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MILTON BRADLEY'S *GAME OF LIFE*: CONSTRUCTING A NATIONAL NARRATIVE  
THROUGH BOARD GAME ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis approaches the Milton Bradley Company's classic *Game of Life* as an object of both material culture and literary study, applying critical analysis and historical research to the 1860, 1960, 1982, 1991, and 2016 editions of the game to better understand social assumptions about morality and American adulthood. Each edition is first assessed as an artifact of literature, a readable object from which implications can be drawn about the respective society's expectations concerning adulthood and ethics. Next, historical research is conducted on the era surrounding each edition, providing context for each board's message and exploring whether or not the editions' literary implications correlate to historical events. Milton Bradley's original game, the 1860 *Checkered Game of Life*, concerns itself primarily with entertainment as an outlet for moral instruction, a focus consistent with the recorded history of the eighteenth-century United States; it elevates personal integrity as the catalyst for social success. Editions published after 1960 emphasize materialism and portray morality as a component of the American Dream, tying a player's financial gains to "public morality" by rewarding industry, perseverance, and healthy risk-taking. By 2016, the game shifts from the American Dream to a focus on personal affirmation and individualism—a change consistent with the mentality of an emerging millennial culture.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

At its heart, the average board game depends on a fantasy narrative. To engage customers of various backgrounds and ages, a game must either give players a chance to explore an alternate reality or to exercise some character trait in gameplay that bears significance in their own lives. Nobody quite outgrows that very human desire to step briefly into fantasy now and then, if only for entertainment's sake. Beyond its fictional premise, however, a board game often contains a second narrative: a testimony to the social conditions of its creators. What does the game world reward? What does it condemn? What might those rewards and punishments imply about the world of its makers, the frame narrative from which the game world first developed?

Such questions are central to this study, which focuses on Milton Bradley's iconic *Game of Life*. Since its creation in 1860, *The Game of Life* has become a popular fixture of board game culture both within the United States and abroad. The edition sold in 2016, however, bears little semblance to the original game—and rightly so. American culture has changed socially, economically, politically, and morally since 1860; to maintain cultural relevance, the modern *Game of Life* has adapted to reflect the social, economic, and moral standards of each new generation. With over a dozen editions behind it, the *Game of Life* can speak to one hundred and fifty years of evolving American culture and entertainment. As such, the game begs analysis. This study approaches Milton Bradley's *Game of Life* first as literature and then as an object of historical and cultural value, tracing each edition's social implications to relevant historical

events and using those connections to better understand American perspectives on adulthood, morality, and prevalent social values.

Although English theses typically focus on literature, poetry, or other written forms of human expression, the core function behind those exercises—critical analysis as a method by which to understand human culture—is not limited to traditional study. It can, in fact, cross into material culture, analyzing unusual remnants of human society just as aptly as a book, speech, or dissertation. This particular study maintains such a focus, delving into a form of research known widely as material culture—the analytical study of everyday objects that might reveal truths about their societies of origin.

Material culture, as a field, has gained popularity in recent years, but it has yet to be applied to many remnants of American culture. Specifically, material culture scholars have yet to fully explore the board game as a facet of social experience, let alone as literature. As Jason Begy notes in his 2015 study “Board Games and the Construction of Cultural Memory,”

“To date there is little work applying material culture to board games...[but] objects which were not made with the intention of expressing a viewpoint or idea (as opposed to artistic or political works) are particularly valuable for study...From this perspective, commercial board games designed to be sold as mass-market entertainment products are ideal subject matter.” (4)

Since material culture study reveals the hidden social assumptions of an object’s creators, it can help modern scholars understand implicit American values, past and present, within board game culture. I might claim to spend every cent of my paychecks wisely, but a quick survey of my bank account records will prove otherwise. Likewise, a nation may claim an array of heritages and values—and even use historical facts to support their assertions—but may stand corrected

after confronting an element of early society that infers otherwise.

Modern academia might still have much to learn about the board game's role in material culture, but its role in education, entertainment, and family dynamics has been studied at length. Collins and Griess documented the advantages of classroom board game activities in their study "It's All in the Game: Designing and Playing Board Games to Foster Communication and Social Skills," positing that board games help students to become better communicators by employing multiple senses. Board games also contribute to personal development by creating outlets for conversations that a young learner might not be mature enough to initiate. In an Israeli study called "The use of board games in child psychotherapy," Ayala Oren observes that in therapy sessions, children age 6-12 often ask to play board games or sports instead of addressing their psychological needs through therapy or role playing. Oren eventually realized that "for many children at this stage of development, talking is not a natural language for interpersonal and inner discourse" (Oren 364). Since board games are a familiar "culture" for many young children, they provide structured space for abstract exploration and creativity.

Oren later asserts that "when following the rules of the game, children are free to express fantasies, wishes and urges that are acceptable only in the framework of the game" (365). This affirms the educational value of many board games, but especially *The Game of Life*, which centralizes around themes that typically do not concern a six-to-twelve-year-old. The average grade schooler worries little about college, marriage, careers, or retirement, but might willingly entertain those ideas while playing *The Game of Life*, if only in a highly idealized context. In this shallow sense, the game gives a young child his or her first glimpses of adulthood, instructing the player according to the social framework of his or her time.

For many games, educational or non-educational, the personal attachment aspect of gameplay occurs through the use of an avatar— a pawn or icon representing the player’s game identity. Douglas Guerra notes that Milton Bradley’s original *Game of Life*, marketed in 1860 as *The Checkered Game of Life*, was one of the first American board games to capitalize on the avatar figure. Rather than creating a world separate from the player’s personal identity, Bradley created a likeness of nineteenth-century American life that placed new emphasis on timing and decision rather than the traditional ideals of place and avocation... character in *Life* was framed as a position from which to make public decisions....and *Life*’s capacity to simulate the “exercise of judgment” may account for the game’s immense popularity. (Guerra 2)

This emphasis created a strong basis for personal connection to Bradley’s original game. The early pawn was not merely a pawn; it became the Civil War soldier, child, or homesteader in a manner distant enough to treat lightly, yet personal enough to accept as a temporary identity. When an avatar “makes a good decision,” the player can ascribe his own merit to the action. When the avatar suffers the consequences of a negative decision, the poor choice impacts the player in a short-term sense, but does not define him; the fantasy is “only in the framework of the game” (Oren 365). By giving gamers access to fantasized human experience in the name of entertainment, the board game becomes literature after all. The product itself might serve a shallow purpose, but its inadvertent social and personal implications reveal truths about its creators and their culture.

Having undergone more than a dozen revisions since its inception in 1860, *The Game of Life* deserves far more serious analysis than this project will allow. Therefore, I have limited my study to five editions of the game; these, I feel, reflect significant eras in American history as well as significant changes in the game’s underlying narrative. The



first chapter explores the implications of the 1860 *Checkered Game of Life* and contextualizes Milton Bradley's original game against the social norms of nineteenth-century Massachusetts. The second chapter, concerning the 1960 *Game of Life* remake, documents a shift away from ethics-based gameplay in favor of an "American Dream" materialism narrative. The third chapter considers the 1982 *Game of Life* in light of economic struggles and new attitudes towards gambling and social risk. The fourth chapter documents changes in the 1991 *Game of Life*, most notably a shift towards promoting community service. Finally, the fifth chapter documents the impact of millennials on the 2016 *Game of Life*, a game that champions experience and personal affirmation, but suggests little to a player about the true nature of modern American adulthood.

## Chapter 2

### *The Checkered Game of Life: 1860*

On April 3, 1866, a young inventor from Springfield, Massachusetts filed a patent declaring that “I, Milton Bradley...have invented a new Social Game...peculiarly adapted to the home-circle...[and] so arranged as to impart useful and instructive facts, or to impress moral truths upon the minds of those engaged in play” (Bradley). Milton Bradley would live to see society accept his game with fervor, initiating an impressive history of American board games and family entertainment. He did not, however, imagine that his company’s original moneymaker would spawn dozens of editions over a one-hundred-and-fifty-year period.

Lewis and Fannie Bradley, Milton’s devout Methodist parents, abided by a code of ethics that encouraged them to both accept unfortunate circumstances *and* pursue better ones as conscience and the word of God permitted. As James J. Shea observes, young Milton’s parents believed that “He must understand and try to emulate...courage at all times...endurance under the most trying circumstances; a stubborn belief that you could improve your lot if you remained tenacious; and, finally...acceptance of what must be God’s will” (Shea 24). The Bradleys also “emphasized, through example and conversation, that learning should accompany pleasure as well as pleasure accompany learning,” which would later become a key philosophy in their son’s company (28).

It was into this legacy of deep faith, moral fortitude, and “pleasure learning” that Milton Bradley’s parents brought their son—and it was on the fundamental principle of moral entertainment that Bradley based his board game in 1860. Bradley designed a game in which a

pawn—an avatar representation of the actual player—navigates a checkerboard of circumstances, goals, and positive and negative moral values, attempting to avoid negative squares and obtain “happy old age” before the other players. As an homage to the board’s checkered pattern, Bradley called his creation *The Checkered Game of Life* (Shea 49). His game, unsurprisingly, quickly captured the attention of nineteenth-century society on the home front and eventually the warfront. As a moral-based entertainment source in a war-torn, yet deeply religious society, the 1860 *Checkered Game of Life* was poised from the beginning to both reflect and reinforce nineteenth-century American values, even through a time of national conflict.

#### **1860: Overcoming Denominational Differences**

Bradley took great pains to keep his game beyond reproach for as many facets of society as possible, especially different Christian denominations. As a Methodist himself, Bradley understood the common religious grievances against games at the time and could market around them, emphasizing the instructional nature of *The Checkered Game of Life* and minimizing any question of the game’s moral value. Although dedicated to his faith, Bradley chose deliberately not to market based on religious belief. Instead, he appealed to the widely-held moral values within Christianity—implying them in gameplay, but not openly acknowledging their religious foundation. This allowed him to bypass the theological discourses that might divide portions of his society and to emphasize the underlying moral principles in scripture upon which most denominations could agree.

Many nineteenth-century Christian denominations, according to Shea, held a basic position of “rigid opposition to games” (63). However, Shea notes that this attitude stemmed

more from a calling to industriousness than moral or Biblical opposition, writing that “Almost unconsciously Protestantism made a great effort to adjust itself to the frontier way of life...the changing attitude (towards favoring games) was a result less of shifting religious views than of the simple fact that leisure time increased as it became easier to make a living” (69). By using the game to reinforce widely-held social values, Bradley managed to market across multiple religious denominations, expanding his consumer base.

Realizing, for example, that “the clergy of dissenting faiths generally looked askance upon games of chance,” (Shea 62) Bradley eliminated the use of dice from *The Checkered Game of Life* entirely and downplayed the game’s scandalous use of the teetotum (a six-sided die often used in the context of gambling). He depicted the game’s brief flirtations with chance as a means to the end of exercising strategy and wisdom, since life itself is an escapade “involving chance as well as skill” (*American National Biography Online*). By creating a checkerboard-style game that allowed for strategic movement, Bradley also managed to keep the primary action of any turn in the hands of the player; chance decided how far a player might move his avatar, but the player himself could still choose the direction and ultimate outcome. Bradley also avoided specific religious references altogether, restricting the game to values that most of society, regardless of denomination (or lack thereof), would accept as valid. This allowed him to circumvent theological discourse, include nonreligious audiences, and still communicate the moral values that held his own faith together

.

