

# THE BOARDGAME BOOK



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Boardgames have been invented and played in nearly all parts of the world, although the games played by the Indians of South America seem to be entirely of European or African origin. Only among the Eskimos and Australian Aborigines have no boardgames been found. This book provides a comprehensive selection of the world's boardgames and shows the different forms these take.

Some boardgames depend on chance – the player has to accept what destiny allots, without being able to influence the course of events. An example of this is the Game of the Goose (pages 140–141), and the numerous versions and adaptations of this game that have been developed since the eighteenth century, such as Universal History, Tramway Game, Panorama of Europe and Gathering of the Nations. Recent research suggests that in societies where games of chance are prevalent there is likely to be an emphasis on control of the supernatural, with a belief in gods and spirits that are benevolent, or at any rate can be coerced by performing certain actions.

Other boardgames are based on strategy, where no advantage is given to any player, but each can achieve mastery through exercising the necessary skill. The classic example of this type of game is Chess (pages 18–21), the logic and complexity of which has made it a perennial favourite – sometimes even an obsession – in both its Oriental and Western forms.

In between these two classes of games stands a group which combines elements both of chance and skill. Backgammon (pages 88–91) is such a game where a skillful player can exploit the throw of the dice so as to gain advantage even from a seemingly unpromising position.

Boardgames often reflect aspects of daily life in a play form. Some games, for example Draughts/Checkers (pages 26–29), are a form of standardized warfare, with two equal and opposing armies struggling for supremacy and power. In other battle-games, such as Go (pages 124–127) or Mu Torere (pages 42–43), the aim of each army is to blockade the other by seizing either territory or strategic points.

A second group of battle-games involves two sides of unequal numbers and different capabilities, so that the game takes the form of a hunt rather than a war. One family of these games, represented by Fox and Geese (pages 50–51), originated in northern Europe, while another, including games such as Cows and Leopards (pages 62–63), developed in southern Asia.

Another group of games is built around the idea of a race. Nyout (pages 32–33), Pachisi (pages 110–111) and Patolli (pages 108–109) are examples of this type of game. In these games, the players are not seeking to win by defeating each other by elimination or immobilization, but are competing to pass successfully along a fixed course from beginning to end. Sometimes the course is marked with pitfalls and dangers, while in other games the chief



danger is the possibility of attack by an enemy piece. The three games mentioned above are all of the 'cross and circle' type, where the pieces go round the board like the hands of a clock and are taken off at a marked winning point.

During recent centuries in the West, one of the most common forms of race game has been based on the idea of reaching a goal in life, overcoming difficulties and hindrances on the way. This type of game developed in the eighteenth century, and the Game of the Goose (pages 140–141) is probably the original from which other variants are derived. The factors common to all this group are the spiral form of the board and the movement of the pieces from the outside towards the centre. The essential similarity of all these boards is disguised by their varied appearance and the many different aims that each displays; also the sets of difficulties or hazards involved being particular to every game.

A further group of boardgames is characterized by the fact that one person plays on his own without needing an opponent. This kind of boardgame presents a single player with the possibility of defeat or success in the solitary solving of a problem or set of problems in particular circumstances. Solitaire (pages 54–55) and Pentalpha (pages 60–61) are examples of boardgames for one player.

Mancala is the general name given to a large group of games. Although these are usually included in the category of boardgames, they have not been reproduced in the book, as it would be difficult for any of them to be played on a flat page. The main feature shared by all members of the Mancala group is that the board consists of two, or sometimes four, rows of shallow depressions into which a number of counters, mostly pebbles or seeds, are placed. These are then redistributed by each player in turn. Like a number of other games, the earliest examples of this game are from the ancient Middle East, in this case Egypt.

Several sets of hollows arranged for a Mancala game have been found cut into the roofing slabs of a temple built at Kurna on the west bank of the Nile in about 1400 B.C. It seems that these and a number of other boardgames were cut by the masons for use while working on the project and before the stones were finally positioned, since some have been cut away at the edges when the stones were fitted into place. Other sets have been found cut into a pylon built in front of the great temple at Karnak during the Ptolemaic period in the last three centuries before Christ. Other boards suitable for games of the Mancala type have been found in Arabia, predating the establishment of the Muslim religion. The game from which the whole family now takes its name was described by Edward Lane, an Englishman who spent a number of years living in Cairo in the 1830's. At this time traditional Egyptian society was only just starting to come under the influence of modern European civilization. Lane relates how this game was played in contemporary coffee-houses.



