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UNDERSTANDING MEDIA
THE EXTENSIONS OF MAN



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Games
*The Extensions
of Man*

Alcohol and gambling have very different meanings in different cultures. In our intensely individualist and fragmented Western world, "booze" is a social bond and a means of festive involvement. By contrast, in closely knit tribal society, "booze" is destructive of all social pattern and is even used as a means to mystical experience.

In tribal societies, gambling, on the other hand, is a welcome avenue of entrepreneurial effort and individual initiative. Carried into an individualist society, the same gambling games and sweepstakes seem to threaten the whole social order. Gambling pushes individual initiative to the point of mocking the individualist social structure. The tribal virtue is the capitalist vice.

When the boys came home from the mud and blood baths of the Western Front in 1918 and 1919, they encountered the Volstead Prohibition Act. It was the

social and political recognition that the war had fraternalized and tribalized us to the point where alcohol was a threat to an individualist society. When we too are prepared to legalize gambling, we shall, like the English, announce to the world the end of individualist society and the trek back to tribal ways.

We think of humor as a mark of sanity for a good reason: in fun and play we recover the integral person, who in the workaday world or in professional life can use only a small sector of his being. Philip Deane, in *Captive in Korea*, tells a story about games in the midst of successive brainwashings that is to the point.

There came a time when I had to stop reading those books, to stop practising Russian because with the study of language the absurd and constant assertion began to leave its mark, began to find an echo, and I felt my thinking processes getting tangled, my critical faculties getting blunted. . . . then they made a mistake. They gave us Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* in English. . . . I could read Marx again, and question myself honestly without fear. Robert Louis Stevenson made us lighthearted, so we started dancing lessons.

Games are popular art, collective, social *reactions* to the main drive or action of any culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism. Both games and technologies are counter-irritants or ways of adjusting to the stress of the specialized actions that occur in any social group. As extensions of the popular response to the workaday stress, games become faithful models of a culture. They incorporate both the action and the reaction of whole populations in a single dynamic image.

A Reuters dispatch for December 13, 1962, reported from Tokyo:

BUSINESS IS A BATTLEFIELD

Latest fashion among Japanese businessmen is the study of classical military strategy and tactics in order to apply them to business operations. . . . It has been reported that one of the largest advertising companies in Japan has even made these books compulsory reading for all its employees.

Long centuries of tight tribal organization now stand the Japanese in very good stead in the trade and commerce of the electric age. A few decades ago they underwent enough literacy and industrial fragmentation to release aggressive individual energies. The close teamwork and tribal loyalty now demanded by electrical intercom again puts the Japanese in positive relation to their ancient traditions. Our own tribal ways are much too remote to be of any social avail. We have begun retribalizing with the same painful groping with which a preliterate society begins to read and write, and to organize its life visually in three-dimensional space.

The search for Michael Rockefeller brought the life of a New Guinea tribe into prominent attention in *Life* a year ago. The editors explained the war games of these people:

The traditional enemies of the Willigiman-Wallalua are the Wittai, a people exactly like themselves in language, dress and custom. . . . Every week or two the Willigiman-Wallalua and their enemies arrange a formal battle at one of the traditional fighting grounds. In comparison with the catastrophic conflicts of "civilized" nations, these frays seem more like a dangerous field sport than true war. Each battle lasts but a single day, always stops before nightfall (because of the danger of ghosts) or if it begins to rain (no one wants to get his hair or ornaments wet). The men are very accurate with their weapons—they have all played war games since they were small boys—but they are equally adept at dodging, and hence are rarely hit by anything.

The truly lethal part of this primitive warfare is not the formal battle but the sneak raid or stealthy ambush in which not only men but women and children are mercilessly slaughtered. . . .

This perpetual bloodshed is carried on for none of the usual reasons for waging war. No territory is won or lost; no goods or prisoners seized. . . . They fight because they enthusiastically enjoy it, because it is to them a vital function of the complete man, and because they feel they must satisfy the ghosts of slain companions.

These people, in short, detect in these games a kind of model of the universe, in whose deadly gavotte they can participate through the ritual of war games.

