

## LIZZIE MAGIE: AMERICA'S FIRST LADY OF GAMES

*David Parlett*

The idea for this talk arose out of a meeting at last year's Dau Barcelona, an annual game fair held in the capital of Catalonia. Dau Barcelona makes special awards to games inventors and prominent people in the games world. Last year Dan Glimne proposed that it also establish a Hall of Fame for people who might have won it in the past had it existed. Two names immediately suggested were, unsurprisingly, Alfonso the Wise and Steward Culin. I suggested also Lizzie Magie, inventor of the forerunner of Monopoly, and started preparing a citation on her behalf.

But it has proved much harder to discover as much about the person as about her best-known game. Her biography remains unwritten, and her papers are guarded by a New York journalist whom I've not yet been able to contact. Much can be gleaned from some of the most prominent books on the history of Monopoly, notably those of Mary Pilon (*The Monopolists*, 2015), Phil Orbanes (*Monopoly – the World's Most Famous Game, and how it got that Way*, 2006), and Ralph Anspach's obsessively detailed account of his battle with Parker Brothers' lawyers to defend his own game of Anti-Monopoly (*The Billion Dollar Monopoly Swindle*, 1998). Equally helpful have been various postings on the websites [landlordsgame.info/](http://landlordsgame.info/) and [themonopolist.net](http://themonopolist.net).

First problem: although the years of her birth and death are recorded (1866-1948) I only found the actual dates by going to the website of the cemetery sheltering the remains of her and her husband Albert Phillips. Another query: Lizzie Magie is always said to have been a Quaker, as I am, but there is no documentary evidence for it, though she did move in Quaker circles for much of her life. Then again, there's the question of whether or not she knew Stewart Culin. In a BGS paper of 2011, Phil Winkelman suggested that Culin's description of the Kiowan board game Zohn Ahl might have inspired the basic board layout of Magie's proto-Monopoly, given that she was supposedly a friend of his. But was she? The only source for this assertion is one Bonita Freeman-Witthoft in an unsupported comment in

her contribution to *Ancient Board Games in Perspective* (2007). Freeman-Witthoft also suggests that Magie saw Culin's reproduction of great game of eternal circuits, the Liverpool Codex, "and saw the eternal rounds possible in board games".

Why do I call Lizzie Magie 'America's first lady of games'? The title might equally apply to Anne Abbott (1808-1908), inventor of *Dr Busby* (1843) and *Authors* (1861). But how many people have heard of her today? As befits the daughter of a clergyman, Abbott invented simple moral games for children. Magie, however, as befits the daughter of a radical economist\*, invented a complicated game for adults. Her claim to fame is as the composer of a startlingly original and fecund combination of ludemes.

## Development and evolution

First among them is the conversion of the Goose-like pattern of a linear race game with a Start and a Home, or Goal, into a closed loop in which players' tokens circulate till the game ends by depletion of resources. She may not have been the first to make this leap: Adrian Seville has drawn my attention to a game called Monopolist in the New York Historical Society Museum. Its rules are unknown, but the absence of Start and Home spaces could indicate a game of recirculation. (Mancala games are of course recirculatory, but are unlikely to have influenced her.) But to this she added what I think is the novel feature that players can purchase the rights to individual spaces and then charge other players for landing on them. This is certainly unlike anything seen before in race games. Equally advanced was the fact that Landlords was more of a role-playing game, in which much of the player interaction took place off the board and between the personalities involved. Another remarkable indication of her originality is that the ruleset contains a meta-rule, the earliest example I have ever come across. ("Should any emergency arise which is not covered by the rules of the game, the players must settle the matter between themselves; but if any player absolutely refuses to obey the rules as above set forth he must go to jail and remain there until he throws a double or pays his fine, as explained in paragraph "No trespassing.")

