

Board Games of the 20th Century and their Cultural Impact on Reinforcing Racial Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, video games grew incredibly more popular and transitioned to the mainstream. However, many of these games face criticism for gameplay features that propagate problematic racial caricatures and stereotypes. By looking at board games from the twentieth century, this paper shows that racially problematic gameplay is not an exclusively modern trend; instead, it is but one facet of an entire play industry that has been replicating and disseminating racial (and often racist) stereotypes for decades. While many board game developers intended for their games to be critical of social issues, market forces demanded that these games reframe their messaging to better comply with narratives and views, however flawed and damaging, that were familiar to the consumer population, namely parents seeking wholesome entertainment for their children. Structured board games throughout the last century, including Monopoly, Blacks & Whites, and Mystery Date, have further entrenched the notion of the “white normal” by honoring characteristics associated with white Americans and condemning traditionally nonwhite characteristics and lifestyles. Furthermore, Dungeons and Dragons and other tabletop, RPG fantasy games caricatured actual races within the fantastical settings of their games, turning white individuals into graceful elves and nonwhite individuals into brutish orcs. An investigation of board games throughout the twentieth century reveals the tendency of dominating social views and cultural messages to reinforce themselves across generations, as social messaging in games and other consumer products are necessarily defined by the whims of the market and the wishes of the consumer.

Videogames in the Modern Day

Video games have garnered a wide-reaching influence over the younger generation in recent years: over 90% of children in America play some sort of video game (Alanko, 2023, p. 23). With video games holding so much power and reach, many people are concerned about the negative influences of video games. Parents and keyboard warriors online blame video games for glorifying violence, drugs, sexism, and other vices to children. During the Black Lives Matters movement in 2020, for example, several video game companies faced accusations of racism. The EA soccer video game *FIFA20* was exposed for having an internal system that subtly divided players and their traits by race. White players in general had higher scores in accuracy and composure, while Black players scored higher on sprint speed and aggression. The scoring system reinforced archaic pseudoscience about race where white people had more developed brains and Black people had naturally stronger bodies. In another case, many players of the popular gacha action role-playing game (RPG) *Genshin Impact* flocked to Twitter to complain about the Chinese developers’ treatment of the game’s latest, and comparatively weaker, dark-skinned character “Dehya.” The games industry continues to reinforce racial stereotypes within their products intentionally or not, despite a general global push for diversity and inclusion.

Effects of Games on Children Psyche

The potentially corrupting effect of games is neither an exclusively modern concern nor limited to the hyper-realistic video games of the twenty-first century. Throughout the twentieth century, in fact, board games reflected a specific sociocultural outlook and helped instill problematic views in children. Board games such as *Blacks & Whites* and *The Landlord's Game* voiced direct political opinions about capitalism, segregation, and housing policy, while other games like *Mystery Date* more subtly upheld established social norms and conventional notions of feminine beauty. Even games set in fantastical worlds can implicitly reinforce the game designers' biases, whether racial, classist, or gendered. Board games of the twentieth century routinely reinforced racial stereotypes by normalizing white culture, celebrating social hierarchy, and brokering in racialized caricatures, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Historians of play have generally subscribed to one of two schools of thought regarding the impact of games on American culture: (1) games meaningfully contribute to children's cultural literacy, both positively and negatively or (2) games have little impact on culture. Gabriela T. Richard argues that games can be useful tools to teach children about cultures and skills, saying that "playing dominoes – a game prominent in African American and Latino cultures – can help developmentally and culturally-responsive scaffold the learning of language-use, strategy, and mathematical thinking, and hopscotch – a schoolyard and street game prominent among girls – can help develop strategic argumentation, dramatic role play, and rhetorical skills." By creating fun environments that challenge children to use certain skills and rewarding them for doing so, games are effective at developing children's ideas and skills and exposing them to different cultural experiences.

