



**The Game of Life: Struggles of the  
Modern Man  
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**Abstract**

Artifacts from both games and movies can act as euphemistic lenses, subtly implying the values of the time, sometimes inadvertently. Other artifacts reveal paradoxical values of the time explicitly, elucidating the struggle of the modern era. *The Game of Life* board game, a family game made popular in the 1960s, glorifies a life of financial success, promising great rewards to anyone who will spin the game wheel. It is a game no one can lose. Similarly, Ron Howard's film, *Parenthood*, speaks to the struggle of the modern man, a constant battle between the want of a family life and a successful career full of financial awards. This paper attempts to break down these values and elucidate the power of these seemingly benign artifacts.

*Keywords: Board Games, Movies, Modern Era, Modern Man*

### Introduction

Board games and movies act as metaphors for our lives. On their surface, board games are safe. Our actions during play are seemingly without consequences, forever lasting between the four corners of the board, never escaping into our own reality. But board games also imply values, principles that guide us to our glory or even to our doom. The values implant themselves furtively, often residing in cartoon pictures or the squares on the board; they are rarely obvious. Milton Bradley's 1980s version of *The Game of Life* instills a philosophy of wealth and materialism, an obsession with success, paralleling the fluctuating stock market of the 1980s; Ron Howard's *Parenthood* (1989), an award-winning "comedy," shows a more personal example of these values, revealing the paradoxical nature of a man's conflicting role as a father and a successful corporate worker in the dangerous tides of modern culture.

Despite the economic boom of the 1980s, both *The Game of Life* and *Parenthood* arose out of a precarious economic reality. The majority of the 1980s, coined by conservative thinkers as the "Reagan Boom," was a period of impressive economic gain in the United States, citing a record of an additional 18.7 million jobs and an unemployment rate below 5% (Anderson, 1990). Conservative pundits argued that the economic boom was proof of the benefits of pure capitalism, citing that lower taxes and corporate deregulation were superior to more socialist economic strategies (Ferrara, 2011). Despite this overall success, however, the American economy suffered the largest percentage drop of stock prices in American history in the latter half of the decade. The initial economic success of the mid-80s saw an increase in pension funds,

resulting in an overvalued stock market (Carlson, 2007). In 1987, the stock market crash forced the Dow Jones to tumble 22.6%, plunging American families into the second recession of the decade. Although the 1980s suffered recessions, the majority of the decade was seen as a triumph of American capitalist values; American families, however, struggled to maintain a balance between this newfound glory of the corporate world and their time at home.

### **The *Game of Life* Board Game**

The goal of *The Game of Life* board game is to successfully travel through life until one reaches the millionaire estates, the final square of the game. With its rebirth in the 1960s, each version of the game (with a new version arriving approximately once every decade) parallels that particular time's cultures and values, always in the capitalist tradition of cash consciousness and materialistic success (Lepore, 2007). Two to eight players spin a multi-colored wheel in the middle of the board, traveling square by square across a three-dimensional terrain of bridges, mountains, homes, buildings, and churches. Unlike Monopoly, where the player's piece is a thimble or shoe, players in *The Game of Life* travel the board by miniature cars, which include spaces for a spouse and several children. During the first stage of the game, players must spin the wheel and choose one of two paths: (1) go straight to work, skipping the longer career route; or (2) go to college, selecting their job of choice (e.g., doctor, teacher, etc.). The first stage of the game ends at the three-dimensional church attached to the board, where the player must marry; the spouse (personified in another small pin) is set in the seat in the player's car. The remainder of the game consists of the players spinning the wheel, hoping to land on the good squares

(which may include money or asset bonuses) and avoid the bad squares (which may include taxes or the loss of a job). As players travel the board, they have the opportunity to participate in the stock market and various insurance packages, ensuring that their eventual net worth will exceed that of the other players. *The Game of Life*, then, attempts to parallel the journey of a typical American family in a purely capitalist tradition.

