


The Checkered Game of Life: A Breakdown

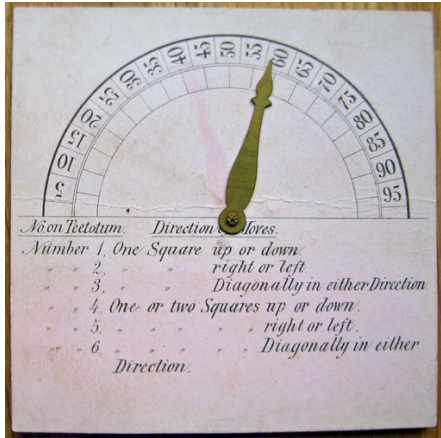

Cultural context

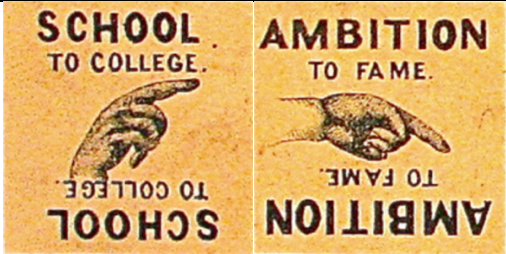
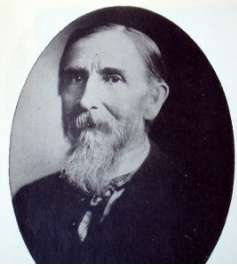
- This game was made during the American Civil War and in the midst of an economic recession
- Increased industrialization = increased leisure time (for some)
- The culture had a strong sense of religious morality, valuing a dedicated relationship to God and condemning idleness
 - It makes sense why one of the mass-produced leisure objects of the time contains a clear moral message about making good choices and being a good citizen
 - Games were not generally considered an acceptable use of one's time, but were more acceptable when they were educational or shared a constructive social message
- This was Milton Bradley's first game; he thought that making a game with a strong emphasis on morality could push back on people's prejudice against games.
 - Finally, a game people could play without being corrupted by the devil!
 - [Unverified] In the 1870s, *The Phrenological Journal* supposedly wrote that Milton Bradley's games would make evenings at home so enjoyable that "none will seek pleasure in places of temptation."
- It's one of several games from that time period that involved navigating vices and virtues, reward and punishment
 - See: *The Mansion of Happiness* (1843) by Steven B. Ives
 - *The Checkered Game of Life* was the best-selling version of this kind of game in the United States
- A travel-sized pocket version of the game was introduced in 1961 so that soldiers could play together
- Milton Bradley was a lithographer interested in the mass production of images; his official title when he went into business was "Mechanical Draftsman and Patent Solicitor"
- This game is clearly part of the mythology of the Milton Bradley Company (which was eventually purchased by Hasbro): a capitalist success story built on "good old-fashioned American values" that now has a place in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History
- Milton Bradley was acquired by Hasbro in 1984
- The 1960s *The Game of Life* was a celebration of the original game/the Milton Bradley company's 100th Anniversary

Questions:

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The game was commercially successful, but who was playing it? Children? Adults? Whole families? 2) Re: Gender – Women’s colleges existed at this time, but admissions would have been mostly upper-class white women. If children/families were playing this game, would most girls/women have been taking a pathway from School to College that wasn’t part of the choices real life afforded them? What about marriage? The game games marriage as being a neutral, optional move, which certainly wasn’t the case for most women...
Physical components	<p>Game board</p>  <p>The game board is an 8X8 checkered surface with alternating red and white squares.</p> <p>Red squares have no effect.</p> <p>White squares contain words and images representing good or bad values/traits (e.g., honesty, bravery, impertinence) as well as some conditions/situations (e.g., crime, matrimony, gambling, school)</p> <p>The meaning of the spaces is a combination of their numbers, their proximity to the game objective, and their images</p> <p>Numbered spaces are worth points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Honor, Happiness, College, Success (5) - Fat Office, Congress (5) - Wealth (10) <p>Landing on positive spaces leads you to numbered spaces and gets you closer to the win condition (100 points + landing on “Happy Old Age”).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School leads to College, Influence to the Fat Office, Honesty to Happiness, Industry to Wealth, Government Contract to