### 1860: Appealing to Social Similarities

Seizing upon increasing religious tolerance towards instructional entertainment, Bradley marketed his game as a merger of play and moral instruction. The game's original patent states that "in addition to the amusement and excitement of the game, it is intended to forcibly impress upon the minds of youth the great moral principles of virtue and vice" (Bradley). Nineteenth century American society was already well-primed to accept moral entertainment, both within and beyond the church. With the release of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678, many American children already "role-played" the struggles of Bunyan's protagonist, Christian, and effectively integrated moral instruction into their playtime habits. "The New Game of Virtue Rewarded and Vice Punished," a British board game with an obvious bend towards moral instruction, had been circulating in British homes and even some American homes since the early eighteenth century (Adams 368-70). The first "distinctly American" educational game, Anne Abbot's *Mansion of Happiness*, graced American society in 1832—but apparently did not gain enough popularity to deter Bradley from entering what he viewed as a niche market in 1860 (Grant et al).

Common moral principles also played a big role in primary education. Publications such as the McGuffey Readers used cute, clever poetry to encourage vocabulary growth and to deliver moral instruction to young students. The fourth *American Educational Reader*, published in 1873 by Ivison, Blakeman & Company, features two hundred and forty pages of educational or moral poetry and prose, including selections such as "The Sin of Lying," "The Value of Knowledge," and "God's Wisdom and Power."

One exercise in the *American Educational Reader* entitled "The Secret of Success" proves a valuable complement to our study of "The Checkered Game of Life." The reader uses a

narrative about a boy who receives the advice “In whatever you undertake, always do your best” from his grandfather; he then grows up, putting forth his best efforts as a follower of God and citizen of his community, and finds success as a result of his work ethic and character (36 Ivison, Blakeman & Company). According to the narrative, success is found by applying oneself thoroughly to whatever commitments demand attention, be they physical or spiritual. Social success is portrayed as the offshoot of personal character. The mundane, insignificant aspects of life are also heralded as catalysts of success. As the *Reader* states,

“I can not do much,” said a little star,  
 “To make the dark world bright;  
 My silvery beams can not struggle far  
 Through the folding gloom of night;  
 But I am a part of God’s great plan,  
 And I’ll cheerfully do the best I can” (37).

The notion that social success must be preceded by personal diligence and moral fortitude is echoed in *The Checkered Game of Life*, but is hardly Bradley’s invention. On the contrary, children had already been learning this lesson for some time; therefore, young audiences were primed to understand such a message in a moral game like *The Checkered Game of Life*.

As a nation in the midst of Civil War, even American adults were uniquely positioned to accept such a diversion—especially on the warfront. Originally, Bradley halted his work on *The Checkered Game of Life* to contribute to the Union army’s effort, believing that his nation required of him a more “serious” act of service. However, while working as a clerk in the Union’s Massachusetts armory, Bradley began to notice a decline in morale amongst the soldiers. He deduced that “To a soldier in an army at war, leisure could seem mere enforced

monotony” and realized that his board game could actually contribute positively to the war effort. (Shea 69). With the consent of his superiors, he designed a kit called “Games for Soldiers,” a travel-sized, light box which included nine common games, including chess, checkers, and his own *Checkered Game of Life*. The kits fared beautifully in Bradley’s hometown, so he began to market them to stores in large cities such as Boston and New York, this time charging “one dollar postpaid” per kit (Shea 70). The kits—and *the Checkered Game of Life*—began to move between Union state borders.

Bradley’s soldier kit, “the first concept of its kind introduced anywhere in the world,” became a positive influence on the warfront and home front alike (Shea 70). It provided soldiers with a source of normalcy and amusement between military operations, and it provided charity organizations, who donated the kits in droves, with a new way to pledge support to the Union army. Finally, the soldier kits preserved American moral values amidst a season of national change—morals that held value regardless of one’s political allegiance. Although Bradley’s game made no effort to address politically-charged values, such as the inherent evil of slavery, it *did* appeal to virtue, honesty, and other basic tenants of American society, allowing a tumultuous nation to retain its traditional, unifying values as a matter of fun—not obligation. American fathers, mothers, soldiers, and charity organizers were learning the same lesson as their school aged children: that fun did, in fact, have a proper place within moral and social instruction.

### 1860: Morality as Currency

The end goal of *The Checkered Game of Life* is not material. Milton Bradley's original game does not require the players to gather money, insurance deeds, or any other physical item. Allusions to wealth do exist, as I will discuss later, but only in a very general sense. The material world is essentially absent from the 1860 board. Instead, players compete to reach one hundred points—and points are decided based on different moral values and lessons that one can learn on the board. “Happy Old Age,” a square promising fifty points, is of course the ideal location if one wants to win quickly—but it still only accounts for half of a winning player's success. The other half of victory is achieved through careful navigation of the board's less advantageous yet equally valuable milestones.

That being said, *The Checkered Game of Life* does create a sort of currency out of morality itself. By nature of the point value system, the game quantifies every moral decision portrayed on the board, giving otherwise intangible values a “monetary” identity within the narrative of gameplay. Morals are also depicted as means to the end of alternative forms of gain in certain circumstances—the means to the end of social gain. For example, an avatar landing on “happiness” or “truth” can work his way towards “wealth” or “success” more easily than avatars in other locations. Also, the game honors financial prosperity, even though materialism itself is not a necessary component of victory in *The Checkered Game of Life*. In fact, “wealth,” a square located at the very top of the checkerboard, is worth ten points, marking it as a positive trait. Financial prosperity is still celebrated in the 1860 *Checkered Game of Life*, albeit not to the same obsessive degree as in its twentieth-century counterparts.

The abuse of money, however—which is exhibited in squares such as “Gambling” and



“Intemperance”—can position a player nearer to spaces like “Poverty” and “Ruin.” An overzealous player can also jeopardize other opportunities if he pursues the “wealth” square too exclusively; as Burns observes in his *Canadian Review of American Studies* article “The Game of Life: Idealism, Reality and Fantasy in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Versions of a Milton Bradley Game,” “the excessive pursuit of wealth [in *The Checkered Game of Life*] is an obstacle to achieving happy old age,” as evidenced by the space, values, and pitfalls that separate “wealth” and “happy old age” from each other on the board (56). Essentially, in Bradley’s game, “The love of money is the root of all evil,” not money itself; Bradley leaves a distinction between prosperity and its possible channels of abuse (1 Timothy 6:10 KJV). Therefore, even when money makes a brief appearance on the board, it still manages to cast morality as the true currency of gameplay.

### **1860: Decisions as Determinants of Destiny**

As previously mentioned, *The Checkered Game of Life* utilizes a brilliant mix of chance and deliberation. Chance and risk enter gameplay via the teetotum, a six-sided die that determines a player’s range of motion per turn, and through a remarkable little invention called other players—autonomous human beings with their own vested interests in winning *The Checkered Game of Life*. According to the game’s rules, if one player lands on a square occupied by another player, he sends the former occupant to “jail” at the bottom of the board. This not only negatively repositions the former player, but penalizes his current point standings as well. Therefore, despite one’s best efforts, it is possible for a player to find himself in a

situation with no possible positive outcomes. Yes, the game's goal remains one hundred points of moral accomplishment, but ironically, that position can be obtained in part by sending innocent pawns to prison—or collecting revenge on someone who sent your own pawn there.

According to Burns, the ability to negatively influence other players overshadows the game with a strong appeal to individualism, ultimately portraying other people as obstacles to one's own ambitions within the game narrative. Burns writes that "life, as here symbolically portrayed, is a very individualistic, competitive, anti-social adventure. Social encounters are risky and can be detrimental to one's success unless these encounters are self-initiated and controlled" (61). It is interesting that the nineteenth-century *Checkered Game of Life* portrays individualism as a necessary safeguard against the ill will of other people; the game's successors from 1960 onward take a much more positive approach to individualism, portraying personal advancement as a celebratory quality instead of a coping mechanism. The 1960-2016 games also laud community, especially after 1991 with the introduction of national community service initiatives, more than Milton Bradley's original creation.

Although chance and rude players might limit an avatar's range of motion, not all is lost if one is astute. A wise player can almost always move himself into positions that allow for positive outcomes; with a little foresight, he might even avoid the meddling of other players. Negative situations in *The Checkered Game of Life*—including prison, poverty, ruin, and even suicide, which pulls the player permanently out of the game—are more often the byproducts of negative decision-making than another player's spite. In fact, the squares are grouped so as to make winning more difficult for players who make consistently poor decisions and more promising for characters who make consistently wise ones.

### 1860: Celebrating Simplicity

Half of the squares on *The Checkered Game of Life*, which Bradley colored red to show off the capabilities of lithographic technology, have no bearing on a player's point status whatsoever. In other words, half of 1860 "Life" is simply waiting—strategizing, waiting for a moment of opportunity, or crawling out of a negative situation. This is a clear contrast to the *Game of Life* remake in 1960, and even to any of its successors between 1960 and 2016, all of which ensure that *something* exciting, good or bad, happens on every turn that a player takes. The 1860 *Checkered Game of Life* distinguishes itself from its future remakes as a game concerned with *meaningful* life, not necessarily an eventful life. Indeed, a pre-American Dream culture is the natural place for such a subliminal message; as later research will prove, the success-driven, materialistic culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries changes *Game of Life* gameplay significantly, especially by switching the ultimate goal in gameplay from one hundred points of morals to (theoretically) unlimited financial gain.

In fact, 1860 gameplay overall appeals to a society with fewer concerns about material expectations—what we in the era of smartphones and action-packed cartoons might call a "low speed" society. Risking all for perseverance, honesty, or happy old age would probably be a difficult concept to sell in 2016 American society. Jill Lepore, author of *Mansion of Happiness*, took a 1798 board game called *The New Game of Human Life* for a test drive in 2007. Lepore described the old game as following:

"Had Milton Bradley's long-suffering forebears condoned games (which, as Puritans, they did not), they might have like the New Game of Human Life. At least they would have recognized its logic: life is a voyage that begins at birth and ends at death, God is at the helm, fate is cruel, and your reward lies beyond the grave. All of which combine to

make it, by our board-game standards, unbearably dull.” ([newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com))

Lepore goes on to recall a humorous exchange with her six-year-old son during the game.

“When my six-year-old landed on the Docile Boy, at square 9, I asked him, ‘Do you know what ‘docile’ means?...It means you should do what I say, you little blister.’ [He responded] ‘Yeah, right...your roll.’” ([newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com)).

For better or worse, a moral-based game is slower than *The Game of Life* my generation grew up playing—probably by nature of its focus. Striking oil, inheriting the cats of an eccentric aunt, or even planting a tree certainly sounds more exciting than “truth” or “happy old age.” An events-based game maintains interest by encouraging suspense, not to mention it gives players one more way to identify with their avatars. Arguably, a morally instructive game could be event motivated without straying from its goal; a modern example might be Hasbro’s *Chutes and Ladders*, which communicates positive and negative decisions through storytelling illustrations. However, as far as the *Game of Life* series is concerned, an event-motivated narrative only becomes part of the legacy with the remake in 1960. In its insistence that morals take the spotlight, *The Checkered Game of Life* removes the possibility for sub-narratives within the infancy-to-old-age premise. The game captured the attention of Bradley’s own generation, but within one hundred years, failed to communicate a moral narrative in the nation’s new vernacular.

