

Mastering Media: A Review of Paolo Granata's Medium - A Marshall McLuhan Board Game

Luke R. J. Maynard, Vanessa Martins and Kathryn Hawkins

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Article abstract

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Mastering Media: A Review of *Paolo Granata's Medium - A Marshall McLuhan Board Game*

Luke R. J. Maynard

PhD, English Literature (University of Victoria), JD, Law (University of Toronto)
luke.maynard@alum.utoronto.ca

Vanessa Martins

PhD student at Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil (PPGCOM/UFJF)
vanessacoutinhomartins@gmail.com

Kathryn Hawkins

Undergrad student at University of Toronto - Book & Media Studies Program
kathryn.sandford@mail.utoronto.ca

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review *The Medium*, a board game developed by professor Paolo Granata with his students in the Book & Media Studies Program at St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto. It is based on Marshall McLuhan's Laws of Media and one of its goals is to stimulate creative and fast thinking skills. After playing the game, we inferred that it encourages players to think about how technology, as McLuhan argued, determines society and, at the same time, how people cannot be functionally separated from them.

Keywords: *The Medium*, Review, Laws of Media, Tetrad, Marshall McLuhan, media, medium, board game.

Introduction

Marshall McLuhan is well known for his unconventional way of saying things. His aphorism "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964), for instance, does not deny that the content is part of the message and that it is also relevant. He cared about the content transmitted by different media; if he did not, he would not have enjoyed studying and teaching English literature and poetry. *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), one of his first works, is also an example in which he considers the content of a message, as he treats newspapers, comics, and advertisements as poetic texts. So, in his famous aphorism, he omitted the obvious to emphasize (and to shock people) that regardless of its content

or intended messages, a medium has its own intrinsic effects on our perceptions. The other meaning of “the medium is the message” is that a medium transforms its content.

His unorthodox way of expressing himself and his ideas is also clear from his interviews in TV programs, radio and magazines. He wanted people to think outside the box and used different tools to encourage this. A particularly interesting problem-solving device created by McLuhan is a deck of playing cards called *Distant Early Warning*, designed to solve personal or business problems. The player shuffles the deck, chooses a card and interprets its meaning. Among the cards were McLuhan’s own quotes and other humor and provocative phrases from other authors.

Following the concept of unusual tools to expand critical thinking, professor Paolo Granata, associate professor and academic coordinator of the Book & Media Studies Program at St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto, developed with his students a board game inspired by McLuhan’s Laws of Media (available at: <https://www.themedium.online/>). The game was a collaboration with the Centre for Arts, Design & Information Technology at George Brown College, along with a group of designers, scholars, and media experts.

The Tetrad, as McLuhan’s Laws of Media are collectively called, serves as a framework for understanding various media by analyzing their enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval, and reversal.

Understanding the Laws of Media

By the end of his life, Marshall McLuhan and his son Eric McLuhan revisited *Understanding Media* at the request of its publisher. The result was *Laws of Media: The New Science*, released nearly eight years after McLuhan's death. The Tetrad was created by asking what the impacts of media were, in the form of four questions:

1. Enhance - What does the medium enhance or intensify?
2. Obsolesce - What does the medium render obsolete?
3. Reverse - What does the medium flip into when pushed to the limits of its potential?
4. Retrieve - What does the medium retrieve that had been obsolesced earlier?

These questions can be applied to any medium and were tested for a variety of media by the authors and other media ecologists. Marshall McLuhan spent the rest of his life looking for a fifth dimension of the Tetrad and challenged the readers to find it. However, as observed by Levinson and Lindia (2021),

even after many attempted to do so, none of them have yet been successful.

The Medium - a board game

At the end of *The Lost Tetrads of Marshall McLuhan* (2017), a book by Eric McLuhan that presents the rough process of the development of the Tetrad, the reader is invited to practice the Laws of Media in a game style. It seems that Granata followed the idea of having fun while learning, and developed a board game which consists of an imagination exercise under pressure.

The game is made up of four categories: Obsolete, Enhance, Retrieve, and Flip, corresponding to the four questions of the Tetrad. Players start by selecting the color of their pawns - pieces that will move on the game (♠) - and placing them on the board, according to their chosen color. They will advance along the space of the same color on the board. The player whose birthday is closest to Marshall McLuhan's (July 21st) starts the game. The starting team chooses a player to take a card from the deck, which is composed of 72 cards with a medium of communication or a technology on each of them. The card taken must be kept secret. The same player that took the card rolls the die, which instead of numbers has on each side: Obsolete, Enhance, Retrieve, Flip, a four-color diamond face, and a whirlpool face.

The four-color diamond face indicates that the person who rolled the die has the chance to choose any of the four Tetrad (Obsolete, Enhance, Retrieve, Flip), whereas the whirlpool face indicates that the player's pawn has to move back one space. As soon as one of the Laws of Media is determined by the die rolled, this player has to give a clue so his/her team members guess which medium is on his/her card. Only one clue must be provided in a simple short sentence. For example, if the Law determined by the die rolled is Obsolete and the medium on the card is "credit card", the sentences could be: "This medium obsoletes cash".

