



Faces in Pieces
Cares a trozos
Caras en pedazos
Rostos em pedaços

David PARLETT¹

Abstract: The perception of game pieces and boards as actors and theatres of play is a natural human propensity and has been expressed in many ways throughout the history of games. This paper explores some of the ways, with particular reference to chess and card games, that enable us to appreciate how people of the Past drew on themselves and their surroundings to breathe life into otherwise abstract procedures of formal games.

Keywords: Properties of a game – Board and card games – Perceptions of play – Abstractionism and representationalism – Traditional and proprietary games – Race games – War games – Ancient and medieval board games – Early card games.

Resumen: La percepción de las piezas y los tableros del juego como actores y teatros del juego es una propensión humana natural y se ha expresado de muchas maneras a lo largo de la historia de los juegos. Este artículo explora algunas de las formas, con especial referencia al ajedrez y los juegos de cartas, lo que nos permite apreciar cómo las personas del Pasado recurrieron a sí mismas y a su entorno para dar vida a procedimientos de juegos formales que de otro modo serían abstractos.

Palabras clave: Propiedades de un juego – Juegos de mesa y de cartas – Percepciones del juego – Abstraccionismo y representacionalismo – Juegos tradicionales y propietarios – Juegos de carreras – Juegos de guerra – Juegos de mesa antiguos y medievales – Juegos de cartas antiguos.

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Introduction

What's in a game? At the very least, a set of equipment and a set of rules for manipulating its components, one of which defines a win. All enable us to classify something as a game, study it as a cultural entity, and critique it. But there is another property of a game that can be overlooked and may therefore be regarded as contingent rather than essential, and that is its relationship to human experience – that is, what it represents of the real world and what cultural references it overtly makes or undesignedly implies. In short, what a given game is actually *about* – if anything.

From this perspective, games lie on a continuum ranging from highly representational at one end to completely abstract at the other. The extremes are tellingly illustrated by a cartoon in *La Revista del Snark*, an Argentinian games magazine that ran for just ten issues in the late 1970s.²

It shows two chess players, both deeply absorbed in their contest, with a thought-bubble emerging from each one's head. One player's reads 'Nxc6, Bc5+, 0-0-0...' etc. The other's bears images of guns and daggers, dripping blood, skulls, and other graphic indications of vicious combat. Given their differing perceptions, we might well ask whether they are both playing the same game. (Especially as one of them seems unaware that the other cannot castle out of check.)

This appeals to me because it summarises a fact of which I have become increasingly aware throughout my lifetime's experience of playing games, and that is that gamers fall into two groups: abstractionists, who primarily regard games as a form of mental exercise or mathematical recreation, and literalists, who see them as more or less theatrical representations of real-life experience, whether realistic or fantastic. Upon seeing a game for the first time most people will ask 'What's it *about*?' and won't be satisfied with the answer 'It's not *about* anything – it just *is*. It's a game. It doesn't have to mean anything outside itself.'³

² https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Revista_del_Snark

³ <https://www.parlettgames.uk/gamester/whatsit.html>



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People who have not been brought up to value the playing of games or to take them seriously, apart from games of great social prestige such as Chess and Contract Bridge, still tend to mentally classify games into two large groups: traditional black-and-white abstract games like Draughts and Backgammon, and colourful proprietary games like Monopoly and its derivatives, with a possible third grouping for colourful children's games like Ludo (Parcheesi) and Snakes & Ladders (Chutes & Ladders).

Colourful proprietary games have been around since the development of printing, on which they absolutely depend for their cheapness and effectiveness, with noticeable booms in creativity and productivity in the 19th century, between the two 'World Wars', and since the latter half of the 20th century. Yet dice and board games can boast a history of more than 7000 years, while card and tile games are well over a thousand years old. Small wonder, then, that traditional board games are perceived as abstract and mathematical, at least by comparison with the thousands of new representational or thematic games that now flood the market in the space of a year (You can hear many in the industry complaining that there are simply 'too many games' for all but the most outstanding to garner any significant share of the market. The game pie is too large and its slices too small).

But the more closely you examine the games of the past, the further you can see beyond the simple abstractions of linear race-tracks and squared fields of battle, of stones and beans and faceless, featureless pawns. To the people who played them, squared arrays were places where things really happened, and the pieces they moved around the board were living beings, whether animals or people, gods, or spirits of the departed. Games are dramatic representations of things that happen in real life, or in dreams, or are believed to happen after death. And, more than mere representations, they can be acts of magic designed to bring about the very happenings they depict, just as cave paintings can be interpreted as a form of wish-fulfilment in the forthcoming hunt.

It is no coincidence that games are said to be 'played': they amount almost to 'plays' in themselves, as much an art form as plays performed on the stage. Where does a game end and a play begin? Recent years have seen a proliferation of role-playing games



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(RPG's), in which players assume different identities and wield the varying powers peculiar to those identities. This development, finding its earliest expression in *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), represents a major advance on the supposedly role-playing aspect of classic boardgame predecessors such as Monopoly. In Monopoly, everyone is playing basically the same character, that of the arch-capitalist 'Mister Moneybags', who seeks to amass a fortune by property trading and speculation.

My aim here is to illustrate the fact that the perception of pieces and boards as people and theatres of play is a natural human propensity and has been so throughout the history of games.

I. Race games and war games

Modern board games are complex combinations of elements drawn from traditional board games. In the words of Cosimo Cardellicchio: 'Nowadays, due to the urgent request of new titles from the games industry, the borders between board games, card games, tile games, dice games, pencil-and-paper games, have vanished to yield the modern commercial game-into-a-box, a product that provides the player with everything he needs'.⁴

Traditional board games, in contrast, are relatively monolithic. They are usually classified as either race games or war games – terms, it bears noting, that in themselves attach representational properties to technically abstract games. Roughly speaking, race games are those in which the aim is to reach a specified finishing point ('Finish', or 'Home') and the movement of pieces is controlled by the throw of lots such as dice, while in war games movement is governed by strategy: without dice, players enjoy relative freedom of movement, albeit within carefully prescribed rules (Dice might be regarded as material rules. The roll of a die announces a rule that says 'You must move your piece through precisely this number of spaces'). Race games are often described as games of chance because of the random element introduced by dice, and war games,

⁴ CARDELLICCHIO, Cosimo 'The new board games paradigm'. VIth Board Game Studies Colloquium, Ipswich, 2014.