The climactic ending of *The Checkered Game of Life* is much simpler than its successors’ endings—yet it is very similar to the later games as well. Theoretically, the games all bear a similar ending; Bradley named that game-changing destination “happy old age.” Every edition since 1860 has preserved that final objective—but in every edition published after 1860, that state of being happy and old is called “retirement.” Happy old age does not disappear after

1860; it simply receives a new moniker and becomes, like every other component of gameplay, an offshoot of American materialism. Happiness itself does not remain a satisfying endpoint in the twenty and twenty-first centuries. For modern players, something material must be ascribed to that state—and a million-dollar nest egg solves that problem rather simply.

### Summary

In one sense, we might call Bradley a visionary for devoting his career to an unproven product in a stressed social market in the middle of national turmoil. On the other hand, we might see him as a very practical risk taker; after all, he focused on contributing a microcosm of his present, not some zany game of the future, to American society. Either way, his *Checkered Game of Life* draws its greatest strength from the same factor that alienates it from modern society: cultural integrity. In championing the most basic common values of his culture, Bradley inadvertently created a veritable, playable social history of nineteenth-century American society. By avoiding specific religious or political messages, he managed to design a game that alienated few of his contemporaries and honored the standards of many, regardless of denomination, political creed, or even military affiliation. By focusing on moral instruction, he became part of America's love affair with fun-based learning, reinforcing the themes of his own childhood as well as the tendencies of nineteenth-century elementary educators. By making money a social incentive in *The Checkered Game of Life*, but also punishing players for abusing financial gain, Bradley managed to capture wealth's double social role as a mark of success and a moral snare. Finally, by focusing the game on the simple aims of a morally concerned culture, Bradley created a slice of nineteenth-century Americanism that dealt honestly with the hunger for

success, concern for morality, the role of individualism, the unavailability of fate, the value of wise decisions, and the desire for a happy ending that marked—and perhaps continues to mark—American society at large.

### Chapter 3

#### *The Game of Life: 1960*

In the mid 1950s, inventor Reuben Klamer traveled to Massachusetts in response to a crayon advertisement. Klamer hoped to sell a new art supplies concept to the renowned Milton Bradley Company; instead, he left with a challenge. According to Klamer, the company “wanted a game celebrating their 100th anniversary” and encouraged him to submit an idea for consideration (osu.edu). Seeking inspiration for a centennial-worthy product, Klamer toured the Milton Bradley archives, which led him to the 1860 *Checkered Game of Life*. He immediately saw potential in the company’s original moneymaker and decided to revitalize it for modern audiences. In 1960, Klamer’s *Checkered Game of Life* reboot was published as *The Game of Life*, and since then, the game has become a permanent fixture of modern gaming worldwide.

American society had evolved significantly since founder Milton Bradley designed his *Checkered Game of Life* in 1860. While the 1860 game sought the approval of a religiously moral, principle-based society, the 1960 game needed to capture the attention of a highly motivated, comparatively materialistic culture—one marked by the prosperity of the 1950s and slowly preparing for warfare overseas. Therefore, although Bradley and Klamer’s games were designed with similar goals, they present two very different visions of the ideal American life. To make his 1960 *Game of Life* relevant to his own culture, Klamer downplayed moral obligation and framed gameplay around the classic American Dream instead—a theme that has remained central to the game despite over a dozen revisions in the last fifty years.

### **1960: The Resuscitation of the American Dream**

To an extent, the 1960 game's materialistic focus was a sensible choice based on market research. According to game researcher Peter Andrews, statistics indicate that *The Checkered Game of Life* had all but lost the toy market's attention by the 1950s, remaining popular only "to a clientele of traditional and religious orientation" (qtd. in Burns 50). Morality had not by any means disappeared from the United States; however, it no longer served as the driving force behind entertainment. Between 1910 and 1950, the United States had more or less warmed up to the notion of moral-less entertainment on multiple fronts, including gambling, which became legitimized in the mid 1960s (Moran 50). Unfortunately for Klamer, this meant that the 1960 *Game of Life* could not depend on morals as a market unifier. In 1860, a values-based game allowed Mr. Bradley to circumnavigate religious and wartime differences to find a common ground among average American families. Where would Klamer find such a unifier?

He ultimately found it in the American Dream, a phrase coined in 1931 and defined by Jennifer L. Hoshchild as "the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it—material or otherwise—through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment through success" (qtd. in Samuel 5). Hoshchild, the author of *Facing Up to the American Dream*, makes an interesting distinction by including "virtue and fulfillment" in the American Dream message—one that neatly encapsulates the most glaring difference between Milton Bradley and Reuben Klamer's *Game of Life* designs. The value-based culture of Bradley's time viewed success as the attainment of morals; therefore, the logical order of gameplay was to make moral achievements the steps to procuring "happy old age." However, as Lawrence R. Samuel observes in his book *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, the American Dream culture of Klamer's time viewed "success as they define it—material or



otherwise” as a means to the end of obtaining “virtue and fulfillment” (Samuel 5). Therefore, in the 1960 *Game of Life*, virtue and fulfillment are understood to be implicit in the real end goal: material gain.

The American Dream proved a particularly advantageous angle for the 1960 *Game of Life*. According to Samuel, the 1950s were a fairly stable era for the United States economically and socially, increasing national morale and renewing commitment to American values. Samuel writes that by midcentury, “the United States had recovered much of the swagger it had lost during the Depression and war years. This renewal of self-confidence, much of it driven by anticommunistic fervor, had a direct impact on the American Dream, making the 1950s one of its golden eras” (51).

Perhaps the American Dream momentum of 1960 was short lived; after all, by 1962, the United States would send nine thousand soldiers to Vietnam, the Cold War would escalate, and the Civil Rights movement would challenge the nation’s preconceived notions about race and class. For a few brief years, however, the quintessential American Dream still had a fairly strong hold over most of the nation. Klamer’s *Game of Life* entered the public arena right after a season of renewed faith in the American Dream and right before a season of major social change and overseas combat. The American Dream did, in fact, permeate much of American culture before and even during the mid 1960s, and the reinvented *Game of Life* capitalized masterfully on that momentum.

### **1960: From Moral Instruction to Money**

“You too can be a Millionaire in the game of Life. That’s the object of the game.”

Thus reads the opening sentence of the 1960 *Game of Life* instructions. From the very beginning, the game strikes a much different tone than its *Checkered Game of Life* ancestor, which Milton Bradley praised in his 1860 patent as “so arranged as to impart useful and instructive facts, or to impress moral truths upon the minds of those engaged in play” (1 Bradley). In the 1960 game, financial acquisition takes the place of moral instruction; this does not leave the game amoral by any means, but it portrays general morality as secondary to the ultimate goal of obtaining money and winning the game.

Each player in the 1960 *Game of Life* begins young adulthood with two physical assets: a car and two thousand dollars. Through progressive gameplay, they have opportunities to invest in insurance or stock, purchase homes, donate (compulsively) to charities, and pay taxes. They can also climb Mount Everest, buy a yacht, strike it rich on the stock market, win monetary awards, and even demand money from other players. The board strikes a fair balance between squares demanding payment and squares yielding gain, allowing each player plenty of opportunity to both “strike it rich” and struggle financially.

From a practical perspective, money makes the 1960 game simpler than *The Checkered Game of Life* in many regards. For starters, money is measured numerically; there is no need to ascribe point values to various good or bad deeds as Milton Bradley did for the 1860 game. Secondly, focusing on the general accumulation of money eliminates the need to play until a specific value is reached. In the 1860 *Checkered Game of Life*, the game continues until one player reaches fifty points, requiring an indefinite length of gameplay similar to Monopoly. The 1960 game, by contrast, makes the goal a finish line and assesses the winner based on his state

once that line has been crossed by every player. Finally, money is tangible and therefore easier to track mid-game; a 1960 *Game of Life* player can easily assess his standing mid-game based on the physical evidence in his hands.

Oddly enough, the 1960 materialism angle, while arguably shallow, is also more consistent with the essence of gaming than its 1860 counterpart. The basic philosophy at the heart of the American Dream—engaging in healthy competition to better one’s social or financial standing—is naturally congruent with the basic philosophy of gameplay in general: beating the other players. The 1860 game marketed itself as a moral instructor and preached against the competitive spirit seen in the 1960 remake; however, it delivered its lessons on goodwill through competition and celebrated morality by rewarding the person who could achieve morality the fastest. In the words of Burns, “in the 1860 game there is a conflict between the ideal behavior recommended on the board and the aggression promoted in play. The 1860 game board condemns self-seeking behavior generally and ambitious behavior specifically. There is no such conflict in the 1960” (79). Without that conflict of interests, the 1960 *Game of Life* is free to use money and rivalry as the conduits for lessons in ambition, risk, and friendly competition.

Since money is the primary motivator of the 1960 *Game of Life*, the game monetizes every aspect of adulthood in one way or another. This certainly makes for convenient gameplay. However, on a less reassuring note, it also explicitly defines the values of every aspect of life, including people, quantitatively. Marriage plays almost no functional role in the 1960 *Game of Life*; it is simply a step that rewards players financially for bothering to stop and meet that special somebody, not to mention a milestone to obtain before having children. Children are similarly marginalized; they have almost no role in the game other than to provide a player with

extra cash. Players receive monetary gifts from their rivals to celebrate the birth of a son or daughter, and on the “Day of Reckoning,” each child is worth twenty thousand dollars. Childless players are actually mandated to donate money to an orphanage on one square, so in a sense, childlessness is not just a social oddity in 1960 *Life*, but a financial issue.

Careers are also marginalized; they do nothing other than decide one’s salary. Good deeds can both result in rewards and expenses. If the family unit happens to surface in the middle of gameplay, it is often to slap an extra fee of some sort on the player. Unfortunately, by nature, everything in the 1960 *Game of Life* must be considered and defined in financial terms—even aspects of society that should never be monetized, such as people. In short, the financially motivated 1960 *Game of Life* creates space for interesting gameplay, but also monetizes many (theoretically) non-commercial aspects of American society, such as family and personal goals, that children might not consider in financial terms otherwise--introducing young players to the idea that even in-laws, dreams, and goodwill come with a price.

### **1960: Emphasis on Public Morality**

As I mentioned earlier, the shift from value-focused to money-focused gameplay does not necessarily indicate a lack of morality in the 1960 *Game of Life*. Rather, the game underscores a different type of morality—a subset that Laurence Splitter calls “public morals” in his 2011 essay “Identity, Citizenship, and Moral Education.” Splitter divides morality into three categories: private morals, public morals, and personal identity. He claims that “[private values] belong to the sphere of (personal) morality” while public values “are the common (shared)

threads that hold a citizenry together—and, accordingly, must be relatively objective and uncontroversial” (Splitter 495). In other words, public morality pertains mainly to the type of moral recorded in national law, not necessarily the type that one might harbor individually, although the two can definitely align in many cases.

The 1860 *Checkered Game of Life*, while laced with elements of both public and private morality, clearly emphasizes private morality. The public qualities of prison or ruin are preceded in every circumstance by a personal moral situation, such as ambition. The 1960 *Game of Life* likewise exhibits traces of both public and private morality, but by making materialism the primary motivation of gameplay, it must by nature emphasize public morality. Players do engage in upright public behavior (such as jury duty or charity actions) as well as negative public behavior (such as reckless driving or foolish investments). These public actions imply personal morals; reckless driving typically results from inattention or thoughtlessness in some form, and acts of public service tend to speak of initiative or goodwill. However, the private moral must be derived from a public action—not the other way around.