Lizzie's first game was called the *Landlords Game*, or just *Landlords*. She developed this in her mid-thirties, while living at Brentwood, Maryland, being granted a patent for it in 1904. The mechanism of purchasing and owning spaces and thereby gaining further resources for continuing the game was inspired by her ideological commitment to Henry George's Single-Tax

theory, which her father James actively promoted. Thus the mechanics of play derived naturally from the narrative theme of the game itself, which is the ideal way of inventing games.

In 1906, she moved to Chicago. That year, she and fellow Georgists formed the Economic Game Co. to self-publish her original edition of "The Landlord's Game." In 1910 she married Albert Phillips, and Parker Brothers published her humorous card game "Mock Trial." In 1912, "The Landlord's Game" was adapted in Scotland by the Newbie Game Co. as "Bre'r Fox and Bre'r Rabbit." The instructions claimed it was protected by a British patent, but this is not well evidenced.

Landlords underwent several transformations in the ensuing years. "The object of the game" she says in her first patent, "is to obtain as much wealth or money as possible, the player having the greatest amount of wealth at the end of the game after a certain predetermined number of circuits of the board have been made being the winner". This sounds more pro-capitalist and less idealistically Georgist than her game was later to become. In an earlier description of the game published in 1902 in *The Single Tax Review*, Lizzie was concerned about the effect her game would have on children, believing that their innate goodness would stop them becoming "little monopolists" after playing it. In this she must have been disappointed. It was not enough to promote her cause, and by the time her 1904 patent expired she had developed a revised version, whose object was now described as "...not only to afford amusement to the players, but to illustrate to them how under the present or prevailing system of land tenure, the landlord has an advantage over other enterprises and also how the single tax would discourage land speculation".

By the time of her 1924 patent the Landlords Game had undergone what might be called a 'complete folk make-over', thanks to its enthusiastic adoption by real Quaker communities who fully appreciated its moral implications. First among these was the community of Arden, Delaware, founded in 1900 and based on ideas such as Henry George's single-tax theory and William Morris's Arts and Crafts principles. According to Orbanes, Lizzie spent several summers there, and its residents had a handmade copy of the game provided by the inventor herself (apparently it still exists). They continued to make their own equipment and develop designs and rules of their own, which Lizzie may or may not always have known about.

Living at Arden in 1910 was the radical economist Scott Nearing, a teacher of economics and sociology. Phil Orbanes writes: "One day Nearing brought a handmade copy of the Landlord Game into his classroom as a tool to show the evils of rent gouging. Nearing wasn't certain of the game's title,

and he referred to it as the Antilandlord Game. His students nicknamed it Business or Monopoly because Nearing's version emphasised acquiring sets of lots... The importance of [his] decision to add the Landlord's Game to his curriculum cannot be overstated. Its academic nature appealed to his students' level of sophistication and social consciousness... A few eventually became economics instructors at other schools and established a tradition of introducing their homemade copy of the game to new students. A few copies even reached beyond the college campuses...

Thus from Arden the game gradually spread further throughout Quaker communities of the north eastern states, and from them by diffusion throughout communities having no Quaker affiliations at all and hence increasingly less interested in the game's basically anti-capitalist principles, in fact probably more opposed to them. The ironic apotheosis of this degradation was reached in 1933 when Charles Darrow designed his variation on the Quaker folk game and became a millionaire on the proceeds. What Lizzie got out of this was a \$500 dollar pay-off from Parker Brothers, plus their agreement to publish more of her games. To add to the irony, Darrow's wife Esther Charles's wife, was herself a Quaker.

The rest, as they say, is history. But it is the history of Monopoly, not the story of Lizzie Magie, in which I'm much more interested. She is one of the most interesting, varied, eccentric and enigmatic characters I've ever come across. She might be called a Jill of all trades and mistress of none, except that of promoting Georgist principles.