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by contrast, as games of strategy. But such a contrast can be misleading. Any game that gives you a choice of moves introduces an element of strategy: the greater the choice, the more strategic and hence more skill-demanding it becomes. Thus Backgammon, in which you move any of 15 pieces in accordance with the roll of two dice, is more strategic than Snakes [Chutes] & Ladders, in which you have only one of each and hence no strategic choice at all.

Such records as exist of ancient games suggest that dice-driven race games are older than free-moving war games. They can, in fact, easily be seen as extensions of simple dice play. It is arguable that racetracks might have originated as scoreboards – that is, as a means of recording the results of a succession of dice throws in order to prolong the tension of awaiting a final outcome. The natural human propensity to convert abstractions into real-life phenomena resulted in the movement of (literally) ‘counters’ along a scoreboard being perceived as people or creatures racing along a real-life track.

In race games such pieces are often likened to the local fauna. For example, the ancient Egyptian race game best known now best known as Fifty-eight Holes, since the only factor common to the large variety of specimens found is its duplicated racetrack of 29, is more popularly known as Hounds & Jackals, after a particularly fine specimen found at Thebes, in which the pegs that fit the holes are realistically shaped into the likeness of the eponymous creatures.⁵ The association of animals with play is amusingly brought out by a papyrus of c.1250-1150 BCE depicting a gazelle and a lion enjoying a game of Senet.

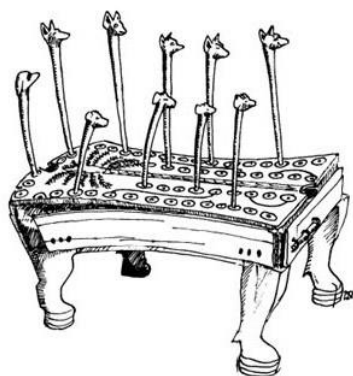
⁵ HOERTH, A. J. ‘The game of hounds and jackals’. In: FINKEL, Irwing L. (ed.). *Ancient board games in perspective*. London, 1990, p. 64.



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Image 1



Game of 58 holes (“Hounds & Jackals”).

Image 2



Gazelle & lion at Senet.

If not the pieces, then the board itself may become representational, as in the Egyptian game of Mehen, in which the racetrack winds into a spiral illustrating a coiled snake. That a spiral is the most efficient way of collapsing a lengthy racetrack into the smallest area is most noticeably exemplified in the late medieval Game of Goose and its numerous descendants.

In many historic race games an element of conflict between the players is introduced by the perception of attack when the roll of dice causes one piece to land on a space



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occupied by an enemy piece, in which case a piece so covered is sent back to the beginning and must start again, well represented in Backgammon. But whether war games evolved from race games, and if so how, is a debatable topic. A possible intermediary might be found in so-called running-fight games common in Arabian Islam. These differ from pure race games in two respects: that the track is looped rather than linear so that the play circulates in laps, and that pieces when landed on are not sent back to the start but removed from play, so that a win consists in capturing most pieces rather than by getting home first. A notable example of such a game is Tâb, a North African game described by Thomas Hyde in 1694⁶ but not recorded earlier than 1310, making it impossible to establish a convincing line of descent. It is interesting to note that, in one description,⁷ the players refer to one team as Muslims and the other as Dogs.

II. Strategic war games

Chess is the prime exemplar of strategic war games, but its earliest incarnation as 5th-century Chaturanga is far from the earliest known example. A game mentioned frequently in ancient Greek from the fifth century BCE onwards is Petteia ('pebbles', meaning game pieces), also known as Polis ('city-state', or the society inhabiting it), whose strategic character is often emphasised. In the *Republic* Plato suggests that mastery of the game demands long and continuous practice, while Philostratus, in *Heroica*, 2.2, characterizes a game assumed to be Petteia as 'no idle sport, but one full of shrewdness and needing great attention'.

Petteia was played on the squares of a board of varying sizes but ultimately settling down to 8x8, and with pieces that might be pebbles but are often described as being of glass and are distinguished by colour for ownership. They move orthogonally forwards or sideways and capture by 'custodianship' – that is, by enclosing an enemy piece between two friendly ones. Petteia was also known to the Romans under the name *Ludus Latrunculorum*, 'game of mercenaries'. That it was perceived dramatically as a

⁶ HYDE, Thomas. "De tâbiludo seu ludo tâb". In: *Historia nerdiludii*, 1694, p. 217.

⁷ LANE, Edward William. *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 1860, p. 348.



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war game is brought out in an anonymous Latin poem in praise of the orator Piso, whose skill is described as follows:

“The pieces are strategically drawn up on the open board, and battles fought between glass militia, with White now trapping Black, and Black now White. Every foe yields to you, Piso – but does any of your own men, once you have marshalled them, ever surrender? Which of them has not felled an enemy though himself upon the brink of death? Your battle tactics are legion. One man, fleeing from an attacker, turns and overpowers him; another, hitherto standing guard, advances from a distant corner; another rushes stoutly into the fray to cheat the foe that creeps upon his prey; another invites blockade on either flank, and, pretending to be trapped, himself traps two others; another more ambitiously tears through the massed phalanx, swoops into the lines, and razes the enemy’s rampart to wreak havoc in the walled stronghold. Meanwhile, though the fight still rages fiercely, the enemy ranks are split, and you victoriously emerge with ranks unbroken, or with the loss of but one or two men, and both your hands rattle with the horde of captives.”⁸

Attempts have been made to relate Chaturanga to Petteia/Latrunculi, but evolutionary evidence is lacking. Chaturanga differed most significantly by its introduction of pieces differentiated functionally by their various powers of movement. Hitherto, gaming pieces were either completely undifferentiated, as for example the nuts or shells of Mancala games, or, more commonly, differentiated by ownership. Owner differentiation is usually exhibited by colour, such as the black versus white of Chess, Backgammon, and Go, though in Shogi (Japanese Chess) it is shown by the direction in which a player’s pieces are pointing (Even in Mancala, a degree of at least temporary ownership is indicated by the fact that each player may only move pieces on their own side of the board and capture only on the opponent’s side). Chess appears to be the earliest known game in which pieces are also distinguished by movement. It has throughout its history come to be increasingly regarded as an abstract and highly

⁸ AUSTIN, R. G. “Roman Board Games”. In: *Greece and Rome* IV, 10 (1934), pp. 24-34, 11 (1935) pp. 76-82.



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mathematical game, but in its original incarnation it was certainly considered representational.