Conversely, games can also, according to Richard, "entrench stereotypes and bias" just as easily as they provide educational resources and meaningful cultural knowledge (Richard, 2017, p. 37). To that end, some historians believe that games significantly reinforced racial stereotypes and widened the racial divide in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Historian and archeologist Christopher P. Barton and Kyle Somerville, for example, argue that the children's toys and games market is dominated by white manufacturers who reinforce the white middle class lifestyle while discriminating against other races (Barton & Somerville, 2012, p. 37).

Other historians argue that games have little to no direct influence over culture and are, instead, innocent items of play. Children's interactions with games, toys, and media, David Buckingham asserts, is more multifaceted and complex than simply absorbing the product's direct messaging (Buckingham, 2000, p. 90). Psychologist Joel Best argues that games and toys displaying a particular type of behavior do not necessarily inspire children to act similarly or subscribe to the game's messaging. In fact, toys and games are not themselves indicative of how children play with them, as Best says:

Claims about problematic toys ignore this complexity, implying that the nature of toys somehow constrains how children can play with them. Again, analysts interpret what toys mean, often in narrow, even superficial terms. Critics of video games, for example, worry that the stories they depict celebrate violence (e.g., kung fu fighting), sexism (e.g., rescuing the Princess), and so on (Best, 1998, p. 206).

Best claims that the way children engage with toys and media does not necessarily conform with the toy's direct messaging. These scholars believe that the general public's critical view on non-productive leisure as well as the popular and natural view of children's minds being vulnerable can be easily misconstrued into claims about toys being problematic without sufficient direct evidence pointing to such a conclusion. They further contend that those who construe toys as social problems are often blindsided by the "ideal" play of the past, their childhood, and are unwilling to accept the innovations in new children's play (Best, 1998, p. 199).

While these scholars are correct insofar that children do not uncritically absorb all the messaging found in the games they play, their suggestion that games have no influence over the public is flawed. These scholars downplay the fact that games, whether board, tabletop, or video, have incredibly large player bases that are

exposed to their messaging, often for long periods of time. As such, games and toys have a clear and direct influence on children's psyche.

Furthermore, it is true that some children play with toys outside of their intended purpose; however, children also play with toys and games as intended. Board games, especially, have specific sets of rules designed to constrain gameplay and limit players' ability to improvise. These rules, assuming they are followed, impart and reinforce the messaging and biases of the game makers, even if the children playing the games do not actively express the game makers' views. Many board games from the 1960s to the 1980s, then, reinforced racial stereotypes in children, whether intentional or not, by proffering cultural commentary on property ownership, housing markets, and beauty standards for women, among other things.

The Landlord's Game and Gilded Age Capitalism

Board games of the twentieth century, overall, greatly bolstered white culture and preexisting social hierarchies, promoted discrimination along racial lines, and stifled diversity. Lizzie Magie's *The Landlord's Game*, which later became *Monopoly*, demonstrated the virtues of capitalism and property ownership from the perspective of the property owner or the landlord. Magie released *The Landlord's Game* in 1903 to show Americans that the "unfettered landlordism" of the Gilded Age only made property owners richer while impoverishing tenants (Pilon, 2015, para. 7). During the early twentieth century, the United States experienced unprecedented economic expansion, technological innovation, and industrial development. These monumental improvements, however, were neither the product of government policy nor equally distributed. Instead, an excessively small group of robber barons, among them Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie, controlled the overwhelming majority of American wealth from atop their vast corporate empires.

Alongside the unprecedented opportunity for stable employment, though, Americans grappled with a host of social issues and exploitative practices. Journalist and muckraker Lincoln Steffens outlines the exploitive and corruptive practices of business and industry in big cities such as St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia. Large business owners often used their powers to bribe public servants, influence elections, and bend legislation to their favor. As Steffens writes in *McLure's Magazine*, the Philadelphia voting machine "controls the whole process of voting, and practices fraud at every stage" (Steffens, 1904, p. 199). In another article, Steffens exposes Pittsburgh's late boss Christopher L. Magee for taking over the city's railway franchise by forcing contracts to his own company. These exploitative practices further concentrated power and resources at the top, all the while stripping workers of their autonomy and subjecting them to long workdays and low wages.