The rules of this fascinating game have been included here as the board may be marked out with the required number of hollows wherever the ground is suitable. For example, any sandy beach provides a good surface or the game may be played in a garden, or in the dust of a country path, which is one of the most familiar sites for the game in Africa.

### RULES

1. The board is made by hollowing two rows of six shallow circular depressions: one row for each of two players.
2. Seventy-two pebbles or counters are used. One player, without counting them out, places about half in each row, either in the middle hollows of each row, or in the hollow which is on each player's extreme left.
3. The other player picks up all the counters from any one of his pits, and sows one in each pit rotating from left to right along the rest of his row and then down his opponent's row, continuing until all the counters have been placed. From A to F, F to a and f to A (see figure A).

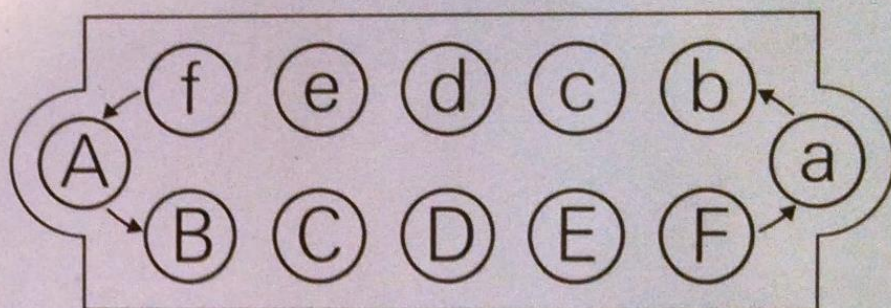


Figure A

4. If the last counter is sown into a pit already containing one or three counters, the player *bears off* those two or four (including the newcomer) and any counters there may be in the pit opposite. If one or more of the immediately preceding pits contains two or four counters, he *bears off* these too, together with any counters in the pit opposite.
5. If the last counter of a lap falls into a pit with an even number of counters already in it, the player lifts all these counters out and sows them rotating from left to right around the board.

7. Each player plays in turn, continuing until his last counter lands in an empty pit.
8. If there is more than one counter in a player's row and his opponent has none on his side, the player must put one of these counters in the end pit of his opponent's row on his opponent's extreme left. However, if there are only two counters left on the board, they become the property of the first player to get them both in his row.
9. When there are no counters left in play the round ends and each player counts the counters in his possession. The difference between the two numbers is the score for that round.
10. A new round is begun and play continues until one player has a score of sixty.



*A game of Mancala is enjoyed by two girls from the Dan tribe in the hinterland of Liberia, West Africa.*

Forms of Mancala are found throughout Black Africa, but because the game is played using hollows scooped out of the ground, or perishable material like wood is used to make a board, it is not possible to determine exactly where this game originated. It may have developed in ancient Egypt and then spread south-west (there were extensive trade-links in the period of the Pharaohs between Egypt and both Central and West Africa), or the game may have originated in Black Africa and been taken to Egypt at a very early date. There are a number of different forms of Mancala played in the different regions of West Africa. The early seventeenth century traveller 'Richard Jobson described one form of the game, called Wari, in the Gambia territory:

'In the heat of the day, the men will come forth and sit themselves in companies, under the shady trees, to receive the fresh aire, and there passe the time in communication, having only one kind of game to recreate themselves with all, and that is a piece of wood, certaine great holes cut, which they set upon the ground betwixt two of them, with a number of some thirty pibble stones, after a manner of counting, they take one from the other, until one is possessed of all, wherat some of them are wondrous nimble.'

The inhabitants of West Africa who were

enslaved and taken to the Americas brought much of their culture with them. This included their religion, which survives in altered form in Brazil and as Voodoo in Haiti, and also a number of forms of Mancala such as Wari.

There are four variants of Wari found today in the West Indies and Guyana, one of which is known as Awari. Traditionally this game is played by men rather than women. However, some women do play it but if a woman becomes too expert at the game, most men will refuse to play her, since it is considered humiliating to lose to a woman. Another form of Mancala, known as Pallanguli, is played by the Tamils in southern India and Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Here it is usually played by women, but sometimes men use it as a gambling game. Unless this form of the game arose spontaneously without any connection with other Mancala games, which seems extremely unlikely, it is probable that it reached the Tamils either from Muslim invaders or through the trade links between India and Africa.