Chaturanga is widely believed to have originated in north-west India some time earlier than the first recorded references to it dating from the 6th century CE. It's a pity that so little is to be found on the subject in Indian texts of the period, but we do know that it rapidly spread to the Persians and thence to the Arabs, both of whom acknowledge India as its source and themselves devote more literature to its practice and study. That the original game was strongly thematic is shown by its name. Chaturanga, literally meaning 'four-limbed', was also the title of the quadripartite classical Indian army (fought by Alexander the Great in the 4th century), consisting of elephantry, chariotry, cavalry, and infantry. Each player was equipped with two pieces representing chariots (*ratha*, equivalent to our rooks), two horses (knights), two elephants (bishops), and eight foot-soldiers (pawns). This array defends a rajah (king), who is accompanied by a vizier (occupying the ecological niche of a queen), and each player's object is to capture the opposing king. The various pieces are necessarily distinguished by their shape, thus introducing a secondary level of distinction to that of ownership by colour (in the broadest sense of the word).

There can be no question that the whole set-up represents a battle between two armies. The literalness of the representation is extraordinary – historically unprecedented, in fact. How did it come about? In his classic *History of Chess*, Murray surmised: 'The game of chess was invented when some Hindu devised a game of war, and, finding the ashtapada board convenient for his purpose, adopted it as his field of battle.'⁹ Ashtapada was an Indian game played on an 8x8 grid with 16 cross-cut squares, suggesting the race rather than the battle. But, reasonable as this assumption is, Murray did not go on to address the real question, namely: was Chaturanga *invented as* a representation of war, or was *a war theme attached* to a pre-existing abstract game, whether abstract or representational of something else? Or could it, as has been suggested, have derived from a mathematical puzzle conducted on such a board? My experience as games inventor leads me to start with a mechanism and then attach a theme to it, rather than

⁹ MURRAY, J. H. R. *A History of Chess*. Oxford, 1913, p. 42.

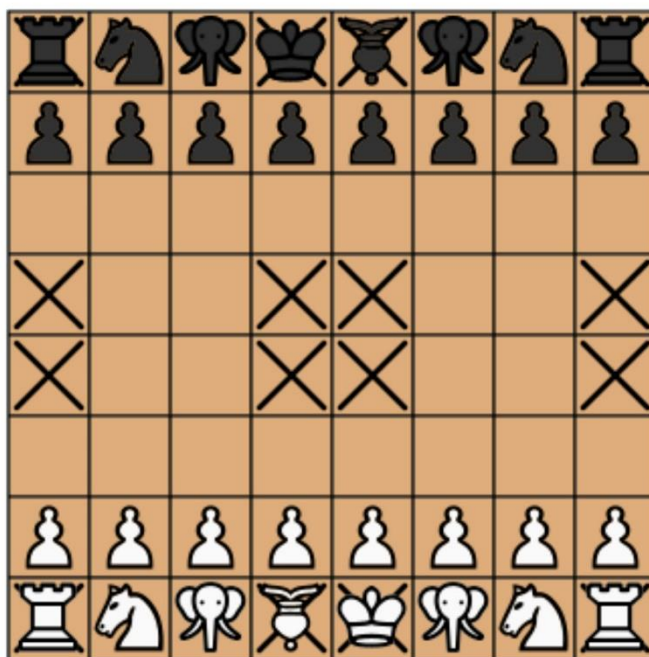


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start with a theme and then seek an existing mechanism to make it work. We shall never know, unless and until some definite precursor can be convincingly demonstrated.

Image 3



Chaturanga (modern reconstruction).

Whether the earliest Chess pieces were abstract or representational remains to be determined. Ann C Gunter writes: “Most chess histories have attributed the development and persistence of the abstract tradition of chess pieces to the influence of an Islamic prohibition on images. Often it is assumed that pieces originally were designed to represent figures of battle, and then stylized to render these figures abstract. [...] Yet the Koran’s prohibition on images specifically governs art in a religious context, as abundantly attested by many works of art created for secular purposes. Moreover, it has not yet been established that the earliest chess pieces were figural



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forms, or exclusively figural, although [...] figural forms are included in the earliest known examples.

The Middle Persian invention story itself, with its emphasis on the challenge presented by decoding the game, might itself argue for an ancient (pre-Islamic) tradition of abstract forms. Perhaps, as noted above, the earliest pieces were abstract (or at least highly stylized) in form, offering no obvious indication that the game represented two armies at war. Indeed, parallel traditions in the forms of pieces and pawns may have emerged with, or appeared soon after, the game's invention.”¹⁰

The Middle Persian invention story referred to here comes from the 7th-century *Chatrang-namak*, ‘the invention of Chess’, which purports to explain how the game reached Persia from India. An Indian raj sends his vizier to the king of Persia with many riches including an ornate Chess set with emerald and ruby pieces, all which he may have provided that he can explain the nature and use of the Chess set. The king's sage not only realizes that it is a war game, but also deduces the aim of the game and the movement of the pieces, and returns the compliment by devising a completely new game – Nard, an ancestor of Backgammon – and sending it to the raj accompanied by the same challenge.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Chaturanga, from an evolutionary viewpoint, is that the playing-pieces are differentiated by their powers of movement. Games with differentiated pieces certainly existed before Chaturanga, but they are few and far between. We have already noted that the hounds and jackals of the game of Fifty-eight Holes were differentiations of ownership rather than power, value, or functionality, but in the Royal Game of Ur, a race game dating back to about 2500BCE, each player has five pieces named after birds, and supposedly representing them: swallow, valued at two units; storm-bird (5), raven (6), rooster, (7), eagle (10).

¹⁰ GUNTER, Ann C. “Chess and its culture in west, south, and southeast Asia”. In: *Asian Games; the Art of Conquest*. New York, 2004, p. 154.



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As reconstructed by Irving Finkel, largely from rules recorded on cuneiform tablets, the values represented amounts paid for them when captured in play, and they started from designated squares, with the eagle closest to the main track. To the modern eye, they do not appear to serve any other distinctively functional purpose in play. However, thanks to the existence of clay tablets bearing rules for the game in cuneiform characters, we can surmise that a lot may have been going on in the minds of the players. As translated by Finkel,¹¹ we read such rules as:

If the astragals score 2:
the Swallow can sit at the head of the Ditch.
It comes out of the Ditch and a woman will love the one sitting in the Tavern;
as for their Pack, well-being is in place.
If it does not come out of the Ditch a woman will despise the one sitting in the Tavern;
as for their Pack,
well-being will not be in place for them as a group.

