

GAMES CLIMBERS PLAY<sup>1</sup>

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'Reality is the apparent absence of contradiction'—LOUIS ARRAGON, *Le Paysan de Paris*.

WHAT I should like to propose in this article is not a new answer to the basically unanswerable question: 'what is climbing?' but rather a new way of talking and thinking about it. Climbing is not a homogeneous sport but rather a collection of differing (though related) activities, each with its own adepts, distinctive terrain, problems and satisfactions, and perhaps most important, its own rules. Therefore, I propose to consider climbing in general as a hierarchy of *climbing games*, each defined by a set of rules and an appropriate field of play.

The word *game* seems to imply a sort of artificiality which is foreign to what we actually feel on a climb. The attraction of the great walls, above all, is surely that when one is climbing them one is playing 'for keeps'. Unlike the player in a bridge game, the climber cannot simply lay down his cards and go home. But this does not mean that climbing is any less a game. Although the player's actions have real and lasting consequences, the decision to start playing is just as gratuitous and unnecessary as the decision to start a game of chess. In fact, it is precisely because there is no necessity to climb that we can describe climbing as a *game* activity.

The obstacles one must surmount to gain the summit of Indian Rock in Berkeley or the Hand at Pinnacles National Monument are scarcely of the same order as those defending the West face of Sentinel Rock in Yosemite or the North face of the Eiger. And the personal satisfaction of the climber upon having solved each of these problems could hardly be the same. As a result, a handicap system has evolved to equalise the inherent challenge and maintain the climber's feeling of achievement at a high level in each of these differing situations. This handicap system is expressed through the rules of the various *climbing-games*.

It is important to realise at the outset that these rules are negatively expressed although their aim is positive. They are nothing more than a series of 'dont's': don't use fixed ropes, belays, pitons, a series of camps,

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etc. The purpose of these negative rules is essentially protective or conservative. That is, they are designed to conserve the climber's feeling of personal (moral) accomplishment against the meaninglessness of a success which represents merely technological victory.

Let us take as a concrete example the most complex game in the climbing hierarchy—bouldering. It is complex by definition since it has more rules than any other *climbing-game*, rules which prohibit nearly everything—ropes, pitons, and belayers. All that is left is the individual standing in front of a rock problem. (It should be noted that the upper belay belongs to practice climbing, that is, training for any of the *climbing-games*.) But why so many restrictions? Only because boulders are too accessible; they don't defend themselves well enough. For example, it would be an absurdity to use a ladder to reach the top of a boulder in Fontainebleau, but to use the same ladder to bridge a crevasse in the Khumbu Icefall would be reasonable since Everest defends itself so well that one ladder no longer tips the scales toward certain success. Thus the basic principle of a handicap is applied to maintain a degree of uncertainty as to the eventual outcome, and from this very uncertainty stems the adventure and personal satisfaction of climbing.

More generally, I discern a complete spectrum of *climbing-games*, ranked according to the complexity (or number) of their rules. The higher one goes on the scale, the more inaccessible and formidable become the climber's goals, and, in consequence, he need apply fewer restrictions to conserve the full measure of challenge and satisfaction inherent in the *climbing-game* he is playing. At the top of the hierarchy we find the expedition-game, which although complicated to organise and play, is formalistically speaking, the simplest game of all, since virtually nothing is forbidden to the climber. The recent use of airplanes and helicopters exemplifies the total lack of rules in the pure expedition-game.

While variant games have arisen in isolated and special circumstances in different countries, one can distinguish the following seven basic *climbing-games*.

1. *The bouldering game*: We have already discussed bouldering, but one should note that the basic bouldering rules eliminate not only protection but also companions. The boulderer is essentially a solo climber. In fact, when we see solo climbing at any level of difficulty it represents the application of bouldering rules to some other *climbing-game*. Aside from that, this game is found in every country where climbing exists, although the number of climbers who specialise in it is relatively small.

2. *The crag climbing game*: Crag climbing as a pure game form has doubtless reached its highest form of expression in the British Isles. It is practised on cliffs of limited size—routes averaging one to three pitches

in length. Because of their limited size and the large amount of time at the climber's disposal, such routes are not imposing enough to be approached with the full arsenal of the climber's tools (though they may contain moves as hard as those of any climb). Fundamentally the game consists in climbing them free with the use of extremely well-defined and limited protection. The use of pitons is avoided or, in special cases, standardised at an absolute minimum. Pure crag climbing is scarcely practised as a game in this country except in areas such as Pinnacles National Monument, where the rock is virtually unpitonable. There are, however, a number of areas in the States, such as the Shawangunks, where the crag game could be played with more rigour.

