GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

What's the Universal Appeal?

ABOVE Senet gaming board for Amenhotep III, king of Egypt (reigned ca. 1390–1353 BCE) —Brooklyn Museum (public domain)

LEFT Painting of Queen Nefertari—one of the principal wives of Ramesses the Great of the 19th Dynasty—playing Senet —public domain Wikimedia

Before archaeologist

Howard Carter (1874–1939) discovered in 1922 the tomb of King Tutankhamun (reigned ca. 1336–1327 BCE) in Egypt's Valley of Kings, he excavated another high-status burial chamber in Thebes earlier. This one belonged to an official, identified as Kemen, an administrator of cattle and granaries, of the Temple of Amun at Karnak. A cartouche on his casket put him at the time of the Middle Kingdom Pharoah Amenemhat IV, who ruled ca. 1786–ca. 1777 BCE. The tomb had been looted by grave robbers in antiquity, but Carter and his team found a trove of artifacts in the disturbed fill, including cosmetic vases, alabaster fragments, and a toiletries kit of cedar and ebony, inlaid with ivory. They found a game set made of ivory, cedar, sycamore, ebony, and copper, accompanied by several tall pins of ivory, some carved into the heads of jackals, some of dogs. The top was drilled with fifty-nine holes that charted a race to a goal at the top.

The game of Hounds and Jackals was widely known in the ancient Middle East. Sixty-eight similar boards have been found in what are now Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Syria. Recently, archaeologists working 2,200 kilometers away in Azerbaijan, on the shores of the Caspian Sea, have discovered several game boards with the same layout as the one excavated by Carter. They are several centuries older than the one found in Thebes, with some of the game boards carved into flat stones. Players probably threw dice to determine how far to move their pieces, similar to the modern game of cribbage. Six-sided dice were invented even earlier, with some from the Indus Valley in modern Pakistan dating to around 3000 BCE.

Board games have captivated people for thousands of years. The Egyptians played another game called "senet" that was even older than the peg board game. King Tutankhamun had a Senet set in his tomb from the 1300s, and by then the game had been around for over 1,000 years. Throughout Egyptian history, there are paintings of the game being played.

There is fragmentary evidence for a version of the game from about 3100 BCE but better evidence of game boards from the First Dynasty (lasting until ca. 2900 BCE). Senet is played on a board ten squares long and three squares wide and involves people taking turns with dice or casting sticks (which function like dice). There are even Old Kingdom records of players trash-talking one another, one saying, "It has landed on me. Be

Men playing mancala in Mali —Susan Liebold/Alamy Stock Photo

happy my heart, for I shall cause you to see everything taken away." The other player responds, "You speak as one weak of tongue, for the advantage is mine!"

In Africa, there is a family of games known by several names, but generally called "mancala." The board—sometimes just pits in the sand—has two ranks of six holes each. At either end of the board there are two larger pits, belonging to each of the players. They take turns placing their seeds or stones in the pits, attempting to outmaneuver their opponent and gain more of the seeds. The game is easily learned, but deeply strategic and difficult to master. Enslaved Africans brought versions of the game to the Americas, where it is known by many names, including Wari, Ayo, and Oware.

A game similar to Mancala, and indeed to Senet and Hounds and Jackals, was played in ancient Mesoamerica. It is called "patolli," and it is still played by Totonac– and Nahuatl-speakers in parts of Mexico. Like these other games, Patolli involves throwing marked beans (like dice) and moving pieces around a board. In the royal Aztec court in Tenochtitlán, Spaniards described watching nobles play the game, which involved a great deal of shouting and betting going on among the players and bystanders. King Moctezuma (ca. 1466–1520 CE) enjoyed watching the matches. Similar cross-shaped boards marked out with fifty-two spaces have been found in Maya and other archaeological sites dating back into prehistory. The ethnologist E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) described the game in 1879 and commented on its similarity to the south Asian game of Pachisi (also played on a cross-shaped board, and also dating back to around 1000 BCE).