Due to its initial social critique, *The Landlord's Game* was not very popular; Magie earned a mere five hundred dollars for her creation (Pilon, 2005, para. 9). A board game's social impact is contingent on the number of people who purchase it. With this, board games struggle to gain popularity when they challenge existing cultural norms. Therefore, when Charles Darrow rebranded the game as *Monopoly* in 1933, he discarded Magie's reform-minded politics and advocated for and glorified monopolies, the accumulation of wealth, and unbridled landlordism. This reinvention resonated with the American public at an opportune time, as the economic downfall of the 1930s left Americans with a lot of free time to play board games. Struggling Americans enjoyed *Monopoly*, in particular, because it allowed *them* to escape to a fantasy world of wealth (as cited in History101). Replete with better publishing, more streamlined mechanics, and a more attractive appearance, Darrow's game was an instant hit and has become one of the most popular board games in history (Crocco, 2001, p. 31). Instead of critiquing and exposing the corporate barons of the time, Darrow's version of the game provides the fantasy that anyone could reach the top of the economic ladder in the United States, a welcome reprieve from the drudgery of American industrial life.

Blacks & Whites and Housing Segregation

Other games released later in the century further celebrated the potential benefits of capitalism, although often in more explicitly racial terms. *Psychology Today*'s 1970 board game, *Blacks & Whites*, allowed competitors to play as black or white, albeit with whites having a significant advantage at the start of the game. This game reflected the patterns of housing segregation and suburbanization that swept the United States amidst post-World War II prosperity. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, large numbers of African Americans moved into urban communities, leading white families to move out. In particular, white veterans took advantage of generous government programs following World War II to build their own homes in the rapidly expanding suburbs that were starting to envelop most American cities. Because of this mass migration to the suburbs, however, the property value of urban communities entered a freefall, which compelled many Black Americans to pursue the opportunities provided by the suburbs. To maintain the racial homogeneity of their new suburban communities, white Americans implemented redlining policies and restrictive housing covenants, which denied people the ability to live in certain predominantly nonwhite communities, access to loans, employment opportunities, and housing.

The creators of the *Blacks & Whites*, Robert Sommer and Julia Tart, included many of these racially exclusionary housing practices in their game with the intention of educating the public, particularly children, of the injustices faced by Black Americans. According to a *Times Magazine* article at the time, however, these fictionalized inequalities were "too successful," in that they made the game a "simulation of frustration" where black players "could not win" (Time Magazine, as cited in Tower, 2014, para. 5). Blacks not only get less money to start (\$10,000 as compared to the 1 million White players get) but also cannot purchase certain properties and draw from a separate random event deck with generally less favorable events. The strict rules limiting the opportunities of "Black" players—instead of generating awareness and empathy regarding residential segregation and discrimination—demonstrated the efficacy of racist housing policies, further normalized white superiority, and taught impressionable children how to implement stable segregation patterns in the housing market.

Additionally, the game brokered unironically in the "ghetto" and "gang" stereotypes that are disproportionately applied to African Americans and denigrated living conditions associated primarily with Black Americans. One of the four major "zones" of the game board is dedicated to the "ghetto," an unfavorable spot to buy property...and the "zone" in which most Black players start off. The game also advertises itself as an exemplar of segregated housing, claiming in its instructions that it welcomes the player, particularly "Black" players, to "experience the ghetto. Live on welfare. Try to buy in a white suburb." For the white players, however, the challenge is simple: win the game "cheaply and quickly" with the \$1,000,000 they get at the start (Sommer & Tart, 1970). Eventually, David Popoff, editor of *Psychology Today*, amended the game's rules to make it possible for black players to make a comeback and "beat the system" (Tower, 2014, para. 5). However, these amendments were too little too late. *Blacks & Whites* had already cemented itself as a board game emblematic of the discrimination of the 1960s and 1970s. By placing the white players and Black players in direct opposition to one another and making it all but impossible for white players to lose, *Blacks & Whites* reflected the discriminatory reality of segregated housing in the mid-twentieth century and, perhaps more importantly, glorified the importance of maintaining white neighborhoods.

