THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF CONTEMPORARY BOARD GAME CULTURE

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Introduction

Societies produce objects that reflect their cultural values, and board games as cultural objects reflect the social character of contemporary society. In *The Lonely Crowd* (2001 [1950]), David Riesman describes the dominant form of social character as other-directed. Different from personality, social character refers to the social organization of preferences and goals within individuals, as well as their predominant emotional drives (Riesman xx). I identify two forms of other-directedness in board game play. One form of other-directedness is characterized by collaborative play emphasizing the importance of working as a team. A second form of other-directedness is characterized by players cooperating in pseudo-collaborative games, only to engage in acts of betrayal.

I observed that other-directed social character has transformed board game culture. Thorstein Veblen's concept of barbarism, described in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994 [1899]) can be applied in understanding this phenomenon. Board game culture now includes activities that Veblen would have classified as predatory, including the quest for invidious distinction and pecuniary damage incurred by board game purchases. The predatory nature of contemporary board game culture extends into the online comparison and ranking of board games. Board games are not a temporary escape from the anxieties and problems of other-directed society, but yet another arena where those problems exist.

David Riesman and Social Character

Social character is a concept first described by Erich Fromm in *Fear of Freedom* (2001 [1942]). David Riesman, for whom Fromm was a mentor, extended, amplified, and elaborated the concept into sociology (Mestrovic 1997, p. 44). Social character can be viewed as a social phenomenon. Riesman states that social character, a social phenomenon, is different from personality, a psychological phenomenon (Riesman 3). Whereas personality addresses the more or less permanent attributes of an individual's self, social character address the common organizations of the individual's drives and satisfactions (Riesman 3-4). Even though social character is found within individuals, it is a shared product of groups. As such, social character emerges from the shared experiences groups, such as classes, regions, and nations (Riesman 4).

Riesman's masterwork on social character is *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (2001). The work sold over a million copies, and

landed Riesman on the front cover of *Time* magazine in 1954, a first for a social scientist (Horowitz 1006). Riesman was a lawyer by training, and he did not have a doctorate in sociology, but he wrote a bestselling sociology book. *The Lonely Crowd* is regarded as a classic in social and cultural criticism, and remains the bestselling book in sociology.

The appeal of Riesman's book was in its rich description and analysis of social character types, and the transformation in American society from among them. Riesman describes three social character types: tradition-directed, inner-directed, and other-directed. The three social character types are not presented as a hierarchy or as an evolution, but as three modes of social organization that appear in chronological order. Thus, the movement from an earlier type of social character (tradition-directed) to a later type (inner-directed) should not be seen as an improvement or as an evolution.

Tradition-directed social character types learn rigid rules and roles from their society, one which values traditions and strong, extended families. Tradition-directed people do not think of themselves as individuals first, if at all, but as members of clans, families, or tribes. The primary emotion organizing the social life of tradition-directed people is the fear of being shamed (Riesman 24). Thus, a common strand in tradition-directed types, whether they are in a society on a Pacific Island, in the mountains of Europe, or in a small rural village in Asia, is the value of honor, which is the exact opposite of shame.

Inner-directed social types are motivated from within by principles and guided towards goals. Riesman describes this mental mechanism as a gyroscope set going by the individual's parents and parent-like authorities (i.e. teachers and mentors) (24). The inner-directed individual goes through life obeying an inner pilot. The primary emotion organizing the social life of the inner-directed type is the feeling of guilt (Riesman, 2001, p. 24). When the individual is set off the course of his or her inner gyroscope, he or she is beset by guilt. Although social approval is valued in all societies, for inner-directed societies, obeying the dictates of internal principles becomes the cardinal virtue (Riesman 24).

Lastly, the other-directed social type is entirely motivated from without, hence the name. The family is not an isolated unit for this type of person, but is just another part of the social environment (Riesman, 2001, p. 25). The other-directed individual takes his or her cues from the signals of others. In contrast to the inner-directed type who is guided by an internal gyroscope, the other-directed type is guided by an internal radar (Riesman 25). Hence, the inner-directed individual may have a favorite game, for example, that he or she prefers to play endlessly. The other-directed individual is constantly scanning the radar for the newest, most popular games, abandoning a previously beloved game for a game that takes its place. The primary emotion guiding the tradition-directed person in making those decisions is the feeling of anxiety.

Social Character and Board Games

Different board games reflect the social character of their origins. Games in general

can be categorized as tradition-directed, inner-directed, or other-directed.