In this sense, the 1960 *Game of Life* retains the component of moral instruction that Bradley emphasized so clearly a century prior to Klamer’s creation. Although *The Game of Life* itself was not studied for moral qualities until several years after its publication, scholars were in fact evaluating the role of morality in gaming even in the 1970s. A 1977 *History of Education Quarterly* article by David Wallace Adams and Victor Edmonds argues that, rather than forsaking virtue, twentieth-century American culture simply highlights the relationships between different values more pointedly than their ancestors. Like *The Game of Life*, much of American culture began to consider morality in relation to fiscal and social success; therefore, morality often became measured within a social—a public—framework. According to Adams

and Edmonds, modern American success means “not simply being rich or famous. It means attaining riches or achieving fame. You had to know where a man began and where he ended in order to determine how far he had come” (Adams et al. 361-2).

### **1960: Trading Tradition for Risk**

Another distinctive American Dream quality in the 1960 *Game of Life* is the integration of financial risk—what nineteenth-century society might have called “fate.” Every game, to some degree, depends on fate. Even Bradley could not avoid invoking fate in *The Checkered Game of Life*, although he depicted the game’s brief flirtations with chance as a means to the end of exercising strategy and wisdom, since life itself is an escapade “involving chance as well as skill” (*American National Biography Online*). By the 1960s, American culture had grown far more comfortable with the concepts of fate and risk; in fact, both were elements of the ever-elusive American Dream, which applauds risk-taking and entrepreneurship.

As I mentioned earlier, U.S. society had already warmed up to many non-educational forms of entertainment by the 1960s, including gambling, which itself is an interesting concept when considered in context of the American Dream. Gambling encompasses the highs of impossible gain and the lows of unbearable loss in a single action, often ruining the people who believe in it most fervently. However, it manages to continually draw those same consumers back into the system based on the promise of “next time.” In his *Journal of Popular Culture* article “Great expectations: The legitimization of gambling in America, 1964-1995,” Peter William Moran refers to the normalization of gambling as “a modern version of the American

Dream wherein the traditional emphasis on hard work, frugality, and self control as essential qualities in the formula for success...had been supplanted by faith in good fortune” (49).

In the 1960 *Game of Life*, risk presents itself in several ways—most visibly, perhaps, in opportunities to “bet on the wheel,” invest in stock, and gamble in other capacities. However, the board design itself also speaks to the presence of chance in adulthood. The 1860 *Checkered Game of Life* utilized a square, checkered board upon which a player could move in multiple directions. This emphasized strategy and deliberation in gameplay, making any given circumstance in the game ultimately self-inflicted. In contrast, the 1960 *Game of Life* employs a linear track of gameplay, one upon which players move in the same general direction, but land randomly. Every player has an equal opportunity, theoretically, to obtain the highest awards and pay the steepest fees; however, thanks to the spinner, dubbed “The Wheel of Fate” in the game instructions, the odds of landing on any given square are different in every round of gameplay, maintaining a sense of randomness within the uniform track.

Although the 1960 board is set up to emphasize fate and chance, Klammer still manages to incorporate strategy and deliberation into the game’s overarching narrative. Players do get to make deliberate choices about whether or not to invest in the stock market, buy insurance, or go to college. At some points, the track forks briefly, pressuring players to choose between two possible paths. Even the fate-based gambling occurs ultimately by choice; although the player obviously cannot decide the outcome of a gambling risk, he does choose whether or not to gamble in the first place—and as far as side bets and pure wagers are concerned, gambling is always a choice, never a mandate.

By shaping itself around the Wheel of Fate and designing randomized movement through the game, Klammer’s 1960 *Game of Life* does embody Moran’s “modern American Dream” of

“faith in good fortune” (49). However, by retaining individual responsibility within the random world, Klamer manages to keep strategy and decision-making alive as well. The 1960 *Game of Life* actually presents success as a healthy combination of effort and fate, not the byproduct of fate or effort alone. As the game’s instructions take care to point out that “Fate plays a large part, but your decisions are also very important...You will come to forks in the road. In each instance the longer way offers greater rewards, but also greater penalties. The choice is yours!” (Hasbro) For a nation of American Dreamers on the brink of legitimized gambling, the chance components of *The Game of Life* provided a safe space to exercise risk and uncertainty. As a nation focused on entrepreneurship and living deliberately for success, however, responsibility maintained a role in gameplay, affirming the importance of good decision-making in adulthood.

### **1960: Separation of Youth and Adulthood**

The 1960 *Game of Life* further emphasizes materialism by adjusting the lifespan of the player’s avatar. While Milton Bradley’s *Checkered Game of Life* followed the avatar from infancy to (potentially happy) old age, the 1960 *Game of Life* tracks an avatar’s adventures from age eighteen (college) to retirement. As Thomas A. Burns observes in “The Game of Life: Idealism, Reality and Fantasy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Versions of a Milton Bradley Game,” this range more accurately reflects the focal point of a nation focused on individual success and material gain. Burns states, “For modern American culture, the age of eighteen at the time of graduation from high school is about as early in life as a game oriented in the acquisitive direction can reasonably begin” (76). Although American social life clearly reaches beyond the college-to-retirement window, most of the average worker’s money is made



during those middle-aged years. This emphasizes working life above youth and old age, perhaps intimating that the most valuable time in one's life is the window in which he or she can forge a financial identity or contribute to the workforce.

Normally, as the academic adage states, one cannot argue from absence; however, the absence of childhood and old age from the 1960 *Game of Life* is not an entirely independent occurrence. It must be considered in relation to its 1860 predecessor, especially since Klamer himself admits drawing inspiration from the original *Checkered Game of Life*. On one hand, the absence of childhood in the 1960 game certainly reflects a prosperity-driven nation. "The illusion...in which the individual achieves wealth by the beginning of middle adulthood and lives from then on in a state of perpetual bliss," if highly unrealistic, is at least unflappably American (Burns 72). On the other hand, the college-to-retirement focus could also reflect the growing distinction between youth and adulthood.

Prior to the twentieth century, "children were more likely to be regarded as immature adults whose lives were not conceptually separable from adulthood" (Burns 76), perhaps explaining childhood's brief cameo in the 1860 game. Conversely, the twentieth-century began to make stronger distinctions between childhood and adulthood. The "teenager" concept was introduced by a *Time Magazine* article in 1944 and then popularized in the 1960s (*Time*). Federal legislation such as universal education and child labor restrictions further support this hypothesis, demonstrating a national trend towards defining childhood as a period in life separate from adulthood (Burns 76). The divide between child and grownup would continue to grow wider as the United States neared the twenty-first century, as evidenced by themes in later editions of *The Game of Life*. The 2016 edition especially isolates childhood from adulthood, as I will demonstrate in chapter six.

### Summary

In some respects, Reuben Klamer's *Game of Life* did not deviate much from its *Checkered Game of Life* namesake. Both games utilize chance and strategy as means to the end of their goals. Both games use an avatar figure to invest players in the narrative of gameplay. Most importantly, both games claim to mimic the realities of adulthood in their particular eras. However, as analysis proves, the realities of adulthood in 1860 and 1960 are vastly different. While the 1860 *Checkered Game of Life* utilizes competition and entertainment to render moral instruction, the 1960 *Game of Life* uses competition to encourage material gain, financial success, and personal risk-taking. Life in *The Checkered Game* portrays adulthood as a season in which one makes deliberate choices to cultivate virtue; life in the 1960 game portrays adulthood as an unpredictable era marked by gain and loss, one that invokes decisions for material benefit more than moral obligation. The end goal of the 1860 game is happy old age; the end goal of the 1960 game is a wealthy retirement; whether or not those end goals match likely depends on one's place in American history.

## Chapter 4

### *The Game of Life: 1982*

If the 1960s were an era of social discovery and idealism in the United States, the 1970s might well be viewed as a series of socioeconomic reality checks. The Vietnam War ended in 1975, leaving social and political messes in its wake. The U.S. economy suffered a series of economic crises in 1973 and 1980, negatively impacting the energy industry. President Richard Nixon resigned amidst scandal in the early 1970s—the first time that a presidential candidate’s conduct resulted in removal from office. In short, while the 1982 *Game of Life* was in its early stages, the track records of three great American giants—the presidency, the military, and the economy—had been blemished.

Having banded together through political and economic turmoils for several decades, Americans of the 1980s were apparently ready to turn their attention to more individual interests. As a 2007 *Voices of America* podcast commentator observes, “[In the 1960s,] society’s hero was the person who helped others. For many in the Nineteen-Eighties, society’s hero was the person who helped himself.” For many, helping oneself took the form of financial gain; as *Voices of America* later observes, “success [in the eighties] seemed to be measured only by how much money a person made” ([voanews.com](http://voanews.com)). To some, a society that measures one’s personal success through money might sound shallow or even regressive, especially after the legacy of civil activism often ascribed to the sixties. However, having faced wars, political schisms, and several economic recessions, perhaps working-class Americans of the eighties cannot be blamed for refocusing on financial and personal growth. At any rate, this focus made marketing easy for the Milton Bradley Company’s 1982 *Game of Life*, which uses personal responsibility and sociopolitical goals as springboards for financial gain.

### **1982: Practicing Fiscal Responsibility**

Economic awareness and flexible spending were integral components of American culture in the late seventies and early 1980s. One source recalls a humorous anecdote of an American economics professor who taught in a British school at the start of the 1980s. According to *Voices of America* narrators Rich Kleinfeldt and Ray Freeman, “One of his students asked this question: ‘What is most important to Americans these days?’ He said: ‘Earning money.’ Clearly, his answer was far too simple. Still, many observers would agree that great numbers of Americans in the 1980s were concerned with money” ([voanews.com](http://voanews.com)).

From a historical perspective, the 1982 United States had every reason to worry about finances. In 1973 the United States agreed to arm the State of Israel when the middle eastern ally suffered a surprise attack from Syria and Egypt. “Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) imposed an embargo against the United States” in retaliation ([history.state.gov](http://history.state.gov)). This resulted in a severe oil shortage in the United States and a season of fuel rations—the country’s most severe economic recession since World War II (Zarnovitz et. al 471).

The United States bore the repercussions of this embargo until 1975, placing an already weakened economy into the hands of President Jimmy Carter in 1977. Unfortunately for Carter, the economy made little headway during his presidency. Between 1977 and 1980, worker productivity decreased, tax rates increased and the United States lapsed into what later was dubbed the Great Inflation. Whether or not the financial crisis was the Carter administration’s fault, it certainly contributed to his status as a one-term president. Ronald Reagan would prevail against Carter in 1980 based on a platform of economic reform through tax cuts and “trickle down economics.” At the Republican National Convention in July 1980, the party officially

adopted economic reform as its primary domestic platform: “Our foremost goal here at home is simple: economic growth and full employment without inflation” (*The American Presidency Project*). This message resonated strongly with American voters and contributed significantly to Reagan’s success in the 1980 election.

The 1982 *Game of Life* walks the line between a financially cautious nation and economic ambition—and in many ways, this mirrors the attitude of working class Americans in the early eighties. From a general gameplay perspective, money is both won and lost quite easily in 1982 *Life*. The board provides players with opportunities to gain money on sixty-six squares, but it provides space for economic loss on fifty-three squares. Unlike many of its later counterparts, the 1982 board makes the odds of success and failure rather equal. By establishing a sort of equilibrium between favorable and unfavorable economic situations, the game reflects both the optimism of the emerging Reagan generation and the healthy pessimism of a post-recession society. The odds of success in gameplay are high enough to allow players to dream and expect big financial returns, but the odds of failure are high enough to preserve a sense of realism within the fantasy world.

