

# Games people play

Can games help us to live more nurturing, cooperative and sustainable lives? Clive Adams considers the potential for play to help us hone these skills for survival

## RE-THINKING HUMAN NATURE THROUGH CREATIVITY

At the heart of today's ecological crisis lies a serious failure, not only to understand the essence of humanity's place within the rest of nature, but to be conscious of the forces that drive human nature and determine the choices we make. The arts can offer unique insights into these issues and in previous programmes with which the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) has been involved, such as *The Animal Gaze* (a London Metropolitan University exhibition curated by Rosemarie McGoldrick and shown at CCANW and four Plymouth galleries in 2009 to mark the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth) we have explored how artists have used animal imagery to make statements about human identity.

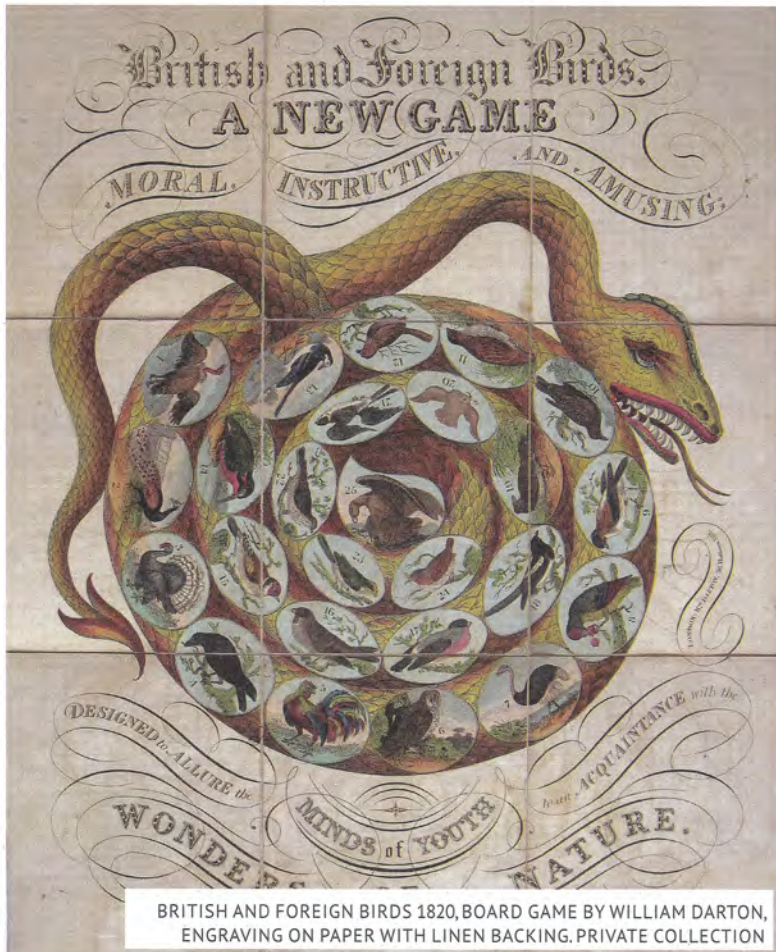
*Games People Play*, our new programme which opened in Easter 2012 and runs to the end of February 2013, explores

– through a range of exhibitions and activities – what games can tell us about human nature, and how a deeper understanding of the advantages of cooperation can help us all to address the needs of the planet.

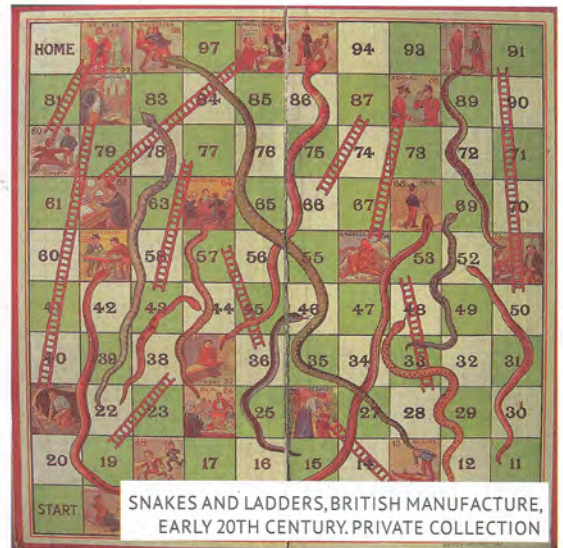
One of its main aims is to encourage new games to evolve, which emphasise our interconnection with, rather than our separation from, nature and each other. It is our contribution to the Cultural Olympiad. *Games People Play* is largely supported financially by Arts Council England, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation.