Only members of the team of the player that holds the card must try to guess it. They must think quickly as the time for guessing the medium is only one minute, which is counted with the help of an hourglass that is set after the clue is given. Each team has only one chance to guess the medium and if they do not get it right, they pass the cards to the next team who now has the chance to get it right, using a different Law of Media than the one used by the previous team. The law of media now used for the other teams is determined by the sequence established on the board. That is, as the board has one of the four Tetrad elements on each corner, the next element (counterclockwise) is the one that must be used.

Pawns move on the board according to the number of clues needed to guess the medium. In other words, if 1 clue was enough to guess it correctly, the team that guessed correctly should move its pawn 4 spaces forward; if 2 clues were needed, the pawn should be moved 3 spaces, and so on. If nobody playing the game is able to guess the medium, all the team's pawns should be moved back one space.

In addition to the 72 cards containing one medium each, eight “Wild Cards” are included in the deck. They consist of Marshall McLuhan’s aphorisms with some instructions that could indicate good luck or bad luck for the team, depending on what is described on each. For example, one of McLuhan’s famous one-liners is “I don’t necessarily agree with everything I say”. This quote is followed by two contradictory sentences and another sentence that forces the team to skip a turn.

Figure 1 - *The Medium* board game



Source: Marshall McLuhan Special Collection, available at Kelly Library - University of St. Michael’s College

The board has two different special spaces on it. One is the “Tetradic Space”, which indicates that if a pawn stops on it, clues concerning all the four Laws of Media can be given at the same time for his/her team. The other special space is the “Whirlpool Space”, which indicates that the pawn placed on it should be moved to a space indicated by a gray arrow on the board. This is an interesting appeal, as one of the game’s goals is to avoid them in order to reach the end faster.

In addition to making the game interesting, Granata and his team took the “whirlpool” into account when designing it in reference to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *A Descent into the Maelstrom* (1841),

which provided Marshall McLuhan with a metaphor for describing an irrational curiosity upon media environments. The sailor in Poe's story gets sucked into the Maelstrom when he abandons his ship, but manages to escape the Maelstrom by understanding and using the vortex patterns in his favor. In fluid dynamics, a vortex is a region in which the flow revolves around an axis line, which may be straight or curved. "McLuhan saw the mass media as a titanic vortex pulling society towards new forms of behaviors — new ways of being — that threatened to completely overwhelm or even destroy it." (Stantonian, 2017, online).

According to McLuhan, "Our situation is very like that of Poe's sailor in 'The Maelstrom,' and we are now obliged not to attack or avoid the *storm* but to study its operation as providing a means of release from it" (McLuhan, 1951, 151). That is, as it is impossible to avoid the impacts of technology on us, as long as we are aware of their implications in our lives, we are able to continue "sailing" safely.

By offering a "group mode" in which players work in teams, Granata's game can be played with a large number of players, limited only by the size of the game board and venue so players can comfortably interact with each other. The authors of this review played the game, and as it was not possible to form teams with only three players, we played individually. With each turn, one player took a card from the top of the pile, rolled the die, and offered a clue to an opposing player, who would then try to guess the medium, and advance their pawn if successful. If the medium was not guessed correctly at the first clue, more clues were given to the same opponent. If after four clues, corresponding to the four elements of the Tetrad, the medium was not guessed, the opponent's pawn had to be moved back one space.

Playing with only three players is something of an exercise in good faith, as players attempting to beat their opponents to the finish must still provide them with the best clues possible in order to help them advance. The game is at once a competition and a cooperative exercise. However, when playing in teams, requiring at least four players, the dynamic changes as members of same team read clues to each other, and try to formulate clues as clear as possible. When played individually, as we did, players can play collaboratively, offering one another the best possible clues; or they can play competitively by offering the most difficult clues to their opponents in an attempt to stump them. This way, clues might be as hard as possible so the opponent fails to guess correctly—but when considering the hardest clue within the bounds of fairness, players sometimes arrive at highly innovative ways of thinking about the impact of media in the real world.

Applying McLuhan's Laws of media to the game *The Medium*, we found the below possibilities:

1. Enhance - The game enhances:
 - The *Laws of Media* book;

- Awareness of the media environment;
 - Troubleshooting;
 - Creativity and fast thinking;
 - Interactive learning.
2. Obsolesce - The game obsoletes:
 - Traditional group study methods and tools.
 3. Reverse - The game reverses into:
 - A collaborative learning tool, if reversed in one direction;
 - A competitive party game, if reversed in another direction
 4. Retrieve - The game retrieves:
 - Analogue learning technologies;
 - Analogue entertaining technologies;
 - Face-to-face social interaction;
 - Childhood memories and methods of learning.

Final Remarks

By playing *The Medium*, a Marshall McLuhan board game, players are able to grasp the full breadth of McLuhan's understanding of the concept of "media", as the game presents a wide variety of old and new media; not limited to those available in McLuhan's lifetime or directly referenced in his work, but new ones, such as 3D printing. When using the laws of media to give clues to teammates, players get the chance to become aware of the media environment by recognizing its unintended and invisible functions and/or implications. This way, it encourages players to think laterally about how technology, as McLuhan argued, determines society and, at the same time, how people cannot be functionally separated from the technology with which they engage.

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