More complex forms of Mancala, involving four rows rather than two, are played in East and South Africa. Four-row Mancala boards made of stone have been found in and near the mines of Zimbabwe, the site of a civilization that flourished from about 1450 A.D. to about 1800 A.D., in the area now known as Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. One of these four-row Mancala games, called Hus, is played by the Hottentots. It is unusual in that the stones remain on the board and are not *borne off* by the players. The rules of this game for two players are given below.

## RULES

1. There are four rows of eight holes, two rows for each player.
2. Each player has two stones or counters in each of the holes of his back row and two in each of the right-hand four holes of his front row (see figure B).

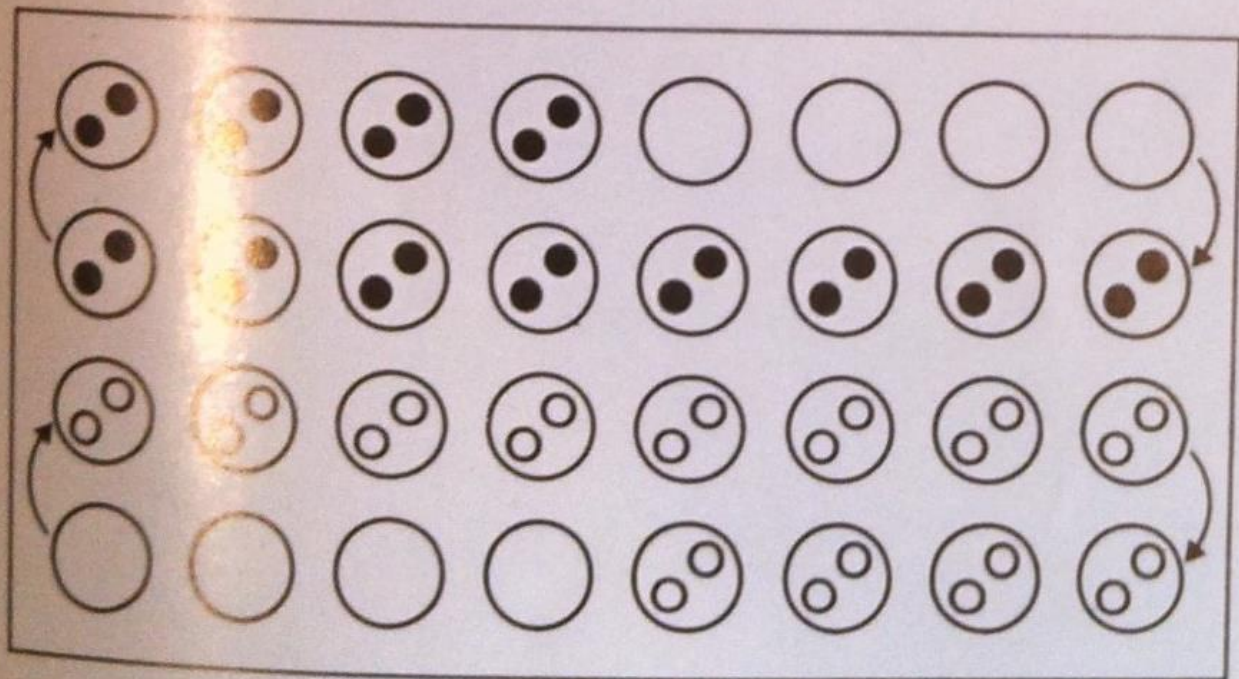


Figure B

3. All moves are made in a clockwise direction, each player moving only around his own two rows.
4. The first player is chosen by lot, lifts the counters from any one of his holes, and sows them one at a time into the following holes. If the last stone falls into an empty hole, that is the end of his turn, and his opponent takes a turn.
5. If the last counter is sown into a hole which already has counters in it, all of these counters,

including the one just thrown into it, are lifted up and sown one by one into the next holes.

6. If a player's sowing ends in a loaded front-row hole, and the corresponding hole in his opponent's front row has counters in it, he takes up those counters and sows them instead of his own. More than one of these captures can be made in the same turn of play.

7. If a player captures counters from one of his opponent's front holes, and the corresponding enemy back hole also contains counters, he takes up and sows these too and also captures and uses the counters from any other one of his opponent's holes.

8. A player must begin his turn from a hole which contains two or more counters: if he has only *singletons* he cannot play and loses the game.

