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**THE AUSTERITY
KITCHEN**
BY CHRISTINE
BAUMGARTHUBER

Where the alimentary is
elementary.



At the end of the 18th century, historian E.P. Thompson writes, "the utilitarian attitudes of the new manufacturing class ... impose[d] a work discipline in the factory towns [and] made it hostile to many traditional amusements and levities."

In the first volume of *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (1908), author Georg Simmel offers a less cheerful take on the pleasant character of parlor games. He observes that at dinner gatherings and other social events "countless suggestions and nervous influences [go] back and forth, robbing individuals of their repose and independence of thought and action." These antic oscillations condition said individuals to respond to "the most fleeting stimulations" with "the most excessive impulses," their "higher, discriminating, critical functions ... as good as turned off." Higher faculties among the players thus deactivated, "parlor games usually achieve the greatest joyful outcome."

In May of 1826 the Bradford wool-combers and weavers met to consider "present unparalleled distress and famishing condition of the operatives," and could think of no way of mending it but by breaking windows.

Previously by
CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER

*Coweye Burgers and
Plastic Malts*

Dinner with Caligula

*A Contrary Image of
Steaming Excrement*

Some Assembly Required: Parlor Games and Their Uses

By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER



WOODEN FACE.

It often happens that, by accident of consanguinity or some other connection, people who don't get along must spend a few after-dinner hours together. This happens mostly at holidays. Once the jellied cranberry and candied yams have been dispatched, these ill-sorted fellows, having swallowed their antipathies like so many antacids, sit in uneasy silence. Feeling it at once too early and too late to leave, they devise ways to beguile those hours. Most times the choice can be as stark as watching TV or sitting in silence, nursing drinks. The first option is usually exercised, if only so as to avoid the second. Three hours slathered in surround-sound bombast works its magic; guests and hosts are ready to head home or to bed. The next day, the gathering is judged by all involved to have been a success.

Reach far enough back in the annals of history, and you'll discover evenings spent among relations (and non-relations) weren't always so uninspired. Those masters of postprandial entertainment, the Victorians, simply refused to allow their guests to escape unamused. They played cards, contemplated rebuses or exchanged riddles. Before roaring fires, children pantomimed and adults struck poses in elaborate *tableaux vivants* of subjects mythological and historical. Of special fondness were parlor games, which united brother and sister, stepchild and stepparent, man and wife in diversions both "innocent and healthful," as *The Book of Parlor Games* puts it.



PINCH WITHOUT LAUGHING.

These amusements existed in such variety as to appeal to every temperament and turn of mind. Logic contests and word-play required keen powers of thought; "games of motion" demanded great vigor and strength. A parlor game could last hours or mere minutes. In terms of set-up, handiness trumped complexity. All but a very few games participants could play using items found in the typical Victorian household. When it was fair, games moved out-of-doors to the garden. Perhaps most importantly, parlor games encouraged virtually no competition, and thus occasioned no potential divisiveness. No one kept score. The winners claimed their friends' applause as their trophy.

Parlor games owed their tremendous popularity, which they enjoyed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to their inoffensive character. Families found the games' arrangements pleasantly inclusive, their rules quickly comprehensible. Those wishing to play games of unusual intricacy had manuals to rely on. These placed such games under one of six categories: Games of Motion; Games Which Simply Require Attention; Games of Memory; Games of Wit; Games for Catching, or Which Are Intended to Mystify or Tease; Games in Which Gallantry Can Be Shown, or Wit, or Learning.

The most exhilarating of these merriments required players to act out scenarios. "The Wolf and the Dog," for instance, enlisted an active and robust man capable of calling "his courage and patience forth" to play the Wolf. The role of the Dog fell to the group's oldest woman, behind whom all the other players lined up to form her tail. The Wolf was tasked with seizing the person representing the final segment of the Dog's tail, crying, "I am the Wolf, I will eat you!", as he lunged. Once the Wolf successfully captured that person, he or she moved ahead of the woman designated the Dog. The games continued in this way until the Dog found herself the last in line.

Games requiring greater mental than physical exertion often proved exhilarating in their own right. "A Curate and a Vicar are chosen, and as many professions as there are players," read the instructions to "His Worship and the Curate," as recorded in *The Book of Parlor Games*:

and when the Curate has begun, and has said to the one he wishes to attack, "I come from your house, Mr. Optician, or Madame the Milliner (or any other trades-person,) but I did not find you in; where were you?" The person interrogated replies, "I was at—(whomever she pleases to say—Hairdresser, Tailor, Goldsmith, &c., provided one has been named.)