		<p>Wealth, Bravery to Honor, Perseverance to Success,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some positive square are advantageous because of their proximity to the square that ends the game but are unnumbered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o E.g., Cupid leads to Matrimony - Other times, a square will be worth points but take you further away from the goal in a spatial sense (e.g., Politics leads to Congress) - Ambition leads to fame (represented by a cage), Idleness to Disgrace, Crime to Prison, Impertinence to Poverty, Gambling to Ruin <p>The images on these spaces also communicate values:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fame is represented by a cage (not something to aspire to) - Matrimony being unnumbered could mean that acquiring a spouse advances you toward a happy old age but doesn't gain you any wealth - Suicide square is rubbed out (board owner says due to social taboo) – So, what leads to Suicide in this game?
	Teetoum	<p>This six-sided spinning top was used instead of rolling dice.</p> <p>Historical context: They didn't want to encourage gambling</p> <p>The numbers on the hexagonal part of this game piece don't directly</p>

	<div></div>	<p>translate to movement forward/up on the board. Instead, the numbers are coded. Lower numbers mean players have less choice about the direction and number of spaces they move in; higher numbers mean more choice.</p> <p>1 = 1 space up or down 2 = 1 space left or right 3 = 1 space diagonally 4 = One or two spaces up or down 5 = One or two spaces left or right 6 = One or two spaces diagonally</p> <p>The game comes with score cards for players to track their points with a needle on a dial, as well as a guide for how each number corresponds to a particular kind of movement.</p> <p>The game came with four score cards, indicating that it was intended to be played by four players but could be played “with equal interest by more or less, as the company may be” (quoting Bradley)</p>
First Impressions: Aesthetic, Affect	<p>This game’s box art and board feel simple and...elegant? As if it is meant to be owned and displayed in the living room during an event for adults. (If you do start to take gameplay into account, the character of these materials feels aspirational, like it’s inviting and urging you upward toward elegance, maturity.)</p> <p>I was wondering what the “ladders” that move players up and down the rows would be, and I really like something about the hands pointing you up or down the board.</p>	

	 <p>Also, game manufacturer and company founder, Milton Bradley. His face really does look like the face of a guy who would make “pull up your bootstraps and get your life together” the game.</p> 	
Rules	<p><u>General Rules:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Players start in the lower left-hand corner on the “Infancy square and progress toward “Happy Old Age” in the upper right. - Players take turns spinning the teetotum and moving around the board according to the choices that correspond with their spin - Players move around the board, gaining and losing points as they navigate various decisions in the progression of their in-game lives <p>Objective/win-state: The winner is the first player to accumulate 100 points and land on the “Happy Old Age” square in the upper right-hand corner.</p>	
Mechanics	<p>1. Chance</p> <p>The “checkered” ups and downs of life being out of our control</p>	<p>Players spin the teetotum and the resulting number between 1-6 is associated with movement instructions.</p> <p>For higher numbers, these instructions include more options for the direction and distance of movement around the board.</p>

	<p>2. Judgement</p> <p>Evaluating options; Decision-making; Doing our best to get ahead</p>	<p>Players make decisions about direction and/or distance as they move around the board.</p> <p>Movement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive squares move the player forward and upward - Negative squares move the player backward/downward - At first glance, it looks like a clear spatial metaphor for going <i>upward</i> (a la Donkey Kong) to get closer to the goal: in this case, being aligned with God and aspirational class mobility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o This is supported by Infancy and Poverty being at the bottom of the board while Wealth and Happy Old Age (which partially triggers the win state) are at the top: live well, make good choices, live <i>up</i> to the ideals that lead to a happy retirement o But: The life conditions and events on this board easily apply to a working-class person (the amount of wealth accumulated could be modest but still indicative of hardworking tenacity and readiness to pull on bootstraps) o So, the positioning of the squares on the board may actually be more representative
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		<p>of <i>movement through time</i>, from infancy to old age. If each row is a rung on a ladder, each row is a life stage with the expected/associated benefits and struggles; Poverty comes after Infancy because no matter what situation you were born into, staying in poverty as you enter adulthood is a matter of making good choices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ You are also not penalized for landing on Poverty if you've only recently left Infancy because, according to Bradley, it is "not necessarily a fact that poverty will be a disadvantage" ○ Going from Ambition to Fame is a downward movement because desiring fame is immature, like you're regressing back into someone with impractical, youthful ideals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Movement around the board tells a life story. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gambling: on the same level as wealth because you need to have money to gamble it away - Truth: Just exists. Nothing sends you to truth, you
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		<p>can just find it or not as you age, and it doesn't take you anywhere useful.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cupid -> Matrimony is coded (strangely) neutral; a lateral move and gains you no points. - Small increments of one or two spaces (inching through life)
	3. Points	<p>Points seem to be representative of a combination of wealth (the Wealth square is worth more than any other) and vague "good person" points for making choices of higher moral value.</p>