9. If a player captures all his opponent's counters, that constitutes a double win.

10. The player who wins one game begins the next, and the overall winner is the player who wins the best of seven games.

As well as corresponding to certain important human situations in their basic structure, boardgames often refer to specific historical circumstances in their names and those of their



*Ivory Chessmen: a mounted knight from Canton, China, standing twenty-three centimetres (nine inches) high and carved from a single tusk. The howdah-carrying elephant represents a king and was made about 1790 in Delhi, India. In the original Indian game an elephant was used in the same way as we now use a bishop. Its identity was changed by Muslim Arabs for a V-shaped piece which Europeans took to represent a bishop's mitre.*

pieces. Dablot Prejjesne (pages 152–153), for example, mirrors the conflict between nomadic herders and settled agriculturalists, while Asalto (pages 52–53) is a version of Fox and Geese updated at the time of the Indian Mutiny.

Chess pieces have for centuries been carved in forms based on local political personalities. Napoleon, for example, is represented (always as the White King) in many chess sets made at the turn of the nineteenth-century. A chess set carved in the Soviet Union in 1930 shows one side as Communists and the other as Capitalists. An English set made in 1973 represents the British political scene of the time. The white pieces stand for the Conservatives, Mr. Heath and his cabinet, whereas the black pieces portray the Labour opposition led by Mr. Wilson.

The development of Chess also reflects in broader terms the different societies through which it has passed. In ancient India, where this game probably originated, the pieces stood for the different arms of warfare: chariots (which became rooks), cavalry (still recognisable as knights), elephants (changed into bishops), the king and his prime minister (now the queen). In Chinese Chess (pages 24–25) the king has altered into a general, the queen is a mandarin,



and in addition to the other pieces there is a cannon, a reminder of the fact that it was the Chinese who invented gunpowder.

The changing identity of the piece now known as the bishop is particularly interesting, showing as it does how different cultures change and reinterpret what they adopt from the outside world in accordance with their own preconceptions and prejudices. In the original Indian game, this piece was an elephant, and was shown as such in the way it was carved. Taken from India to Persia, Chess was adopted by the Muslim Arabs in the seventh or eighth centuries after they had overrun Persia. The Islamic tradition, however, tends to be hostile to the artistic representation of any object, preferring art to be non-representational. A V-shaped nick was therefore cut into the top of the elephant-piece, so that it would remind players of an elephant with its big, flapping ears. When the game reached Europe, the form of the piece reminded western Christians of a bishop's mitre, and that is how the piece got its present name. It may seem strange to us that bishops should be part of a battle game, but in the Middle Ages it was not unheard of for churchmen to take an active part in fighting when they considered it necessary or appropriate. The old French epic 'Song of Roland', for instance, dating in its present form from the eleventh-century recounts how Archbishop Turpin joined in the battle against the Saracens, which was presumably perfectly acceptable to both the author and his audience.

Race-games of the Game of the Goose family are especially easy to adapt to particular circumstances, and both Up to Klondyke (pages 74–75) and Gold Rush (pages 72–73) focus on the excitement and enthusiasm that the nineteenth century gold-strikes aroused.

Up to Klondyke was almost certainly published within a couple of years of the discovery of gold in the Klondike in 1896. The story of how it was found, at Dawson off the Yukon river in north-western Canada, is a classic tale of gold prospecting. The three men who staked the claim at Fort Cudahy, the Mounted Police post eighty miles down the river, were George Carmack and two Indian companions called 'Skookum' Jim and 'Taglish' Charlie. The creek where the gold was found was soon renamed Bonanza Creek and rapidly became the centre of a mining camp. After a ship had called in at Seattle from Alaska in the spring of 1897, news of the Klondike was flashed round the world by telegraph. During the next few months thousands of men and several women struggled to the Klondike over one of several difficult routes. One was by boat to Skagway or Dyea and then either over the Chilcoot Pass or via the White Pass to Lake Bennett, down the White Horse Rapids to the Yukon and on down to Bonanza Creek. Thousands died on the way. An even harder journey was from Edmonton northwards along the Mackenzie river and west down the Porcupine and up the Yukon.

Within a few years Dawson had grown from a few

shacks to a city of twenty-five thousand, and at the peak of the boom in 1900 gold to the value of over twenty-two million dollars was produced. Only the gold, however, kept people there and when that ran out the bulk of the population left, so that by the middle of this century Dawson was a sleepy town of a few hundred inhabitants.

Another kind of race-game, Snakes and Ladders (pages 134–135), with a particularly interesting history, was used to combine pleasure with instruction until the modern form which is purely for fun. It is based on a game called 'Moksha-Patamu' used in India for religious education. According to the Hindu sages, virtuous acts, represented by ladders, shorten the journey of a soul through a number of incarnations to Nirvana, the state of ultimate perfection. Human sin, symbolized by the head of the snake, leads to reincarnation in a lower, animal form. Thus Snakes and Ladders is a symbolic moral journey through life to heaven.

