

Introduction to *Gaming as a Technique of Analysis* (1954)

Katie Salen

1954. West Germany gains an unexpected 3-2 victory over Hungary in the World Cup, known from then on as The Miracle of Bern. Officials announce that an American hydrogen bomb test had been conducted on Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. Marilyn Monroe weds Joe DiMaggio. The Geneva Conference partitions Vietnam into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Mathematician Alan Turing commits suicide.

When viewed from this perspective, 1954 was a year of conflict, a year filled with instability and transformation on the world stage. This instability was mirrored by a change in the way man regarded machine, aided by a realization of the immense potential of high-speed computers to assist in decision-making processes. The digital age was in its infancy, and in texts like “Gaming as a Technique of Analysis” we catch a glimmer of the computational future as it was once conceived. Yet at the same time, despite its wrapping in an era of atomic optimism, we see computer scientists turning to the expressly human element of games, to the role of *man the player*, explicitly perceived.

As analysts, Mood and Specht are concerned with the human qualities of judgment and intuition, and the way the process of decision-making can be modeled by a machine, in this case a game, “...a black box into which we crank inputs and out of which are ground outputs.” While we might not naturally think about games as machines—they hardly seem so in their spontaneous and improvisational expression of play—games *can* be understood as state machines, or models of behavior composed of states, transitions, and actions. As game designer Warren Robinett points out, “A video game is a simulation, a model, a metaphor.” This definition of games as *models* is important to note, for it points to their status as artificial systems, systems that reflect the values and expertise of their designers. As *designed* models then, games embed man in both their creation and in their play, as Mood and Specht are quick to point out.

Presented as part of a symposium on the use and value of war game methods, “Gaming as a Technique of Analysis,” argues for gaming as a strategy for discovering optimal choice within a system of complex possible outcomes. They characterize gaming as “the use of a model with a human decision link,” which is simply a fancy way of saying that games have players. These players are bound by the rules of the game, act within these constraints, and tend to optimize their choices in pursuit of the best possible outcome. Yet rules never solely determine the play of a game, and are always set into motion by players with their own wants, skills, and expectations.

But of even greater importance to analysts of the time, gaming as defined by Mood and Specht provided an observable and repeatable system where multiple scenarios could be quantitatively assessed and tested, by players who despite their fallibility as humans, carried with them the power of creative thought, intuition, and speculation. For the authors, this power is what set gaming apart from pure machinic calculation. “To sit down and play through a game is to be convinced as by no argument, however persuasively presented.” Man-machine reigned supreme, and more than 50 years after this text was written, the world of players would be hard-pressed to disagree.