## A woman of many parts

At age 24 she moved to Washington DC, where she trained as a stenographer and found employment at the Dead Letter Office, supplementing her income by teaching the Single Tax Theory in the evenings. Two years later, in 1892, we find her self-publishing an anthology of poetry entitled *My Betrothed* – and other poems. Of no particular literary merit, these are the sort of things that might be expected of a highly romantic young woman of the 1890s – so much so, that reading them, in the interests of research, somehow made me feel guilty of voyeurism, as if I'd been caught looking through the keyhole of her boudoir. Yet even these are not without interest. The longest of them, entitled *My Betrothed*, is not, as one might expect, addressed to a man, but by a presumably fictitious man expounding the delights of his beloved but as yet unpossessed Roberta. Not all the poems are love poems: in one, she muses upon the atomic composition of the universe and questions its

relationship to the human mind:

I **think** of this vast wilderness of worlds,  
 The universe, and the thought affords me pleasure.  
**Can it** think of me?

In *Genius Imprisoned*, she represents the as-yet unfulfilled Genius as a youth thinking great poetic thoughts, concluding:

Should Genius, out of place,  
 Toil on till death, impoverished, unknown?  
 This poet soul, imprisoned, dreams away.  
 A thousand brilliant thoughts  
 Come rushing to his brain...

Did Lizzie Magie see herself as an unrecognised genius? Quite possibly, though not for her poetry. She was a woman of many parts. Only a year after her publication of *My Betrothed* she had invented and secured a patent for an improved typewriter carriage-return. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that she should come up with such an advanced game mechanism for Landlords. As Phil Orbanes writes:

Lizzie's game was mind-boggling for its day. Children (and likely most adults) could not be expected to grasp the play of the Landlords Game because children had no knowledge of the intricacies of real estate, taxes, and finance.

(This, despite Lizzie's hopeful note in her 1902 description: "Children of nine or ten years and who possess average intelligence can easily understand the game and they get a good deal of hearty enjoyment out of it".)

Having already had one game published, Department Store, she now tried selling Landlords to Parker Brothers. George Parker declined the offer, considering it too complicated, but did instead publish her card game Mock Trial. Lizzie published Landlords herself through the specially-founded Economic Games Company of New York, of which she was listed as part owner. In 1910 it also appeared in Scotland under the re-implemented title Brer Fox an' Brer Rabbit.

The first decade of the 20th century was a busy time for this unrecognised ill-paid genius of poetry, inventiveness and economics. She was now approaching 40 and, unusually for a woman of her age, still unmarried.

Upon reaching 40, in 1906, she took the extraordinary step of advertising herself for sale as 'a young woman American slave' to the highest bidder. She described herself [Pilon, p.61] as:

Intelligent, well-educated, refined; true; honest, just, poetical, philosophical, and womanly above all things. Brunette; large gray-green eyes, full passionate lips, splendid teeth, not beautiful but very attractive, features full of character and strength, yet truly feminine; height 5 feet 3 inches; well proportioned, graceful...

The goal of the stunt, she told reporters, was to make a statement about the dismal position of women. She described the salary she earned as 'slavery of one kind or another' and complained that men were blind to the plight of the victims created by the capitalist system.

Not surprisingly, this advertisement produced a variety of Responses of varying degrees of propriety. Was she husband-hunting? Possibly, but perhaps not consciously, given that she was already on record as an ardent anti-marriage feminist. To quote Pilon again, *'Lizzie... was in search of a benefactor, a financial angel who could provide her with the time and means she needed to develop and promote several games she was working on... She wanted "an opportunity to develop the best that is in me"'*. The best response she had came from an elderly couple in Wisconsin, who offered to take her in, look after her, and let her get on with whatever she wanted. In the event, she took none of them up, instead becoming a newspaper reporter. Perhaps, after all, the whole thing was just a stunt, and she was playing a secretly satirical game. Four years later, in 1910, she married one Albert Phillips, a journalist who some years previously had been involved in a scandal over a possibly scurrilous magazine called *Climax*. (Don't look for it online – you'll come up with something completely different.) They lived in Arlington, apparently in complete harmony, until his death in 1937.

## A chequered history

Lizzie Magie's life from the date of her 1924 patent remains obscure pending a detailed biography, apart from her subsequent shameful treatment at the hands of Parker Bros.

