

**W** BY MURRAY L. BOB  
HY ARE ADULTS SPENDING MORE TIME playing games, while the young play less than at any time since the '50s? The games adults are indulging in offer some clues. They tend to be either simple, relatively non-competitive TV- and movie-derived party games, or else pop-psychology offerings of the tell-all type.

The game "Adverteasing" tests trivia players' "knowledge" of slogans, jingles and commercials. Fast food for the mind, this game has a "just open the box and play" character. You have neither to sit down nor pay attention. Indeed, you can do several other things while playing. "Dr. Ruth's Game of Good Sex" and "A Nightmare on Elm Street" depend on mass-media tie-ins for their appeal, while "Scruples" has you tell fellow partygoers about your most intimate "relationships."

**Adults just wanna have fun:** The speed and ease with which we learn these games and their brief duration reflect a push-button culture concerned with convenience rather than challenge. Contrast almost any recently devised game with chess, which takes you out of yourself because it demands close attention, and you will see what I mean.

Pop-psychology games mirror the narcissism of the "me" decade. On the other hand, games like "Pictionary" are party games—thus, the self-absorption is not solipsistic. People do socialize. But the undemanding character of the play, its focus on the personal and on "having fun," make winning and losing less important. Like the mass media that inspires so many of them, these games are designed to entertain rather than to challenge.

A spokesperson for Parker Brothers says, "Thirty years ago games were considered childish. Today ... it's become perfectly acceptable for adults to play games." Does this mean that now that games have become childish, adults are more apt to play them? Are adults becoming childish, while children turn adult? It almost seems that way when we learn that college students, who make up a big part of the market for board games, are now increasingly saying that they "don't have time" to play or that they are "into studying."

The clinical psychologist A.S. Longo, developer of the game "Red Letter," says, "Basically we're all out of control in the work environment. When you play a game, the structure of the game gives you control. You understand the parameters." In that context, the contrasting behaviors of working adults and college students vis-à-vis games becomes more explicable, as does the reversal in their respective attitudes over the last three decades.

If work is more "out of control" than it once was, it is understandable that workers will crave the structure that can be found in safe, predictable games. Today's games are entertaining and non-adversarial enough to offer relief from the pressures of increasingly competitive and unpredictable work environments, where the philosophy seems to be that "rules are for fools" or are made only to be broken, bent or stretched.

**Unruly reality:** By contrast, college students, though worried about their futures, presently have relatively safe, structured and subsidized lives. They have less need now for the release that games bring. Legitimate career concerns lead them to believe they haven't time to play around and had better study instead. Thus, the same economic uncertainty that makes adults flee from reality

# WHAT'S IN A GAME?

## FALL OUT OF BED Hold

- Play against one other couple. The male loses 2 Arousal Points, the female loses 1 Arousal Point.

## GONORRHEA SCARE Play Immediately

- All players lose 2 Arousal Points.

## TELEPHONE CALL FROM MOM Play Immediately

## OW! THAT HURT! Play Immediately

- You and your partner each lose 1 Arousal Point.

## SEXUAL DEVICE Play Immediately

- You and your partner gain 3 Arousal Points, which you can split up as you wish. You can move your Arousal markers up or down the Arousal Tracks.

## FLU ATTACK Play Immediately

- You and your partner lose 1 Arousal Point.



into simple games makes students turn from games to preparation for a threatening reality. For the adult the flight is from real uncertainty to playful structure; for youth it is from the temporary safe structure of playland to preparedness for a Hobbesian war of all against all.

One may quarrel with such perceptions, but since feelings are facts, they should be taken into account—and not only by the marketing mavens of gamesmanship. The pressures on the young may be greater and begin earlier than at any time in the last 40 years: get good grades, get into the right schools, meet the right people, make career decisions

in order to do well in a job market more mercurial with every passing decade. It isn't just in teaching and engineering that personnel shortages change to surpluses every four years; the same thing holds true of stockbrokers, doctors and other professions. And socio-economic uncertainty isn't confined to jobs: affordable housing is notorious by its absence, marriages are more than ever a gamble and, as a consequence, families have assumed almost unrecognizable and incomprehensible shapes—by the standards that used to prevail.

But it isn't just students who have problems. Poor working stiffs have to deal with

the reality that the factory, business or service that employs them may be sold out from under them virtually overnight, jeopardizing all aspects of their existence. Workers must come to terms with a situation wherein competitors from across the globe are more of a menace than those half a mile away. Nor are those in public employ more secure, subject as they are to the vagaries of an increasingly irrational budget process at every level of government.

It's easy to see why many adults choose to spend their lives playing games, since games are being played with their lives.

Murray L. Bob is a writer in Jamestown, N.Y.