

On the lookout for fair game – aspects of (im)morality in board games

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Abstract

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The discussion about the – usually negative – influence on the morals of young gamers is a familiar one when talking about computer and video games. Interestingly enough, however, board games have not fallen suspect of morally corrupting youngsters, although there are hardly any board games on the market which pursue ethically high purposes, while many can be found displaying or triggering ways of behaviour which could be classified as ethically or politically incorrect. This appears to be even more remarkable when bearing in mind that games can be seen as cultural assets and an important means to develop one's personality.

The intention of this article is to try and analyse this apparent paradox by investigating which different kinds of immorality can come into play under which conditions. Special attention will be paid to the board games of the family game type. Finally an attempt will be made to find an answer why immorality is not only attractive but plays a vital role in board games and why these games, nevertheless, unlike computer games, are principally perceived in a positive manner.

Key words: board games, ludology, games research, game studies, pedagogy, immorality in board games

“Values” are a hypothetical construction, as Hermann Giesecke (2005, p. 9) points out, and not a matter of sensual experience like good or bad behaviour. He continues that to a large degree children do not learn values and norms through the influence of teachers but through socialisation in the form of social participation (p. 11). Following the developmental psychologists Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, Detlef Garz (1998, p. 13) calls children moral philosophers, but as they adapt their experiences to their own worldview, their ideas might objectively be wrong. Yet this worldview is not static because the way a child thinks is changing through its interaction with its environment. This means that thinking in moral categories develops when children begin to see the world not only from their own point of view but are able to put themselves in the place of others and see things from their perspective. Playing is one important factor that helps developing the ability of ‘role-taking’, which is an important condition for acting morally (p. 16).

To put it short, morality is not an inherent quality but has to be learned via social interaction. However, when children or people in general spend less and less time with other people and more and more time in a relatively isolated area of life excluding their environment, for instance playing alone on the computer, the question arises what effect this might have.

Every time another pupil runs amok in their school, the same debate occurs of how computer and video games influence young gamers’ morals. However, the problem does not lie in the game itself, but in the player and whether he is able to distinguish game play and reality, and, of course, how he experiences his social environment.

By contrast, so far board games have not yet been accused of producing weapon yielding psychopaths. Quite the contrary, board games are usually seen as a social activity, producing positive interaction within a group of people.

Now, every game is in some way a distraction from everyday life, an escape route into a fictional world, an artificial reality, which might or might not copy aspects of the real world. In any case each game allows a certain freedom that the player’s real life often does not offer. This does not have to refer to bloody massacres, of course, but might include the attractive possibility to turn oneself into a railroad tycoon, a master builder or even simply a farmer – if only for a few hours. The scenarios of game land naturally are limitless – different occupations, time and space travel, the most unrealistic fantasy worlds. Besides, games offer not only different lifestyles but experience of different roles (knights, princesses, aliens, ghosts, vampires, animals); and such role playing provides moral insights and perils.

Adults in play as in real life are generally responsible for themselves. Adults are also responsible for the children with whom they play as well as what they

play. Of course, board games, which are played in a group, often consisting of the members of a family, are far easier to control than what children might play on their own in front of the computer.

Still adults, too, enjoy escaping their everyday routine, and in games they are not always looking for a harmonious world, but sometimes like to experience a higher degree of power than they have in real life. Adults, too, might hide away behind a computer screen, but a board game on the other hand brings the family together at one table. The question is whether a board game can fulfil each player's needs for divergence from the ordinary to the extent that computer games do.

This article investigates morality in board games, though within its scope no thorough analysis can be achieved, it should rather be seen as an attempt to outline basic tendencies. To begin with a short introduction concerning target groups, themes and 'regions' will be given; then it will be considered what may be amoral, problematic or undesirable in board games. And finally an attempt will be made to answer why a certain degree of immorality or political incorrectness is not only attractive but may even play an important role in games, and also to explain why board games enjoy positive connotations in contrast to many video or computer games.

1. Morality in relation to different types of board games

When talking about moral and immoral aspects in games one has to differentiate morality from what is considered politically correct in a given society. While the *political correctness* is a relatively young term based on social agreements and the avoidance of discrimination, morality has been discussed for centuries, and even though it has been based on social accordance it appears to be at a deeper level and not necessarily limited to a specific culture. Both aspects will be taken into consideration in the following discussion.

