

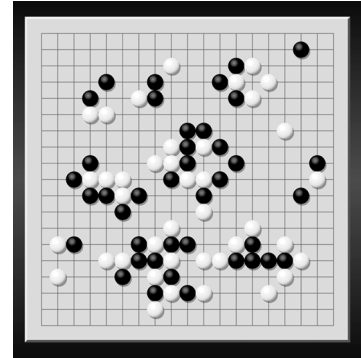
### The Games People Play

The Game Maker for *The New York Times* (Yes! There is a Game Maker) explains.

adapted from an article by Sam Von Ehren

- 1 Why do people love games? As the Game Maker for *The New York Times*, I grapple with this question every day. The reductively easy answer is simple: They're fun! But why are they fun? Do they have to be fun? As we dig deeper and deeper, we find more questions. What even is a game? What is fun? My take on the appeal of games is also simple, if paradoxical. Games are a controlled form of freedom.
- 2 Games occupy a strange place in our cultural consciousness. Nearly everyone has played a game at some point in their lives. And yet, games are rarely discussed with the same reverence as other media like films or books. For most, games are like chocolate: a guilty pleasure consumed secretly. The game designer Sid Meier once remarked that "a game is a series of interesting choices." Navigating these choices shapes the course of play, laying bare who we are and how we think. Playing a game is an act of exposition.
- 3 When you play a game you make several agreements with your opponent. You agree to engage in a voluntary conflict against each other; to follow a system of rules to govern your conflict; and to accept the outcome of those interactions, declaring one the winner and the other a loser. We adhere to these agreements and rules faithfully, committing to and executing the game with little hesitation. Game designers call this alternate state of being "the magic circle". Imagine a circle drawn in chalk on a sidewalk. When we are inside the chalk we are "playing" the game. We'll only do what the rules of the game allow. We will try to win. When the game ends, we leave the circle and return to normal. The magic circle is what separates a game from reality.
- 4 I use the metaphor of a chalk line because the magic circle is not an absolute barrier or even a physical one. We can enter and exit the magic circle freely. We bring our bodies, personalities, and life experiences into the game. We take the memories and experience of the game with us when we leave. The chalk line casts a spell on that space of sidewalk and turns it into a space for playing.

- 5 Humans have always been drawn to this trick, finding novel ways to play within their environments. In prehistoric times, humans were playing games with sheep ankle bones called Knucklebones. Players balance a few bones on top of their hands, then toss a few in the air, capturing as many as possible on the way down. Go, a strategy game invented in ancient China, is still played, highlighting part of what is so fascinating about games. Although Go's origin is unclear, many scholars speculate that it was created to teach tactics and strategy. By entering the magic circle to play Go, we give ourselves permission to try, to fail, to lose, and when we stop playing, we carry that experience with us. The same is true for Chess, Poker, or any number of analog games.



- 6 Digital games take many of the powers of traditional analog games and ramp up both the rate of interaction and the complexity of the underlying systems, but I often find that analog games are a bit more playful. When playing an analog game, the only limitations are the rules you've agreed to. You can modify them at will, more easily creating playful experiences.
- 7 Games sometimes model real-world systems, allowing free exploration of their interlocking processes. The precursor to Monopoly, Elizabeth Magie's The Landlord's Game, was created to model and critique capitalism by giving players an opportunity to feel its failings first hand. It was not very fun, but that's OK. One of the dark secrets of game design is that games don't need to be fun to be meaningful. Games can help us deal with stress and give us the power to transform our living rooms, backyards, and online meetings into different playful realities.

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