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# Anti-Capitalist Ideology Animated First 'Monopoly' Game

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By Kristin Aguilera

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This month, hundreds of thousands of voters in 180 countries elected a new “Monopoly” token that will be added to the game later this year. The cat token won the race and will replace the iron, which was introduced in the 1930s.

More than 1 billion people have played “Monopoly” since its creation, by some estimates, with more than 275 million copies sold in 111 countries and 43 languages. But while the game’s success is indisputable, its origins are not.

An unemployed salesman and heating engineer named Charles Darrow has been widely credited with inventing Monopoly during the Great Depression. Darrow, along with his wife and son, designed and hand-produced the sets beginning in 1933. In 1935, Darrow licensed the game to Parker Brothers and quickly became a wealthy man.

Maxine Brady includes this story in her 1975 publication, “The Monopoly Book: Strategy and Tactics of the World’s Most Popular Game.” And when Darrow died in 1967, the headline of his obituary in the New York Times read “Charles B. Darrow Dies at 78; Inventor of Game of Monopoly.”

But while he was an inspirational story of achievement during the Depression, Darrow seems to have entered the picture decades into the game’s history. The game that today epitomizes the triumph of capitalism actually began as a tool for teaching an anti-capitalist economic theory.

## 'LANDLORD'S GAME'

Elizabeth Magie (later Elizabeth Magie Phillips) developed what is arguably the earliest version of "Monopoly" around the beginning of the 20th century. Her invention, called "The Landlord's Game," was patented in 1904 and manufactured beginning in 1906. Magie was a follower of the economist Henry George, who vehemently opposed land ownership and believed capitalism created an unfair advantage for landowners.

Magie's purpose in developing the game wasn't merely to provide a diversion for families, but to illustrate the Georgist principle that rents impoverished tenants while making property owners rich. The game included George's concept of a single land-value tax, which he believed would discourage real estate speculation. And, unlike "Monopoly," the properties were rented and not owned. Among the similarities between Magie's game and "Monopoly" were the "continuous path" structure, with no set beginning or end; property groups; and "Go to Jail" and "Jail" spaces.

In 1909, Magie approached Parker Brothers about purchasing "The Landlord's Game" from her publishing company, Economic Game Co., but George Parker, the company's founder, declined. Meanwhile, business professors began using Magie's game as a teaching tool, and students shared it with their friends and families. An abridged version omitting the single federal land tax -- renamed "Auction Monopoly" -- gained traction in the 1910s. In addition to the name, the similarities between this version and "Monopoly" were even more striking than the original, with named streets, a monopoly rule allowing higher rents to be charged when a player owned all railroads and utilities, and chips representing property improvements.

Magie approached Parker Brothers with this variation in 1923, but again, George Parker declined.

By the 1920s, "Auction Monopoly" was spreading from dorm room to dorm room and kitchen to kitchen throughout the Eastern and Midwestern U.S. And, much like folklore, different versions and regional adaptations began to appear. Daniel Layman developed an edition of the game based on the streets of Indianapolis, which he called "The Fascinating Game of Finance" (later, "Finance"). This version crept even closer to modern "Monopoly," as it included four railroads, and spaces and cards for "Chance" and "Community Chest."

## DARROW'S 'INVENTION'

Another adaptation appeared shortly thereafter, when Ruth Hoskins, having learned the game in Indianapolis, brought it with her to Atlantic City, where she had accepted a teaching job in 1929. There she replaced the property names with the names of local streets and reinstated Magie's rule of purchasing properties for set prices instead of auctioning them. This is the version to which Darrow was probably introduced through an acquaintance of his wife.

With no job and lots of time on his hands, Darrow set about creating his own copies, with numerous graphical improvements that we recognize today as the signature game designs.

Darrow called his game "Monopoly" and hand-painted one set per day, which he sold for \$4 apiece. Soon the demand for "Monopoly" was greater than he was able to fulfill. He hired a company to print the game on cardboard, and he sold it in a Philadelphia department store.

Darrow copyrighted Monopoly in 1933 and attempted to sell it to Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers, both of which rejected it the following year.

In 1935, Parker Brothers learned about the game's impressive sales in Philadelphia and reconsidered, but by then Darrow had realized its commercial potential. Although he may have been inclined to sell it outright to Parker Brothers at their initial meeting, this time around Darrow insisted on a licensing agreement, whereby he would receive royalties from sales.

"Taking the precepts of Monopoly to heart," Darrow told the New York Times, "I did not care to speculate, and when Parker Brothers, Inc. made an attractive offer, I gladly accepted and have never regretted that decision." Royalty payments made Darrow a millionaire, and his family continues to receive substantial payments today.

The success of "Monopoly" and the complexity of its history have spawned many arguments, disputes and lawsuits over the years. As President John F. Kennedy once said, victory has many fathers. In this case, it has many inventors.

(Kristin Aguilera is the deputy director of the Museum of American Finance and the editor of Financial History magazine. The opinions expressed are the author's own.)

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To contact the writer of this post: Kristin Aguilera at [kaguilera@moaf.org](mailto:kaguilera@moaf.org).

To contact the editor responsible for this post: Timothy Lavin at [tlavin1@bloomberg.net](mailto:tlavin1@bloomberg.net).