Of interest from a representational point of view is the ancient Egyptian game of Senet, played by all social classes throughout Egyptian dynastic history, from the thirtieth to the fourth centuries BCE. This, too, was a race game played with pieces differentiated only by ownership, but on a marginally representational board. The track of thirty squares, called houses, is folded into three rows of ten, such that forward movement traces the shape of a reflected S. In Timothy Kendall's reconstruction¹² each player starts with seven pieces arranged on alternate houses of the first fourteen. The 15th, or House of Rebirth, and the last five houses, all bear meaningful if not exactly representational symbols.

¹¹ FINKEL, Irving L. "[On the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur](#)". In: *Ancient Board Games in Perspective*, 2007, p. 16-32.

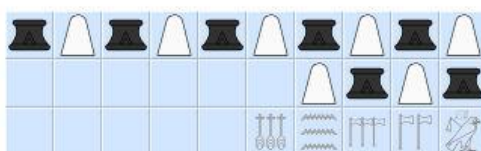
¹² "[Rules of the Game](#)". In: *Senet: a game of Ancient Egypt*.



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Image 4



Senet, showing set-up and marked squares.

The 26th, House of Happiness, cannot be passed but must be landed on by an exact throw. Upon reaching 27, the House of Water, a piece must return to the House of Rebirth (15). Alternatively, or compulsorily if 15 is occupied, its owner must home it by throwing a 4 before they can make any other move. Houses 28, 29, and 30, require an exact throw of, respectively, 3, 2, 1, to enable a piece to get home – or be ‘born(e)’, in both senses and spellings of the word. Failing an exact throw, it retreats 27. The first to get all seven home wins. Senet was undoubtedly perceived as a representation of the journey of the soul after death,¹³ but contributes nothing to a quest for the origin of Chess.

Chinese Chess feels far more representational than its Indian equivalent, as immediately suggested by its title. Xiang-qi can be variously translated as the game of elephants, of generals, or simply of figures, though the last of these is less appropriate as the pieces are distinguished not sculpturally but by denominations stamped or printed on flat discs – that is, they are specifically labelled rather than being solidly representational. It differs also in being played on the points rather than the cells of a squared grid. The board itself, however, is relatively pictorial, being divided horizontally into two distinct halves by an undifferentiated row representing a boundary, often referred to as a river, and a group of points on each side specifically marked out as a palace or fortress.

¹³ PICCIONE, P. “The Egyptian game of senet and the migration of the soul”. In: FINKEL, Irwing L. (ed.). *Ancient board games in perspective*. London, 1990, p. 54-63.

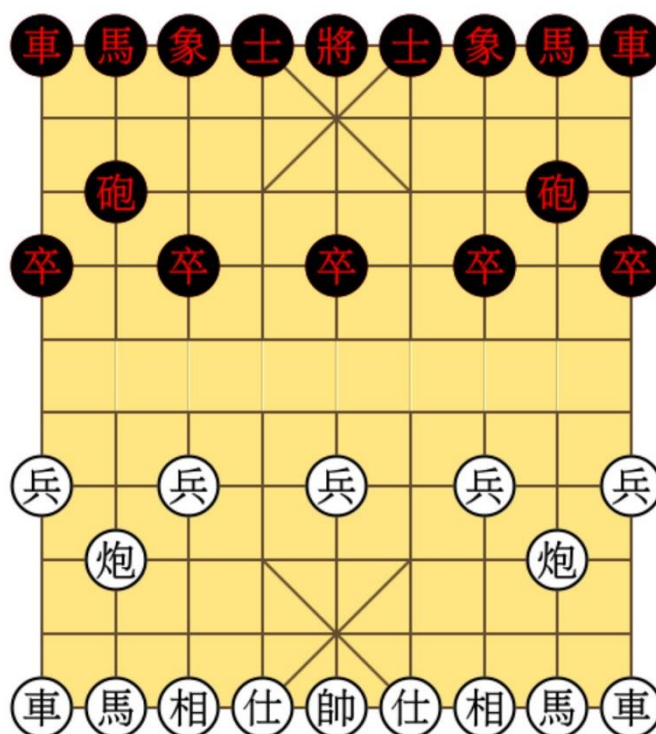


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This houses the player's central piece, the King equivalent, whose capture determines the outcome of the game, and who is now known as the General (hence fortress), but was originally the Emperor (hence palace). The General/Emperor moves one point orthogonally and is accompanied by two Ministers/Advisers, each moving one point diagonally.⁷

Image 5



Xiang-qi.

It is notable that all three figures are restricted in movement to the nine points of the Palace/Fortress. In their restrictive isolation we may recognise the ancient Chinese cultural importance attached to the Emperor, whom no ordinary mortal was allowed to



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approach – an importance so great as to account (at least legendarily) for his replacement in the game by a General.

The remaining duplicated pieces – chariot, elephant, horse, together with five foot-soldiers – reflect the constitution of Chaturanga, but in Xiang-qi are supplemented by another duplicated piece known as the Cannon, on the south (red) side, or Catapult, on the north (black). This piece moves horizontally or vertically, like the Chariot, but has the unusual property of being able to move only by leaping over another piece, of either side, regardless of how many vacant points it traverses in doing so. Few Chess pieces, in any culture, are so aptly named and pictorially represented!

Shogi (Japanese Chess), though probably descended from Xiang-qi via one or another of several proposed routes, has experienced profound modifications and additions that, as Murray observes, “have transformed the game from a representation of warfare to a game in which it is difficult to find a representation of anything”.¹⁴ It includes pieces with such fanciful names as the Flying Dragon and the Drunk Elephant, neither of which would sound out of place in a modern fantasy game. Of particular interest is its variation on the idea of promotion, in which pawns as well as other pieces promote to a status with slightly expanded movement upon reaching not just the furthest rank, as in Chess and Draughts/Checkers, but also on any of the further three ranks (of the 9x9 board).

The flat pieces, shaped like elongate pentagons, bear characters differing on the two sides to indicate whether representing its basic or promoted status. When you capture a piece you may subsequently enlist it into your own army, showing ownership by rotating it to point towards the opposing army. A captured piece that has been promoted must be reduced to its equivalent ‘other rank’ before rejoining the fight. The whole representational ludeme of promotion, as exhibited in various games, offers potential scope for further study. Does it in Shogi, for example, bear any evolutionary relationship to Chinese promotion games?