Many games¹ are neither 100 percent politically correct, nor do they pursue ethically high purposes. Of course, it is in the nature of games that the participants should rival each other, but then one might ask how moral it is to snatch away things from other players, hinder their progress and try to make other players lose, particularly if games are considered cultural assets or an important means to develop a player's personality. As Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004, p. 534) point out, children are especially affected by this: "The prevalent rhetoric of contemporary Western culture is *play as progress*: the notion that play is for children and that it is valuable because it helps them properly evolve

¹ In the following, the term "game" will refer specifically to "board games", if not stated otherwise.

into adults.” To analyse this seeming paradox the different kinds of immorality and political incorrectness, and the conditions which may come into play shall be investigated.

An assumption is that games for different players allow different degrees of deviation from what might be considered ethically acceptable. It makes a difference whether a game is aimed at children or family players (who tend to play lighter games to spend time together in an amiable way) or at gamers or even ‘game freaks’ (for whom games tend to be a serious matter, not simply a means to pass time), and also whether its target is the mass market or just a certain niche. Such categories are, of course, fuzzy, but even a cursory survey goes to show that games with immoral or politically incorrect elements are most often tolerated or even favoured in gamers’ or ‘freak’ games. Besides, there is a certain tolerance for the lack of political correctness in children’s games, while family games seem to be the ones in which the infringement of ethic rules is least acceptable. This leads to the question which games allow which violations of moral rules. Special attention will be given to examples of the family game category as such games range in difficulty between children’s and gamers’ games. Besides, family games appear to be the type most thoroughly checked for elements of political incorrectness.

1.1. Focus on family games

To find a definition of a family game is not easy though. Even specialist literature does not give a clear outline of what makes a game a family game. Is it any game that a family plays together? Does a certain age limit define the game type? A certain duration? Or a certain (low) level of complexity? All in all, one probably has to define family games as part of a continuum with no distinct borderlines, but overlapping at one end with children’s games and at the other with gamers’ games. Children’s games are usually distinguished from other game types. They have a separate heading in online shops and their own shelves in department stores and game shops. Family games on the other hand are sometimes subsumed under the heading of children’s games while sometimes, they are grouped with communication and party games², but occasionally they also receive their own heading as “family games”.

When checking the online lexicon Wikipedia, one discovers that in English there is no such heading as “family games” when referring to board games, but the keyword leads on to the entry “German-style board game” or “Eurogame”:

² And sometimes even under both headings at the same time (which might not only be due to marketing reasons but also to the lack of a clear differentiation).

German-style board games are a broad class of tabletop games that generally have simple rules, short to medium playing times, indirect player interaction, and physical components, which are frequently wooden player tokens or markers. The games emphasize strategy, downplay luck and conflict, lean towards economic rather than military themes, and usually keep all the players in the game until it ends. German-style games are sometimes contrasted with American-style games, which generally involve more luck, conflict, and drama (Wikipedia, no date, a).

Also the German Games Archive offers no ‘classification’ for family games on its website, but certain games are assigned to particular age groups. There, games are classified as family games when they are meant for players from nine years up, because:

At the age of 9 and on the threshold to adolescence children already are real partners in gaming. The children start to empathise more with other people’s feelings and interests. They learn to precalculate the moves of other player’s a few steps in advance and develop their own strategies. The adolescent wants to know all the rules and is keen on abiding by them. He can also reflect their sense and develop own variations of the rules to make a game better or more playable. From 11 years on, many children develop a remarkable creativity and new games with individual sets of rules (Nürnberg online, 2010b).

This is mirrored in what Garz (1998, p. 54–56) says about the moral development of children. Quoting Piaget, he states that each morality is a system of rules. So like a game, morality has rules to which children abide to differently as they grow older. While very young children do not consider rules as obligatory (like they often play with changing rules), they become untouchable for children between 5 and 10. Only when their way of thinking approaches that of an adult, it becomes clearer that rules are based on mutual agreements and are not written in stone, but can even change with time.

For that age group of 11 to 15, the archive recommends games more complex than children’s games as well as communicative and interactive quiz games, because through them the young players can enjoy sociality and learn something about themselves and their own position in their social environment. The next category offered by the Games Archive is games for adults, which means starting at the age of 16/17. There is no special category for games classified as 12+, though this designation can be found on many game boxes and is often considered a marker for adult games – at least on the level of complexity. Actually, the higher age marker offered by the Games Archive usually refers to themes considered unsuitable or incomprehensible for children – themes like politics, satire, sex or extreme violence.