Blacks & Whites and *The Landlord's Game* were braced by cultural inertia. They accepted and magnified preexisting societal norms, regardless of the original intent of their creators. Although both games were initially intended to be social commentaries and cultural criticisms of their respective historical moments, their gameplay was, on the whole, too compelling. By functionally equating "whites" with "winners" and extolling the tenets of capitalism, these two games repeatedly reminded young players of the economic disparities of American life and clearly demonstrated how to be successful and prosperous at the direct expense of other American citizens, particularly nonwhite citizens.

Mystery Date and the “White Normal” in Romance

Moreover, game and toy companies necessarily adhere to the cultural norms of their time to move product. The 1965 board game *Mystery Date*, for example, plays into the normalization of white hierarchies and beauty standards. The game, which is almost entirely dependent on luck, requires players to move around a game board based on a dice roll. Each player is trying to complete a set of clothing for a date. Once a player lands on one of the “open the door” squares, they may try to open the door in the middle of the game board to see their “mystery date.” If the door opens to the man with the corresponding “date” for the player’s outfit, the player wins.

Despite the seemingly innocuous nature of this game, all four primary pieces used in the game depict traditionally beautiful women: white with a skinny waist and wavy hair. As it is marketed to little girls, this game capitalizes on the message that white beauty is the ideal beauty (Milton Bradley, 1965, as shown in Etsy). This messaging carries over to the illustrations on the game board and even to the male dates behind the doors, who are tall, white, and broad-chested. Players also run the risk of opening the door to reveal a “dud”: a hunched over, bespectacled nerd in overalls (Milton Bradley, 1965 as shown in Etsy). Essentially, *Mystery Date* establishes the ideal and, implicitly, only romance: a dashing white man and attractive white woman. All other pairings are either a “dud” or so far outside of consideration as to not even be included in the game.

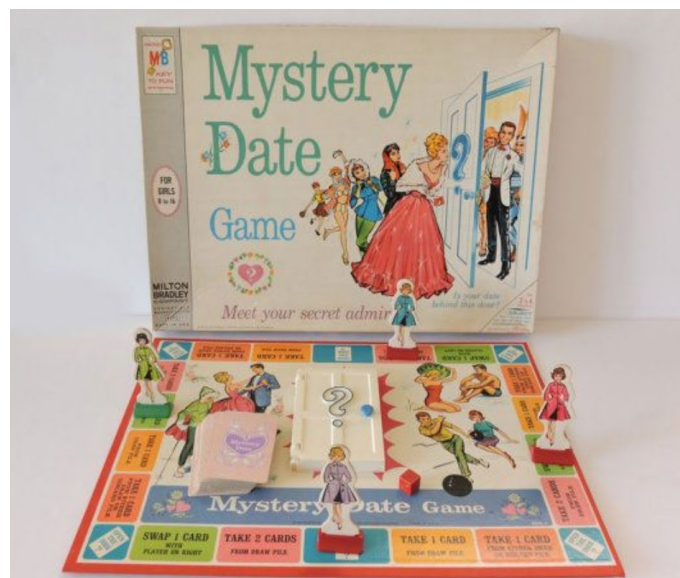


Figure 1. The original Mystery Date game accessed through Etsy’s post on Pinterest. Mystery Date was a popular chance-based board game in the 60s where one tried to prepare the right outfit for the right date and prevent a dud (Etsy).

In addition to promoting the primacy of Eurocentric beauty and taking for granted racially exclusive dating, *Mystery Date* further engrained traditional gender roles. Not yet encumbered by the second wave feminism that swept through the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, Milton Bradley, the company behind *Mystery Date*, simultaneously promoted and relied on traditional, conservative relationship standards to move their product (Macmillan Reference, 2008, para. 8). At the same time, the subtextual messaging found within this Milton Bradley game further entrenched these conservative dating values in the minds of its young players.

