# Childish Mindgames

Back in 1986, I probably had my worst-ever bout of creative block. I was 22 years old, had been out of college for a year, and was earning my living as an English as a Second Language teacher in one of the toughest high schools in Brooklyn. I had just finished my heftiest score up to that point, *Pity The Morning Light That Refuses To Wait For Dawn*, a 180-page composition for soloists, chorus and orchestra which I'd worked on pretty much every night for nearly a year (including New Year's Eve). This was back in my days of ballpoint pens and overly meticulous calligraphy meaning each of those 180 manuscript pages were painstakingly drawn, at a rate of approximately two hours per page. The work was not written for any commission and had no chance of a performance; it was just something I felt I had to write at the time. To this day it has never been performed, but at this point that has more to do with problems in securing the rights to the texts I set than anything else. Ah, the innocence of youth…

Anyway, once I had completed what felt like a seemingly endless and ultimately futile project, I thought I'd never write another piece of music again. (I'd even titled the final movement "Last Music.") Creating notated music for other musicians to read from in order to make a personal musical statement started to feel hopelessly effete. Most of my social contacts at the time were the students at the high school who had no idea or interest in what classical music or its history might be. (I still remember one student's insistent assertion that World War II was fought between America and Russia over Vietnam back in the days.) It was a far cry from the heady world of musical academia at Columbia University where I was told that the music I was writing was pop because it wasn't rigorous enough. To this day I wonder how my then students would have reacted to the music that was promulgated on Columbia composers' concerts in the early 1980s. But, composing is not a choice; it's a compulsion. The music will eventually find its way out.

For me, that way out, was buying a Jaymar toy piano on a whim at a neighborhood flea market. I didn't have much context for the toy piano. I'm not even sure if I had one when I was a young child although most people of my generation did. I know I'd owned a recording of John Cage's 1948 *Suite for Toy Piano* for several years and thought it was one of his most moving pieces. I might have also heard Wendy Mae Chambers play a few other pieces on a toy piano. As far as I can recall, Margaret Leng Tan hadn't begun giving toy piano recitals (although later, when she made her toy piano CD for Point Music, she borrowed my instrument). But, for whatever reason, I really wanted the instrument and just briefly fooling around on it immediately made me want to compose music again. I attached a DiMarzio pick up microphone to it and ran it through an old Electro-Harmonix Memory Man effects unit; then it got even more interesting. Perhaps this was some sort of subconscious commentary on memories and lost childhood; I honestly don't remember. But, by plugging in this innocent little toy piano, it suddenly became an orchestra that I could have access to. I envisioned creating a series of short pieces for this set up (which I called a "magic piano"). They were all based on the rules of old table games played by children in various parts of the world. I've been obsessed with traditional board games most of my life and even ran a games' club where I was teaching. But, perhaps the source of my wanting to create music based on game structure was my subconscious reaction to being told my music lacked rigor. I know it had little to do with John Zorn's similarly structured but totally different sounding game pieces, only one of which I'd ever heard at that time. But, for some reason after working on just two of these pieces I gave up and the project never made it past my ideas notebook. I went back to my creative block passing in and out of it without finishing a large scale project I was ultimately happy with until 1994 at which point I became obsessed with rigor, but in a totally different way.

The toy piano did however resurface, without any peripheral electronic gadgets, as one of the instruments in the ensemble for my 1995 Margaret Atwood-inspired song cycle *The Other Side of the Window* (I liked the way that it could function as a portable budget celesta) and again in the first act of my "performance oratorio" *MACHUNAS*, this time as a quite conscious evocation of lost childhood innocence. And games went on to affect my music in other ways. I attribute my eventual obsession with counterpoint to studying chess combinations and my love for slight variations that sound like repetitions but aren't to my love for the African board game wari.