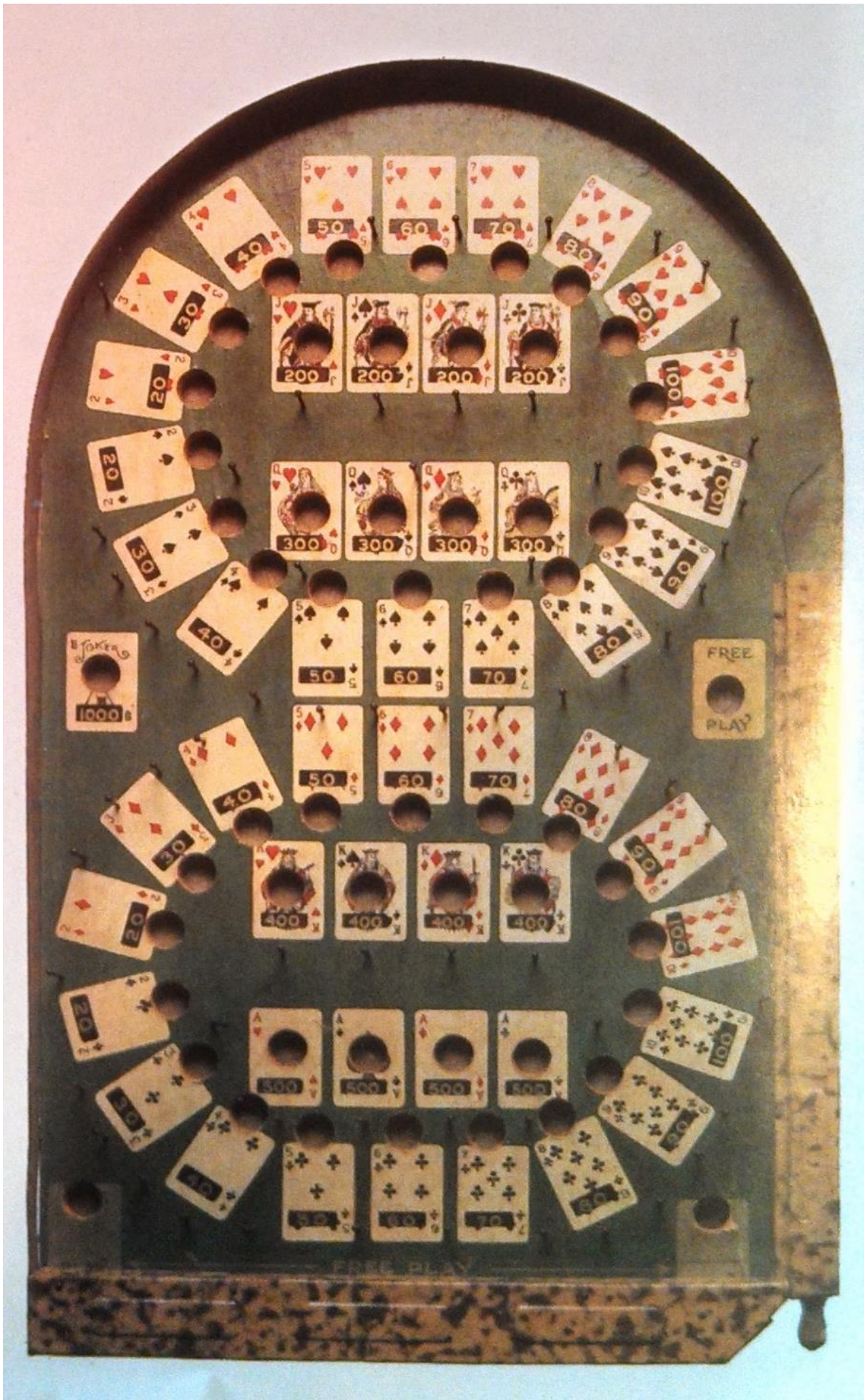
In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many spiral games were produced to teach children history, geography, scripture, botany and other natural sciences. Simpler games were designed for amusement only and others commemorated important topical events, such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 held in London, England.