In 1932 – at the height of the Depression - she republished *Landlords* (via the Adgame Company, Washington DC) with the inclusion of a significant variation entitled *Prosperity*, in which the anti-capitalist Georgist message was strengthened. In the words of Scott VM on BoardGameGeek:

The rules of the Landlord's Game are intentionally frustrating to show how capitalism is a flawed system (according to Henry George and his followers). Once players are sufficiently frustrated, they may switch to a different set of rules for the Prosperity Game, which teaches how a single taxation system leads to a more balanced distribution of wealth.

In 1933 Charles Darrow designed his own version of Monopoly and marketed it himself until Parker Bros took it over in 1935. Despite Darrow's assurance of original authorship, George Parker became worried by accounts of the Quaker folk game and his discovery of Magie's patents. He therefore offered to buy her out in exchange for \$500, acknowledging her in the Darrow Monopoly version, republishing her revised Landlords-Prosperity game, and publishing two more of her games, namely Bargain Day and King's Men, an abstract strategy game. Lizzie was delighted.

But not for long. Parkers did publish Landlords, but without the anti-capitalist Prosperity variation, despite their previous assurances, and it took two years for her other two games to appear. In 1937, now aged 71, she got the Washington Evening Star to publish an interview in which she asserted her originality and denounced Darrow for his plagiarism and Parkers for their shameful treatment of her. It had little effect, and when she died 11 years later Parkers managed to expunge virtually every trace of her from their public records. Darrow was henceforth promoted as the 'onlie true begetter' of Monopoly.

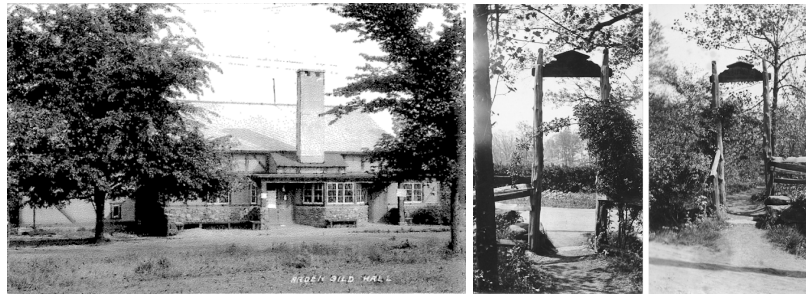
The first public hint of the true story appeared when Sid Sackson discovered her original 1904 patent and described it in his book *A Gamut of Games* (1961). Then in 1973 economist Ralph Anspach published a game originally called Bust the Trust, intending to demonstrate how harmful monopolies could be to a free-enterprise system, and how antitrust laws work to curtail them in the real world. When he retitled it *Anti-Monopoly* in 1974 Parkers sued him for trademark infringement. Anspach eventually won the suit after it had dragged on for 10 years, during which period he discovered virtually everything there was to know about the history of Landlords and the communal Quaker contributions to its evolution into Monopoly. If Lizzie is the heroine of this story, Anspach is the hero, and I'll give him the last word.

Phillips lost her chance for recognition as the real inventor of Monopoly once she struck her deal with [Parkers] and kept quiet about the Darrow bogus history. As a result she end up as a tragic figure in this story because one mistake in judgment exposed her to the two betrayals she suffered at the

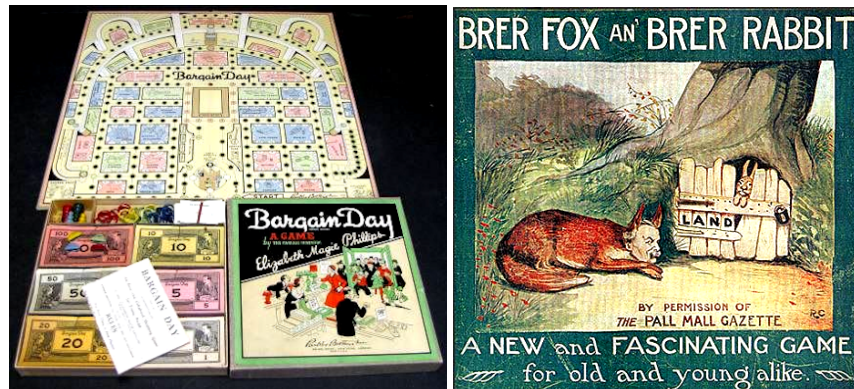
hands of [Parkers]. She traded the recognition she deserved as the inventor of the world's most popular game for the opportunity to promote a higher cause, and, in the end, she lost on both counts.