To sum up, both the Archive and Wikipedia agree that games of the family type should be suitable for children playing together with adults. The typical initiation age is around eight to nine years of age. The games are characterised by easy rules, which are simple to learn while still offering a variety of moves. Another criterion is that no one drops out of the game early (which means it is a group experience to the end) and the playing time does not exceed 45 minutes to one hour.

At the same time family games are not just playable within a family, but often attract more than one target group, such as (older) children, families, casual players and gamers.

2. Some criteria for morality in board games

Different views on aspects of morality and political correctness can be observed on various levels: Male players may be said to approach certain game topics differently to many female players (as for example Andrea Meyer (2007) states in her article *Women want to gather*); what is considered harmless enough in one country may not be treated this way in other countries. At the same time, opinions vary over time about games considered suitable for family playing. What children consider fun might appear offensive to some adult players, while certain topics are regarded as ethically or morally unsuitable for children. A few examples might outline this further.

2.1. Male vs. female players

Individual exceptions aside, female players tend towards lighter games, which comprise family games as well as communicative, quiz and party games. Rivalry here is not the main focus, but playing is rather just one activity among others, and winning a game often is second to the social group experience. Though many male players also enjoy such games, a numerous group of males is interested in games that demand full concentration on what is going on the board. The interest in war and strategy games is much higher among male than female players, and apart from the choice of topic, also the mechanisms of harming or killing characters in play, trying to eliminate the opponent and open negative interaction between the players are less acceptable to female players. The conclusion drawn from these observations would be that female players show lower tolerance towards open fighting (in theme and mechanism).

2.2. Germany vs. other countries

German editors in contrast to editors from other countries mainly publish games with rather “harmless” topics. The bigger German publishing houses refrain from non-politically correct subjects; games like *Spank the Monkey* with its ambiguous title and the violence against an animal, or *Kablamo*, a game of Russian roulette (both by the Swedish publisher Gigantoskop), are hardly thinkable from a German publisher. German publishers also avoid the morally questionable, yet popular genre of war games and war simulations such as the *Axis & Allies* series or the Polish post-apocalyptic *Neuroshima Hex*. Such morally questionable games may be sold in Germany, but German publishers tend to stay away from such subjects.

Instead Germany plays a leading role in family board games, as the Wikipedia heading “German-style board games” indicates; such family board games avoid politically incorrect elements. And though certain disputable subjects like thieves, pirates or gangsters, seem acceptable, war games are generally avoided for historical reasons and are of marginal importance at best.

2.3. Present vs. historical

The German editors’ abstinence from war-related games, of course, has to do with World War II, because until then war games were not only popular, but were considered a worthwhile family activity by the government.

In 1812, the Prussian Army invented the game simply called *Kriegsspiel* (*War game*) to train officers by using a specially designed table to simulate war situations. With time the game became quite popular also in lower military circles and abroad, and later on games that dealt with war, military campaigns and propaganda also reached the family board game table. The highest quantity of such games was produced before and during the Second World War, according to the Spielzeugmuseum Nürnberg (Nürnberg online, 2010a), which presented such games in an exhibition in 2006/07 to show how the Nazis were using war and propaganda games to indoctrinate the population. While the early games described the political and moral situation after the treaty of Versailles, games later on were used to promote new war technology and the supposed superiority of the German army, to recruit soldiers for the newly-established air and tank force. So the Nazi regime used the entertainment offered by games for propaganda and education. Also during the war, certain behavioural patterns were trained through games – like being aware of potential spies in the game *Achtung! Feind hört mit!*. And the families at home relived the experiences of the soldiers at the front with the help of board games.

Of course, the German government was not the only one to use games in that way. Among the Allies later on games like *Bomb Berlin*, *Target Tokyo* or even *Atomic Bomb* – a dexterity game about dropping bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – were quite popular, too.

In Germany though, the topic became rather unpopular after the war, while the winners of World War II kept on playing war games, and even today, the number of war games published in the U.S. alone, shows that these topics are still highly popular.

As Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p. 516) state “[a]nother way of saying games reflect cultural values is that *games are social contexts for learning*. This means that games are one place where the values of a society are embodied and passed on.” But also as far as America is concerned, the board game situation has not always been the same. In his article *American Games: A Historical Perspective*, Bruce Whitehill describes the forms and functions of early board games produced in the United States. Whitehill (1999, p. 116) states „these games provide a mirror of the American culture in which they were made, and the examination spreads some light on the values of the people who purchased and played them.”

A successful branch in the 19th century were games that exploited the moral fervour of the time like *The Mansion of Happiness* (published in 1843, copied from an English original)³ or games like *Messenger Boy* (from the 1890s) where good traits of character would propel the player forward while negative traits would throw him back. This distinction has basically vanished from modern games where, for example, acquiring something in a game by paying for it on the one hand or by stealing it on the other may be treated as equally possible and promising means for success. Games which focus on high moral ends do not appear to attract players anymore. People rather appear to feel put off by games that propagate the greater good or include a moral lecture⁴. The opinion of Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p.517) that “[c]reating games is also creating culture, and therefore beliefs, ideologies, and values present within culture will always be a part of a game, intended or not.”, reveals something about current society. In contrast to them though, games in earlier times were less likely to be dismissed as just another way of killing time, as Whitehill (1999, p.125-126) points out:

Even the youngest children had much more responsibility, be it on a farm, or in a shop or factory, than the youth of today. Amusements were allowed, of course, but games were

³ Whitehill (1999, p. 119): “The significance of this game is its theme of moral instruction: those who pursue vice are punished (sent back), and those who possess admirable virtues are rewarded. On the game board, printed under the title was, “an instructive moral and entertaining amusement.”

⁴ In a personal talk with the author of this text, an experienced German editor stated that on the (German) board game market games for do-gooders basically have no chance.

expected to be instructive and educational. A large proportion of the nineteenth century games were about history and geography.

So the educational value of games and play⁵ was one of the main focus points of board games until the early 20th century, when games became a regular spare time activity for Americans, and games did not necessarily have to be educative as long as they were fun to play.

Game titles in the 20th century were also more relevant to their time than current titles. While nowadays a huge amount of topics are linked to the past or far-away lands or even imaginary places, in America in the early part of the century “many world events and episodes in the development of a growing United States became the subject of games, as games continued to reflect what was happening in society” (Whitehill, 1999, p. 129)⁶.

Whitehill (1999, p. 140) sums up the development of the role of board games in the American society as follows:

Games of Colonial days were mostly from Europe and they, and their new American counterparts, were primarily used to teach morality and the value of virtue and hard work. By the turn of the century, after the United States experienced an onslaught of immigrants seeking political freedom and good fortune, games became less reverent and more instructive. Eventually, as a leisure class developed, games became pastimes, and game crazes became new recreations. [...] And an industry once concerned with education, moral instruction, and family values has given way to competitive conglomerates driven by licensing, the demands of advertising and packaging, and the inescapable bottom line.

2.4. Children vs. adults

As Whitehill (1999, p. 139) also states “games help a culture pass on some of its rules and rituals to a younger generation”, so looking at the currently available children’s games one might discover what the current older generation wants to pass on. It is undisputable that playing is an important part of life – play-

⁵ Cf. Immanuel Kant who argued in “Von der Physischen Erziehung” (1803) that a child acquires most of its intellectual and physical capacities through playing and that therefore games must have a perspective and an ultimate purpose. Quoted after Kobbert (2010), p. 33/35.

⁶ Another assumption concerning the lack of references to the events of the day might be that current developments are reflected in games in a subtler way – like for example in view of the on-going debate concerning the Muslim world, an increase of board games with a topic or background taken from an Arabian context during the last decade can be noted – still those games seldom deal with current events, but rather lead the player into a historical or fantastical world of *Arabian Nights* and historical stereotypes about the Orient. Another example can be found in *Habemus Papam* (2010), published a few years after the election of Benedict XVI., which is set in medieval times.

ing serves as training for physical, mental and social abilities. Every child has certain predilections and by playing each child also educates itself. Through the games it plays a child will gather a lot of what it needs to function in society (Kobbert, 2010, p. 47) and develop perception, recognition as well as social and emotional behaviour. As Garz (1998, p. 13) puts it generally, human development and the development to morality comprise an interaction between the individual and the world as well as the world and the individual, which leads to a lifelong exchange. Another important factor of play is mimicry, the pretending to be something else, the as-if situation offered by the safety of the game as a symbol for the real or an invented world. If confronted with negative interaction, as for example in classic games like *Ludo*, the players can learn or train how to cope with failure and other peoples' mean behaviour.

