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PAPER

"Fun in Late Capitalism: Erving Goffman and the U.S. Cultural Economy." Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, Ypsilanti, Michigan, 4 March 2005.

Erving Goffman, in his work on games, argues that the "fun in games" comes not from totally escaping into a privately constructed world of play, but instead from striking a balance between, on the one hand, a fanciful detachment from reality, and on the other, allowing "too much reality" in. In his discussions of gambling, sports, and parties he notes that the outside world will be allowed into the game, but in a "controlled and disguised" manner. In addition, Goffman's work on "role distance" has suggested that personal style in everyday life occurs as much in *resistance* to normative roles as in strict adherence to the social structural requirements of the roles. In this paper, these arguments are generalized to consider the relation of United States consumerism—especially regarding the entertainment industry—to the political economy of the United States. It is argued that consumerism in the cultural sphere should be understood neither as escapism into private enclaves, nor as a decline of cultural standards, but as the construction of a kind of gaming environment in relationship to political and economic structure. It is this gaming environment which now provides the context by which economic value is attributed to objects, events and images in our cultural economy.