And the very last word to Lizzie herself: "I am thankful that I have been taught how to think and not what to think".

## Figures



**Figure 1:** Arden Gild Hall and Arden George Henry School, 1992.



**Figure 2:** Bargain Day game and Brer Fox box.



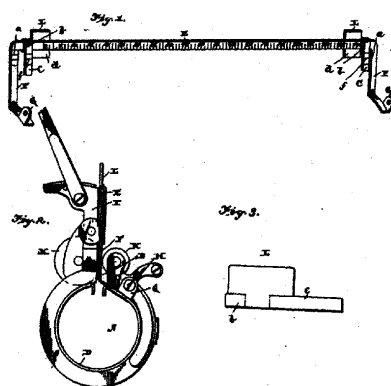


Figure 3: Carriage return.

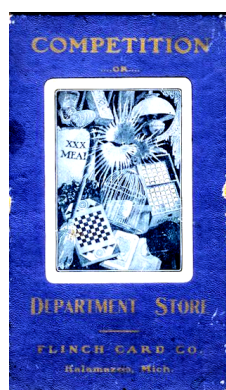


Figure 4: Department Store.



Figure 5: Henry George Birthplace.

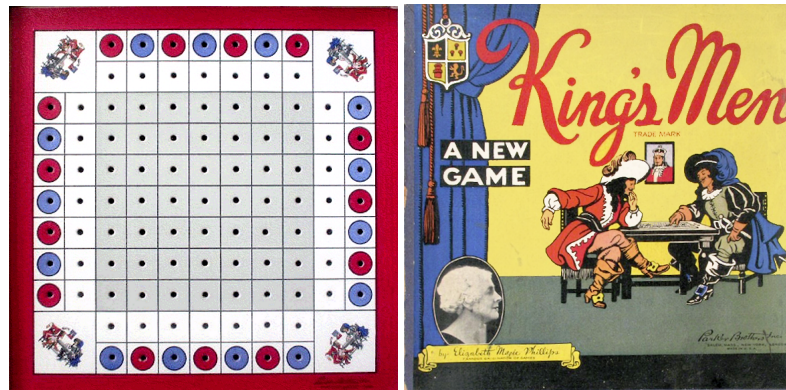


Figure 6: King's Men board and box.

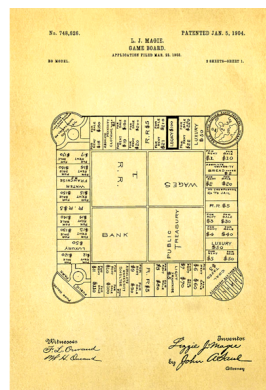


Figure 7: Landlord's.



Figure 8: Lizzie Magie.



Figure 9: Mock Trial.

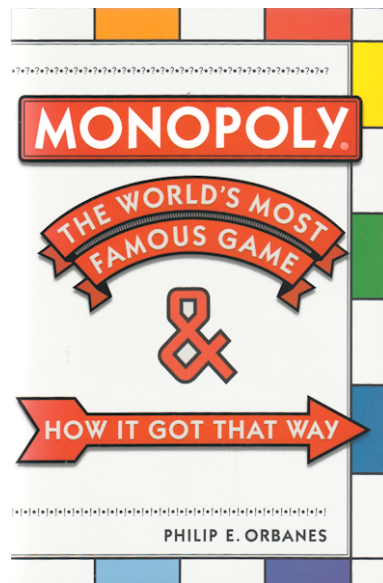


Figure 10: Orbanes book.