

Games People Play

Clive Adams asks how we can turn the obvious power of games from wasteful escapism to useful social and environmental activism

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 also to be conscious of the forces that drive human nature and determine the choices we all make. Games can tell us a great deal about human nature, and a deeper understanding of the advantages of cooperation can help us all to address the needs of the planet at this time. The arts can offer unique insights and can encourage new games to evolve that emphasise our interconnection with, rather than our separation from, Nature and each other.

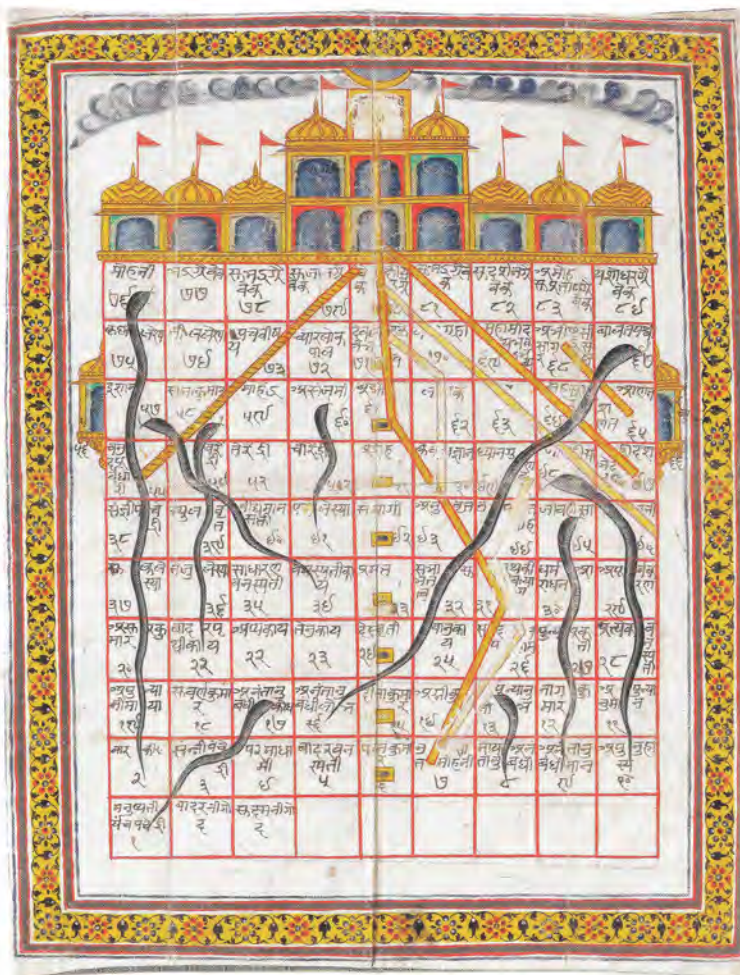
The psychiatrist Eric Berne, the author of *Games People Play*, maintained that during most of our social lives we are playing games; and, writing in the 1960s, he did not mean

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 Robert Axelrod invited game theorists to submit programs for a computer *Prisoners' Dilemma* tournament, the object of which was to develop a theory of cooperation that could be used to discover what is necessary for cooperation to emerge. The most successful strategy developed was named *Tit for Tat*, because of its characteristics of forgiveness and reciprocation.

Board games can be categorised as race games such as *Senet*, *Ur* and *Pachisi*, war games such as chess, and counting games. *The Game of the Goose*, devised in Italy in the 16th century, 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 the first half of the 19th century, taught morals and behaviour, yet, curiously, they did so through an element of gambling and chance. 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, ladders stood for virtues such as generosity, faith and humility, and 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 through evil deeds the player would be reborn in a lower form of life (*patamu*). There were fewer ladders than snakes, as a reminder that the path of good was more difficult to follow 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*.