But over the years that incomplete toy piano cycle has gnawed at me from time to time as most unfinished business tends to do. *The Extensible Toy Piano Project*, a joint endeavor by Clark University and The College of the Holy Cross, convinced me to do a bit of personal archeology. Thanks to their festival, I dug up these nearly 20 year old pieces and played around with them again. I've added several new ideas to them in September 2005 which are the product of a misspent adulthood and which would be disingenuous to pawn off as the work of a young composer, but the attempt was to get back into the head of where I was then, which was in part about getting back into the head of where I had been 20 years before that, long before any musical paradigm got ingrained and codified into a post-Piaget cognitive default. In revisiting this music, I've decided to drop its somewhat quaint original moniker *Children's Games* and replace it with the similar, but more potentially revealing *Childish Mindgames*. The new title might initially come across as incendiary, especially considering the music's structural conceits created after being accused of ambivalence towards compositional rigor, but it's actually a very accurate description since the procedures involved are not those of children, but rather, are derived from games by children, and hence they are child-ish.

Childish Mindgames received its world premiere performance on November 5, 2005 at Razzo Recital Hall in Clark University's Traina Center for the Arts in Worcester, Massachusetts during the closing concert of *The Extensible Toy Piano Project*.

**"Hop-Ching"**

Chinese Checkers has nothing to do with checkers and it is not Chinese. It is actually a variant of a game that originated in Victorian-era England around 1880 named Halma, which is Greek for jump. For some reason, Halma's gameboard of 16x16 pegholes, accommodating up to 4 players with 15 gamepieces each, morphed into a hexagram-shaped gameboard, accommodating up to 6 players with 10 gamepieces each. Hop-Ching was the name of the first Chinese Checkers set issued commercially in the United States in 1928. I bought an original Hop-Ching set at the same flea market where I purchased the toy piano. For the musical composition "Hop Ching," I had to reduce the number of players to two since a single instrumentalist only has two hands. I also reduced the "game pieces" from ten down to three. While the hand can easily accommodate five pitches, I decided instead to make the starting position, as well as the ultimate goal, a C major triad to make the process more audibly discernable.

Each hand begins with a major triad an octave apart. Moving toward each other from opposite directions, on white keys only, these triads morph into a variety of diatonic trichords one note at a time with voices allowed to move only to upper or lower neighbors or to jump over an adjacent voice up or down a third (in emulation of Halma and Chinese Checkers moves). It ends when one hand reaches the same major triad an octave away, the unstated goal position being a return to the sound of the opening position, but with hands reversed. To further mimic the moves of the game, the rhythm is a steady accented half note followed by a quarter note in 3/4 time and the timbre of the toy piano is transformed by the effects unit into a thick haze of vibrato.

**"Tic-Tac-Toe"**

Tic-Tac-Toe is probably the world's most common pencil and paper game. It can be utterly compelling to a new player, but it quickly becomes totally predictable once you get the idea. Therefore, it seems a perfect framework for structuring music that attempts to establish tonality in a haze of chromaticism, which can either succeed or fail. To convey the two opposing players, the two hands maintain separate and distinguishable steady pulses creating relentless cross-rhythms throughout.

In emulation of the game's attempt to line up three plays in a row, each hand tries to form a contiguous major triad while preventing the other from doing so by reaching those pitches sooner. As the piece progresses, each hand pulses on more and more pitches. Once a pitch is used, it cannot be reused in another octave. The piece ends when either a contiguous triad is attained or all 12 pitches of the chromatic scale are in play making a contiguous triad impossible in either hand. To make this more audibly discernable, no affects are used other than amplification.

Two solutions are presented here: a "winner" which has a successful tonal resolution, and a "draw" which is a dense atonal cluster. Of course, since hands have only five fingers, hitting all 12 pitches is not quite possible. In a rare moment of practicality, the music ends after one hand manages to voice a six-pitch cluster thanks to adult thumbs being capable of hitting more than one small toy piano key at a time.

