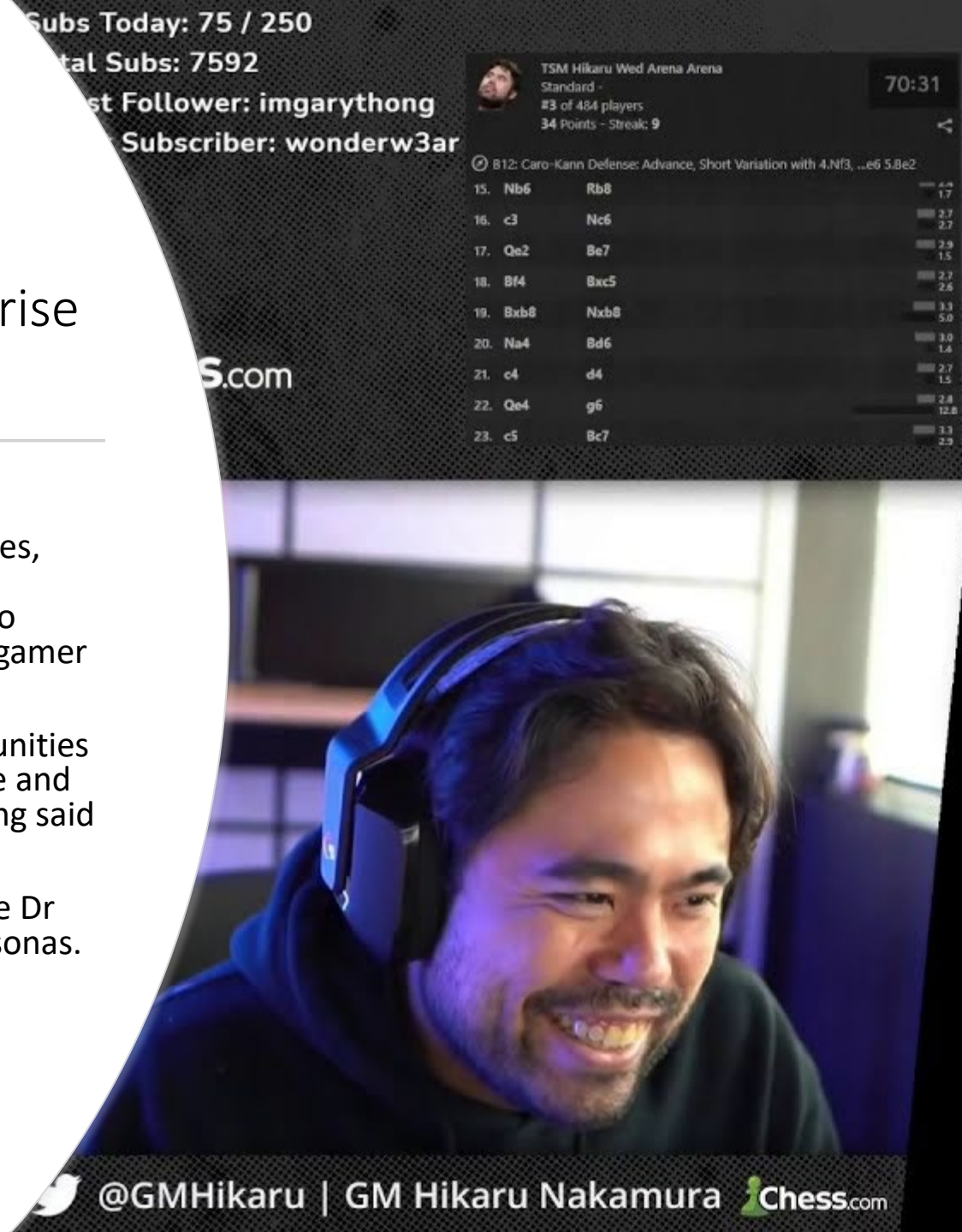
Versus the computer

- Time and points are new metrics of skill and knowledge.
- Complex narration is now achievable for the designers adding storytelling to the medium
- The removal of the sociable element allows for more unique games to be produced than ever before. New mechanics are invented yearly as opposed to decades or centuries.



The Internet and the rise of the gamer profile

- With the creation of common gaming spaces and communities, the diaspora of gamers from different games have started to coalesce into a more uniform gamer culture (a rich topic in itself).
- Ones standing in these communities is heavily linked to their profile and the effort one puts into curating said profile.
- Modern gamers are almost like Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde – two personas. The online gamer tag and the person from real life.



Umehara Diago – the master of Streetfighter: The *real* me versus the online me

- “During that time, this person named “Umehara Diago” was going to arcades and playing, working hard and growing and winning and those things were **fun**, and they felt integrated, **but then I won** the tournament and became famous and the more **the difference between the arcade and the real world became clear**. Slowly, this “Umehara” figure and the person named “Umehara Diago” started separating.”





Is everyone that eats, a foodie? Is everyone that watches films, a movie buff? Is everyone that reads, a book worm? Is everyone that plays a game, a gamer? No, no, no and no. Half of all people that play games might be women, but half of all gamers are clearly not women.

(Azradesh, reddit user – post)

- Meta is simply the collective understanding of what strategy and tactics are optimum in any given game. Metagaming appears with the proliferation of the Internet as users would share and exchange ideas faster than ever before in history. Games today are extremely optimized compared to the past
- In the end, Meta enforces behaviour through proficility. To be considered a valid member of a community one has to be aware of it and what it says. To prove it you need to show your points and demonstrate knowledge.
- No one controls the meta. It is organic and shifts with time.

Conclusions

- Gaming history reflects how we view the world and ourselves with each epoch having specific gaming trends
- Games are, in the end, about humans trying to make the world and reality seem more accessible, understandable and relatable.
- As the Internet becomes more and more central to our lives, people in the West are entering an era where in order to be valid, one must adhere to the meta. Individuality and authenticity are slowly replaced by profile-based identity in gaming.