Leela, the original Indian game of Snakes and Ladders, Rajasthan. Late 19th century, private collection. Photo: David Garner

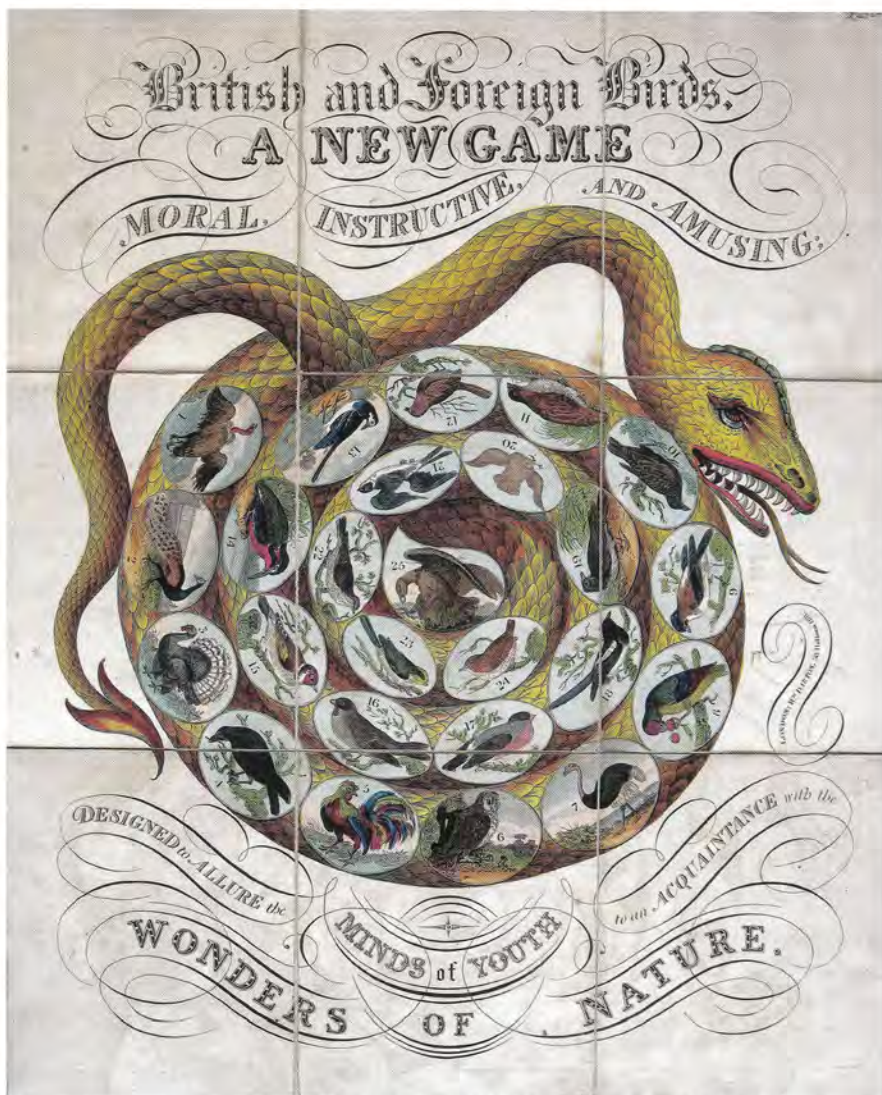
Photography and video by contemporary artists use sporting imagery to make wider comments on the human condition. Here we see artists exploring the entire range of human emotions in sport, from confidence to anxiety, triumph to despair; and also the idea of territorial control, attachment to a team, the cult of fitness and youth, and the winning of prizes.

Today's computer and video gamers abandon reality in favour of simulated, competitive, often violent virtual environments. The statistics surrounding the massive amount of effort and energy lavished on gaming are staggering. We are fast becoming a society in which a substantial portion of the population devotes its greatest effort to playing games.

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

Games developers know better than anyone how to inspire extreme effort and reward hard work, and to facilitate cooperation and collaboration. 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 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 the 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, which can then 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



British and Foreign Birds, 1820, board game by William Darton. Private collection

The only thing that will redeem humankind is cooperation, and the first step towards cooperation lies in the hearts of individuals

– Bertrand Russell

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.

At times of environmental and social stress new forms of creativity tend to evolve, such as the first landscapes painted on the walls of Roman villas during the first century BCE, 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 the art critic and art historian Suzi Gablik writes and which will evoke “feelings of belonging to a larger whole rather than experiencing the isolated, alienated self”. R

Clive Adams is the Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, Exeter, which is staging Games People Play until February 2013. To learn more visit www.ccanw.co.uk