3. *The continuous rock-climbing game*: This is the game that most California climbers know best. It differs from the crag game in allowing the full range of rock-climbing equipment to be used at the discretion of the climber as well as allowing the use of direct aid. Fundamentally this game should be played on longer, multi-pitch climbs whose length puts a kind of time limit to the mechanical means that a climber can employ and still reach the top. Shorter climbs should still be approached as more complex games with stricter rules.

4. *The big wall game*: This game is practised not only on the bigger Yosemite walls but in the Dolomites and elsewhere. It is characterised by the prolonged periods of time spent on the walls and by the fact that each member of the party does not have to climb every lead (e.g., different climbers may prusik with loads on different days but are still considered to have done the entire climb). The full technical and logistic equipment range is allowed. In the modern big wall game fixed ropes to the ground and multiple attempts to prepare the route are no longer allowed (see Part II), and a rigorous distinction is still made between free and artificial moves and pitches.

5. *The Alpine climbing game*: In Alpine climbing the player encounters for the first time the full range of hostile forces present in the mountain environment. In addition to problems of length and logistics he meets increased objective dangers in the form of falling rock, bad weather and extreme cold, and bad conditions such as verglas. All this leads to a further relaxation of formal rules since success in the game may often include merely surviving. In Alpine climbing the use of pitons is avoided wherever possible because of time loss in situations where speed means safety, but where pitons are used there is a tendency to use them as holds also. Thus the rules of this game do not require one to push all leads free. The restrictions upon the player are more determined by the nature of the mountain and the route than by a set of rules which he accepts in advance.

6. *The super-Alpine game*: This is the newest *climbing-game* to appear and is not yet completely understood. It rejects expedition techniques on

terrain which would traditionally have been suitable for it. Its only restrictive rule is that the party must be self-contained. Any umbilical-like connection in the form of a series of camps, fixed ropes, etc., to a secure base is no longer permitted. This rule provides a measure of commitment that automatically increases the uncertainty of success, making victory that much more meaningful. Often the major Alpine routes under extreme winter conditions provide suitable terrain for super-Alpine climbs. Some of the early, classic super-Alpine routes were the South face of Aconcagua, the ascent of Cerro Torre by Egger and Maestri, and the first winter ascent of the Eiger North wall.

7. *The expedition game*: I have already mentioned the lack of rules in this game, but I wish to point out that there are still differences of personal involvement on the part of the players from expedition to expedition. For example, members of the Austrian Broad Peak expedition who packed all their own loads up the mountain were, in a sense, playing a more difficult game than the usual Himalayan expedition that moves up the mountain on the backs of its Sherpas.

It should be noted that the above ordering of *climbing-games* is not an attempt to say that some games are better, harder, or more worthwhile in themselves than others. One remembers that the very purpose of the game structure is to equalise such value connotations from game to game so that the climber who plays any of these games by its proper set of rules should have at least a similar feeling of personal accomplishment. Of course, each type of game will still have its own proponents, its own classics, heroes, and myths.

The real purpose of ranking climbing games into such a hierarchy, however, is not to make judgements about a game or its players, but rather to have a useful scale against which to discuss climbing ethics, since unethical behaviour involves a disregard of certain rules.

## II

Within our new framework we can now clear up certain misconceptions about climbing ethics. Ethical climbing merely means respecting the set of rules of the *climbing-game* that one is playing. Conversely, unethical climbing occurs when a climber attempts to use a set of rules appropriate to a game higher up on the scale than the one he is actually playing (i.e., a less restrictive set of rules). Applying this idea to the bolt controversy that has animated ethical discussions among climbers for the last several years, we can see that there is nothing unethical about bolts *per se*; it is merely that their use is prohibited by the rules of certain *climbing-games* and not by others. In certain games the question becomes meaningless for, as Bonatti points out, on a major mixed face no amount of bolts can guarantee success, whereas an excessive number will ensure defeat through lack of time.

I have assumed so far that the rules for various *climbing-games* were fixed. Of course, this is not the case, as both the games and their rules are undergoing a constant, if slow, evolution. The central problem of climbing ethics is really the question: who makes the rules for these games? and secondly: how do they change with time?