The game also uses money to emphasize personal responsibility—arguably the edition’s most prevalent moral value. Players are encouraged to buy homeowners, automobile, and life insurance early in the game; if they do not, they may find themselves burdened with stiff fees for broken cars, burgled homes, and property damage later in the game. Rather than victimize the player who pays these fees, however, the game often defines the trouble as the player’s own fault. Carelessness is mentioned often; a player can actually lose his car for reckless driving or his homeowners insurance for “carelessly” starting a fire in his own house (Milton Bradley Company). Not only does the 1982 game give players plenty of chances to lose money, but it

often portrays these moments as the natural effects of negative behavior, mainly irresponsibility. This message makes sense for a culture “[whose] hero was the person who helped himself” ([voanews.com](http://voanews.com)).

In addition to paying for moral mistakes, players also pay rent and purchase items to upgrade their cars and offices. A basic house costs \$40,000; if one is so lucky as to upgrade to a larger house, it will cost \$140,000. Keeping up with the Joneses costs quite a bit; no era refutes that fact. One unusual square—a required square—makes each player pledge significant financial support for community outreach efforts: “Help homeless children. Give \$120,000 to orphanage” (Milton Bradley Co.). The game itself does not focus much on community service, especially compared to its 1991 successor, so this cannot be taken as a comment on community service levels in the 1980s. It does, however, reiterate a basic theme in the 1982 edition: that responsibility, positive or negative, always includes an element of cost.

On a more practical note, prices in the 1982 *Game of Life* are often two or three times higher than costs in the 1960 game—an adjustment that actually mirrors the inflation rate between those editions quite well. According to the US Inflation Calculator, the inflation rate from 1960 to 1982 was two hundred and twenty-five percent; an item purchased for one dollar in 1960 would cost three dollars and thirty cents in 1982 ([usinflationcalculator.com](http://usinflationcalculator.com)). Although this rate is not applied uniformly in *The Game of Life*, many of the recurring spaces shared by the 1960 and 1982 boards do, in fact, adjust for inflation, often doubling or even tripling the amount of a fee or reward. In the 1960 edition, for example, college costs fifteen hundred dollars, a price that can be offset by a one-thousand-dollar scholarship. In 1982, on the other hand, college costs five thousand dollars, a price that can be offset by a three-thousand-dollar scholarship. While a 1960 player pays ten thousand dollars for his fictitious house, a 1982 player pays forty thousand.

Insurance, home repairs, and stock market returns also cost (or reward) a player twice or three times more in 1982 than they did in 1960. Again, while these prices are not necessarily inflated uniformly, they do reflect the 1982 designers' attentiveness to the cost of living in a modern era.

### **1982: Normalizing Risk as Entertainment**

As a post-recession culture with a devalued currency, 1982 American society might also have been poised by its circumstances to turn to gambling and risk as alternative sources of wealth. Elements of gambling exist abundantly in the 1982 *Game of Life*. Just as in 1960, players can place up to \$24,000 in "side bets" at any time by attempting to predict the number on the spinner. If they guess correctly, they collect ten times the amount of money they gambled; if they guess incorrectly (surprise, surprise), their bet monies return to the bank. A few of the pathway squares award the player for gambling successes, such as "Win on horses! Collect \$300,000" and "Win the lottery! Collect \$96,000" (Milton Bradley Co.). Others, however, emphasize consequence within gambling; a bad day at the races might cost a player \$2,000 (Milton Bradley Co.).

A few new elements of risk-taking in the 1982 edition also serve as cultural signposts, depicting American society as even more receptive to gambling than it was in the 1960s. One such example is the opportunity to "Win the lottery! Collect \$96,000" (Milton Bradley Co.). While the lottery's appearance might not mean much to a twenty-first century player, it actually marks the game as published after the legitimization of gambling. According to Peter William Moran, "legalized gambling in America was confined to racetracks and the casinos of Nevada" between World War II and the early 1960s (50). The first official state lottery opened in New

Hampshire 1964, four years after Reuben Klamer remade *The Game of Life* for modern society. The New Hampshire lottery “sparked a new wave of legalized gambling that has touched virtually the entire country,” creating a new outlet for game-based risk in American culture (Moran 50).

The 1960 edition does not mention the lottery because it was published four years before that institution was legitimized on a large scale. As such, 1960 *Life* mainly depicts gambling through horse races, variably successful nights at the casino, or winning the occasional sweepstake. By 1982, the lottery had more than earned its place in *The Game of Life*, moral or not, and American culture had overwhelmingly embraced legalized gambling. According to a Gallup poll, eighty percent of American adults in 1982 “favored some form of legalized gambling,” (Moran 50). By 1989, “Americans were gambling a total of more than \$200 billion and that figure was growing at a rate of about 10% annually” (qtd. in Moran 51). While the ethical value of gambling would continue to be a point of social contention, overall, many Americans did at least accept it in 1982, so gambling-based risk in the 1982 *Game of Life* is in some ways more prominent than it is in the 1960 predecessor.

Many philosophers and sociologists of the 1960s and 70s put forth speculative reasons for the nation’s new attitude towards gambling. Roger Caillois argued that games such as gambling “are an outlet from regimented and standardized daily life,” making it an important outlet for creativity and achievement (Moran 52). Robert Merton purported that gambling might serve as an “alternative mode” of pursuing cultural goals and as “an outlet for individual frustration” within capitalistic society (52). Erving Goffman believed that humans need to take risks by nature, framing gambling as “an opportunity for the participant to demonstrate possession of some highly valued and respected character traits, such as presence of mind,



coolness under pressure, courage, daring, and the ability to accept either positive or negative outcomes of action” (53).

At the heart of all three scholars’ theories lies the perception that gambling is a game—a belief which is perhaps quite self-evident in the study of gambling, but critical to a study of *The Game of Life*. A board game, even one built upon a theme of normal American existence, is still an escape from normalcy. It still allows a child or grown-up to adopt a new person for an hour or two, live a life wildly different than his or her own, and shed that identity at the game’s finish line. Board games also, to an extent, provide players with alternative ways to feign social accomplishment, as Merton suggested of gambling. Goffman’s arguments about gambling also relate to board games—and his perhaps more intriguingly than the others, since he marked gambling not as immoral, but an opportunity to exercise socially accepted moral qualities such as bravery and good sportsmanship. From Goffman’s perspective, gambling in *The Game of Life* to any extent does not necessarily indicate a moral decline in the United States; rather, it would simply give young players an outlet through which to exhibit admirable social qualities, should they choose to use it. Perhaps, by Goffman’s logic, we can view gambling as a further manifestation of “public values” and their evolution—and therefore, as complements to a financially-driven moral message (Splitter 495).

In addition to horse races, lottery participation, and casino outings, 1982 *Life* players have the opportunity to become “Millionaire Tycoons” on “The Day of Reckoning” before retirement by spinning a ten on the spinner. If they achieve this goal, they become Millionaire Tycoons and automatically win the game. If they fail—and ninety percent of the time, they will fail—they are “Bankrupt! Retire to the country and become a philosopher” (Milton Bradley Co.) This is the most high-stakes opportunity to gamble in the game; every other circumstance

provides the player with better odds. However, none of the game's risk-based elements set the player up for complete success. The 1982 edition reflects a nation very comfortable with the ideas of both gain and loss—or at least, it reflects a nation that accepted the importance of both states, especially if they were self-inflicted. This would change with time, as we will see when we study the 2016 edition.

Interestingly, the most favorable risk-based element of gameplay is the stock market. Players can purchase stock for \$50,000 and “play the market” on several occasions. To play, they lay their stock certificate on the numbers four, five, and six before using the spinner. If the plater spins a one, two, or three, the market is down and he loses \$60,000. If he spins a four, five, or six, the market is stable and nothing happens—no gain, no loss. If the spins a six, seven, eight, nine, or ten, the market is up and he gains \$120,000. Compared to other opportunities in the game, the stock market allows the player to experience significant financial gain *and* significant financial loss. However, only thirty percent of the numbers actually result in loss, so the player has a seventy percent change of a favorable outcome, even if that outcome does not include financial growth.

The margin for error makes stocks the safest outlet for gambling in the entire game—a decision that makes sense for a culture that was attempting to restore faith in its stock market. An entirely unfavorable stock market would discourage players from investing at all—just as a poor market discourages real-life investors. An entirely favorable market, frankly, is unrealistic and therefore not a viable option for a game that claims to simulate real life. By tipping the odds in favor of gain, but allowing a healthy margin for loss, the 1982 *Game of Life* introduces young players to the range of outcomes that exist within the real investment world. Even if this approach to the stock market simplifies the field excessively, it encourages young people to give

investing a try—and since an integral part of economic recovery by nature is risk, the general message of the game’s stock market seems compatible with the economic climate of the 1982 United States.

### **1982: Emphasis on Service-Based Careers**

Although the United States economy did struggle in the 1970s as a general rule, a National Bureau of Economic Research publication observes that some sectors of industry managed to survive. Unemployment did increase during the seventies, but the Bureau reports that this occurrence was “relatively moderate” given the extent of the national oil crisis. According to authors Zarnowitz and Moore, “One of the principle reasons for this anomaly is that the growth of the service industries, which are less affected by recession, offsets the decline in the goods-producing industries to a larger extent with respect to employment than with respect to output” (473). In other words, certain industries—service industries, such as law and the medical field—continued to manage in a weakened economy based on public demand for their services.

This might account for the 1982 *Game of Life*’s career options, which are completely comprised of service industries. With the correct spin, a *Game of Life* college student can become a doctor, journalist, lawyer, teacher, or physicist; otherwise, he receives the generic “University Degree Salary” and makes a modest \$16,000 on payday. Although the careers serve virtually no purpose other than as salary-markers, they do reflect something important: a 1980 game board designer’s perspective of a promising, secure career path. This could also reflect a nation shifting towards white-collar, specialized jobs; none of the post-1982 boards that I studied

featured goods-producing industries. Arguments might be made for “salesperson” and “artist” in the 1991 edition, but apart from these exceptions, service-based careers, such as doctors, lawyers, and even secret agents, prevail well into the 2010s.

Although the 1982 *Game of Life* mainly features common service-based careers, it does include one oddball on the occupation roster. Physicists have never occupied a very large corner of the public or private sector. However, college-bound *Life* gamers, luck-permitting, can in fact become physicists and earn \$30,000 on each payday—a sum second only to doctors and lawyers, who make \$50,000. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in May 2015, the United States employed an astounding 15,650 total physicists; in a nation with roughly three hundred and twenty million citizens, this represents about an angstrom of American society ([bls.gov](http://bls.gov)). In 1982, that number was presumably even lower. Why, then, would Milton Bradley choose “physicist” as one of its five service-based career options? Simple—for the same reason that the game awards \$240,000 to any lucky player who happens to discover uranium.

Between Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” strategic defense initiative in 1983, and advancements in nuclear energy and medicine, the United States had long since developed a special interest in nuclear technology. The nation’s personal interest was prompted in part by a peaking global interest in the subject—and by the 1980s, Cold War tensions between the United States and the former Soviet Union also played a role in the nation’s conversations about nuclear weapons. Therefore, the average American student in the 1980s would already be familiar with the concept of nuclear technology. In “The Game of Life,” children could move beyond an academic knowledge of nuclear energy and weaponry and actually harness their powers as a conduit of innovation and financial gain.