Games are dramatic models of our psychological lives providing release of particular tensions. They are collective and popular art forms with strict conventions. Ancient and nonliterate societies naturally regarded games as live dramatic models of the universe or of the outer cosmic drama. The Olympic games were direct enactments of the *agon*, or struggle of the Sun god. The runners moved around a track adorned with the zodiacal signs in imitation of the daily circuit of the sun chariot. With games and plays that were dramatic enactments of a cosmic struggle, the spectator role was plainly religious. The participation in these rituals kept the cosmos on the right track, as well as providing a booster shot for the tribe. The tribe or the city was a dim replica of that cosmos, as much as were the games, the dances, and the icons. How art became a sort of civilized substitute for magical games and rituals is the story of the detribalization which came with literacy. Art, like games, became a mimetic echo of, and relief from, the old magic of total involvement. As the audience for the magic games and plays became more individualistic, the role of art and ritual shifted from the cosmic to the humanly psychological, as in Greek drama. Even the ritual became more verbal and less mimetic or dancelike. Finally, the verbal narrative from Homer and Ovid became a romantic literary substitute for the corporate liturgy and group participation. Much of the scholarly effort of the past century in many fields has been devoted to a minute reconstruction of the conditions of primitive art and ritual, for it has been felt that this course offers the key to understanding the mind of primitive man. The key to this understanding, however, is also available in our new electric technology that is so swiftly and profoundly re-creating the conditions and attitudes of primitive tribal man in ourselves.

The wide appeal of the games of recent times—the popular sports of baseball and football and ice hockey—seen as outer models of inner psychological life, become understandable. As models, they are collective rather than private dramatizations of inner life. Like our vernacular tongues, all games are media of interpersonal communication, and they could have neither existence nor meaning except as extensions of our immediate

inner lives. If we take a tennis racket in hand, or thirteen playing cards, we consent to being a part of a dynamic mechanism in an artificially contrived situation. Is this not the reason we enjoy those games most that mimic other situations in our work and social lives? Do not our favorite games provide a release from the monopolistic tyranny of the social machine? In a word, does not Aristotle's idea of drama as a mimetic reenactment and relief from our besetting pressures apply perfectly to all kinds of games and dance and fun? For fun or games to be welcome, they must convey an echo of workaday life. On the other hand, a man or society without games is one sunk in the zombie trance of the automation. Art and games enable us to stand aside from the material pressures of routine and convention, observing and questioning. Games as popular art forms offer to all an immediate means of participation in the full life of a society, such as no single role or job can offer to any man. Hence the contradiction in "professional" sport. When the games door opening into the free life leads into a merely specialist job, everybody senses an incongruity.

The games of a people reveal a great deal about them. Games are a sort of artificial paradise like Disneyland, or some Utopian vision by which we interpret and complete the meaning of our daily lives. In games we devise means of nonspecialized participation in the larger drama of our time. But for civilized man the idea of participation is strictly limited. Not for him the depth of participation that erases the boundaries of individual awareness as in the Indian cult of *darshan*, the mystic experience of the physical presence of vast numbers of people.

A game is a machine that can get into action only if the players consent to become puppets for a time. For individualist Western man, much of his "adjustment" to society has the character of a personal surrender to the collective demands. Our games help both to teach us this kind of adjustment and also to provide a release from it. The uncertainty of the outcomes of our contests makes a rational excuse for the mechanical rigor of the rules and procedures of the game.

When the social rules change suddenly, then previously

accepted social manners and rituals may suddenly assume the stark outlines and the arbitrary patterns of a game. The *Gamesmanship* of Stephen Potter speaks of a social revolution in England. The English are moving toward social equality and the intense personal competition that goes with equality. The older rituals of long-accepted class behavior now begin to appear comic and irrational, gimmicks in a game. Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* first appeared as a solemn manual of social wisdom, but it seemed quite ludicrous to sophisticates. What Carnegie offered as serious discoveries already seemed like a naïve mechanical ritual to those beginning to move in a milieu of Freudian awareness charged with the psychopathology of everyday life. Already the Freudian patterns of perception have become an outworn code that begins to provide the cathartic amusement of a game, rather than a guide to living.

The social practices of one generation tend to get codified into the "game" of the next. Finally, the game is passed on as a joke, like a skeleton stripped of its flesh. This is especially true of periods of suddenly altered attitudes, resulting from some radically new technology. It is the inclusive mesh of the TV image, in particular, that spells for a while, at least, the doom of baseball. For baseball is a game of one-thing-at-a-time, fixed positions and visibly delegated specialist jobs such as belonged to the now passing mechanical age, with its fragmented tasks and its staff and line in management organization. TV, as the very image of the new corporate and participant ways of electric living, fosters habits of unified awareness and social interdependence that alienate us from the peculiar style of baseball, with its specialist and positional stress. When cultures change, so do games. Baseball, that had become the elegant abstract image of an industrial society living by split-second timing, has in the new TV decade lost its psychic and social relevance for our new way of life. The ball game has been dislodged from the social center and has been conveyed to the periphery of American life.