Modern children's games may include stronger immoral or at least politically incorrect elements, for example *Chicken Cha Cha Cha* published by the German editor Zoch where a main element is to rip out the tail feathers of other players' chickens. Another immoral topic is pirates, a topic seemingly unrelated to the real piracy in for example the Gulf of Aden. Pirates in games are 'far removed in time and place', and the settings are always historical or fictitious with colourful costumes and even very cute childlike pirates. Other children's games are set in an animal world with the players seeing the world through the eyes of those animals, but with a distorted view; for example *Chuck-it Chicken* features a rooster bombarding hens with their own eggs and the game shows neither an overt educational value nor even a politically correct view of animals.

It seems that children's games enjoy and are granted more moral freedom than family games, in which the least tolerance of immorality is to be expected; however, certain conditions have to be considered, like a humorous presentation or cute appearance. Amusement is the dominant factor, whereas moral standards (in terms of the game theme) appear to play a rather subordinate role, and on the contrary games offering an opportunity to infringe upon them may provide a special pleasure.

3. Different types of immorality in games

Some game-playing is unlawful; the state regulates gambling for example. However, players can also undermine the rules of play by cheating, helping others or accepting help as in 'kingmaking' (which means helping another player to win), or allying against another player. In various board gamer forums like BoardGameGeek, there are discussions about people 'not playing

to win⁷ or those ‘resigning in the middle of the game’⁸, and thus destroying the satisfaction of winning for other players. Some players sulk or get aggressive when losing, which may take the fun out of the game and distort normal play.

Such behavioural failings among players occur regardless of the moral content of a game; however, players’ reactions can highlight dubious moral content. Heated discussions can be found about certain games and their (potentially) politically incorrect content. A Spanish forum for example starts with a comment about Bruno Faidutti’s *Isla Dorada*; there pictures of *natives* on the game cards were considered too stereotypical and were thought to carry the potential for hurting some feelings. The forum discussion then developed into a debate about games and racism and finally focused on slavery in games like the very popular *Puerto Rico*⁹.

Some people also feel offended by religious topics. Two examples from a discussion on BoardGameGeek may stand as illustration here: A player from Israel describes his discomfort at playing *Amun Re*, because in the game sacrifices have to be made to that god. The player’s discomfort is unrelated to the reality of this sacrifice but derives from the fact that he is under a religious injunction not to participate in an act that resembles worship of other gods¹⁰. In the same discussion the game *Evo* is brought up. *Evo* deals with evolution and the discussion mentioned someone who refused to play *Evo* because he did not believe in evolution. There are, therefore, players who take the world of play seriously enough to have compunctions about playing games with certain themes.

3.1. “Immorality” in selected family games

This chapter now considers the questionable moral aspects of winners of the Game of the Year during the last decade, as well as the debatable aspects of certain currently available (family) classics and German family and children’s games.

At present, there are few overtly immoral or politically incorrect games displayed (except in specialist board game shops where the gamers’ games are

⁷ Message board thread: <<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/553203/not-playing-to-win/page/1>>, access date: November 28th 2010

⁸ Message board thread: <<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/518750/resigning-in-the-middle-of-play/page/1>>, access date: November 28th 2010

⁹ Message board thread: <<http://www.labsk.net/index.php?topic=56144.0>>, access date: November 28th 2010.

¹⁰ Message board thread: <<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/19889/a-religious-problem-dont-laugh>>, access date: November 28th 2010.

sold). An exception might be *Guillotine*, published in 1998 by Amigo, which proved to be a bestseller with an openly immoral topic: the aim in the game is to behead as many aristocrats as possible (in a historical context naturally).

During the last ten years, award winners have been games with rather harmless topics, which offer a carefree playing situation, in which the meanest element is that the players might get into each other's way. The winner of 2010, *Dixit*, may serve as example. It is a story-telling game with picture cards that possess a rather dreamlike quality, and wooden bunnies as counters. Other examples are *Keltis* (2008), *Ticket to Ride* (2004) or *Alhambra* (2003).