Almost certainly the first boardgames had a religious rather than a purely secular use. The earliest known game-board, now in the Musée du Cinquantenaire in Brussels, Belgium, dates back to between 4000 and 3500 B.C. It was found in a pre-dynastic cemetery at El-Mahasna, about eight miles north of Abydos in Upper Egypt, together with a large number of clay and ivory objects. The board was nearly eighteen centimetres (seven inches) long and seven centimetres (two and three-quarter inches) wide, standing on two crossbars. The surface was divided into three by six squares and with the board were eleven conical pieces. The archaeologists who found the grave believed that its occupant may have been a magician or soothsayer and the game used for divination and foretelling the future.

On the back of the board is an explanation of what each card represents as follows:

Hearts/Diamonds *good*  
Clubs/Spades *bad*  
Red picture cards *blondes*  
Black picture cards *brunettes*  
King *a married man*  
Queen *a woman*  
Jack *an unmarried man*  
Ace *a letter*  
Two *divorce*  
Three *health*  
(if red *good* if black, *poor*)  
Four *a surprise*  
(if black, *a disappointment*)  
Five *a change*  
Six *business affairs*  
Seven *marriage*  
Eight *travel*  
Nine *love*  
Ten *money*





5♥ 50  
6♥ 60  
7♥ 70

Q♥ 200  
K♥ 200  
A♥ 200  
2♥ 200

Q♠ 300  
K♠ 300  
A♠ 300  
2♠ 300

5♣ 50  
6♣ 60  
7♣ 70

5♦ 50  
6♦ 60  
7♦ 70

Q♦ 400  
K♦ 400  
A♦ 400  
2♦ 400

A♣ 500  
K♣ 500  
Q♣ 500  
J♣ 500

5♣ 50  
6♣ 60  
7♣ 70

1000  
1000

FREE  
PLAY

FREE PLAY

## Examples

Ace of Diamonds, Jack of Clubs, Four of Hearts.

*Interpretation: you will receive a letter from a dark young man which will be a pleasant surprise.*

Queen of Diamonds, Five of Spades, Nine of Diamonds, King of Spades.

*Interpretation: a woman will cause a change in the matrimonial affairs of a dark-haired young man.*

Ten of Diamonds, Six of Hearts.

*Interpretation: you will receive money, probably from a business deal enabling you to make a change for the better.*

Jack of Spades, Nine of Clubs, Jack of Hearts.

*Interpretation: two young men are in love with you, one is dark and the other fair. Both are unhappy, and the affair is ill-favoured.*

Ace of Hearts, Six of Diamonds, Ten of Hearts.

*Interpretation: you will receive a business letter relating to money. The transaction will be successful.*

Eight of Diamonds, Three of Hearts, Five of Clubs, Six of Spades.

*Interpretation: you will travel, your health will improve, but there will be an unfortunate change in your affairs.*

Other early game-boards include one from Beth Shemesh, Israel, dated about 2000 B.C., and the Royal Game of Ur, discovered by Sir Leonard Woolley in Iraq and dated about 3000 B.C. The divinatory use of boardgames has not only been confined to ancient times, nor to the Middle East. Zohn Ahl (pages 36–37) was used for fortune-telling in North America up to a century ago and in Madagascar, political and military decisions were taken with the help of Fanorona (pages 150–151) at the end of the nineteenth century. Linstron's Fortune Telling Game, dating from the early years of the twentieth century, is a modern example of the same idea. During play the curved end of the Linstron's board is raised slightly and marbles are propelled by a spring from the tunnel on the right, coming to rest either in a hole linked to a card, or out of play against the base line.

It seems that boardgames were not only used to divine the future, but were played in the after-life. According to Ancient Egyptian belief, the souls of those who died had to pass through various trials before their final judgement. If successful, the souls entered the Blessed Fields of the Dead. Here they could enjoy life after death in such pleasant ways as playing a game of Senat, as shown in the illustration to the right. This is part of a papyrus text from the Book of the Dead, which was commissioned for Ani, a Royal Scribe (c. 1250 B.C.), to help him on his journey to the world of the dead.

As the gods are often believed to intervene in games of chance, it is not surprising that many cultures have a particular deity to whom gamblers may appeal when trying to influence their luck. Shown on the right is a reproduction of a Pre-Columbian statuette from the northern coast of Ecuador. This represents a god of gambling, comparable to Macuilxochitl, the Aztec deity who was also the god of sport and pleasure. Both cultures usually portray these figures wearing a helmet-mask in the shape of a bird's head. The Ecuador deity is shown playing pan-pipes, like his Greek counterpart, Dionysus. The vessel attached to the statuette's back was for holding a libation to the god when gamblers wanted to enlist his aid, just as the Aztec players of Patolli (pages 108–109) called on their god Macuilxochitl for help. Less powerful than the deities are the talismans and lucky charms used by gamblers over the centuries.

