# The landlord's game

By Steve Thorngate

December 13, 2012

As a kid I loved to play Monopoly. *Loved* it. Friends and I would have marathon games, fighting over close readings of the rules, bargaining for half an hour while the dice and younger siblings sat idle, the whole deal. My sisters still talk about the time I prematurely ended a game I was losing by flipping the board over and scattering the pieces everywhere. (I maintain that I did this as an ill-conceived joke, a wouldn't-it-be-funny-IF-I-did-this-stereotypical-thing-OOPS-even-done-ironically-it-ruins-the-game type of move. I was never an angry-outbursts kind of brother; patronizing lectures were more my speed.)

I bet I haven't played Monopoly in ten years. Partly because I've lost any taste for complicated games with lots of parts and rules—give me something that takes five minutes to learn and years to master (hearts, Scrabble, sets, the dictionary game). But also because the more my political conscience developed, the more Monopoly became a thoroughly appalling pastime.

This is well-traveled territory, but I appreciate the way Christopher Ketcham captured it this fall in *Harper's*:

> [I] had a conversation with Richard Marinaccio, the 2009 U.S. national Monopoly champion. "Monopoly players around the kitchen table"—which is to say, most people—"think the game is all about accumulation," he said. "You know, making a lot of money. But the real object is to bankrupt your opponents as quickly as possible. To have just enough so that everybody else has nothing." In this view, Monopoly is not about unleashing creativity and innovation among many competing parties, nor is it about opening markets and expanding trade or creating wealth through hard work and enlightened self-interest, the virtues Adam Smith thought of as the invisible hands that would produce a dynamic and prosperous society. It's about shutting down the marketplace. All the players have to do is sit on their land and wait for the suckers to roll the dice.

> Smith described such monopolist rent-seekers, who in his day were typified by the landed gentry of England, as the great parasites in the capitalist order.

Monopoly is not about capitalistic virtue. It's about vice that Adam Smith—no one's socialist—roundly condemned.

But I especially enjoyed Ketcham's article for its history of the game, which I didn't know much about. Apparently it began as a tool to teach Georgism, the 19th-century economic ideology opposed to private land ownership. The rules of the game actually encouraged cooperative rather than competitive play (though they didn't mandate it).

Now, I've never enjoyed noncompetitive games. I've been known to say rude things like, "Can we please play anything but The Ungame?" and "Why would you say you wanted to 'play tennis' with me if you really just wanted to hit the ball back and forth?"

But I've come to believe that Monopoly in its present form is pretty destructive stuff, especially for kids just learning how capitalism works (and sometimes doesn't). So I was fascinated to learn of the game's ironic history: it was intended as a cautionary tale about landlords and rent hikes, not a celebration of them. But people found the latter way more fun.

Whether or not you share my view of Monopoly, if you've ever enjoyed playing the game you really should read Ketcham's whole article.