Examples of a tradition-directed board game would be Chutes and Ladders. Chutes and Ladders originally was known as Snakes and Ladders, and is an ancient board game from India dating back to the second century BCE ("Chutes and Ladders or Snakes and Ladders"). The game, Moksha-Patamu in its original language, was used as an instructional tool in order to introduce concepts to children, first from Jainism and later from Hinduism (Bornet 94). Ladders helped to represent and teach the concept of karma or destiny, while snakes represented the setbacks created by kama or desire (Bornet 94). A game of Snakes and Ladders emphasizes destiny and contains within it no possibility for strategy. How a player advances or falls behind in the game is entirely left to chance, which reflects the religious and philosophical values behind it. It should be noted that the current version of the game, Chutes and Ladders, has become other-directed. Players move forward by "being nice" (important for other-directed types) by landing on squares representing good deeds (being generous, doing chores, eating properly, etc.) and fall behind by "not being nice" (not doing homework, skating on thin ice, etc.).

Inner-directed games include games where players are in open competition with each other. Each player has his or her own goal. Monopoly is a game known to most people, and could be characterized as inner-directed. Monopoly is a game in which players buy property or make payments as they move around the game board. And there is something very inner-directed in which the imaginary property of the game is handled. Riesman writes:

> The linkage between work and property in an era of private competitive capitalism… reinforced the possibilities of isolation from people. Property, for the inner-directed man, became freely transferable; the individual was not attached to it as in the earlier era by sentimental and traditional ties, but he attached it to himself by his choices, by his energetic actions. No longer an affair of the extended family, property became an extended part, a kind of exoskeleton, for the individual self (Riesman 114).

To tradition-directed persons, Monopoly would be a highly irreverent game. Anthropologists such as Christopher Boehm and Dinko Tomasic, writing about traditional life in the Balkans, note that the loss of real property is treated with the same gravity as deaths in the family among tradition-directed people. In short, tradition-directed types see the sale of lands as shameful. Inner-directed types see the exchange of property as working on the exoskeleton of the individual. Monopoly can be construed as a game in which the players compete to build the most complete individual self.

For other-directed types, groups are important. One can think of the fictional groups that other-directed individuals consume in the mass media: Marvel's the Avengers, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and her Scoobies, the X-Men, the Power Rangers, etc. The relationship that the other-directed person can have to the group can be quite

complex. Hence, many board games stress the importance of working together as a group, and there are games in which all the players work together, nobody works against the group, and the challenge or adversary is a part of the game's mechanic. For instance, in the game Pandemic, published by Z-Man Games, players assume the roles of medical researchers trying to contain and cure multiple epidemics around the world in an effort to prevent a worldwide pandemic. A similar game in which players cooperate is called Flash Point: Fire Rescue, made by Indie Boards and Cards. In Flash Point, players take on the role of fire fighters or other first responders in rescuing people from a burning building. For younger children, Forbidden Island by Game Wright, is game where a group of adventurers works together to retrieve treasure from an island that is disintegrating under their feet. In all of the above games, the players can only win or lose as a team.

Cooperation with a group is a valued other-directed trait. The role of groups in other-directed societies can be described thusly:

> … children's fantasies are now *groups*, as mentioned previously. The lone hero smacks too much of inner-direction, and had to be dropped… The new children's role models are Barney *and* Friends, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and the Power Rangers. All of these involve individuals working in groups and bent on tolerance (Mestrovic 1997: 53).

Lonely heroes, such as the Superman of the Golden Age of comic books, smacked of too much inner-direction.

In the course of conducting research for *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman interviewed people, among them a child who gave a very memorable answer:

> A: I like Superman better than the others because they can't do everything that Superman can do. Batman can't fly and that is very important.
> Q: Would you like to be able to fly?
> A: I would like to be able to fly if everybody else did, but otherwise it would be kind of conspicuous (83).

The brief excerpt from the interview is dense with meaning. In sum, being conspicuous, even when doing something spectacular like flying, is undesirable to the other-directed person unless everyone else can do it. So, if the Golden Age comics Superman could fly, but Batman could not, then that was acceptable among inner-directed types. Today, Harry Potter can fly with his broom, but that is okay, because all of his peers can fly on their brooms as well. Furthermore, the ever-present sense that the group is constantly scanning for undesirable conspicuousness is a source of anxiety for other-directed types.

The difference between the attitudes towards being an individual is vast between the social types of inner-directed and other-directed. Using Superman as the quintessential, inner-directed hero, we can focus on the need for solitude. For the other-directed type, there never is solitude, only loneliness. Riesman explains the different between the two by stating that for the inner-

directed person, a temporary escape from the troubles of life was solitude. Thus, it is possible for an inner-directed child in an earlier era who was satisfied to be alone with his or her hobby, and hobbies sometimes stood in for friends (Riesman 69). The other-directed type, through media, is warned of the dangers of being alone (Riesman 155). The golden age Superman had his fortress of solitude, where he could retreat from the concerns of the world. The new, other-directed vision of Superman shows his fortress of solitude as a place of danger. In *Superman Annual 11* (1985), Batman, Robin, and Wonder Woman go to the fortress of solitude for Superman's birthday, only to discover that he is in danger. In an animated version of the comic shown on the television cartoon *Justice League Unlimited*, the phrase "fortress of solitude" is used sarcastically by a character visiting the fortress (*Justice League Unlimited*, "For the Man who Has Everything", episode 2, originally aired August 7, 2004).

