

Free to play. Of games, sports, and dictatorships.

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Abstract

Apparently, sports and games are a propaganda tool which are good for any dictatorship: parades and winners, emphasized victories, precocious stereotypes and so on. Games were used (and are used) as propaganda tools: toy weapons for young fascists, toy soldiers and wargames.... There is a perverse pedagogical idea behind the possibility of incorporating some “rule of the society” into the rule of a game. Games are also part of any mind control system since the Roman era, as the Latin motto “panem et circenses” (*bread and circuses*) states. At the same time, games convey an idea of freedom that is vital for democracy. The essay investigates the recent history of play and games, looking more closely at the idea of freedom that games may support.

Key words: game, freedom, propaganda, dictatorship

Fiction often offers a distorted version of our reality, somehow with a deeper view on our real obsessions and how our societies really appear. This is more than evident with the success of the “dystopian” genre: a dystopia is a kind of utopia gone wrong, like Orwell’s *1984*, Huxley’s *A Brave New World* or Robert Sheckley’s *The Tenth Victim*. Many dystopian novels and movies pivot around a game or a sport, especially after the global success of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008-2010). *The Hunger Games* is a trilogy set in an unspecified dystopian future time, in the nation of Panem, located in North America. The main city of Panem is called Capitol, surrounded by twelve districts in varying states of poverty. Every year, one boy and one girl from each district are randomly selected for a broadcasted competition called the Hunger Games. The players are “tributes” (every district is still paying a toll for an ancient rebellion) and are forced to fight to the death in a dangerous public arena and are followed via TV by a wide audience. The winner and the winning district are rewarded with food, supplies, and riches. By the end of the trilogy, the protagonist and narrator Katniss Everdeen, a tribute from the twelfth district, will find herself guiding a rebellion and eventually overthrowing the dictators of Capitol. Apparently, sports and games are a propaganda tool of use to any dictatorship: parades and winners, emphasized victories, precocious stereotypes and so on. Games were used (and are used) as propaganda tools: toy weapons for young fascists, toy soldiers and wargames... and some equivalent roles for specific targets. The fact is that there is a perverse pedagogical idea behind the possibility of incorporating some “rule of the society” in the rule of a game, Any toy museum is full of examples of how a culture can be precociously taught through games conveying roles and models, values, and hierarchies. Games, however, are part of any mind control system since the Roman era, as the Latin motto “panem et circenses” (*bread and*

circuses) clearly states. In this essay I would like to investigate the recent history of play and games and to look more closely at the idea of freedom that many games may support.

Let us start with the famous distinction made by Claude Lévi-Strauss¹ between ritual and game. Many societies, both small and large, have ritual forms that aim to keep the group united, therefore those rituals are “conjunctive”; games appear to be, on the other hand, “disjunctive”, as at the end of the game there should be only one winner, and one or more losers – games appear to celebrate a rivalry and competition that risk disrupting the group itself. Some games, for this reason, can become something akin to rituals, when the result of the game is already known or prepared: something similar happens in Italy in the traditional “Corsa dei ceri” di Gubbio (celebrated on May 15th every year from 1126), where three teams from different areas of the town try to take a large statue up the steep roads of Gubbio, to honor the patron saint, Sant’Ubaldo. The team bringing the statue of Sant’Ubaldo has to be the first to finish, therefore the order of arrival is already decided: it is not a true “run” (“corsa”), but somehow a fast procession, and is both a ritual and, borrowing Lévi-Strauss’ term, conjunctive.

Each and every form and kind of power needs its own rituals to maintain consensus among citizens; yet it was only from the nineteenth century that games became a regular part of propaganda, much needed to the storytelling of the dictator or the government. Games were crucial in the representation of the Nazi supremacy in Germany (think of the celebration of the Olympic Games in Berlin as filmed by Leni Riefenstahl), essential during the Cold War or needed to celebrate the unity of Tito’s Yugoslavia. Chess competitions (like the Fischer-Spassky match of 1972), basketball or baseball championships, and even athletic tournaments were used to promote constant competition with other nations: the “disjunctive” propriety of the game was used to celebrate the rituality of a war fought in different fields. A more recent example dates back to 2010, when North Korea joined the final round of the Soccer World Cup, being defeated in one of the early matches by Portugal, with the tragic score of 7-0 – in North Korea the match was not broadcast in its entirety (because of the terrible performance of the team), and the rest of the tournament was not shown but told: while the rest of the world celebrated Spain’s first World Cup, North Korea was told that it had been won by Portugal in order to demonstrate that North Korea had been defeated by the strongest team in the world.