In contrast, American football is nonpositional, and any or all of the players can switch to any role during play. It is, therefore, a game that at the present is supplanting baseball in general

acceptance. It agrees very well with the new needs of decentralized team play in the electric age. Offhand, it might be supposed that the tight tribal unity of football would make it a game that the Russians would cultivate. Their devotion to ice hockey and soccer, two very individualist forms of game, would seem little suited to the psychic needs of a collectivist society. But Russia is still in the main an oral, tribal world that is undergoing detribalization and just now discovering individualism as a novelty. Soccer and ice hockey have for them, therefore, an exotic and Utopian quality of promise that they do not convey to the West. This is the quality that we tend to call "snob value," and *we* might derive some similar "value" from owning race horses, polo ponies, or twelve-meter yachts.

Games, therefore, can provide many varieties of satisfaction. Here we are looking at their role as media of communication in society as a whole. Thus, poker is a game that has often been cited as the expression of all the complex attitudes and unspoken values of a competitive society. It calls for shrewdness, aggression, trickery, and unflattering appraisals of character. It is said women cannot play poker well because it stimulates their curiosity, and curiosity is fatal in poker. Poker is intensely individualist, allowing no place for kindness or consideration, but only for the greatest good of the greatest number—the number one. It is in this perspective that it is easy to see why war has been called the sport of kings. For kingdoms are to monarchs what patrimonies and private income are to the private citizen. Kings can play poker with kingdoms, as the generals of their armies do with troops. They can bluff and deceive the opponent about their resources and their intentions. What disqualifies war from being a true game is probably what also disqualifies the stock market and business—the rules are not fully known nor accepted by all the players. Furthermore, the audience is too fully participant in war and business, just as in a native society there is no true art because *everybody* is engaged in making art. Art and games need rules, conventions, and spectators. They must stand forth from the over-all situation as models of it in order for the quality of play to persist. For "play," whether in life or in a wheel, implies

interplay. There must be give and take, or dialogue, as between two or more persons and groups. This quality can, however, be diminished or lost in any kind of situation. Great teams often play practice games without any audience at all. This is not sport in our sense, because much of the quality of interplay, the very medium of interplay, as it were, is the feeling of the audience. Rocket Richard, the Canadian hockey player, used to comment on the poor acoustics of some arenas. He felt that the puck off his stick rode on the roar of the crowd. Sport, as a popular art form, is not just self-expression but is deeply and necessarily a means of interplay within an entire culture.

Art is not just play but an extension of human awareness in contrived and conventional patterns. Sport as popular art is a deep reaction to the typical action of the society. But high art, on the other hand, is not a reaction but a profound reappraisal of a complex cultural state. Jean Genet's *The Balcony* appeals to some people as a shatteringly logical appraisal of mankind's madness in its orgy of self-destruction. Genet offers a brothel enveloped by the holocaust of war and revolution as an inclusive image of human life. It would be easy to argue that Genet is hysterical, and that football offers a more serious criticism of life than he does. Seen as live models of complex social situations, games may lack moral earnestness, it has to be admitted. Perhaps there is, just for this reason, a desperate need for games in a highly specialized industrial culture, since they are the only form of art accessible to many minds. Real interplay is reduced to nothing in a specialist world of delegated tasks and fragmented jobs. Some backward or tribal societies suddenly translated into industrial and specialist forms of mechanization cannot easily devise the antidote of sports and games to create countervailing force. They bog down into grim earnest. Men without art, and men without the popular arts of games, tend toward automatism.

A comment on the different kinds of games played in the British Parliament and the French Chamber of Deputies will rally the political experience of many readers. The British had the luck to get the two-team pattern into the House benches, whereas the French, trying for centralism by seating the deputies in a

semicircle facing the chair, got instead a multiplicity of teams playing a great variety of games. By trying for unity, the French got anarchy. The British, by setting up diversity, achieved, if anything, too much unity. The British representative, by playing his "side," is not tempted into private mental effort, nor does he have to follow the debates until the ball is passed to him. As one critic said, if the benches did not face each other the British could not tell truth from falsehood, nor wisdom from folly, unless they listened to it *all*. And since most of the debate must be nonsense, it would be stupid to listen to all.

The form of any game is of first importance. Game theory, like information theory, has ignored this aspect of game and information movement. Both theories have dealt with the information content of systems, and have observed the "noise" and "deception" factors that divert data. This is like approaching a painting or a musical composition from the point of view of its content. In other words, it is guaranteed to miss the central structural core of the experience. For as it is the *pattern* of a game that gives it relevance to our inner lives, and not who is playing nor the outcome of the game, so it is with information movement. The selection of our human senses employed makes all the difference say between photo and telegraph. In the arts the particular mix of our senses in the medium employed is all-important. The ostensible program content is a lulling distraction needed to enable the structural form to get through the barriers of conscious attention.