WHY ARE HUMANS so fascinated by games? Why do we spend hours playing them, and get so wrapped up in them that we forget to do other things? According to a Pew Research Center report for 2024, 85 percent of teenagers play video games several times a week, and 40 percent play daily. A 2024 Entertainment Software Association report shows that 190 million Americans play some sort of video game at least once a week, from solitaire on our phones to Fortnite® or Minecraft® on a variety of machines. Our impulse to play games has remained strong over thousands of years.

Psychologists and sociologists who have studied games identify several kinds of reasons for playing games. For one thing, they are bounded and governed by a set of rules that are always the same, which is calming. Games are predictable and often follow laws of probability, so the odds can be calculated for many outcomes. They allow us to feel like we have competence or mastery over something—whether it is beating an opponent or getting to the next level. The kinds of table games people have played for 5,000 years allow us to socialize in a way that is structured

Canadian soldiers playing cards in a shell crater, WW I —Canadian War Museum

and not limited by our relationships with the other players or other common characteristics. We can sit and play Scrabble® or Hearts with anyone who knows the rules, including grandparents, grandchildren, and people we barely know, so they provide us with a feeling of social connection (even on multi-player gaming platforms with people from all over the world). People who barely speak each other's languages can play together such games as Senet if they know the rules. For the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE), writing in "*The Art of Love*" around 1 BCE , games were a pastime for lovers: "It is disgraceful for a young woman not to know how to play: love is often won through playing." He advises us not to get too carried away, however: "the greater labor is controlling your manners. Then we are reckless and we are revealed in our very zeal and our hearts lie exposed through our games. Anger steals in, an unsightly evil, and lust for wealth and quarrels and fights and grievous vexation; accusations are uttered, the air resounds with shouts, and each invokes angry gods to aid him."

PLAYING GAMES has been a way for soldiers to find a sense of escape and emotional regulation in dangerous settings. During WWII, the Red Cross distributed hundreds of thousands of decks of cards to US servicemen, and they were a ubiquitous part of a soldier's life. Games helped with stress and also with the boredom of soldiering. The same was true in the Classical World. At the Roman garrison at Vindolanda, near Hadrian's wall in the north of England, archaeologists have found sixteen boards for the game "ludus latrunculorum"—the "game of brigands," or "mercenaries." This was probably the most widely played game in the Roman Empire. Chinese soldiers in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) played another board and dice game called "liubo;" it was popular throughout east Asia at the time.

This bounded, insulated escapism can be felt by anyone who plays games. When exhausted or over-stimulated, players can spend some time in the world of a chess match or a game of Go and regain their equilibrium. In the same way, games offer anyone access to a mental state known to psychologists as "flow," an immersive and pleasant experience where one's abilities are matched to the demands of the game. In a conversation between basketball players Julius Erving and Michael Jordan, Jordan described the "flow" state of being "in the zone": "It's a great feeling. It's like every move, every step, every decision that you make is the right decision."

Like parables and fables, games can teach or reinforce a society's core beliefs and values; many games are structured like human activities, including trade, farming, dating, or warfare. Games with partners, like bridge or whist, teach us to cooperate. The games Monopoly® and Risk®, dealing with business competition and world conquest, were some of the biggest selling board games in the twentieth century in the United States

Writing in 1938, historian and social theorist Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) described games as creating a "magic circle," a metaphorical space apart from everyday life with its own sense of order and set of rules. Huizinga calls a game something that is "isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain, a temporary world within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart." That sense of games as a world apart is well expressed in Walter Tevis (1928–1984)'s 1983 book, *The Queen's Gambit* (Random House). His heroine observes, "It's an entire world of just 64 squares. I feel safe in it. I can control it; I can dominate it. And it's predictable. So, if I get hurt, I only have myself to blame." Huizinga's 1938 book, *Homo Ludens* (Angelico Press), makes the case that our fascination with games defines humankind, more so than the "wise" or "knowing" attributes rather arrogantly claimed by Homo sapiens. Instead, we are the people who play.