The game board encourages the capitalist values of wealth and materialism. Looking at the board, players can easily spot the implied values. In the 1980s and 90s versions of the game, the pictures of no less than seven sports cars, all freshly waxed with shiny exteriors and wheels, soar across the board. Five multi-leveled homes, varying from white-columned mansions to hearty winter cottages, are strategically placed around the board's corners and pathways, tempting the player with implied comforts of bright green lawns and comforting home fires. Cartoon businessmen with white smiles play rounds of golf on two corners, hitting the green with polished golf clubs, as if their greatest worry was how to conquer the 18th hole. Families ski the white slopes, zooming down mountains across the board. Sailboats float by, carrying smiling families holding hands. Random piles of dark green cash are spattered across the board with the occasional \$100 dollar bill floating through the sky like an innocent feather. Perhaps even more revealing is the omission of certain realities. Racial minorities cannot be found on the board. There is no sense of poverty, no sense of "losing" in a capitalist society. Rather, the board drips with materialism and wealth, giving the player a vision of a utopia, a consumer-driven world opened to anyone willing to play; it almost whispers, "Come, and this too shall be your reward."

*The Game of Life* presents an obsession with success, implying that financial success is inevitable as long as one plays the game. The "good squares" vastly outweigh the "bad," often awarding the players with multiple thousands of additional capital. Players hit or pass "Pay Days" every eight squares, paralleling real-world payday schedules. Players may also land on random pay raises of \$10,000, adding to their growing net worth. Lottery winnings of over \$50,000 and family cruises also litter the board, promising the players that eventually they will strike gold. Families may take random theme-park vacations. They might even have the opportunity to "Hire a Maid and Butler." In the 1990s version, players can win Idol Shows and Dancing Contests.

Not all of the squares give benefits, but the "bad squares" are not all that bad; players may be forced to purchase extravagances, but these purchases are always covered by the plethora of good squares. Players may be forced to pay taxes, but only if they land on that square; unlike the Pay Day squares, which are awarded regardless of whether the player lands on them or passes, taxes are only required by the unlucky soul who spins the wrong number. It is not uncommon, then, for players to complete the game without paying taxes. The only somewhat financially dangerous squares are the nine "Lawsuit" squares, suing the hapless player for \$100,000. Players can also lose their jobs. The loss, however, is minimal; players simply select a new "Career Card," with additional qualifications being unnecessary.

Thus, one cannot lose *The Game of Life*. With the ratio of good squares to bad squares, the player commonly ends the game as a multi-millionaire. Salaries, raises, and random bonuses

more than compensate for the occasional bad square. Even if the player is slightly short in net worth, the final square allows the player to "Collect a Retirement Gift of \$10,000 from Each Child." Thus, the *Game of Life* is called a "Family Game," so easy a child can play it and win.

### **Ron Howard's *Parenthood***

Ron Howard's 1989 hit movie *Parenthood* serves as a more personal example to the implied values of *The Game of Life*. Grossing over 100 million nationwide, *Parenthood* won numerous awards and garnered significant support from critics, arguing that it is "the best kind of comedy... where we eventually acknowledge that there is a truth in comedy that serious drama never can quite reach" ("Box Office Mojo," 2011; Ebert, 1989). *Parenthood* is a complex tale of three generations of the Buckman family, suffering from workplace woes, family trauma, and the struggle of maintaining the delicate balance of work and family. Gil Buckman (Steve Martin) is determined to be a better father than his own, striving to be an attentive father to his three children, the eldest of whom suffers from anxiety disorders. Gil works as a sales executive, wining and dining business-types, desperately waiting for another promotion, all while trying to maintain the delicate balance with his family. He is a good father, but he is terrified that his work-life will force him to become a detached workaholic, disregarded by his wife and hated by his children. The pressure peaks when Gil arrives home after his company denies him the promotion, selecting a shameless young buck instead; he then learns that his wife, Karen, is pregnant again. The pressure is too much, and Gil nearly loses all faith in his plan. In the end, however, Gil takes a cue from the philosophy of his 90-year-old grandmother: "I enjoy the roller

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coaster," his grandmother said. "You get more out of it."