Any game, like any medium of information, is an extension of the individual or the group. Its effect on the group or individual is a reconfiguring of the parts of the group or individual that are *not* so extended. A work of art has no existence or function apart from its *effects* on human observers. And art, like games or popular arts, and like media of communication, has the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures.

Art, like games, is a translator of experience. What we have already felt or seen in one situation we are suddenly given in a new kind of material. Games, likewise, shift familiar experience

into new forms, giving the bleak and the bleak side of things sudden luminosity. The telephone companies make tapes of the blither of boors, who inundate defenseless telephone operators with various kinds of revolting expressions. When played back this becomes salutary fun and play, and helps the operators to maintain equilibrium.

The world of science has become quite self-conscious about the play element in its endless experiments with models of situations otherwise unobservable. Management training centers have long used games as a means of developing new business perception. John Kenneth Galbraith argues that business must now study art, for the artist makes models of problems and situations that have not yet emerged in the larger matrix of society, giving the artistically perceptive businessman a decade of leeway in his planning.

In the electric age, the closing of the gaps between art and business, or between campus and community, are part of the overall implosion that closes the ranks of specialists at all levels. Flaubert, the French novelist of the nineteenth century, felt that the Franco-Prussian War could have been avoided if people had heeded his *Sentimental Education*. A similar feeling has since come to be widely held by artists. They know that they are engaged in making live models of situations that have not yet matured in the society at large. In their artistic play, they discovered what is actually happening, and thus they appear to be "ahead of their time" Non-artists always look at the present through the spectacles of the preceding age. General staffs are always magnificently prepared to fight the previous war.

Games, then, are contrived and controlled situations, extensions of group awareness that permit a respite from customary patterns. They are a kind of talking to itself on the part of society as a whole. And talking to oneself is a recognized form of play that is indispensable to any growth of self-confidence. The British and Americans have enjoyed during recent times an enormous self-confidence born of the playful spirit of fun and games. When they sense the absence of this spirit in their rivals, it causes embarrassment. To take mere wordly things in dead

earnest betokens a defect of awareness that is pitiable. From the first days of Christianity there grew a habit, in some quarters, of spiritual clowning, of "playing the fool in Christ," as St. Paul put it. Paul also associated this sense of spiritual confidence and Christianity play with the games and sports of his time. Play goes with an awareness of huge disproportion between the ostensible situation and the real stakes. A similar sense hovers over the game situation, as such. Since the game, like any art form, is a mere tangible model of another situation that is less accessible, there is always a tingling sense of oddity and fun in play or games that renders the very earnest and very serious person or society laughable. When the Victorian Englishman began to lean toward the pole of seriousness, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw and G. K. Chesterton moved in swiftly as countervailing force. Scholars have often pointed out that Plato conceived of play dedicated to the Deity, as the loftiest reach of man's religious impulse.

Bergson's famous treatise on laughter sets forth the idea of mechanism taking over life-values as the key to the ludicrous. To see a man slip on a banana skin is to see a rationally structured system suddenly translated into a whirling machine. Since industrialism had created a similar situation in the society of his time, Bergson's idea was readily accepted. He seems not to have noticed that he had mechanically turned up a mechanical metaphor in a mechanical age in order to explain the very unmechanical thing, laughter, or "the mind sneezing," as Wyndham Lewis described it.

The game spirit suffered a defeat a few years ago over the rigged TV quiz shows. For one thing, the big prize seemed to make fun of money. Money as store of power and skill, and expediter of exchange, still has for many people the ability to induce a trance of great earnestness. Movies, in a sense, are also rigged shows. Any play or poem or novel is, also, rigged to *produce an effect*. So was the TV quiz show. But with the TV effect there is deep audience *participation*. Movie and drama do not permit as much participation as that afforded by the mosaic mesh of the TV image. So great was the audience participation in the quiz shows that the

directors of the show were prosecuted as con men. Moreover press and radio ad interests, bitter about the success of the new TV medium, were delighted to lacerate the flesh of their rivals. Of course, the riggers had been blithely unaware of the nature of their medium, and had given it the movie treatment of intense realism, instead of the softer mythic focus proper to TV. Charles Van Doren merely got clobbered as an innocent bystander, and the whole investigation elicited no insight into the nature or effects of the TV medium. Regrettably, it simply provided a field day for the earnest moralizers. A moral point of view too often serves as a substitute for understanding in technological matters.

That games are extensions, not of our private but of our social selves, and that they are media of communication, should now be plain. If, finally, we ask, "Are games mass media?" the answer has to be "Yes." Games are situations contrived to permit simultaneous participation of many people in some significant pattern of their own corporate lives.