Other Children Industries and Racial Stereotypes: Mechanical Banks

Other children’s entertainment industries also adhered to popular politics to garner more support from the consuming public, all the while promoting a certain worldview, belief, or political position. Mechanical banks, piggy banks with mechanical play features that incentivized saving money, clearly pandered to the base instincts of American consumers. Most egregiously, racial (and racist) caricatures often adorned these toys. Mechanical banks, as Barton and Somerville argue, exploited the “perceived phenotypic stereotypes of how an Irishman, Chinese man, Negro, or Indian should look and act.” In doing so, the manufacturer of these toys recreated perceived phenotypic stereotypes that were “designed to prompt negative emotions, feelings of power at abusing an outcast character, which was pictured as uncivilized insignificant, and foolish (Cross, 1997, p. 98-99 as cited in Barton & Somerville, 2012, p. 53). These racial caricatures resonated with the toy’s white audience and reinforced the discriminatory sentiments of the early 20th century.

On one mechanical bank, for example, a man sits atop a mule. His skin is pitch black, reminiscent of the minstrel shows that abounded in the early twentieth century. When the play feature was activated, the mule would swing forward, throwing the black man off its back (Norman, 1982). Another mechanical bank similarly depicts a black man comically falling over after being kicked by the hind legs of a mule (Norman, 1982). Only two of the countless banks that were produced, these examples nonetheless illustrate an all-too-common trope of the industry: racial or ethnic minorities finding themselves in undesirable, often dangerous, and purportedly humorous situations. Although many racial and ethnic groups were depicted in these toys, including Chinese and Irish people, African Americans were targeted the most often. Appealing to the same audiences as turn of the century minstrel shows, these interactive banks readily brokered in harmful, stereotypical depictions of nonwhite Americans and normalized the mistreatment of Black Americans.



Figure 2. Mechanical Banks known as “Always Did Spised a Mule” that depicts a black man being kicked over by a mule (left) and bucked off a mule (right) (Norman, 1982).

Toy manufacturers understood that they needed to produce games that confirmed or, at the very least, did not contradict the views and biases of the broader public. Remaining noncontroversial was crucial for toy manufacturers attempting to meet their bottom line. In particular, these manufacturers produced products that appealed to the sensibilities of American parents, as these parents would only purchase media that passed on acceptable views to their children. In fact, purchasing games and toys became a way for parents to communicate ideas nonverbally and subtly to their children. Toy and game manufacturers existed in a somewhat cyclical socioeconomic ecosystem, in which companies made games that brokered in the popular ideas and politics of the contemporary moment. At which point, parents purchased said games for their children; these children then

internalized some aspect of the game's messaging and grew up to purchase games for their children, thus resetting the cycle. In a way, then, board games and toys contributed to the generational accumulation of problematic, racial views among white Americans. Beginning with *Monopoly's* glorification of land lording and the tasteless commodification of Black bodies on mechanical banks, American consumers have grown accustomed to games that bolster even their most problematic political stances, whether it is a game that is basically red lining with dice or a shopping challenge that glorifies traditional, white relationships.

Dungeons & Dragons and Racism in Fantasy

In fact, this trend had not slowed down by the 1980s and 1990s, even though the nature of the games children played became increasingly more otherworldly and fantastical. The portrayal of numerous fictional races in fantasy games, whether orcs, elves, or dwarves, indirectly encouraged racial biases, even if no Black/white binary existed in the mechanics of the game or within the fictional universe created by the game.