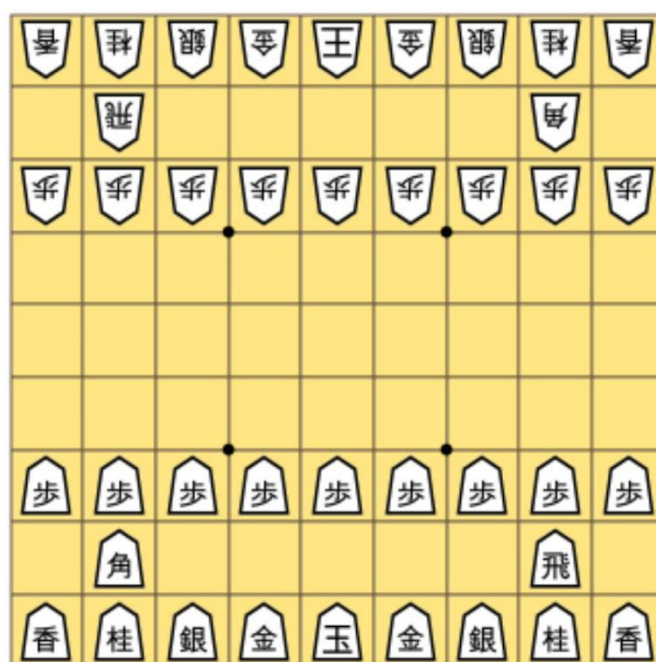
¹⁴ MURRAY, J. H. R. *A History of Chess*. Oxford, 1913, p. 138-9.



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Image 6



Shogi.

Chess reached Europe from Islamic and Arabic-speaking countries under the name Shatranj. In this form – better designated ‘old European Chess’, with the queen moving one square diagonally and the bishop two, the pawn only one square initially, and the king not castling – it must have done so a little earlier than its first recorded literary reference in the *Versus de schachis*, a 98-line poem giving dramatic expression to the roles and powers of the various pieces. That versions and copies of the *Versus* circulated widely thereafter is shown by a substantially similar poem, #210, in the *Carmina Burana*, beginning *Qui cupit egregium / scachorum noscere ludum, Audiat: ut potui / carmine composui* – ‘Anyone seeking

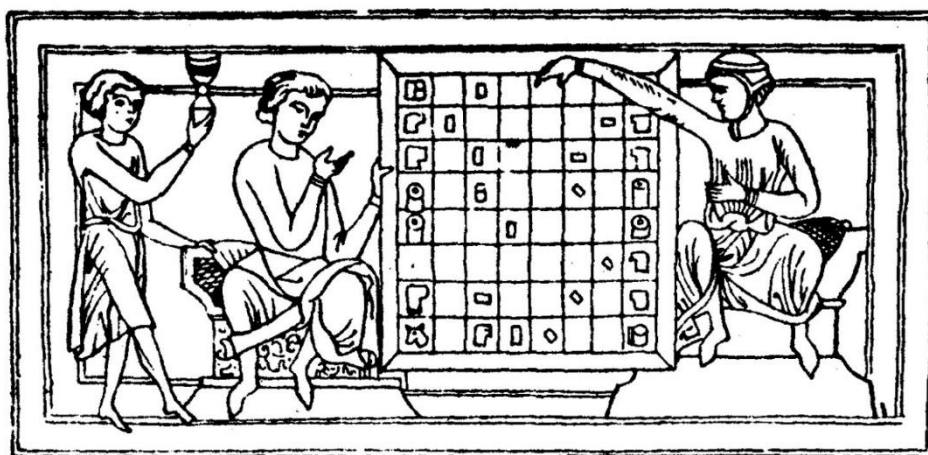


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instruction / in chess, that noble distraction, / Hark! I've written you these / lines from
 my expertise'.¹⁵

Image 7



Old European Chess, line drawing from image in the *Carmina Burana*.

On becoming absorbed into European culture, Chess underwent changes of *dramatis personae* for certain pieces that had no direct European equivalent. There was no problem with *rex* for king, *eques* for horse (knight), or *pedes* for foot soldier (pawn). Chariot would not do for *rukḥ*, so it was simply rendered as *rochus*, whence English *rook*. There was no such official as an adviser, vizier, or minister (though 'prime minister' might now suggest itself!), so the king would naturally instead be accompanied by his queen, *femina* or *regina* – a transformation we find repeating itself in the world of playing-cards, introduced into Europe in the 14th century. Most interesting were the diverse roles assumed by *al fil*, the Asian elephant.

¹⁵ MEYERS, W.; HILKA, H.; SCHUMANN, O. (eds.). *Carmina Burana*, I Band: Text, 3. Die Trink- und Spielerlieder. Heidelberg, 1970, pp. 55-59 (tr. Parlett).



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The closest-sounding Latin word was *alficus*, an angel, whose religious connotation may underlie the later (15th-century) English *bishop*. The French equivalent is *le fou*, a fool, joker, or jester (cf playing-cards again!). The various transformations, incarnations, and characterisations of chess pieces in different countries and languages is a complex mixture of roles, words, and shapes of pieces, and a whole book could be devoted to untangling them. Here it will suffice to say that the European game of *eschecs* – literally, of chess *pieces* – begins to look more like a medieval court than a battle-ready army.

At this stage of the game's development the queen, like its formal ancestor the minister, moved only one square diagonally, and the bishop, converted from an elephant, two. In the 15th century the game was speeded up by maximising their diagonal range, thus initiating the period of modern Chess. It's worth considering how this came about. Any new game that undergoes an explosion of popularity (albeit among a limited social class) naturally tends to spawn variations introduced experimentally, as much for the sake of novelty as anything else.

In the case of long diagonals an essential missing link, now extinct (apart from folkloric revivals) was Courier Chess, associated with and perhaps invented in the 12th century in the town of Ströbeck in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany.¹⁶ Courier is basically old European Chess played on an enlarged board of eight ranks and 12 columns and takes its name from a new piece called the Courier, characterised by the then novel idea of a piece able to move diagonally for any distance.

What gave rise to the novelty of the courier? My first thought was that the long diagonal move arose from the innovation of the bi-coloured chequering in Europe, perhaps at first sporadically, since it is mentioned as an optional extra as early as the *Versus de schachis*. Its immediate effect is to make the diagonals stand out more clearly, enabling players to judge and foresee such moves with greater facility, so it is hardly surprising that, as bi-coloured chequering became customary, a new piece having such a move would be conjured up to complement the still-existing short diagonal moves of the sage or counsellor and the bishop (or archer, in Courier Chess).