*Parenthood* speaks to the paradox of manliness in the modern era; Western culture expects men to be manly, stoically and courageously supporting their families through hard work. But the culture also insists that men be "in touch with their softer side," being the good husband and father to their wives and families and spending quality time with each. The paradox is most apparent in the scene when Gil arrives home from work after having been fired (See Appendix). He is stuck in this paradox, as if his arms are being wrenched from two opposite but equally powerful forces, and he can hear his torso tearing. The modern era requires men to assert their dominance and independence, to take life by the horns, to make "spur of the moment" decisions like quitting a job on ethical grounds. But this purely manly action fails to account for consequences; Karen reveals her pregnancy, and she suggests that Gil consider returning to work: "this is why I'm saying maybe...now this isn't the best time for you to be out of work or starting a new job." Such an action, Gil feels, would disgrace his masculinity; he would have to "crawl back, kiss Dave's feet and get my crappy job back." Such action would demean him, feminize him, and castrate him to the point of admitting "I'm a eunuch."

Karen counters that the unexpected pregnancy affects her as well; she cannot return to work. Karen accepts the pregnancy, taking the unexpected with a *C'est la Vie* attitude that Gil finds infuriating. Suspecting that Gil may want to end the pregnancy, Karen asks Gil directly whether or not he'd prefer an abortion. Frustrated with Gil's indecision, Karen inadvertently appeals to his manly side, urging him to pretend "it's your decision...pretend you're a caveman or

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your father. What do you want me to do?" Unable or unwilling to make a decision, Gil seeks a more supportive consolidation: "I want... [sits down, defeated] I want whatever you want." The paradox defeats Gil as he mutters: "That's the difference between men and women. Women have choices. Men have responsibilities."

The thought of another baby, another responsibility, acts as a scathing reminder to Gil that he is already failing as a father, unable to separate the pressures of work and the pressures of family in the unpredictable economy of the late 1980s. He cannot be both a father and a supporter, working 60, sometimes 80, hours per week, his energy zapped as if he ran two marathons after a sleepless night. Gil's own father showed no emotion; he worked those 80 hours, supported his family, being manly. Fatherly support for Gil, though, was nonexistent. During the first scene of *Parenthood*, Gil vows, "it will be different with my kids." Gil will do whatever is needed to have "strong, happy, confident kids." But in the scene with Karen in the bedroom, having lost his job and learning of a new child, Gil feels the impossible weight bear down on him as if he were the titan Atlas, legs and arms trembling as he balances the Earth on his meager shoulders. He is forced to accept the seemingly inevitable reality that he must return to work, whether it be his past job or an equally depressing employment; he will be forced to play politics, forced to smile when he'd rather weep:

**Gil:** Whether I crawl back to Dave or get another job...it's obvious now I'm gonna have to spend less time at home. I'm gonna have to have business dinners. I'm gonna have to play racquetball. I'm gonna have to get guys laid. I hope you don't mind if I bring home a



few prostitutes, honey, because that's what it takes to get anywhere, and I'm not getting anywhere! Whatever happens, you have to count on less help from me.

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**Gil:** I'm ready to discuss it. However, I can't right now. I gotta go to the goddamn Little League. Ten little boys are waiting for me to guide them into last place.

**Karen:** You really have to go?

**Gil:** My whole life is "have to."

Throughout most of the film, Gil Buckman lives as if he is spinning the wheel on *The Game of Life*. He is a product of a capitalist culture, beckoning him to embrace his manliness and plow through the hours, the office politics, the wining and dining; he lives under the false impression that success in his society is a matter of luck, a matter of merely spinning the wheel. No one loses in *The Game of Life*; there are no pictures of failed families, suffering from bankruptcy and poverty, unable to feed their children. *The Game of Life* culture assures Gil that success is something to be reached, always defined as a monetary level he has not yet achieved. In the end, Gil realizes the fantasy; the mirage proposed by *The Game of Life* and the American culture of the 1980s is a false promise. Gil eventually takes his cue from his wife, Karen. She has no use for "success" in the conventional sense. Karen refuses to live her life by some spinning wheel telling her when they have landed on a bad square or a good square. To her, both the bad squares and the good squares have different values and meaning; they remind her that life isn't a game to be played, another wheel to spin, a boring merry-go-round. Life, she feels, is a roller

coaster.