### Summary

By making finances the means of moral instruction, encouraging healthy risk, using gambling to create space for the exercise of admirable traits, and emphasizing service-based careers, the 1982 *Game of Life* creates a veritable microcosm of a post-recession American society. The connections between money, personal responsibility, and positive and negative behavior allow players to measure their personal habits against financial prosperity (or loss)—a decision that fits the patterns of a nation focused on fiscal gain as an extension of personal character. The game deals openly with gambling and investment, allowing players to practice traditional moral values while experiencing success and failure in their risk-based ventures; it also, however, provides a safety net under the stock market, favorably tilting the scales so as not to discourage healthy risk-taking in a reemerging economy. Finally, by emphasizing service based careers, the game appeals to the industries that best survived the 1973 recession, encouraging children to view them as more stable than goods-based careers.

Most importantly, the game reflects the duality of timidity and hope that many Americans possessed moving into the 1980s—and a decade later, as the economy stabilized and people retained more of their personal incomes, this attitude would transfer naturally into a strong emphasis on community service. What the 1982 *Game of Life* made mandatory as a demonstration of responsibility's cost, the 1991 edition would make a natural extension of one's career—and the key to winning the game.

## Chapter 5

### *The Game of Life: 1991*

On November 16, 1990, the United States Senate and House of Representatives passed the National and Community Service Act of 1990. The 182-page document opens with a section entitled “Findings and Purpose,” in which “The Congress finds the following:

- (1) Throughout the United States, there are pressing unmet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs.
- (2) Americans desire to affirm common responsibility and shared values, and join together in positive experiences, that transcend race, religion, gender, age, disability, region, income, and education.
- (3) The rising cost of postsecondary education are putting higher education out of reach for an increasing number of citizens.
- (4) Americans of all ages can improve their communities and become better citizens through service to the United States.” (United States Congress 6).

In response to these needs, Congress ratified the National and Community Service Act, hoping that the Act would “renew the ethic of civic responsibility and the spirit of community and service throughout the...United States,” and “encourage citizens of the United States, regardless of age, income, geographic location, or disability, to engage in...national service” (6-7). The Act provides suggestions, federal incentives, and programs to allow each member of the American community—children, grownups, natives, immigrants, students, retirees—to both serve and be served, facilitating nationwide civic engagement.

The 1990s produced several strong social campaigns in the United States, including movements for prison reform, environmentalism, responsible alcohol consumption, and special needs education. They produced something else as well: a new *Game of Life*. Once again, the Milton Bradley company updated its bestseller to fit the social priorities of its target market—and this time, the game clearly caters to a generation with renewed interest in civic and community engagement. The 1991 *Game of Life* emphasizes citizenship and community, ascribing monetary value to both entities as frequently as possible and slightly diminishing the roles of fantasy and adventure seen in other editions of the game.

### **1991: General Candor of Realism**

The 1991 *Game of Life* makes little effort to shield young players from life's incidental expenses. Although it downplays personal consequence (a theme heralded by its 1982 predecessor), it *does* expose players to an array of costly life experiences—college, for example. The 1991 *Game of Life* is the first edition to place all college attendees in debt—a decision that makes sense for a nation mourning “the rising cost of postsecondary education” (United States Congress 6). Players start their college careers with \$10,000, a car, and \$40,000 in student loans, which must be paid back with an additional \$10,000 in interest. After choosing one's career and salary (discussed later), each player receives a personalized tax number. Salary and tax rates, however, can change quite often, thanks to spaces that allow players to swap salaries. In short, the only certainty in “Life” for a college-bound player, brief as it might be, is debt.

The 1991 edition also greatly minimizes the game's appeal to fantasy. It boasts far fewer opportunities to strike gold, wrestle an octopus, or do some other improbable feat for money. Of

the fifty-five spaces that allow players to randomly strike it rich or encounter expenses, only thirteen lead to financial gain. The other forty-two spaces require payment—often for positive reasons, such as family vacation or donating to charity, but payment nonetheless. At first glance, these numbers might make the game look like an hour of debt and frustration. However, the fifty-five gain-and-loss squares are nestled into a board with 145 total squares; they only account for roughly one-third of gameplay.

Since the 1960 and 1982 editions depend on random events to further gameplay, this marks a significant shift for *The Game of Life*. If the opportunity to strike it rich or hit misfortune has been minimized, what takes its place? By tipping the gain-loss balance in favor of loss, the 1991 *Game of Life* shifts emphasis away from the random happenings of gameplay and towards a new feature: community service. The 1991 edition introduces a new source of income called “Life Tiles.” These tiles receive more space on the board than any other element of gameplay, and they reward players for civic or community-centered behaviors—by implication, moral behaviors.

### **1991: Rewarding Citizenship and Community**

Players receive Life Tiles by landing on spaces that involve some sort of community-building, civic engagement, or family milestone. Each Life Tile has a unique monetary value, ranging from \$50,000 to \$250,000. However, these values are not visible to players until everyone has retired, leaving the net worth of their good deeds a mystery until the very end. Even if a player cannot derive the exact value of a Life Tile, though, he comes to recognize it as



a significant contribution to his bank account. A small or medium-sized Life Tile might still yield greater financial gain than the most extravagant instance of random success. Remarkably, visiting one's in-laws or saying "no" to drugs can benefit a player more than winning the lottery, finding hidden treasure, or winning the Nobel Prize.

By designating certain behaviors as tile-worthy, Milton Bradley presents players with a pattern of model moral behavior, elevating certain actions as personally moral or socially noble. For instance, a player must stop his or her turn to buy a house, choose a career, and get married—marking each of these events as significant—but only marriage yields a Life Tile. All three events receive equal consideration, but only one receives moral designation. Likewise, every Life Tile space on the board encourages the player to view its corresponding action—donating money, spending time with one's family, or refusing to drink and drive—as a mark of moral integrity. As previously mentioned, the Life path boasts 35 opportunities to pay for car wrecks, charity donations, and family vacation, but only 12 opportunities to randomly "strike it rich." This places the lion's share of a player's earnings in Life Tiles — community service— and incidental career gains, so community service and citizenship are not only moral goods, but considerably lucrative.

Many of the 1991 Life Tiles—and events in general—focus on local, family-oriented actions—the sort of behaviors that one might expect of a small, upstanding suburban family, such as recycling or driving responsibly. This seems congruent with the social climate of the 1990s, an era marked by relative peace and economic stability for the United States. The localized focus of community service also suggests the presence of an American generation with an inward focus—or at least, without an overarching sense of responsibility to identify with global concerns.

Interestingly, research from the 1990s seem to support this theory. In their 1998 publication *Student Politics: The New Localism*, authors Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Cureton discuss the findings of a 1990 undergraduate survey, which asked college students to list what they considered the major historical events of their lifetimes. The study had been conducted in previous generations as well. College students of the 70s and 80s typically answered with the same two or three events: “Vietnam and Watergate, followed by the civil rights movement and the assassination of national leaders during the 1960s” (*Review of Higher Education*). In contrast, 1990 students listed as many as seven events, including the Rodney King affair, the Challenger Explosion, and AIDS. When asked about their inability to agree on two or three events, one student said, “Our generation hasn’t had any defining moment to really galvanize us. The hundred-day Gulf War wasn’t enough to do that. We didn’t have the Vietnam war... We don’t have a shared identity. There isn’t anything holding us together or moving us” (*Review of Higher Education*). Notably, these same students voiced a belief that their generation “is getting more involved” and “cares about the country and society” —admitting a lack of historical unity, but indicating a common social goal (*Review of Higher Education*).

The game graphics clearly appeal to this sense of localism. The few drawings along the “road of life” depict families engaged in very local suburban activities, such as family picnics or polling lines on Election Day. Even from a design perspective, the game encourages a sense of civic and personal duty that more or less adheres to local needs, not global causes. The 1991 *Game of Life* caters to a generation that has been raised to wholeheartedly appreciate civic engagement and social betterment—that is undeniable. However, the children of the 1990s seem to seek those goals in a very local sense—at least initially.

As the game progresses and the Life Tiles' contents are revealed, a loftier sense of service does become part the game. At retirement, the players learn that many of the accomplishments on the tiles are, in fact, outlandish—discovering a new planet, for example, or composing a symphony (Hasbro, Inc). In 1991 *Life*, major achievements still exist; instead of standing independently, though, they are portrayed as byproducts of minor achievements. You cannot win the Pulitzer Prize without first having a daughter or saying “no” to drugs. In other words, the 1991 *Game of Life* portrays adventure, honor, and fame as extensions of simple daily events—not to mention traits like family loyalty, humility, and service. Through this, the 1991 *Game of Life* compounds the value of what some might call “random acts of kindness.” Not only do Life Tiles promise a player financial gain, but they become the gateway to the “big” differences that many young dreamers want to make.

The 1991 *Game of Life* teaches children not to “despise the day of small things,” but rather to use small-scale deeds as an avenue to large-scale success (Zechariah 4:10 KJV). It also teaches that the most extravagant successes in life do not necessarily require spectacular circumstances. Earning a Nobel Prize and striking gold in one's back yard might be equally difficult for the average person, but one is the result of effort; the other, luck. Therefore, even the most lucrative Life Tiles, while dependent on unusual circumstances, are the products of a basic commitment to community service, effort, and selflessness, not fate. This decision further emphasizes a theme of realism in the 1991 game and reflects on a general commitment to prizing selflessness, community involvement, and effort.

By introducing Life Tiles and downplaying random moments of gain and loss, the 1991 *Game of Life* effectively shifts the players' focus from a life of random excitement to one of meaningful, localized service. It then uses those small moments to deliver the sense of large

scale satisfaction that many activists, young and old, seek in reality. Also, through one other element of gameplay, the 1991 game encourages players to broaden their definitions of service and social activism; the renovated career cards, which play a larger role in the 1991 *Game of Life* than they do in any early edition, make this lesson possible.

### **1991: Working to Serve**

In 1860, careers make one brief appearance in gameplay as “fat office,” a square surrounded by prison, fame, poverty, and ruin. The editions between 1960 and the late 1980s include specific careers, but only for those who attend college—and even then, they are assigned permanently based on where one lands. In these editions, careers developed a sense of social hierarchy, ascribing higher salaries to some fields and lower salaries to others, just as one might expect in reality. The 1991 *Game of Life* is the first edition to present careers as flexible components of adulthood—or even to include them much at all after college. On one hand, this reinforces the importance of one’s career, but on the other, it encourages players to view their careers as gateways for progress and service, not merely financial gain.

Unlike its ancestors, the 1991 *Game of Life* expands the array of career opportunities for all players, even those who opt to skip college. Rather than landing on a square to determine one’s occupation, each player has a chance to draw from a stack of cards; career-only players draw one card while college graduates can pick three and select their favorites. Then they draw salary cards—once again, one choice for career-only players and three choices for college graduates. This allows the game to challenge stereotypical views on careers and their corresponding salaries; in theory, a player could become a teacher making \$100,000 per payday

or a doctor making \$20,000—situations that we might call absurd in reality. It does something more important, though: it portrays salary and career as independent entities. It allows a career to be what a person *does* rather than simply what he or she makes. This contributes to the overall theme of civic engagement and community, which emphasizes initiative and action as the channels for societal difference-making.