Some games, such as chess, seem to exist outside of time and culture, passing through dozens of generations and various cultures while slowly evolving, so that the exact point of origin will always remain a matter of conjecture. Although some archaeologists and historians claim earlier connections with the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley, the game of chess apparently evolved from an Indian strategy game called "chaturanga," mentioned in the Mahabharata, one of the Sanskrit epics dating to around 2,000 years ago. From India, there seem to be many versions of the game that evolved across Asia. There is clearer evidence that the game that reached Europe in Medieval times came from the game

"chatrang" that was played in northwest India and then spread to Persia in the late 600s CE. A Persian text from that time describes the pieces and their characteristics, with the pawns serving as infantry, the knights representing cavalry, while the pieces that in modern chess are the bishops were represented by elephants. The chariots in India and Persia became the rooks. In Persia, the piece that became the king was the shah, with the vizier, or counselor, being the strongest and most versatile piece on the board. The vizier became the queen in Europe, and castles and bishops replaced some of the other pieces. When the spread of Islam led to the conquest of Persia in 632-654 CE, chatrang became the Arabic "Shatranj." The Persian refinements to the game were lasting, however, and the modern version has many Persian holdovers. For example, the European term "checkmate" comes from the Persian "shāh māt," meaning the shah is dead.

Chess was carried along with the Islamic expansion into Spain and Portugal, Sicily, and parts of southern Italy. In the intellectually dynamic exchange between Europe and the Islamic world, between 700 and 1400 CE, chess was adopted by the European elite and monastic communities. Chess pieces, like the remarkable Lewis chessmen, found in 1831 in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, begin appearing in medieval archaeological assemblages. Chess shows up in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and in 1630, Richard Brathwaite (1588–1673) wrote, "There is no one game which may seeme to represent the state of man's life to the full, so well as the Chesse."

Another transcendent game that seems to exist outside of time and culture is the game of Go. It evolved through many versions and iterations over the last 3,000 years, if not more. In Go master Cho Chikun's book on the game (1988), he says, "The origins of Go are concealed in the mute and unchronicled past of ancient China. There are a tangle of conflicting popular and scholarly anecdotes attributing its invention to two Chinese emperors, an imperial vassal, and count astrologers." Many histories and scholarly records that might have shed light on the subject were burned by the Emperor in 221 BCE, but the game is clearly much older than that date, dating into the second millennium BCE. The rules and board sizes have changed in the intervening years, but of all the games discussed here, Go is the oldest. It was invented in what is now China, but is also strongly embraced in Japan and Korea.

Hounds and Jackals board found at Thebes, 12th Dynasty —Wikimedia Commons/ Metropolitan Museum of Art DP264105

Go is played on a board of 19 x 19 lines, creating 361 points of intersection between the lines. Players alternate placing white and black stones on the board with the aim of gaining territory and encircling the stones of an opponent. Encircled stones are removed from the board as "captives" and the goal is both to wall off your opponent from your territory, and capture pieces if possible, so that the one with the most territory and captives at the end of the game is the winner. It is simple enough to explain, but it is a game that can never be truly mastered.

ACCORDING TO market researchers, tabletop games are more popular today than they have ever been, with growth expected to make game sales a 34 billion dollar industry by 2030. Go remains very popular, with an estimated 45–50 million weekly players. With a boom of interest in chess in east Asia, however, chess has over 600 million weekly players. Rather than suppressing the sales of tabletop games, digital gaming has stimulated greater interest in "analog" games, especially cooperative ones, following a trend that began during the global Covid pandemic. The human need for mental and social distractions, such as games, is ancient. Empires have risen and fallen while some games continue in their own bubble of culture. It would be entertaining, despite the gulf of millennia between us, to sit down with that Egyptian administrator of 3,800 years ago, and play him in a game of Hounds and Jackals.

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