Dungeons and Dragons, or D&D, is both the most significant fantasy game of the later twentieth century and the premiere example of this so-called "Fantastical Racism." In D&D, a Dungeon Master (DM) facilitates gameplay by guiding players on an evolving medieval quest that is dictated by the decisions of the group, allowing the players to create the story together. D&D aids DMs by providing a framework that players can use when constructing their stories. However, these frameworks and guides were riddled with racial stereotypes. In Dungeons & Dragons, then, real world racism was augmented and unleashed, cloaked under the pretense of "fantasy." For example, in one of the first editions of Monster Manuals published in 1977, orcs are described very unfavorably. They are "cruel" creatures that "hate living things in general, but they particularly hate elves and will always attack them in preference to other creatures. They take slaves for work, food, and entertainment (torture, etc.) but not elves whom they kill immediately." (Gygax, 1977a, p. 76). The dark skinned, bulky orcs were cruel and uncivilized, compared to the light skinned, slender elves, who were graceful and civilized. Orcs, trolls, and some other races that were usually aligned with the forces of evil were visually similar to African Americans, as well as Asians and Native Americans. By attributing "evil" traits to some races while ascribing "good" traits to others, D&D constructs an overarching racial hierarchy that has been repeated time and again by players who build their stories on the frameworks provided by D&D.

Beyond the presence of race and racism in D&D's storytelling, race permeates throughout many other aspects of gameplay. On each quest, to provide one example, players can generally take advantage of the specific attributes of their chosen character. That said, these attributes are distributed along explicitly racial lines. In the first edition of the game, elves gained a one-point dexterity bonus while losing one point in constitution. Half-orcs, on the other hand, gained one-point bonuses in both strength and constitution in exchange for a two-point deduction in charisma (Gygax, 1978b, p.16). These bonuses grant Elves a significantly increased chance of success for certain in-game tasks, such as shooting a bow or disarming an intricate trap. In contrast, Half-orcs have much more success in using a sword or pushing a rock out of the way, while having significant disadvantages on tasks related to charisma, like charming a non-playable character or making an eloquent argument. This attribute system directly informs the players that elves—coded to mean white—are born more dexterous and better suited for technically demanding jobs than Orcs, who are more accustomed to strenuous, physical labor.

Wizards of the Coast, the company behind D&D, tried to rectify this problematic past with a recent pledge committing the company to diversity:

Throughout the 50-year history of D&D, some of the peoples in the game—orcs and drow being two of the prime examples—have been characterized as monstrous and evil, using descriptions that are painfully reminiscent of how real-world ethnic groups have been and continue to be denigrated. That's just not right, and it's not something we believe in (Wizards of the Coast, 2020, para. 4).

However, these stereotypes were not confined to D&D; instead, they permeated throughout the entire genre of high fantasy and fantasy gaming, going all the way back to J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (Malone, 2016, p. 204). This entire subset of the fantasy genre, then, profited and continues to profit from the same harmful stereotypes, which are emblazoned on merch, immortalized in novels and films, and continually present in fantasy gaming.

Conclusion: The Inert Qualities of Culture and the Role of Games in affecting Culture

Over time, games have evolved to become more complex and sophisticated, taking on artistic qualities similar to those found in literature, film, and music. As such, games are not just children's entertainment, but a vessel to deliver a cultural, social, or political message. Consumers shift the messaging of games by purchasing products that reinforce certain cultural norms and stereotypes, and game makers create products that comply with popular cultural politics in order to sell more games. Even games set in worlds altogether unlike our own are impacted by the politics and social norms of the world in which we live. The technologies of the modern day have only exacerbated the problem, as they have allowed games, particularly video games, to reach hundreds of millions of people. Furthermore, many games have evolved into intricate, technical works of art that subtly mask the design elements that reinforce today's societal norms, a far cry from the days of *Blacks & Whites*. Something as small as a single number in thousands of lines of code can change the experiences of millions of players and reinforce racial stereotyping, just as it did in *FiFA20*. If choosing a hunky date, buying property in the burbs, or slaying a thinly-veiled orc with a lucky roll of the dice could impact children's perception of race in America—and it very much did—the hyperreal gaming experiences of the present day can only have further exponentiated the trends that defined gaming throughout the twentieth century. Although difficult, the forces of popular culture, foremost among them games, could and ought to be used as a tool to exert positive change, instead of being a mindless, inert mass reinforcing its own beliefs and regurgitating players' views back to them, no matter how problematic.

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