The game also allots each career three to five opportunities to make money in business transactions. Rather than pay the mysterious bank when a player breaks his leg or opts to attend night school, he pays the doctor or teacher. While these opportunities are luck-based and therefore never guaranteed, they do provide players with an incentive to pay attention to their careers after college—an idea upon which the modern *Game of Life* had not yet capitalized until 1991. Although paying a friend is not necessarily any more fun than paying a faceless bank, this element of gameplay does create a sense of community and codependency, creating unlikely links between players and allowing them to “use their skills” to help each other in various scenarios. This concept lies at the heart of many community service initiatives, which often emphasize interconnectivity and community as driving forces of local civic engagement.

Lest a player grow too comfortable with his or her career, though, the 1991 *Game of Life* provides ten opportunities for players to lose their jobs, return to night school (and pick new jobs), or experience a midlife crisis (obviously leading to another new job). The employment turnover rate—or at least, the possibility of such a thing—is remarkably higher in the 1991 game than it is in any previous edition. Unsurprisingly, economic history mirrors this pattern. Although the United States’ unemployment rate steadily declines from 1992 until 2000, the nation experienced a significant increase in unemployment between 1990 and 1991, when the national unemployment rate escalated from 5.6 percent to 6.8—and then rose again to 7.5 in

1992 (*Bureau of Labor Statistics*). Unemployment, turnover rates, and seeking work in fields completely unrelated to one's college degree were very real situations in the early 1990s. As an edition that honestly tackles difficult economic situations, such as student debt, it seems natural for the 1991 *Game of Life* to incorporate the insecurity of its own job market into gameplay.

On a less pessimistic note, though, a player is never left unemployed entirely; he simply has to pick a new career (and salary) in the event of a layoff, midlife crisis, or a “swap salaries with any player” space. Sometimes, this harms a player financially; in other instances, it might actually benefit him. Again, since careers and salaries are separated, a player does not need to feel any sense of remorse for losing his travel agent career to a new future in sales—especially if sales prove more lucrative. Allowing players to switch careers so often, however, also deemphasizes career as an integral part of an avatar's identity. A career might not last, but the player will. More importantly, even with career swap spaces, opportunities to pay other “professionals,” and flexible salary options, careers do not overpower community service. Rather, they enable a player to live responsibly without taking over his or her life; they keep enough of a presence in gameplay to remind players that the working world exists, but allow Life Tiles, community service funds, and other acts of kindness to dominate the game board.

### **Summary**

The 1991 *Game of Life* approaches a vast array of social subjects with little inhibition, guiding players through taxes, student debt, and job loss just as aptly as success, fame, and career goals. However, it manages to present all of these elements, favorable and unfavorable, as enablers of community service and civic engagement. As an edition born amid a time of national

peace and perceived economic stability (despite unemployment rates), youth of the 1990s lacked the unifying presence of a shocking historical event or milestone. Therefore, the Milton Bradley Company successfully appealed to an ideal that many *did* share—the moral value of community service on a local scale—and used that ideal to open young minds to the possibilities of loftier goals later in life. Most importantly, the game portrays large-scale achievements as the natural offshoots of personal, moral decisions, encouraging children to take community service seriously and to apply *Game of Life* ideals in their daily lives.

## Chapter 6

### *The Game of Life: 2016*

In 2004, Hara Estroff Marano, a former journalist for several major news sources, wrote a *Psychology Today* article called “A Nation of Wimps.” The article criticized parents of millennials for “taking pains to remove failure from the equation” of childhood (*Psychology Today*). Based on technology’s (then) emerging role as a tether between parents and adolescents, Marano predicted the rise of a generation with big ideas, but a crippling sense of parental dependency. Her sentiments have been echoed by many sources in the last decade. One 2012 *Journal of Management Education* article, for example, applauds adult millennials for their confidence and ambition, but criticizes their inability to self-navigate. The report even quotes a *Newsweek* article that calls millennials “a generation of hot-house flowers puffed with a disproportionate sense of self-worth” (Westerman et. al 6).

For better or worse, mainstream media and academia continue to portray millennials as an overhyped, underprepared generation. Unfortunately, as the inheritors of a post-recession economy, maturing millennials have done little to shake free of this stereotype. Thanks to a healthy dose of technological advancement and parental involvement, this generation has become an icon of American potential; however, in the face of unemployment, student debt, and other practical issues, many millennials are indeed living in their parents’ basements, marrying later, and taking fewer risks—and they seem to be imparting the same mindset to their own children. For better or worse, they seem to fulfill the overly sensitive, underachiever stereotype. Milton Bradley’s most recent *Game of Life* edition, released in April 2016, clearly targets this



generation; it emphasizes ambition, communication, and possibility, but downplays risk and moral responsibility. The result is a game that might create good family memories, but generates very few realistic expectations about life and its challenges.

### **2016: Simplification and Customization**

In 2016 the United States has become a culture of progress and simplification. Computers, while physically smaller, hold more data. Many companies avoid “clutter” on products or instruction manuals by opting for graphics and tweet-worthy phrases over full sentences. Scholars, companies, and soccer mom bloggers are generating more online content than ever before, yet that information is somehow still easy to find and consume. 2016 American society has become a paradox of overwhelming information and mass-simplification.

In some respects, the 2016 *Game of Life* has followed suit. Although the new edition emphasizes player-to-player dialogue and interaction, gameplay itself is far less complex. The board’s new design emphasizes user-friendliness, minimizing text and increasing the presence of simple graphics. The oblong board has been replaced with a compact square. The game’s path is simpler. The directions refer to bills as “100k” rather than “\$100,000,” indicating sensitivity to global consumers. The pink and blue game pieces have lost their boxy shoulders and now boast a rounded, user-friendly pushpin appearance. Even the plastic station wagons have been replaced with four contoured cars— only four. Apparently the new *Game of Life* does not plan to entertain families with more than two children; I can safely assume that my own family of thirteen has become a niche market.

Modern American culture has also become very comfortable with the concept of customization in industry—and again, technology has much to do with this change. Thanks to the widespread use of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and other mobile devices with Internet connections, companies operate with more sensitivity to consumer voices. Many companies use online surveys to gather customer feedback, allowing them to stay relevant in an ever-shifting social market. If the 2016 *Game of Life* reflects one aspect of modern American culture above all others, it is this trend towards personalization.

In fact, consumer input is one of the new game's selling points. The company chose its 2016 career cards based on a survey of 400 children ages 8-12, allowing children to weigh in on one of the game's most beloved features since 1991. This change allows Milton Bradley to target a twofold target market: young millennials, who have directly impacted the game's recent design, and adult millennials, some of whom are starting families of their own and transferring the think-big mentality of their own childhoods to the next generation of American children.

From a sales perspective, this duality is genius; it gives both young parents and children reasons to view themselves as stakeholders in the 2016 game. From a sociological perspective, though, it sheds light on an emerging undercurrent of thought in American culture. This new game seems to anticipate what a millennial parent would like their child to *believe* adulthood entails (adventure, prosperity) instead of what adulthood *actually* entails (costs, responsibilities). As such, the game entertains its players, but does not teach them much about the mechanics of working adulthood. If anything, it shelters them from many of the mundane or less favorable aspects of life, choosing instead to make dreams and positive experiences the agents of progress in the 2016 *Game of Life*.

### **2016: Big Dreams and Extended Adolescence**

In the early 2010s, the Milton Bradley Company “conducted an online survey of 400 kids ages 8-12 in each of the following countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Mexico, South Korea, and Australia.” The company viewed the survey not only as a chance to modify the game, but as a chance to “shed light on...professional goals from today’s generation of kids” (*Businesswire*). In addition to allowing participants to choose their favorite careers from a list of 200 options, the survey asked the kids a series of questions about the working world—questions such as “Why did you choose your dream job?” and “What is a reasonable annual salary?”

While choosing their careers, most of the children prioritized personal skill, ambition, and happiness over any sense of ethical concerns. While forty-five percent of the participants chose their dream job “because they’d be good at it,” and seventy-seven percent wanted “to be the boss when they grow up,” only twenty-six percent chose their dream job “because they want[ed] to help people” (*Businesswire*). Children in the United States also expected higher salaries than their peers in other countries, requesting an average salary of \$249, 319. For reference, the United States’ average household salary in 2015 was \$39,531 (*Businesswire*). Survey participants also demonstrated a shift away from conventional careers in favor of more imaginative futures; the new career cards include a dancer, fashion designer, secret agent, and video game designer—the most popular choice. The least popular career, according to Hasbro’s survey, was trash truck driver.

The discrepancy between the kids’ expected salaries and the national average could be due to many factors—the economic statuses of children surveyed, for example, or general misunderstandings about market values. On a basic level, though, the discrepancy could simply

reflect a typical child's dream; even one or two aspiring millionaires could easily tip the survey's results towards a higher expected salary. Either way, the survey results puts the child participants at direct odds with their country's economic realities. This could explain why some elements of gameplay, such as homeownership, are not requirements in the 2016 *Game of Life*. In reality, home ownership has decreased by about five percent in the last decade (*U.S. Census Bureau*)—and if the 2015 average salary was \$40,000, it is entirely possible that many American families, even without burdens such as student debt, cannot afford a house anyway. The 2016 *Game of Life* makes homeownership readily available to players, but not mandatory—perhaps to prevent uncomfortable conversations for mothers and fathers on family game night.

Clearly the 2016 game does not operate based on current American realities, but on the endearing American dream, which at its heart includes prosperity. Really, nobody can blame the Milton Bradley Company for this decision. Everybody loves a good dream from time to time, especially when modern circumstances have made that dream difficult for grownups to achieve in reality. However, in its focus on dreams, the 2016 *Game of Life* provides almost no room for obstacles or failure in gameplay. As such, it sets up an unhealthy expectation that adulthood means unchallenged success—an expectation that makes about as much sense in 2016 American culture as expecting a two-year-old to pass a college entry exam.

The 2016 survey's trends towards high salary expectations, unorthodox career choices, and the desire to “be the boss” should not surprise anyone who has even casually studied millennials. As University of Virginia professor John Portmann noted in a 2004 interview, “Parents have told their [millennial] kids from day one that there's no end to what they are capable of doing... They read them the Dr. Seuss book *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* and create bumper stickers telling the world that their child is an honor student” (*Psychology Today*).

Millennials are marked by a sense of “sky’s the limit” optimism and ambition—and as parents, it would seem that they continue to pass that sentiment along to their own children.

However, Portmann later asserts that this idyllic mindset fails to teach young millennials how to deal with personal shortcomings. He states, “American parents expect their children to be perfect—the smartest, fastest, most charming people in the universe. And if they can’t get the children to prove it on their own, they’ll turn to doctors to make their kids into the people that parents want to believe their kids are.” (*Psychology Today*). According to Portmann, many modern youth are primed to view failure as the result of external forces—real or imagined—and to view themselves as dependent on special allowance or help when they fail. Based on this behavior, University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank F. Furstenberg predicted in 2004 that millennials would enter a “no-man’s-land of postadolescence” in their 20s and 30s, postponing marriage, employment, and family-rearing in favor of a chance to forge their own definitions of adulthood—a trend that does seem to be cropping up among those millennials who are old enough to apply for jobs and start families. Ironically, this season of finding oneself leaves many millennials dependent on their parents anyway, even after they might be expected to support themselves. A 2008 study calls this phenomenon “helicopter parenting,” noting that modern parents have become “highly involved in their children’s lives” even after high school and college, leading “emerging adults [to delay] the traditional markers of adulthood” (qtd. in Mechler et. al 29).