Society has tended to project the predatory instincts of other animals on to humanity, on the grounds that they are somehow more 'natural'. Tennyson's reference to a 'Nature, red in tooth and claw', *In Memorium* (1850),





BRITISH AND FOREIGN BIRDS 1820, BOARD GAME BY WILLIAM DARTON, ENGRAVING ON PAPER WITH LINEN BACKING. PRIVATE COLLECTION



SNAKES AND LADDERS, BRITISH MANUFACTURE, EARLY 20TH CENTURY. PRIVATE COLLECTION



ALICE BECKER-HO AND GUY DEBORD PLAYING THE GAME OF WAR. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEANNE CORNET. C. ALICE DEBORD. REPRODUCED WITH KIND PERMISSION OF ATLAS PRESS

has also flavoured our sense of what Darwin actually meant in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which was simply, and most reasonably, that those species that adapted best to challenges would be the most likely to survive.

Today, science questions the wisdom of establishing models of social behaviour based on an incomplete understanding of nature. The biologist Richard Dawkins maintains in *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998) that, although our genes are basically 'selfish', it can suit their own self-interest to adopt strategies of both altruism and cooperation.

The late Brian Goodwin, in *How the Leopard Changed its Spots* (1994), blames Darwinism, with its emphasis on competition, inheritance and selfishness, as having contributed to some of the difficulties we now face, such as environmental deterioration and loss of communal values. He argues that organisms are as cooperative as they are competitive, as altruistic as they are selfish and as creative as they are destructive, and he believes that we

urgently need to rethink our biological natures in order to reach a more balanced relationship with each other, other species and the environment.

For Eric Berne (from whose book *Games People Play*, published in 1964, the exhibition title has been appropriated) during most of our social lives we are playing games; and by this, writing in the 1960s, he does not mean video games. Sometimes, to get our way, we compete, sometimes we cooperate. Such games are necessary and desirable, but we need to be more aware of the strategies we employ every day; when these games operate at an unthinking level they can be harmful to others and to society.

Game theory, originally applied to the field of economic behaviour, was first explicitly applied to evolutionary biology in the early 1960s by Richard Lewontin, who pictured a species playing a game against nature. Twenty years later, the social scientist and author of *The Evolution of Cooperation* (1984), Robert Axelrod, invited game theorists to submit programmes for the Computer Prisoner's

Dilemma Tournament, the object of which was to develop a theory of cooperation. The game allowed players to achieve mutual gains from cooperation but it also allowed for the possibility that one player will exploit the other, or the possibility that neither will cooperate. The most successful programme developed was Tit for Tat because of its characteristics of forgiveness and reciprocation.

*Games People Play* starts with board games and also shows very early examples (sadly, some only in replica) of race games such as Senet, Ur and Pachisi, war games such as Chess, and counting

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H.G.WELLS PLAYING LITTLE WARS. C. ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS LTD., MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

games. The main purpose of the display of board games, however, is to focus on a dozen or so games made between 1780 and 1918 that were designed originally to provide moral guidance or education in, for example, natural history or geography.

The Game of Goose, devised in Italy in the 16th Century, but based on much earlier games from the Middle and Far East, is generally regarded as the prototype of the modern race game. Early educational board games, developed in the United Kingdom in the late 18th Century and first half of the 19th, taught morals and behaviour, yet, curiously, continued to do so through an element of gambling and chance. Many of the first publishers of these games were cartographers and so developed the race game into a way of teaching geography; these were soon followed by history-based games and those that taught everything from morals and arithmetic to astronomy. In the teaching of moral conduct, one approach was to show the temptations one might meet in life; another stressed the rewards and

penalties for good and bad behaviour.

In *Leela*, played in India from the 16th century as a Hindu guide to salvation, the ladders stood for virtues such as generosity, faith and humility, and the snakes for vices such as lust, anger and theft. The aim of the game was for the player to attain salvation (*Moksha*) through performing good deeds, whereas by doing evil ones they would be reborn in lower forms of life (*Patamu*). There were fewer ladders than snakes, as a reminder that following the path of good was more difficult than the path of sin. The ideals behind the game impressed the Victorians, and it was introduced to England in 1892 as *Snakes and Ladders*.