The notion underlying this supernatural aspect of boardgames is that the gods control what is otherwise called 'chance', or the random fall of the



dice. According to one Greek tradition, it was Palamedes who invented dice, to pass the time during the ten-year siege of Troy. In fact, however, dice go back long before the Trojan War. The earliest kinds of dice were probably casting sticks, made from split twigs – rounded on one side and flat on the other – used in a simple ‘heads or tails’ system with the odds changing subtly according to the number of sticks thrown. Cowrie shells, landing either mouth side up or mouth side down, serve the same purpose. Pyramid-shaped dice and long dice with four marked sides were both used by the Egyptians. Another early form of dice was the bone from a dog’s or a sheep’s foot, called an astragalus, whose different sides were numbered from one to six. Such astragali are probably referred to in the Bible in the expression ‘casting lots’, and are still used today by some Arabian and Amerindian tribes. Cubic dice probably developed from astraguli, but unlike the natural bones, the faces of accurately made cubic dice have equal chances of falling uppermost. The present arrangement, in which the spots on any two opposite faces add up to seven, dates from about 1400 B.C.



*Above: In this Egyptian painting, Ani, a Royal Scribe during the nineteenth dynasty plays a game of Senat, watched by his wife.  
Right: A god of gambling and music from the Jama-Coaque culture of Ecuador, which flourished from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D.*



A poem called the 'Gamester's Lament' from the earliest Indian poetry, the 'Rig-Veda', refers to dice, which in this case were probably made from nuts:

'Don't play with dice, but plough your furrow!

Delight in your property, prize it highly!

Look to your cattle and look to your wife, you gambler!'

These lines are typical of the hostility that gamblers have mostly had to face, being accused of neglecting their duties in life and wasting their substance.

It is interesting to note that the passion for gambling is not prevalent throughout the world. There are several cultures where gambling is not practised. The Aborigines of Australia, traditionally indifferent to the accumulation of wealth, do not gamble, but neither do the Melanesians of Papua, who spend a lot of time acquiring property. Where gambling is common, though, it is often curbed. This can be by social disapproval, as in Victorian times, when the gaming-boards were made in the form of books for the sake of secret gamesters; or by legislation, which leads to ingenious devices like the whisky glass shown on page 17, where the dice could easily be concealed by the hand of an illegal gambler if the police came by.

What was the purpose of the dice? ...

if the police came by.

Whatever the prevailing moral attitude towards dicing, it is clear that boardgames themselves are universally popular. This is proved by the substantial literature on the subject which, in the case of Chess, runs into many thousands of volumes. Of all the books written on boardgames, the first is still considered one of the best. This superb manuscript was compiled between 1251 and 1282 A.D., by command of Alfonso X, King of Leon and Castile. It is now in the monastery library of St. Lorenze del Escorial, a few miles from Madrid, Spain. It consists of ninety-eight pages, bound in sheepskin. The Spanish text, written in a beautiful script, is one of the first masterpieces of literature to be expressed in colloquial language. There are many illuminated initials and a hundred and fifty coloured drawings, ten being full plates. This 'Libro de Juegos' (Book of Games) is divided into four sections: the first part deals with Chess; the second with dice games; the third with varieties of Backgammon; the fourth contains a miscellany of games ranging from the complexities of Grande Acedrez, an enlarged variety of Chess, to the simplicity of Alquerque.