On reflection, it seems to me that the rules of various *climbing-games* are determined by the climbing community at large, but less so by climbers approaching the two extremes of ability. One of these elements is composed of those fainthearted types who desire to overcome every new difficulty with some kind of technological means rather than at the expense of personal effort under pressure. The other group is the small nucleus of élite climbers whose basic concern is not with merely ethical climbing but with minimising the role of technology and increasing that of individual effort in order to do climbs with better *style*. But before talking about style and the rôle of the elite climber in climbing evolution, I want to expand my idea that the majority of climbers are responsible for deciding the rules of a given *climbing-game*.

No matter what their origin a set of rules must be consecrated by usage and general acceptance. Thus, the way good climbers have always done a climb becomes the traditional way of doing it; the rules become classic and constitute an ethical minimum for the climb, defining at the same time the *climbing-game* to which it belongs. But what of new climbs? At any moment there are relatively few members of the climbing community capable of doing significant first ascents; these will be members of the creative elite we have already mentioned. The question arises: should the style they use on a first ascent determine the rules for succeeding ascents? I think not (although their approaches and attitudes will of course serve as guidelines for following parties). Examples of cases where the first ascent has not set the pattern for succeeding ascents are almost too numerous to list. Just because Jeff Foott made the first ascent of Patio Pinnacle solo or because Bonatti soloed the South-west pillar of the Drus, following climbers have felt under no obligation to stick to the difficult rules of the first ascent; or just because the first ascent of the Eiger North wall was made in a storm, no one has seriously suggested that later parties wait for bad weather to go up the face. A kind of group prudence is at work here, rejecting individual solutions whose extremism puts them beyond the reach of the majority of competent climbers climbing at any given period.

What, then, is the rôle of the small minority of extremist climbers in the evolution of *climbing games*? To understand it we must first develop the idea of climbing style. Style may be defined as the conscious choice of a set of rules for a given *climbing-game*. Thus, if a climber follows the accepted rules for a given game he is climbing both in classical style and ethically. Bad style and unethical climbing are synonymous and represent

the choice of rules from a simpler (higher) game, such as Alpine climbing with expedition style. On the other hand, a climber can choose to climb with better style and still be climbing ethically by choosing rules from a game lower down in the hierarchy than that which he is playing. A fitting example would be the way John Gil has applied bouldering rules to certain crag climbing problems, doing extremely hard, unprotected moves high off the ground.

In this way the creative nucleus of élite climbers can express itself by climbing with better style than the average climber (like aristocrats playing a more demanding game than the democratic majority), which certainly provides enough room for personal expression, yet seems to avoid the traditional aristocratic role of leadership and direction. In fact, these climbers lead the majority only indirectly—their responsibility is not to determine and set ethical standards (rules) for the majority but rather to demonstrate the feasibility of new standards by climbing with consistently superior style. Thus, they stake out the possible directions for the evolution of *climbing-games*. And this, aside from suffering the wiles of equipment-mongers, is the only way that such changes can come about.

Let me give a concrete example. The most evident is the way in which the rules of the big-wall game have evolved in Yosemite Valley under the influence of the best climbers of the day whose primary concern was to do their own climbs in the best style possible rather than to impose an arbitrary set of rules on all climbers. After the feasibility of doing the bigger Grade VI walls without siege tactics had been consistently demonstrated, climbers were impressed enough to accept this approach as a basic rule to such an extent that today even strangers to the Yosemite climbing community (such as the two Frenchmen who did the Nose of El Capitan in the spring of 1966) follow it as a matter of course.

In a less dramatic way the rules of all *climbing-games* are changing constantly, becoming ever more restrictive in order to preserve the fundamental challenge that the climber is seeking from the inroads of a fast changing technology. The present laissez-faire of the uppermost games is disappearing slowly as the complexity of rules shifts up the spectrum. The eventual victim, of course, will be the expedition game which will disappear completely as super-Alpine climbing takes its place. This is not only the newest but, in a sense, the most creative *climbing-game*, since here the nature of the obstacles encountered is so severe that it will be a long, long time before technological advances even begin to encroach upon the climber's personal satisfaction. The possibilities, on the other hand, are immense. One can even visualise the day when, equipped with ultramodern bivouac gear, a climbing party of two sets off to do an 8000 m. peak just as today one sets off to do a hard route on the Grand Teton or on Mont Blanc.

Here, I think, this article should end. Not because speculations about the future of climbing are either futile or uninteresting, but because we have already wandered far enough from our original subject. That climbing will continue to evolve is a certainty, although it is far less certain that the idea of *climbing-games* is the best basis for looking at this evolution. But surely this, or any, new framework for thinking and talking about what we are actually doing when we climb is at least a valid step toward the future.