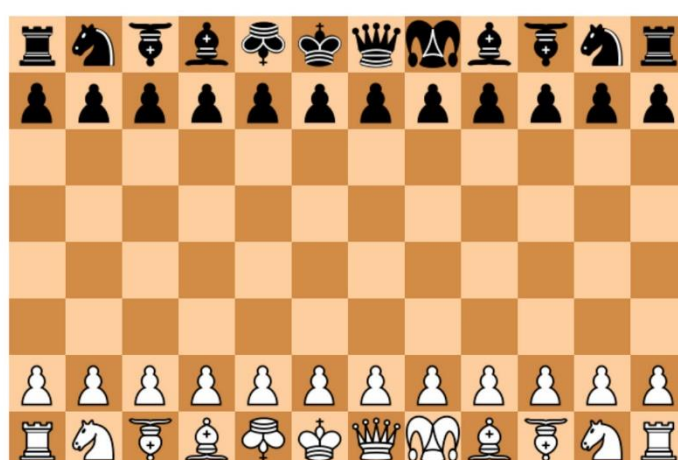
¹⁶ MURRAY, J. H. R. *A History of Chess*. Oxford, 1913, p. 483-5.



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Image 8



Courier chess.

That such a piece should be given the role of the necessarily fast-moving courier is equally natural – the character always reminds me of the speeded-up sequence of Walter Lieck’s courier, in the 1943 film version of *Münchhausen*,¹⁷ running on foot from Constantinople to Vienna and back again (with a bottle of Tokay) in the space of one hour. However, as Gunter points out, “Although the board of Shatranj was typically uncheckered, [those] depicted in the Alfonso Manuscript imply that this design was also introduced from the Islamic world”.¹⁸ In that case, one might suggest that the play of Shatranj had become too deeply embedded in Islamic culture to be amenable to further development, whereas in Europe it was sufficiently novel to encourage the exploration of such new ideas as exploring the potential of the long diagonal.

Courier Chess also introduced a piece moving one square orthogonally and called *der Schleich*, literally the Sneak, but also rendered as the Fool or Joker – perhaps influencing

¹⁷ *Münchhausen*, 1943.

¹⁸ GUNTER, Ann C. “Chess and its culture in west, south, and southeast Asia”. In: *Asian Games; the Art of Conquest*. New York, 2004, p. 154.



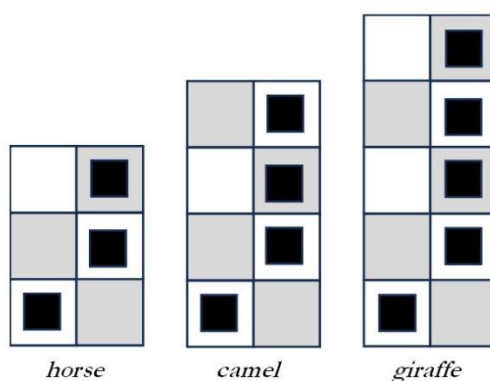
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the French equation of Bishop with *Fou*, and certainly bringing to mind, once again, the duplication of characters in Chess and playing-cards.

We cannot leave Chess without noting variations on the knight's move and named after other animals than the horse. Tamerlane's or Timur's Chess, also known as Great Chess and first recorded around 1350,¹⁹ incorporates pieces known as the camel and the giraffe. The camel moves like a knight but to a distance of one diagonal and two orthogonal squares (thus ending its move on a square of the same colour as its starting point) and the giraffe one square diagonally followed by any number orthogonally, thus ending on a square of either colour. The camel is, clearly, perceived as a horse but with a longer neck, and the giraffe with a longer neck still.

Image 9



Horse – camel – giraffe

– such as the grasshopper, the sparrow, and the rhino – have been introduced into the pantheon (pantherion?) of unorthodox chess pieces, albeit not for game-playing but for the entirely separate world of chess problems.

¹⁹ MURRAY, J. H. R. *A History of Chess*. Oxford, 1913, p. 344-6.



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III. Asymmetrical games

A wide range of apparently related games are described as asymmetrical.²⁰ Not that they were played on asymmetrical boards – rather, their asymmetry lies in the different forces and objectives of the (usually) two players. Typically, one of them operates one piece (occasionally two) positioned in the middle or at one end of the board, and seeks to navigate it to a corner, or outer edge, or opposite end, of the board, while the other operates a larger force of pieces and seeks to thwart or capture the opposing singleton.

The simplest members of this group include English Fox & Geese, French Reynard et les Poules, German Fuchs and Gänse, Dutch Schaap en Wolf (Sheep & Wolf) and so on. The fauna naturally changes when the game is carried into other countries, so, for example, to the Piman Indians of Mexico it was Coyote and Chickens. The tiger games of south-east Asia typically pit from one to four tigers against anything up to 24 hunters, dogs, or cattle. Such relatively simple folk games, surviving nowadays as children's games, are the remnants of larger and more complex games best represented by the early medieval Scandinavian and Saxon games of Tafl, or Hnefatafl, in which a king and his guards occupy the centre of the board and engage with an opposing army initially spread around the periphery. In the Sami game of Tablut, described by Linnaeus in 1812, the central figures are Swedes and their attackers Muscovites. Similar Chinese and Japanese games involve a general and 16 or more rebel soldiers.

Totally free of such bucolic or martial connotations is an unusual outlier of this family, the 10th-century game of Alea Evangelii (the Gospel Game), described and illustrated in a 12th-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript.²¹ Despite a drawing of the layout, and a verbal description of the game from which we learn that pieces include such characters as dukes and a count, the exact method of play is unknown. The theme of the game relates to the Eusebian Canon, whereby relationships are drawn between the gospels in

²⁰ “Surveyed”. In: PARLETT, David. “Corner your fauna”. In: *Parlett's History of Board Games*. Oxford History of Board Games, 2018, p. 185-205.

²¹ *Corpus Christ College manuscript 122*, commonly known as Corpus Irish Gospels, written between 1140 and 1199.



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default of the chapter-and-verse divisions of later date. It seems probable that the game was devised for the purpose of compensating clerics who would have enjoyed playing such warlike games as Hnefatafl before they took holy orders. A similar conversion from secular dice games to devotional pastimes is represented by the 10th-century game of Ludus Regularis, 'a game fit for the clergy to play'.²²

IV. Impact of paper and printing

Until the Chinese invention of paper during the Han dynasty (25-220CE) the ancient world had been unable to produce boards with thematic markings more complicated than the symbols appearing in the last few squares of the Senet board. But the additional development of woodblock printing during the Tang dynasty (618-907CE) suddenly provided all the materials necessary for the economic production of gaming surfaces bearing written symbols and pictorial representations. The technology soon found itself employed for the production of the remarkable series of race games known as promotion games, in which players' tokens might be promoted forwards or demoted backwards en route to an ultimate goal, similarly to Goose or Snakes & Ladders, but with distinctive differences.