**"Yoté"**

Yoté is a checkers-type capture game traditionally played by pairs of children in West Africa. The two players begin with an empty board dropping in turn either sticks or stones (usually 12 each) into a grid of 30 holes (6 x 5) which are traditionally scooped in the dirt on the ground. Once dropped, sticks and stones are then moved around the grid to adjacent holes in an effort to capture all the opponent's pieces by jumping over them vertically or horizontally. The game ends when one player runs out of pieces. In using those rules to make music, a bit of interpretive license had to be taken. Sticks and stones placed in holes are easily translated as the fingers of the left and right hand playing pitches in 2 different octaves. But how can you capture a pitch?

Pitch, whether monophonic or polyphonic, is inherently a horizontal line that moves through time. But a two-dimensional grid can be implied by treating each possible diatonic scale within the total chromatic as a distinct line on a different angle. It doesn't function in quite the same way as vertical, horizontal and diagonal movement, but it's a reasonable simulacrum. By interpreting diatonic scales as lines, movement from pitch to pitch is easily regulated as movement only by scalar steps (e.g. major or minor seconds). Similarly, a capture can be effected by a pitch in one hand "jumping" over a pitch in the other hand which is a possible diatonic scalar step away to an interval that is an additional possible diatonic scalar step away from that "jumped over" pitch. The result of this interpretation of the rules is fully chromatic music that aspires to be diatonic. Only one pitch can be introduced at a time and there can only be a total of five simultaneous pitches in each hand at a time (a concession to dextral limitations). Theoretically all 12 pitches of the chromatic scale can be used in each hand, until a pitch is "captured" at which point that pitch can no longer be used, leaving only 11 possible pitches. After a capture, the "losing" hand can only use 4 pitches at a time. This continues again and again until one hand can no longer play or until there are no more pitches. The effects unit adds chorus, making each pitch sound like it has been dropped into a hole.

**"Moksha-Patamu"**

The ancient Hindu game Moksha-Patamu, known in the English speaking world as "snakes and ladders," is an extremely simple childhood racing boardgame in which players role dice to determine how far they can advance in turn.

The dice-throw nature of this game might make it sound frivolous and out of place in a cycle of musical compositions inspired by mind games requiring some strategy. But, since Moksha-Patamu symbolizes the moral journey through life to heaven, it might actually be the ultimate mind game. Therefore it is the basis of the final movement.

Since this is the only one of the pieces in *Childish Mindgames* that is based on a game whose outcome is determined largely by chance, it is therefore the only one which has an indeterminate result each time it is performed.

How others move seems to have little impact on an individual's movements, therefore the music presents the moves of a single player. But, since we can never completely ignore those around us and engage in a symbiotic relationship of influence no matter what we do, the movement of other potential players is symbolized in the multiple lines generated by the delay unit which should be set to the maximum amount of delay, both in terms of lag time and number of repetitions. To begin, play a sequence of five pitches starting from the lowest note of the keyboard consisting of only ascending seconds and thirds. (This sequence should feel comfortable in the hand without stretching.) The sequence can be played at any desired speed and using any desired rhythmic contour. As repetitions are generated from the delay unit, begin a new ascending sequence of five pitches starting on the second note used in the original phrase creating a new phrase that ends on a higher note. Then a third sequence, etc., gradually getting higher and higher.

But, if the phrase ends either on the second or seventh degree of the scale (which are D and B in the key of C)--normally the pitches that would implicitly resolve to the tonic (C) in tonal music--the player's next phrase must instead descend to an F or A (the diatonic pitches that are in neither the tonic or dominant triads) below the starting note of that phrase to begin the next five-pitch phrase, whichever is lower. (If neither descent is possible, then the next phrase must go all the way back to the starting note.)

Stop playing upon the highest possible note on the toy piano that occurs in a C major triad. (In the case of the 30-key Jaymar toy piano, for which this music was originally conceived, that would be e'; but it could be a different note on another instrument.) The music is over when the repetitions emanating from the delay unit fade out.

For potential players terrified of improvisation, a realization score notating a possible sequence of pitches is provided. But even if someone were to interpret the rhythmically ambiguous stemless notes as a steady rhythm (which ideally they aren't), thanks to the variable nature of delay units, the performance could never be exactly the same every time.

—FJO (September 2005)