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### About the Author



Jonathan Cisco is a PhD student in Learning and Teaching at the University of Missouri. His research focuses on teaching difficult texts, writing across the curriculum, and tutoring composition.

### Appendix

Parenthood (1989)

Gil and Karen

[*Setting: Bedroom. Gil comes home after quitting his job. Kids are playing loudly downstairs.*

*The house is a mess. ]*

**Gil:** I quit my job.

**Karen:** Why?

**Gil:** They gave the partnership to Phil Richards. This is a guy who leaves his wife and kids...then puts his money in his girlfriend's name to get out of paying child support. I mean, the guy is--

Anyway, I couldn't stand it. I snapped.

**Karen:** Can you still change your mind?

**Gil:** What do you mean, change my mind? I quit.

**Karen:** I know, but did you say anything that would make it difficult for them to take you back?

**Gil:** Jesus, honey, I was hoping you'd be a little more supportive.

**Karen:** I'm pregnant.

**Gil:** [*shocked*] Since when?

**Karen:** Since I am. I'm due in February. I didn't want to say anything until I was sure.

**Gil:** How did this happen?

**Karen:** It was an accident. Anyhow, this is why I'm saying maybe...now this isn't the best time for you to be out of work or starting a new job.

**Gil:** You know, if you'd told me there was a chance of this happening, I might not have quit.

**Karen:** You never told me there was a chance you might quit.

**Gil:** It was a spur-of-the-moment decision.

**Karen:** Pretty big one.

**Gil:** Are you saying I should crawl back, kiss Dave's feet and get my crappy job back? I quit! If I go back now, they've got me. I'm a eunuch.

**Karen:** This puts a minor crimp in my life too. I was thinking about starting back to work in the fall. Now I can't.

**Gil:** That's the difference between men and women. Women have choices. Men have responsibilities.

**Karen:** Oh, really? Okay, well, then, I choose for you to have the baby. That's my choice. You have the baby. You get fat. You breast-feed until your nipples are sore. I'll go back to work.

**Gil:** Let's return from la-la land, because that ain't gonna happen. Whether I crawl back to Dave or get another job...it's obvious now I'm gonna have to spend less time at home. I'm gonna have to have business dinners. I'm gonna have to play racquetball. I'm gonna have to get guys laid. I hope you don't mind if I bring home a few prostitutes, honey, because that's what it takes to get anywhere, and I'm not getting anywhere! Whatever happens, you have to count on less help from me.

**Karen:** [*pause*] Why don't you just say what you're really thinking?

**Gil:** What am I thinking?

**Karen:** That I should have an abortion?

**Gil:** I didn't say that. That's a decision every woman has to make on her own.

**Karen:** What are you running for Congress? Don't give me that. I want your opinion about what we should do. Let's pretend it's your decision, okay? Pretend you're a caveman or your father. What do you want me to do?

**Gil:** I want... [*sits down*] I want whatever you want.

**Karen:** I wanna have the baby.

**Gil:** Well, great! Let's have it then. Let's see how I can screw the fourth one up. Let's have five. Let's have six! Let's have a dozen and pretend they're doughnuts! [*pause*] I'm really happy about the way things are turning out, aren't you?

**Karen:** With your frame of mind, not only am I not sure we should have another baby...I'm not sure we should keep the three we've got.

**Gil:** I'm ready to discuss it. However, I can't right now. I gotta go to the goddamn Little League. Ten little boys are waiting for me to guide them into last place.

**Karen:** You really have to go?

**Gil:** My whole life is "have to."