Another dynamic is also at work in other-directed types in that people and friendships are viewed as consumables (Riesman 81). The other-directed person is preoccupied with popularity ratings. In 1950, Riesman was describing today's world where we are constantly asked to give our approval or to like things on Facebook, keep track of how many people viewed a *Youtube* video, rank a restaurant on Yelp, and leave feedback for one's Uber driver. In fact, it is difficult to find things or people in society that are not ranked. The internet is full of web sites dedicated to rating businesses and professionals. Professors are ranked through

RateMyProf, doctors are ranked through *WebMD*, academic journals and their articles are ranked by "impact scores," and workplaces are ranked on *Indeed.com*. For other-directed types, the fantasy super power to have is not flying, as it is the most conspicuous of possible superpowers. For the other-directed type, the fantasy super power to have is the ability to become invisible. This fantasy satisfies the need of the other-directed type to be inconspicuous and able to avoid the surveillance carried out by the jury of his or her peers. Thus, Harry Potter flies and it is no big deal. But he can also turn himself invisible, which is a power that not many others have and it is a big deal.

In other-directed individuals, the conflict between cooperating with a group as well as the pervasive anxiety created by the constant evaluation by the group leads to antagonistic cooperation. Riesman notes that in relations between other-directed types, there is false personalization between people that is a "mandate for manipulation and self-manipulation" (265). Hence, cooperation among other-directed types is not entirely portrayed by the completely cooperative games such as Pandemic or Flash Point. Antagonistic cooperation means that betrayal of the group in order to win is an element of other-directedness, and this is done through manipulation of self and others by the players.

The point might be argued that getting ahead at the expense of the group seems more similar to inner-directedness. Riesman states, that in fact, competition in the era depending on inner-direction was frequently ruthless (101). Where inner-directed types

strove because of ambition, other-directed types cooperate antagonistically (Riesman 101). In other-directed competition Riesman explains that the element of betrayal and antagonism to the group was mitigated in inner-directedness:

> Inner-directed types could cooperate with each other on physically and intellectually evident tasks whether or not they liked or approved of each other. Their inner-directed code, rather than cooperative mood, kept them from constant sabotage (112).

No such inner code holds back the other-directed type from sabotage. In popular media, this antagonistic cooperation, of groups simultaneously working together and working against each other, are pervasive. In the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series, Buffy fights against vampires, demons, werewolves, witches, deities, other vampire slayers, and robots, but she also fights against her best friend and each boyfriend she ever dated. In *Marvel's The Avenger's*, there is a scene where, in the middle of battle, the Hulk slugs Thor in revenge for an earlier altercation in the movie. In the showing of the movie that I attended, the scene provoked laughter in the audience. An inner-directed audience would have been confused and appalled by two heroes fighting with each other in the middle of battle against a common enemy.

Antagonistic cooperation can actually be summarized with the words from a game that is built around the concept. The front cover of the box for Cutthroat Caverns, a game by Smirk and Dagger, states, "without teamwork, you will never survive. Without

betrayal, you will never win." Other games where betrayal is key, feature component of the game include titles such as Betrayal at House on the Hill by Avalon Hill, Dead of Winter by Plaid Hat Games, Battlestar *Galactica* by Fantasy Flight Games, and Shadows over Camelot by Days of Wonder. These games are known as semi-cooperative games. In Betrayal at House on the Hill, players explore a haunted house until a player is designated by a random event into betraying the group. In Dead of Winter, survivors of a zombie apocalypse try to stay alive together even though one or more players, through cards drawn randomly at the beginning, can betray the group in order to meet individual win conditions. In Battlestar Galactica, the group tries to survive constant attacks by killer robots, all the while suspecting that one or more members of the group might actually be a killer robot, too. Shadows over Camelot is an other-directed take on the Arthurian legends; the Knights of the Round Table fight to defend Camelot, with the knowledge that one or more among them may betray the group.

Betrayal through antagonistic cooperation is a trauma that the other-directed type confronts, not just in games but in life generally. Semi-cooperative games, however, allow players to choose how they experience treachery. In Betrayal at House on the Hill, it is guaranteed that in every game, one player will be designated eventually as the traitor and backstab the group. In a game such as Shadows over Camelot, there is the added anxiety whether or not a traitor (or traitors) exist. In Dead of Winter, Battlestar *Galactica*, and Shadows

over Camelot, the possibility of betrayal adds suspense to the game. The distinction is one between a comfortable, "warm" type of betrayal (such as Betrayal at House on the Hill), where everyone knows and expects to be betrayed, and the icy, "cold" type of betrayal from Dead of Winter, Battlestar Galactica, and Shadows over Camelot where betrayal can come unexpectedly when the group believed that it would triumph. In either case, the lesson from the games can be compared to Snakes and Ladders: betrayal is the karma or destiny of other-directedness. There is no strategy to avoid betrayal: it just happens.

