

Tidepools : A Journal of Ideas

1999 Theme: 

Game One

Games have always made us uneasy, and not just the ones where the losers get eaten by lions. An acquaintance of mine, a gravely religious man who resists with all his will the frivolous and the trifling, sums up this anxiety when he says to me, "A good pool player is the sign of a gentleman; a great pool player is the sign of a wasted life." But he is wrong, on a level so deep and so fundamental to our nature that most of us would not think to contradict him. The essential dualism of games-us and them, winner and loser, skill and chance-is an expression of the essential paradox of games. We pretend that they are trivial, that they are simply "pass-times" when there is nothing useful that needs doing, but in fact games have always been the metaphors we use to prove our usefulness: Football is the hunt; track is the chase; poker the lie; boxing the kill. We are very, very serious about games because we feel (even as we deny it) what's at stake.

And the great pool player knows the flight of the stars in their vault of space, and the waltz of atoms in the mind of God.

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Game Two

Just A Game

What is it about games that makes them such a pervasive part of the human experience? Travel across state with a carload of children and you will witness firsthand how human nature tends toward gaming. There is the deck of cards, the activity book full of puzzles and mazes, there is the roadside alphabet game, thumb wrestling, "papers, scissors, rocks"; and when the store of known games is exhausted, children will invent ones to fill the void: a competition to see how many corn nuts can be mounted on the driver's shoulder without his noticing.

Everywhere there are children, there are games; but so too with adults, who have crossword puzzles and bridge, golf, ESPN and let's not forget office politics.

Games make the long haul that much shorter, but they are about more than play and passing time. What we really appreciate about games, which gives them their character, is the idiosyncrasy of their rules. Just as we are mesmerized by the curious mechanisms in Mousetrap, so in most games, we appreciate the creative articulation of boundaries and procedures and codes of conduct that direct the course of movement. No hands in soccer, no feet in basketball, no eyes in Marco Polo, no passing forward in rugby, no running out of the baseline in baseball. You must follow suit, unless ...

Surely games provide relief from our work weeks, but they provide a more important function than that. They allow us to express the full range of our humanity. The vast variety of games suggests the expansiveness of the human spirit that requires so many unique game formulations and the quirky situations they occasion to find full expression.



Human drama emerges out of elemental patterns of experience like competition and reversal of fortune, and can be enacted in games as simple as Chutes and Ladders. But the nooks and crannies of our humanity require the stimulation of more defined and intricate gaming moments: baseball's first and third dilemma, the on-side kick, poker's low hand bluff, split pins. Is it any wonder that so many of the metaphors we use to capture our experience come from such moments in games? the sticky wicket, the ace in the hole, the long shot.

While games like poker and rugby might lead you to doubt how safe gaming is, safety really is the point. In games we are provided with fictional worlds that allow us to enter into drama, that suspend us in emotional intensity, but which always come to an end. "Thank God for the buzzer," we say. While we may bear the memory of gaming through injury or trophy, ultimately on the larger emotional scoreboard, we can tell ourselves (especially when we lose) that it was just a game.

Do we so easily depart from a game, and if so into what? Much of our lives are fictions that we act out, games we are caught up in. Is the division between games and "real" life clear as between jousting tournaments and war, or for most of us is there a blurring of what is game and what is daily life? In leaving a game are we entering another fiction?

This year's edition of *Tidepools* is devoted to gaming, a topic that should be familiar to writers and artists, whose craft is designed to draw us into the game of their fiction, creatively deploying rules of art and nature to lead us into moments that summon the hidden dimensions of our humanity.

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