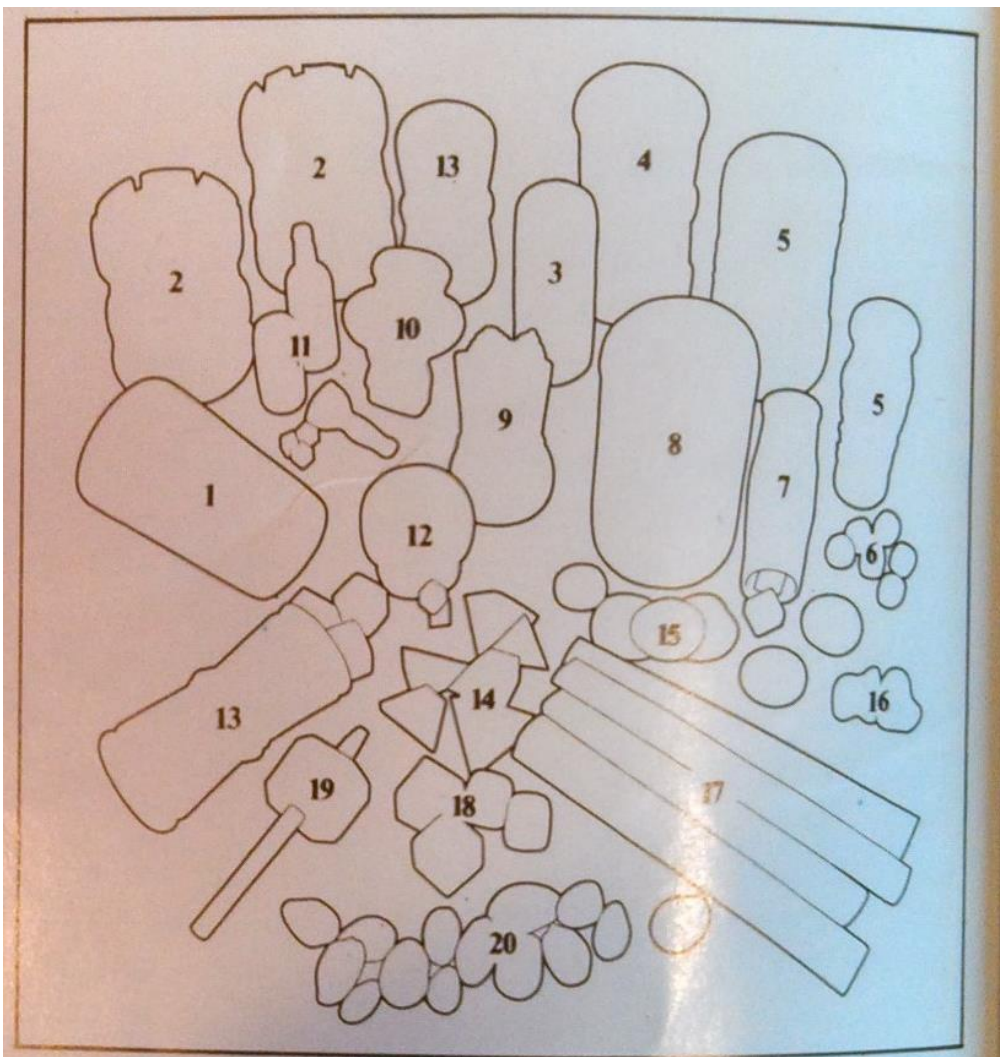
In his introduction, King Alfonso explained that God intended everyone to enjoy themselves with many games, especially boardgames for '... those who like to enjoy themselves in private to avoid the annoyance and unpleasantness of public places, or those who have fallen into another's power, either in prison, or slavery, or as seafarers, and in general all those who are looking for a pleasant pastime which will bring them comfort and dispel their boredom. For that reason, I, Don Alfonso . . . have commanded this book to be written.'

King Alfonso's high opinion of the enjoyment which boardgames provide continues to be endorsed by players of all ages everywhere.

Right: The Spanish king, Alfonso X, from an illustration in the 'Book of Games', which was compiled at his command.  
Below: Box-shaped boards, made in about 1890, simulate books to disguise their frivolous nature.







1. Whisky glass with three dice in a false bottom.
2. English wooden dicing cup and matching money-box (c.1800).
3. Mauchline-ware dicing cup (c.1910).
4. English ivory dicing cup.
5. Chinese dicing cups, carved ivory (c.1850).
6. Six modern Chinese dice.
7. English plain ivory dicing cup with three dice stamped GR as proof of tax paid (c.1790).
8. Tortoiseshell dicing cup (c.1880).
9. Ivory and teak dicing cup from India (c.1900).
10. Dicing cup disguised as a minstrel whose top hat contains two small red dice.
11. Two wooden dicing cups shaped like bottles, souvenirs from the Northeast Exhibition held at Newcastle upon Tyne, England in 1929.
12. Dicing box for Thai Backgammon based on the same principle as the Roman pyrgus.
13. Crown and Anchor dice (c.1940) emerging from a wooden dicing cup, one of a pair (c.1850).
14. Six reproduction pyramidal dice based on originals from Sumer (c.3000 B.C.).
15. Various Roman coins.
16. Two modern astragali based on original examples from 4000 years ago.
17. Reproduction Amerindian dicing-sticks, (nineteenth century).
18. Modern red 'perfect dice' from a Reno casino in Nevada, U.S.A. and the more familiar white, round-cornered 'shop dice'.
19. Eight-sided tectotum.
20. Cowrie shells used as dice.