Explaining Modes of Other-Directed Play

Thorstein Veblen's sociological insight can provide a framework for understanding the fully cooperative form of other-directedness displayed in a game such as Pandemic, and the semi-cooperative form of other-directedness in a game. Thorstein Veblen was a Norwegian-American scholar who began his work as an economist but is remembered as a social critic and as a sociologist (Mestrovic 2003: 2). Although other influential sociologists, including Riesman, recognized the importance of Veblen's contribution to the discipline, textbooks in sociology rarely mention him (Mestrovic 2003: 2). Veblen's best known work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, describes features in modern society that despite the veneer of civilization concealed much older and darker human urges. Veblen indicated that modern society betrayed signs of barbarism, or predatory instincts, despite the trappings and appearance of civilization and modernity.

In *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen discusses the characteristics of barbaric or predatory culture as well as the elements of peaceable culture. Predatory culture continues to exist in modern society, but repackaged. Instead of a barbarian standing at the road chopping heads and taking money, the modern predatory individual goes to law school, works for a high powered law firm, files lawsuits, and takes money. At its core, the predatory instinct that exists has impulses towards the use of force and deception. Veblen writes:

> …as it finds expression in the life of the barbarian, prowess manifests itself in two main directions – force and fraud. In varying degrees, these two forms of expression are similarly present in modern warfare, in the pecuniary occupations, and in sports and games" (Veblen, 1994 [1899]: 273).

Semi-cooperative board games, with the element of fraud through betrayal, are examples of predatory material culture. Board games as material objects, such as Shadows over Camelot captures many of the values and beliefs of the society that created it. In addition to fraud or treachery, Veblen also described other elements in modern society related to predatory culture, such as a fascination with novelty and the habit to spend wastefully in order to draw attention. One should note that when one of these barbaric elements is present, the others elements are not too far away because they are inseparable.

Boardgamegeek.com is a web site dedicated to board games. The site serves as a repository of information for contemporary board games, and evaluates the games through reviews and user ratings. The database for games on the sites has information on over 90,000 titles and currently assigns ranks to over 13,000 games. Fans of board games, who are also users of *BoardGameGeek* enjoy the fact that new games are constantly being published. Novelty is a feature of contemporary board game culture, as is pecuniary damage. A game such as Dead of Winter might be priced at over $50, with other board games approaching three-digit retail prices. Fans of board games often take pictures of their shelves at home, stuffed and stacked with large collections of games, and post them online. This type of photo, as a parody and extension of the selfie, is termed a "shelfie." Shelfies are a way for fans to engage in some of the more barbaric elements of board game culture, such as spending wastefully (what Veblen termed pecuniary damage) and consuming conspicuously in order to make others jealous (which he termed invidious distinction).

Within modern society, Veblen also saw a contrast to the predatory or barbarian instinct. Alongside predatory instinct, Veblen also noted that there existed a peaceable instinct. Hallmarks of the peaceable instinct include the instinct of workmanship and the parenting instinct. Likewise, when one element of peaceable culture is present, one soon finds the other elements as well. So, for example, fully cooperative games are consistent with the peaceable instinct: they are characterized by cooperation within the group of players who work together towards a goal.

Other elements of peaceableness exist in contemporary board game culture. There is a genre of games known as "Print and play" where game designers share their own game designs for no financial gain. "Print and play" enthusiasts download files for the game and make the game at home, by printing out artwork to make handcrafted game boards and assembling tokens from items found around their home. This is a throwback to the early days of Monopoly when Parker Brothers sold the game without tokens: players were encouraged to complete the game by supplying or making their own (Orbanes 68). Players made tokens out of charms from charm bracelets or from miniature toys found in Cracker Jack boxes (Orbanes 68).

Conclusion

Riesman documented the problems and fears of other-directed society. Instead of providing an escape from the dilemmas of other-directed society, such as antagonistic cooperation, betrayal, and manipulation, board games have become yet another arena for other-directed anxieties. Societies create objects that reflect their values, and other-directed society has created board games that reflect its values.

Other-directed people live in a social world that is beset by anxiety, constant evaluation, surveillance, and the real fear of constant betrayal. Board games do not provide an escape from this reality. What board games do provide is a social space where other-directed individuals can

experience, cope with, and learn strategies necessary for manipulation, counter-manipulation, and balancing group work in the face of antagonistic cooperation.

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