The person mentioned, instead of replying, "That is a falsehood," demands of him who has been questioned, "*What were you doing there?*" and the person must reply something suited to the trade mentioned.... A forfeit must be given when something is said not suited to the trade mentioned. It is the same as if the same motive be assigned for a visit as before. They have a right to the Curate's, and, at his question "*What were you doing there?*" is replied, "Getting married," or any thing relating to his ministry, and the Curate is obliged to make a reply conformable to the person whose trade he mentions.

In addition to having "nothing rude in it," "His Worship the Curate" enjoyed the virtue of being "useful in giving general notions in arts and trades." If stimulation of the brain led to stimulation to industry, all the better for the individual and society!

"The Cook who does not like Bones" similarly put players' wits to the challenge. A letter known only to the player designated the leader other players had to avoid. At the leader's prompting his right-hand neighbor put to the other players this question: "My cook does not like bones; what shall we give her to eat?" If the letter to be avoided was "O," say, and a player answered, "Carrots, peas," then the leader responded, "She don't like them, give a forfeit." The game continued until one of the players guessed the proscribed letter.

Other games emphasized powers of invention over those of perception or recall. In "The Metamorphosis," players chose as their "emblem" a piece of furniture or other such household item. "I should like to be a needle," proclaimed a player. This cued the remaining party to begin applying "delicate or mischievous phrases to the metamorphosed person," in response to the question, "If madame was a needle, what would you do with her, what would you think of her, of what would you wish to be?" A successful answer would have gone something like, "She is English, she is piercing, but that she attaches herself." Conjuring witty and amusing phrases was the object.

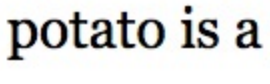


THE SOCCERED BEHIND THE SCREEN.

Inoffensive amusements, parlor games could only blossom in the vast tracts of time formerly claimed by banal necessity. They belonged, then, to the middle and upper classes, who treated them as means of forging group identity at a time when accomplishing such a thing proved difficult. "When, as in modern societies, families lose the monopoly of the establishment of exchanges which can lead to lasting relationships," writes sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, "they may continue to control these exchanges, while remaining within the logic of laissez-faire, through all the institutions which are designed to favor legitimate exchanges, and exclude illegitimate ones." This families accomplish "by producing occasions ... or practices ... which bring together, in a seemingly fortuitous way, individuals as homogeneous as possible in all the pertinent respects in terms of the existence and persistence of the group." Under this second category, "practices," Bourdieu includes parlor games.

If all that's solid melted into air under conditions of capitalism, parlor games and similar practices acted as so many bladders to capture this sublimated social stuff that was formerly so reliably substantial. Capture of this sort required that the individuals participating be taken out of their existing identities and placed in new ones that were determined by the game's instructions, and that in turn determined its outcome. The all-important function of role-playing, then, came down to constituting an identity, however extrinsic and provisional, within a rule far simpler and a field of action far more tightly context-bound than those of the world in which the participants otherwise inhabited. The lack of score-keeping or any other element of competition indicated that the object of a parlor game was not to win the game, but to win allegiances, as the expectation was that the social bonds forged during the game's play the players would translate beyond the confines of that event.

The current after-dinner practice of vegging out in front of the tube appears as simply the next stage of a process set in motion during the great age of the parlor game. The role of television viewer is even simpler than that of pantomimed butcher, baker or candlestick maker; the rules governing the act of viewing simpler still. Keeping quiet and not walking in front of the screen too often is all that is expected of participants. The questions put to them test only the ability to clarify certain plot points: *Who is that woman again? Or: Where did he say he left the briefcase?* A convenient relief from the subtle agonies of socializing, television viewing is perhaps the most homogenizing parlor game ever devised. Whether you find it in a field or on a couch, a potato is a potato is a potato, after all.



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Pictures from Catharine Harbeson Waterman's *The Book of Parlor Games* (1853)

Austin Bierbower's *The Virtues and their Reasons* (1888) warns against games "which imprudently excite in children the passion for winning, and then withhold the chance—thus cheating them as well as tempting them."

Recipe for Parlor Punch from *La Cuisine Creole* (1886): "One tablespoonful of white sugar, a little lemon juice, two wineglassfuls of English black tea, one wineglassful of whiskey, one-half wineglassful of Jamaica rum, a little raspberry syrup, plenty of small ice. Shake well, and strain in fancy glass."

"The Forms of Capital" (1986)

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