On the other hand, some games were prohibited or censored because they could be part of enemy propaganda. Games have a long tradition of censorship, under any form of government or any church – perhaps the funniest example being the censorship of *Monopoly* by communist regimes, since it

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962)

was felt that the game encouraged players to endorse capitalism. In reality, the game was originally designed as a critique of capitalism by Maggie Smith, a socialist activist around 1900 (and the game was at the time called *The Landlord Game*). What are the distinctive characters of a sport, or a game, to become part of a propaganda? What, on the other hand, are the suspicious aspects that bring a regime to ban it?

As often happens with games, things seem a little confusing.

Let us take, for instance, the uniforms: in a game, they help us to recognize two teams and at the same time they function as a simplification present behind every propaganda act. A uniform tells you who are playing for, in which team, or army, you are playing, and under which flag. For this very reason, games with uniforms seem to be perfect for pushing the propaganda of a government: it is conjunctive under a flag, a color and a team, but disjunctive as we need to state that “our” team, our colors and our flag are better or need more space.

The history of the 20th century tells us that games have often been used in that way, to suggest a strict identification between a team and a nation (in a positive sense, think of the history of the South African rugby team told in *Invictus*. This told the story of the rugby world championship of 1995, won against the odds by the first team after Apartheid while the country was under the presidency of Nelson Mandela). However, the same century shows us how this identification can be in competition with loyalty to a government, that faith in a team or to the uniform of a game (in a wide sense) could be stronger than our dedication to an idea or a government.

Consider the Boy Scouts: in the history of the educational movement founded by Baden-Powell we have uniforms, and we have a wide variety of games used by educators. Scouts were studied as a model on which the young militias of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were built, but at the same time were precociously outlawed (between 1927 and 1928 in Italy; in 1933, in Germany). Later on, in Italy there was a scout platoon, “Le aquile randagie”, which actively fought the Nazi-fascist armies.² In scout education, game (and play) are spaces of freedom and possibility, where children and kids can make attempts and experiences, trying tactics and strategies. Dictatorships are afraid of games that convey an idea of freedom, games that make players experience the possibility of freedom. I see here the same difference that Ermanno Bencivenga³ discerns between costumes and uniforms: the philosopher starts from an ordinary story, someone looking for a carnival costume like the cape of Superman. Some games are a way to make a cape from every piece of fabric, or a magic wand from every piece of wood:⁴ but marketing can sell us the “original” Superman cape, a piece of plastic in a

² See also the movie directed by Gianni Aureli, *Le aquile randagie*, 2019.

³ Ermanno Bencivenga, *Giocare per forza* (Milano: Mondadori 1995).

⁴ Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids* (New York: New Press 2004)

trademarked box. Games are a way to explore a space of liberty, of freedom: in Italian, as in many other European languages, “gioco” stands for a “tolerance” between elements (the same is true in English of the word “play”), for an imperfect fit. Every dictatorship tries to tell its own history as a “perfect solution”, while “games” are imperfect fits: some games offer opportunities to look for our best fit. Possibilities in games are often represented as elements of chance, like cards or dice, both have experienced religious censorship. A good example of the morally dubious nature of games can be seen in the Catholic introduction of a new detail in the Passion of Christ: the Roman soldiers are seen to play dice under the cross, an evil action that wasn’t part of the Gospels, but used nonetheless to make people frown upon games.

Some games are eccentric, because they do not offer a perfect fit: but in those games, as a possibility for education, we have a chance to bring our many ways to be, our many imperfect fits. Eccentric games are conjunctive, because they host many different ways to be while simultaneously offering a space of possibilities. They are also conjunctive in the way Bruner uses this term:⁵ they are the key to a world “in conjunctive mode”, the verbal mode of possibilities and chances. Obviously, not all the games are eccentric: we still have games that perfectly serve propaganda, because they leave very little room for personal interpretations. We now have something akin to a movement to introduce games in education as a system of organized competition, with scores, objectives, and prizes, normally known as “Gamification” and this has taken a very different route from, for instance, the educational games designed in Gaming Simulation. It is a matter of nuances. All the games have some play, some tolerance between elements, which is more or less evident. Every game creates its own universe, one full of possibilities within a given set of rules: some games are more “democratic”, because they give all players similar chances to succeed, and some give tiny possibilities to others. Yet sometimes those tiny possibilities triumph against all odds, and against the will of the dictators, as was the case in the fictional universe of *Hunger Games*. Games are there to explore possibilities and through possibilities we experience the fact that another world is possible.

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