Whereas India's Snakes & Ladders charted the course of spiritual development, China's promotion games directed one's avatar up (and down) the secular ladder of the civil service, as befitted a country with an advanced bureaucracy to which admission depended on passing examinations.

Because such games were drawn or printed on paper, no physical remains exist earlier than the 17th century; but literary evidence traces such games back to the Tang dynasty. Invention of the earliest known promotion game, *cai xuan*, is credited to one Li He, an official who triumphed in the palace examination in 827.²³ Similar games devised by

²² CARDOSO, Carla. "[Ludus Regularis: The Clergy Game](#)". In: *Board Game Studies Journal*, vol. 17, 2023, p. 47-92.

²³ LO, Andrew. "Official Aspirations: Chinese Promotion Games". In: MACKENZIE, Colin; FINKEL, Irving L. (eds.). *Asian Games: The Art of Contest*. New York: Asia Society, pp. 64-75.



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scholar-officials proliferated in the Song period (960-1279). One called Han guan yi, invented by Liu Bin (1022-88), was limited to 25 rounds to prevent it from going on for ever. The winner was the first to attain to the position of Chancellor, Commander-in-Chief, Grandee secretary, or any of four others, thereby sweeping a common pool of cash. Bonuses and additional penalties included, for those lucky enough to reach a sufficiently high position, a funeral bonus from other players if they died in office (Whether 'they' meant the player or their avatar is not specified).

Six cubic dice were used, with red fours being highest, as is usual in Chinese games. Two red fours count as one virtue, three as two virtues, and so on; but the same scale of values also applies to less desirable qualities, including 'corrupt', which of course lead to equally rapid demotion.

The earliest surviving specimen, in the National Library of China, may date from the Qing period (1644-1911), or even to the Ming (1368-6144). The next earliest illustration is that reproduced by Thomas Hyde in his *De historia nerdiludii* of 1694.

Promotions recalls the Indian game of Gyan Chaupar, the model for Snakes [Chutes] & Ladders. It first appeared in the late 1700s in two main versions, the Vaishnava (Hindu) of 72 squares and the Jain of 84, with later variants of 100 and up to 385 squares, but literary references to dice-play may imply that such games are much older.

The Indian game has many names and variations but is best referred to as Gyan Chaupar, 'the Game of Knowledge' – the knowledge, or gnosis, being that of the moral life. The player's 'self' is represented by a personal token that moves, in accordance with the throw of a die or cowrie shells, from Start at the lowest, terrestrial end of the board (to which snakes redirect one's avatar) to the upper regions of enlightenment and karma, helped by the occasional ladder.



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Image 10



Gyan chaupar.



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Each square bears a legend describing a virtue or a vice, with ladders arising from some of the virtues to higher, related ones and snakes from some of the vices to lower, worse ones. All broadly represent three main themes: a hierarchically structured cosmos extending from the lowest to the highest realms of existence; karmic forces binding and controlling living beings within it; and practices specific to various religions. 'As players move their pawns from square to square, climbing up ladders and sliding down snakes, they gradually ascend the levels of existence and leave behind the dualities of pain and pleasure until they finally arrive in the divine realm of Vishnu'.²⁴

V. Playing-cards

Playing-cards originated in 10th-century China, perhaps as an extension of paper money as used for gambling. (Compare Liar's Poker, traditionally played with the serial numbers on US dollar bills.)²⁵ How they spread westwards is unclear, but those of India and Persia are distinguished from a presumed Chinese ancestor by the addition of two human figures in each suit, ranking above the numerals 1 to 9, later expanded to ten.

The 'international' set of playing-cards, so called in that it has become the most globally widespread, theoretically consists of numbers 1 to 10 in each of four colours or suits, represented by symbols called spades, clubs, hearts, and diamonds. The numbers are essentially abstract, and the suits almost so, insofar as to most people they are only vaguely reminiscent of real-life objects. But this has not always been the case. French in origin, the common suit symbols achieved their simplified shape in the late 15th century when it was found easier and thus cheaper to mass-produce cards by single-colour stencilling than by hand-painting, as they originally were, or subsequently by woodblock and then copper-engraved printing.

Though Chinese in origin, cards reached Europe from the Islamic world of Mamluk Egypt perhaps slightly earlier than the mid 14th century, probably arriving through the

²⁴ SCHMIDT-MADSEN, Jacob. *The Game of Knowledge*. University of Copenhagen, PhD thesis, 2019.

²⁵ DUMMETT, M. *The Game of Tarot*. London, 1980, p. 36.



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trade port of Venice.²⁶ Mamluk suits were recognizable images of goblets, coins, swords, and polo sticks. These are sometimes said to represent the favourite activities of the upper classes – drinking (despite the Islamic ban on alcohol), gambling, fighting, and horse-riding sports – though, as with all such associations, it is hard to tell whether such activities served to inspire the design of the suits, or were merely attached to them as semiotic afterthoughts.

Cards soon became popular as a medium of gaming because they were easily portable and required no specially-designed boards as a playing-surface. Inevitably, they soon became produced locally, with equivalent symbols from European culture. Thus Italian playing-cards, still widely used today for the games traditionally associated with them, are stylised, though still recognizable, images of cups (goblets), coins, swords, and – not polo sticks, as the sport was unknown in Europe, but batons (sticks), or, as they appeared in Spanish cards, knobbly-looking clubs. As cards and card games spread throughout Europe during the 15th century different local cultures adapted, modified, and played variations on the original suit-system. In German-speaking territories the suits underwent many imaginative variations, mostly of a one-off nature, my particular favourites being cupids, goats, harps, and millstones. They eventually settled down to those of a more bucolic flavour still in use today, namely acorns, leaves, hearts, and (hawk-) bells. It is from these that the French system of spades, clubs, hearts, and diamonds arose by a process of simplification.

But cards are more than numerals: they also include faces, nowadays kings, queens, and jacks (knives, valets), and it is these characters that make them more human than abstract. In Mamluk cards each suit was headed by a king and two deputies or marshals, producing a structure reminiscent of Shatranj, with a king and an adviser or minister controlling an army of pawns paralleled by the numerals 1-10 and the basic structure of 52 cards, 13 in each suit. Just as European card-makers experimented with suit symbols so they also rang the changes on human characters. The original over- and under-marshals variously appear as knights and knaves, the knaves sometimes as maids. Queens are mentioned in a treatise of 1429, and in an early surviving pack of German

²⁶ MAYER, L. A. *Mamluk Playing Cards*. Leiden, 1971.