Zooloretto, the winner from 2007, as mentioned before, might have morally debatable aspects, but as visiting the zoo is a family activity, so is playing this game.

In *Niagara* (2005) there are some negative interactions, as for example stealing from other players' boats or manipulating the weather so that opponents' canoes will drop down the waterfall.

In *Carcassonne* (2001) it is up to the players to choose to play nice or mean; when playing selfishly, players try to steal other players' roads and towns, blocking their figures, so they cannot be retrieved, but it is also possible that the players build for themselves, avoiding negative interaction.

The exception is the winner of 2009, which stands out from other award winning games for its immoral or politically incorrect content. The title – *Dominion* – underlines the claim to power. The editor's website directly addresses the potential player, telling him that he is a monarch like his parents were before him, but that in contrast to them he wants more. The abstract ends with the words: "Your parents won't be proud of you, but who cares..." (Hans im Glück, no date). Basically, the game is close to a solitaire game, in which each player plays only their own cards for themselves, and depending on the chosen cards there may be little to no interaction between the players. If any interaction occurs, it usually affects other players negatively (as when the cards for militia or witch force others to play with less cards or get minus-points). The most interesting aspect in terms of immorality, however, is the discussion in Germany about the cover of the game. On the original version, a band of knights was shown in the foreground and a peaceful village in the background. This was interpreted as a potential military campaign against innocent villagers and therefore met with disapproval; such displeasure shows how little the German game scene tolerates apparent war and violence in family games. The second version of the cover took away the hints at overt potential violence, and showed a section of a rather peaceful town with a beautiful landscape in the background and only covert immorality¹¹.

¹¹ For instance a thief sneaking around the tent or lance-bearers (as subtle indicators for an impending armed conflict).

Just as the jury generally chooses family-friendly games, the German family board game market as a whole displays a tendency towards friendly play. Even though classics like *Ludo* or *Monopoly* with their negative interaction – leading in the latter case to ruining the opponent – are still widely enjoyed, modern family games do not seek to eliminate a player from the game, but rather to create a group experience, where playing is more important than winning.

Comparing the current topics to those of the first half of the 20th century, for example, nowadays there are very few subjects directly linked to the real world of the early 21st century. Generally, neither positive political themes (accomplishments, new inventions) nor negative themes (grievances) are present¹². Most games offer topics that are in some way removed from everyday life – historical settings, exotic countries, futuristic, fantasy or animal worlds¹³. All in all, family games seem to create an atmosphere of escapism and sociality by a relaxing group activity in the safety of one's own home. In this context, certain deviations from what is considered right or wrong in real life are tolerable.

Generally available popular games offer the following examples of immorality:

1. Pirates enjoy a lot of popularity, as long as they are shown in a trivialized way, wearing old-fashioned costumes and sailing the Caribbean Seas a few hundred years in the past.
2. Like the pirates, some other groups of society which usually have negative connotations enjoy certain popularity in games, like the mafia, gangsters or thieves (as for example *The Thief of Bagdad* or *The Godfather*).
3. Also fantasy creatures with a scary origin are trivialized and turn into harmless or even cute figures, for example the vampires in *Vampires of the Night*, which have to be protected from garlic.
4. Games with animals sometimes border on cruelty to animals like *Chicken Cha Cha Cha* or *Pickomino*, which is allegedly about frying worms (though this aspect is not mirrored in the mechanics). *Passing the Pigs*, in which two pig figures are thrown as dice, might be debatable as well.
5. Lying or bluffing is essential for winning in games like *Saboteur*, *Liar's Dice* or *Lügenbeutel*. Such behaviour is usually condemned in real life and contrasts to the moralistic American games of the 19th century.
6. Many games focus on acquiring riches or power. Such games may offer realistic lessons but may be corrupting if they accept that dishonest means like stealing, robbing or killing stand on an equal footing with more honest ways of increasing one's wealth.

¹² Few exceptions: stock market games or games about sport.

¹³ One larger group of exceptions (apart from pure abstract games) are games with a conspicuous educational aim, for example geographical games like *Journey through Germany* or games about animals like *Fauna* etc.

To sum it up, moral improvement is no longer expected from games, in contrast to the games of the 19th century when (by American standards of the time) playing was not primarily considered as entertainment, but as a means of improving one's moral conduct and learning for life. Since then the educational aspect of games has moved into the background when it comes to morality. Learning might be implied, but with the exception of overtly educational games (meant to improve cognitive abilities and factual knowledge¹⁴), it is no longer an important aspect people look for when wanting to play.