In short, the newest *Game of Life* is designed for a generation that has been raised to compete with vigor, but not to lose with grace; a generation quick to dream, but slow to risk; a generation with incredible access to technology and information, but struggling to apply those tools unaided. Thus, millennials—both as young parents and maturing children—are forging a

new *Game of Life* together, one tailored to their own desires as young parents and maturing children. Unfortunately, some of those desires are oversimplified and unrealistic. As such, the 2016 *Game of Life* is endearingly focused on community and positive experience, but oddly void of the circumstances—good, bad, and mundane—that make life an interesting study. This imbalance occurs through many factors of gameplay, but particularly the removal of risk.

### **2016: Risk-Free Competition**

The 2016 *Game of Life* is clearly designed to minimize loss and maximize victory—especially through the Action Cards, a deck of cards that replace the written portions of the board and determine a player's financial circumstances for most of the game. Action Cards always—*always*—benefit players financially, even when delivering bad news. At the end of the game, players exchange their Action Cards for 100k per card. Not only does this reward mundane behavior (is dressing like a comic book hero *really* worth a reward?), but it subversively rewards negative traits, such as laziness. Getting “fired for snoozing on the job” can potentially benefit a player just as much as “Karate classes” (Hasbro Gaming). Even negative behavior, by default, has a positive monetary value.

Furthermore, only fifteen Action Cards—twenty-five percent of the pile—require the player to pay the bank or another person. The rest of the cards either benefit the player immediately or force him to compete against other players for a monetary award. These competitions all utilize the spinner; the player to spin the highest number wins the prize. A player might fail to make money in a competition, but he never loses money in a competition. Likewise, social opportunities might evade a player, but true loss happens infrequently.

The 2016 *Game of Life* tries to present itself as an environment of risk, but every “risky” element of gameplay is moderated. Take, for instance, a point in the game that allows the player to choose between the regular path and the “Risky Path.” A player on the Risky Path can lose up to the exorbitant sum of 200k—worth two Action Cards. However, he can gain up to 500k plus an automatic payday. Even if the player was to land on every risk space and every success space, he would gain more than he would lose. In older versions of “Life,” such as the 1960 edition, players could risk money by gambling—and yes, they could lose large sums of money in the process. The 2016 edition mimics this freedom with multiplayer competitions and “spin to win” spaces, which allow players to compete for a lucky number on the spinner. Neither of these outlets, however, allow for one of the most thrilling, dangerous, and instructional elements of gambling: loss. More alarmingly, they strip gambling of any long-term ramifications, perhaps encouraging children to form unhealthy assumptions about the dangers (or lack thereof) of gambling in real life.

Part of *Life*'s historical allure has always been the opportunity to take big risks in an unimportant context—to utilize avatar gameplay as a safe method of self-exploration. That opportunity is all but absent in the 2016 edition, despite the game's claims to the contrary. The Action Cards are not the only elements of gameplay to regulate risk and loss. The stock market—an opportunity to purchase a luck-based income source—has disappeared, along with risk to personal property (such as fires, earthquakes, and car troubles). In earlier games, these features forced players to consider investments without guaranteed returns, such as insurance policies or stock numbers. The closest equivalent to that experience in 2016 “Life” is the opportunity to sell one's home back to the bank—which, at times, depreciates and pays the

player a few thousand dollars less than one might hope. But even then, the player receives money through the sale; to some degree, he still “wins” the transaction.

Most intriguingly, the newest *Game of Life* removes any sense of risk from retirement—in essence, from winning. In every edition of the game between 1960 and 2005, retirement hinged upon a number of uncertainties. The 1960 version gives players a chance to pick one lucky number to spin for at retirement, promising immediate victory if they win and threatening total poverty if they lose. The 1982 edition sends bankrupt retirees to the countryside to become philosophers. The 1991 edition provides an award to the first retiree, but allows that reward to be stolen in certain situations. In 2016, the first retiree receives a 400k award; the second receives 300k; the third receives 200k; the fourth receives 100k. Everybody wins, even last place.

The game’s aversion to risk does not seem influenced by the desires of modern children; any parent with three days’ experience raising a toddler can testify that risk is alive and well in the average American child. No, the removal of risk must reflect another group: parents and older millennials. Documented studies support this hypothesis, especially in the realms of economics and banking, where adult millennials are significantly less likely to invest in the stock market or non-cash assets. In July 2016, Canadian company Sun Life Global Investments noted this phenomenon in its 2016 *Market Sentiment Report*, revealing that “51% of millennials (defined as those between the ages of 18 and 30) would rather experience less volatility even if it means missing out on opportunities to earn higher rates of return” (*Sun Life Global Investments*). As parents become less open to risk, they pass that mentality along to their children, just as many post-Depression adults continued to live with fiscally cautious mentalities even after the nation returned to a state of economic stability. With the removal of risk, however, comes the removal of loss and negative circumstances—at least in dialogue and speculation. Such a mindset might



be convenient for a game, but it teaches a child nothing about how to combat failure or difficulty when those forces inevitably arise.

In a 2014 interview, psychology professor Charles Williams decried what he perceived as a spirit of entitlement among millennials, stating, “In life, everybody doesn’t get a trophy...sometimes you lose and sometimes you win...and that is part of American life” (*Washington Times*). Failure might be part of real American life, but it is definitely minimized in the modern *Game of Life*. Ample rewards, insignificant losses, and a strictly regimented risk margin ensure that an adventurous gamer will never pay much for his or her adventure. As a result, the game’s traditional elements of risk and investment feel more like trophies in the 2016 edition—participation trophies, perhaps.

### **2016: Vague Moral Messages**

The Action Cards, the vehicles for most of the circumstances in gameplay, say surprisingly little about ethical issues—especially negative behavior or consequence. Of the 60 Action Cards included in the game, only five mention (or even judge) negative behavior. Two cards allow the player to sue for property damages, one card allows the player to sue for theft, and one card, “Fired for snoozing on the job,” judges laziness (Hasbro Gaming). The fifth card, “Fired for sneaking your cat into work,” seems to judge something—but what? Deception? Insubordination? Workplace felines? The world may never know. Of these five negative Action Cards, only two—the “fired” cards—actually ascribe the negative behavior to the cardholder. The lawsuits actually allow the player to project the negative behavior on someone else *and* benefit from it financially. In other words, sixty percent of the bad decisions made in 2016 *Life*

are not the player's own fault, and every single negative card, by nature of the 100k redemption price, benefits the player in the end.

Negative circumstances are also oddly absent from the modern *Game of Life*. Gone are the days in which a *Life* player needed insurance against tornadoes, ended up in the hospital, or experienced a layoff—which is ironic, considering that modern statistics have marked rises in all three misfortunes. In 2016, life consists mainly of positive experience. Homes do not fall into disrepair. Uncles do not need to be bailed out of jail. Taxes do not exist, but tax refunds do. Even the circumstances beyond the player's control rarely veer into the territory of “bad news” unless some sort of restitution (such as monetary gains for a lawsuit) exists.

Positive behaviors are equally understated in the 2016 *Game of Life*. Although fifty-five of the Action Cards allow for positive outcomes, only two of those cards specifically reward a good behavior—philanthropy. Players demonstrate their generosity by setting up a school or giving money to an animal rescue. In theory, though, a school set up by one individual would be a private school, catering to a certain bracket of the middle and upper classes anyway. Two additional cards award the player for winning “family of the year” or being voted “the nicest person ever.” In theory, one could ascribe a moral value—niceness?—to both of these moments. However, at their cores, neither are truly moral achievements; they are popularity contests, and vague contests at that. How *does* one measure niceness? What must a family do to become family of the year? These awards present themselves as good achievements, but leave the recipient to wonder why. This is a clear deviation from 1991 *Life*, which emphasized citizenship and outreach as elements of gameplay.

In theory, moral value can be ascribed to most of the remaining Action Cards, but the player has to identify those values on his or her own. For example, “moral” might not be the

word one would typically associate with learning to play the bongos; however, perhaps bongo lessons (worth 70k in the game) could be seen as an outlet for discovery, initiative, or creativity. Following that logic, it is possible to name a praiseworthy value behind every positive Action Card. Discovering that moral, valuable element, however, depends on player-initiated discussion, not any sense of direction from the game itself.

If personal ethics do not drive the game, what does? Interestingly, most of the positive Action Cards focus on good feelings as an extension of experience—trying new skills, visiting new places, and even interpersonal communication between players. Many of the Action Cards use trivial announcements (“Walk the catwalk!”) to induce multiplayer competition (“Pick an opponent. Both strike a pose and spin.”) and encourage meaningful experiences outside of the avatar’s world (Hasbro Gaming). These experiences might not have overt moral value, but they foster positive interaction *and* account for most of a player’s financial gain during gameplay.

As a “community-oriented and ambitious” generation, millennials are perhaps already primed to associate action with positivity (Mechler et al. 29). In fact, a *Journal of Management Education* article posits that action has become an inseparable component of workplace millennials’ personal identities. The article states that “narcissistic” millennials “strongly desire social contact, as social contacts are a primary source of admiration and attention. Because narcissists are unable to regulate their own self-esteem, they must rely on external sources for affirmation” (Westerman et al. 8). Based on this assertion, and considering the game’s emphasis on experience-driven positivity, it could be said that the 2016 *Game of Life* is more concerned with personal affirmation than moral instruction. This could explain why the game shies away from making value judgments and awards seemingly amoral behaviors.

### Summary

The 2016 *Game of Life* is not devoid of morals, competition, or risk, but it downplays those themes in favor of personal interaction, experience, and emotional affirmation—traits that some scholars view as hallmarks of the millennial generation. The result is a game that celebrates experience, but says very little about negative or risky components of adulthood, such as negative consequences, unsure investments, or catastrophic events. Most notably, it makes little to no effort to impart any sort of moral instruction—a clear deviation from the game’s history. Granted, the missing elements do not necessarily give the game its appeal; in fact, Milton Bradley’s streamlined, personalized approach to the 2016 *Game of Life* proves that the popular game can, in fact, succeed without many of its traditional features. However, by downplaying moral decisions, removing unpleasant scenarios, and emphasizing carefree experiences over grown-up responsibilities, the game becomes a sort of Neverland—one in which adults can become kids again for an hour or two, but kids never exactly grow up. Perhaps this is what adult millennials, a statistically more dependent generation, would like their own children to experience as gamers. However, the new edition seriously deviates from the game’s one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old goal: allowing kids to test adulthood in a setting where important decisions and personal failures are inevitable, but not unconquerable—a setting where life continues despite the obstacles we, the players, might face.

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## EDUCATION

*The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College*

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*Research Assistant, Department of Communications, Penn State Brandywine*

- Researched the role of women in sports journalism from 1980-2010
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## PRESENTATIONS

*Colored Conventions Symposium, Wilmington, DE (2015)*

- Documented the roles of Amos G. Beman and Amanda S. Dutton in the Colored Conventions
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## PUBLICATIONS

*Eastern Communication Association Conference, Philadelphia, PA (2015)*

- “Struggling for Recognition: The Role of Women in Sports Journalism during the Past Decade”
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## AWARDS

First Place, 2014 Recording of Academic Research Contest, Schreyer Honors College

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Sigma Tau Delta (inducted 2016)