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cards head the suits in place of kings instead of ranking below them. Sometimes the pack was extended to 56 cards topped by king, queen, knight, and valet.

Modern French packs retain the delightful and archaic feature of attaching names to court cards, typically:

- Spades – David, Pallas, Hogier;
- Clubs – Alexandre, Argine, Lancelot;
- Hearts – Charles, Judith, La Hire;
- Diamonds – César, Rachel, Hector.

In practice the actual names have varied greatly and the most constant of them have not applied consistently to the same cards. David, Judith, and possibly Rachel appear to be biblical; Alexander, Caesar, Hector, and Pallas are classical, as also is Argine, apparently an anagram of regina; Lancelot is drawn from the Matter of Britain. Charles may be Charlemagne, and Hogier his distinguished cousin. Alternatively, he may head a trio comprising (1) Charles VII of France, (2) Rachel, the pseudonym of his mistress, Agnes Sorel, and (3) la Hire, an illustrious knight of his court. Or is Rachel a corruption of the Celtic Ragnel, relating rather to Lancelot?

In early 15th century Italy there appeared what are now known as tarot cards, and consist of a standard pack of 52 cards (in Italy and France) or 32 (in Germany) with the addition of 22 pictorial cards called *trionfi*.²⁷ These 'triumphs', the origin of our 'trumps', represent allegorical personifications of medieval characters (such as the Fool), astrological figures (the moon), and everyday concepts (death), and might first have appeared as a pack not necessarily designed for playing games. In real life, *trionfi* were medieval re-enactments of Roman triumphal processions and would have provided inspiration for decorative floats paraded through the streets on days of carnival. The *trionfi*, later called *tarocchi* (of unknown etymology), when attached to any of the 'standard' packs of the day were treated as a fifth suit and used in trick-taking games as what we now call trumps, for which purpose it was necessary to rank them in a

²⁷ DUMMETT, M. *The Game of Tarot*. London, 1980, p. 80-83.



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hierarchical order. The lowest-ranking of this order is the Fool, which it is tempting to regard as the original of our modern Joker. But in fact the Fool in tarot games is not the 'wild card' that the Joker would later become. Indeed, the Joker is best regarded as a sort of glorified Jack, and this leads us to focus our attention on the most interesting member of what has been called 'the cardboard court'.

For social or psychological reasons yet to be explored, the Jack or under-servant has played several unique and distinctive roles in playing-card life. Most notably, it often finds itself promoted to the topmost trump. This privilege can be traced back to a famous trick-taking game of the early 15th century known as Karnöffel, which has spawned many variants and still exists in several direct descendants in parts of northern Europe. In Karnöffel, certain cards of an arbitrarily chosen suit are named and exercise a limited degree of trumping power over certain other cards. The top three are Karnöffel (the Unter, equivalent to our Jack), followed by the Pope (seven) and the Kaiser (two).

Any number of games have since developed in which the Jack is the highest trump, most notably games of the Jass family. In Euchre and its relatives the trump Jack is followed in power by the other Jack of the same colour. 'Euchre' looks like a fastidious re-spelling of the German word Jucker, the game's Alsatian ancestor being known as Juckerspiel. Amongst other things, Jucker means a draught- or carriage-horse, being cognate with High German Joch and English yoke. One might think that the two top Jacks were perceived as metaphorically yoked together and drawing the other trumps behind them. A Jack plays other roles of greater or lesser eccentricity in traditional English games such as Crib and All Fours.

The scoring combination of a King and Queen of the same suit naturally became known as a marriage, first appearing in a 17th-century game of that name. The marriage was subsequently paralleled by a combination of Queen and Jack, known as an 'intrigue'. A bézique, in the game of that name, is specifically the spade Queen and diamond Jack, also known as *binocle*, whence American Pinochle. Thus do the human-faced cards,



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which would otherwise be abstractly numbered 11 to 13, become real-life theatrical characters, enjoying marriages and private intrigues of their own!

Of all the playing-cards of late medieval Europe none show so extensive a range of human characters than those of the one-off Hofämterspiel, ‘the Game of Courtly Offices’, produced in Vienna around 1460.²⁸ Consisting of stiffened paper printed in woodblock and hand-painted in watercolour, they are based on earlier German 48-card packs, with suits representing Germany (yellow with black eagle), France (blue with white fleur-de-lis), Bohemia (red with white lion), and Hungary (red-white horizontal stripes). The ranks are those of their respective courtly households, giving some idea of the characters’ relative social status, namely:

	Germany	France	Bohemia	Hungary
12	King	King	King	King
11	Queen	Queen	Queen	Queen
10	master of household	master of household	master of household	master of household
9	marshal	marshal	marshal	Marshal
8	chaplain	stewardess	doctor	Chancellor
7	steward	cup-bearer	chancellor	head cook
6	lady-in-waiting	lady-in-waiting	lady-in-waiting	lady-in-waiting
5	waiter, tapster	cook	falconer	Marksman
4	barber	master of horse	trumpeter	Trumpeter
3	herald	tailor	joustier	Fishmonger
2	messenger	hunter	potter	Baker
1	fool (<i>m</i>)	fool (<i>f</i>)	fool (<i>m</i>)	fool (<i>f</i>)

Conclusion

In this brief survey I have tried to suggest ways in which people of the past might have seen themselves, their animal companions, and their surroundings reflected in the movements and activities of board and card game components. Lest I be thought to

²⁸ RAGG, E. R. (ed.). *Famous Packs of Playing Cards*. Vienna: Piatnik, 1976.



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have lumped their players all together in an invariable whole I must seek to absolve myself.

Image 11



Hofämterspiel: Bohemia II, the Potter.

Historic or traditional games are often spoken of as ‘folk’ games, in that they have no named inventors and are free of the sort of proprietary rights that nowadays belong to commercial games companies: save in a few rare cases their ‘rules’ of play were beholden to no regulatory bodies and were, for the most part, transmitted orally from person to person without reference to players of similar games in other communities. Most of the games that we do know about were in fact those of which written records exist and expensive artifacts remain, and to that extent were the pastimes of a restricted



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élite – principally royalty, aristocracy, scholars, and clerics. The old, broad classification of race games and war games no longer applies. Modern board games are, as Cardellicchio has reminded us, ‘complex combinations of elements drawn from traditional board games’. Many of their meanings may be lost to modern perceptions, but to rediscover them is to unlock for us many of the cultural mysteries of the past.

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