If games mirror society, then nowadays we note a certain tendency towards hiding away from real responsibility and towards mere amusement or pure intellectual challenge. If a game subject is not remote in time or space, it is distanced from real life by fantasy or parody or at least humorous graphics.

4. Result – Does immorality have a right to exist in board games?

Though currently (German) family games refrain from too much immoral or politically incorrect content, a game still could not work without rivalry¹⁵. In gamers' games it is clear that players relish digressions from the ethically acceptable (an example is the game *Junta*, which deals with rising in the hierarchy of a 'banana republic' and transferring as much money as possible to an account in Switzerland by immoral means). Are games with topics like war, corruption or thievery attractive because they enable players to behave outside the accepted morality? Is it felt as an expression of freedom to flout the moral barriers of real life? Or is it a way to cope with one's aggressive instincts in a socially acceptable way? Or is it, on the other hand, mere escapism from the dull and (over-)regulated everyday life?

Adults and children like to transgress certain moral borders sometimes, and only play permits such transgressions without negative consequences, though different views might be considered: On the one hand people can learn from negative examples. Being deprived of something in a game is not much nicer than suffering a loss in the real world, so children might see it as a frustrating experience and refrain from such behaviour in real life. On the other hand, however, children are not immune to false logical conclusions. As mentioned before, Garz points out that the worldview of children is constantly changing. So if they learn to succeed by immoral means in a game, some might also transpose this strategy into real life, as Rudolf and Warwitz (1982, p. 40–45)

¹⁴ This type is still increasing in number, a development that might be illustrated by the German award for educational games which has been in existence since 2003, Deutscher Lernspielpreis: <<http://www.deutscher-lernspielpreis.de>>.

¹⁵ If it is not one of the few cooperative games on the market.

underline that all games have an intentional or unintentional learning effect on the player, which includes grown-ups as well as children.

As far as board games are concerned, the current situation is certainly not a moral-free zone. Still, the primary function of games is to ensure a fun way of spending one's spare time. If it is doubtful that a board game could improve the world, it is no more realistic to see board games harming society.

Especially when compared to computer games, board games with immoral or politically incorrect themes present them in a hyperbolic and humorous way (like *Junta*); so a player is unlikely to be corrupted. Besides, board games are usually played by a group, while in many computer games the player is alone in front of a screen (excluding to some extent the multi-play modes or Internet games where other players are still only virtually present). So while computer game players might develop a feeling of invincibility (if only by adapting the level of difficulty), in board games they will have to accept losing more often (without the option of simply repeating the level again). There they are playing with and against real, non-virtual people, while in computer games the opponents often tend to be a nameless mass with no personality or character, and the distinctions are simple: Good versus Evil, with the player as good guy who is allowed to massacre the bad guys. This, of course, might lead to the question whether such role-playing weakens inhibitions against transporting such behaviour into real life. After all, war games were once used to commit first soldiers, but then also the general population, to war. In this context, one has to wonder whether it is permissible for the realm of computer play to offer a sort of moral-free zone.

In board games, on the other hand, even killing happens on a more abstract level without the realistic graphics modern war video games offer these days. Besides, there is always a certain active social control provided by the other players, so it is understandable why board games lack the threatening potential assigned to certain computer games. Also, the further a theme is removed from everyday life (historically, in space or time, etc.) or the more it is toned down by humorous or trivialized illustrations, the more permissible political incorrectness seems. Trivialization naturally does not justify immorality, but a humorous context appears to make it less likely that certain behavioural patterns are transported from the game into real life.

Still the reactions to some pictures (as in *Isla Dorada* or the cover of *Dominion*) as well as to some subjects (like in *Amun Re*) show that there are elements in board games which evoke rejection from some people: this rejection may be superficial or may be profoundly based on moral reasoning. In any case, such negative responses might offer a chance to make people discover that many problems are not just one-dimensional, and a reflex to a catchword is usually not enough. If people start to reflect on those matters and even discuss prob-

lematical issues with their children, society would gain the aforementioned educational value that Kant claims for all games. It does not always seem to be an easy matter to put this theory into practice, though, because an intention of a game which is not very clearly outlined might not be seen (or just not be accepted) by (some of) its recipients, as examples like *War on Terror* (Andrew, 2011) and *The Landlord's Game* (Wikipedia, no date, b) have shown.