Another example in the display is *Brer Fox an' Brer Rabbit*, from the collection of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Published in the UK in 1913, it was based on *The Landlord's Game* which was patented in America in 1904 by a Quaker, Elizabeth J Magie, to discourage land speculation. American College students, however, soon began playing *The Landlord's Game* using very different rules, with the richest player

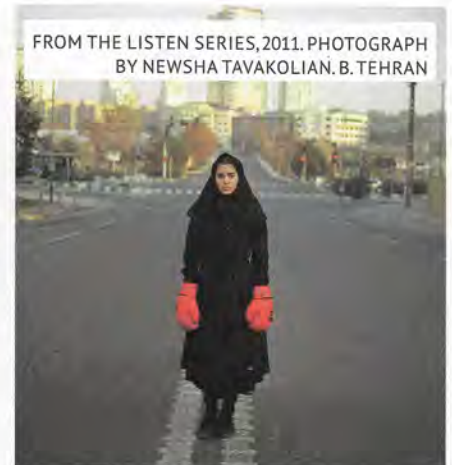
winning and everyone else losing. By 1913 it had been transformed into the first US *Monopoly* set.

This first part of the programme also presents gaming projects that simulate conflict. There are displays of Guy Debord's *The Game of War* and H G Wells' *Little Wars*, with participatory performances led by Class Wargames, a multidisciplinary group of artists and academics. Outside, games are devised and played in a playground area in front of CCANW's building, along the forest trails and in the wider forest environment. Five villages surrounding Haldon, near Exeter, are working with The Moveable Feast Workshop Company, inventing new games as well as researching the heritage of local games.

Additional activities include Fluxolympics-inspired events, Paralympic events and a letterboxing challenge on Haldon, similar to that played on Dartmoor since 1854. Biodiversity and interdependence are also being explored through activities led by artists and wildlife experts in Haldon Forest, a Site



FOREST FOOTBALL. DEvised BY TOM RUSSOTTI, INSTITUTE FOR AESTHETICS, NYC



FROM THE LISTEN SERIES, 2011. PHOTOGRAPH BY NEWSHA TAVAKOLIAN, B. TEHRAN

of Special Scientific Interest due to the presence of birds of prey, nightjars and 30 species of butterfly.

The second half of *Games People Play*, starting in October 2012, will focus on photography and video by contemporary artists who use sporting imagery to make wider comments on the human condition. It will also highlight the new generation of video games designers who use the medium to tackle social and environmental challenges.

In the area of photography and video, we see artists exploring the entire range of human emotions in sport, from confidence to anxiety, triumph to despair. Also, the idea of territorial control, attachment to a team, the cult of fitness and youth, and the winning of prizes. Boxing, in particular, seems to hold a special fascination, especially for some woman artists.

The first written history of the origins of human gameplay in Greece more than 3,000 years ago is to be found in Herodotus' *Histories*. 'Games' days were used to make life more bearable during a famine; this is now thought to have been caused by a catastrophic 19 year-long period of global cooling.

Just as Herodotus' starving Greeks played games to distract them from their predicament, today's computer and video gamers abandon reality in favour of simulated, competitive and often violent, virtual environments. The statistics surrounding the massive amount of effort and energy that is lavished on gaming are staggering; the planet is now spending more than three billion hours a week gaming and one survey estimates that 183 million of us around the world spend

an average of 13 hours a week gaming. We are fast becoming a society in which a substantial portion of our population devotes its greatest effort to playing games.

Some artists, such as Cory Arcangel, subvert the iconography of such games, but game worlds are clearly fulfilling genuine human needs that the real world cannot satisfy. The question that some are now asking is how to turn the obvious power of games from wasteful escapism to tackle real social and environmental challenges, just as those early board games were intended to teach the young how to live virtuous lives.

Games designer and academic Jane McGonigal writes in *Reality Is Broken* (2011) 'reality is broken and we need to start making games to fix it; serious games for real world good'. Games developers know better than anyone how to inspire extreme effort and reward hard work, and to facilitate cooperation and collaboration on a previously unimaginable scale.

Already crowd sourcing games have engaged tens of thousands of players to tackle real world problems for free. Evoke, for example, is a social network

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game produced for the World Bank and initially targeted at Africa, playable on both computers and mobile phones, and designed to help players launch their own world-changing ventures. Others include Superstruct, a future forecasting game created by the Institute for the Future, Free Rice for UN World Food Programme, World Without Oil and Spore.

The Long Game is now under development, intended as a means for universal participation, showing the way for humanity to play collectively to take us on to a new scale of cooperation, coordination and co-creation. The game imagines the entire world setting aside one day a year for 1,000 years to play and to focus its energy on addressing global transformation. Perhaps not so far-fetched, considering that the Ancient Greeks ran their own Olympiad for around the same length of time.

New forms of creativity tend to evolve at times of environmental and social stress, whether they are the first landscapes painted on the walls of Roman villas during the first century BC or games played in Greece even earlier. Although certainly not the only way forward, it could be that this new generation of video games will provide the 'complex and sensitive form of interaction and linking' of which Suzi Gablik writes in *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991) and which will evoke 'feelings of belonging to a larger whole rather than experiencing the isolated, alienated self'. ●

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