Although for many children (and also some adult gamers) playing and learning seem like contradictions, many of the learning processes in games will function on a subconscious level. One instance is the hardening of the psyche for real life, for as one cannot always win, board games do not support the superhero fantasies transported by many movies and videogames, but are much closer to experiences of frustration which happen in real life. Coping with them in play will make it easier for many to deal with feelings of disappointment and aggression. Besides, as the game designer Ulrich Blum points out, playing helps learning how to deal with rules: "Who in his life has had many disappointing experiences with suffocating rules, finds a positive frame in games to handle such a situation" (Blum, 2010). The same goes for questions of equity, fairness, communication, analysis and strategic thinking.

Still, the liberty of playing should not be overly burdened with educational elements. Playing in itself is an important factor in positive and negative learning. Putting oneself into the position of bad as well as good characters is a typical part of playing, starting with such simple children's games like cops and robbers. The question whether a game is moral or immoral, politically correct or not, cannot be ignored, but one must always remember that especially children need games to test and even cross over borders in a protected environment so that they are able to tackle difficult subjects without being hurt.

But, of course, in every game it is important to know the difference between play and reality. Like real life, games have rules, which have to be accepted if the game is to work. Apart from the game rules themselves, however, certain social principles must be considered as well, like for example giving weaker players (or children) a chance. There is also the question of how to handle certain subjects. A game in itself is hardly ever utterly immoral, but might include some morally dubious elements, so the effect it has depends on how the players approach the game and deal with it.

5. Conclusion

In former times, board games were used to transport moral principles, as the titles from the 19th century have shown. A few activities that were considered

unsocial and therefore morally unacceptable are, for example, harming people or animals, stealing, lying or being greedy. As the list in 3.1. shows, however, this view of board games has somewhat changed and all these negative traits can be found in play nowadays. On the one hand, this goes to show that the way people deal with moral values changes over time, that they are not inherent to human nature but are, as Garz points out, negotiable. On the other hand, board games no longer appear to be considered mainly as a means of education; instead, they seem to have become a means of entertainment.

Nevertheless, as has been shown, games implicitly transport certain values. Playing therefore teaches social abilities (like for example how to cope with losing) while at the same time allowing the players to indulge in socially unacceptable behaviour and experience the different perspectives of perpetrator as well as victim (within the setting of the protected ‘game room’). Keeping in mind that “the cultural play of a game is free movement within more rigid cultural structures” (Salen/Zimmerman, 2003, p. 528), a game can be an expedition into the immoral – without any feeling of remorse, as it is only a game after all. Still one should not ignore that a game is not an utterly lawless realm either and that the players’ behaviour can also affect their real world, which means that players have to decide whether they want their fellow players (and the surrounding world outside the game) to be treated fair or as fair game.

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W poszukiwaniu gry fair – (nie)moralne aspekty gier planszowych

Abstrakt

Dyskusja o – zwykle negatywnym – wpływie gier na moralność młodych graczy nie jest niczym nowym w kontekście gier komputerowych. Co ciekawe, pod adresem gier planszowych nie padło dotąd oskarżenie o demoralizowanie młodzieży, choć na rynku znajduje się niewielka liczba gier propagujących wysokie wartości etyczne, a nie brakuje produktów przedstawiających lub wyzwalających zachowania, które można uznać za etycznie lub politycznie niepoprawne. Wydaje się to tym bardziej zadziwiające, że gry uważane są za dobra kultury i istotne narzędzia rozwijające osobowość.

Artykuł jest próbą analizy tego niewątpliwego paradoksu poprzez zbadanie, jakie przejawy niemoralności w grach mogą wystąpić w jakich okoliczno-

ściach. Szczególna uwaga zostanie poświęcona rodzinnym grom planszowym. W końcowej części tekstu autorka spróbuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie, dlaczego niemoralność jest nie tylko atrakcyjna, lecz także odgrywa ważną rolę w grach planszowych, i dlaczego te ostatnie – w przeciwieństwie do gier komputerowych – są postrzegane pozytywnie.

Słowa kluczowe: gry planszowe, ludologia, badania gier, pedagogika, niemoralność w grach planszowych

