

Past at Play: A User's Manual to Early Modern Board Games and Playing Cards as Primary Sources in Historical Research

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We usually associate games with only entertainment. But games have also been used to serve serious purposes. Modern-time's popular board game Monopoly, for example, is a wonderful introduction to Capitalism and real estate activities. Games in the Colonial times taught to the future-generals and officers the idea of Great Empire ruling the whole world. Chess was played with only male pieces for centuries without a queen. When the Queen entered the game in medieval Europe, in just a few decades she became the most powerful piece in the game. And this was related to the changes in the social and political role and position of women in those times. Games were used in the past to support political ideas and practices, to spread social principles and economic values, to introduce the youth into cultural ideals and even to metaphysical doctrines. And it is exactly because of these uses that games are excellent historical sources. Historic games are indeed mirrors to the past. Games as primary sources to historical research help understand the past and study the history from a different perspective other than visual and textual sources.

This paper focuses specifically on printed board games designed, produced, and played in Early Modern Europe. It aims firstly to demonstrate the reciprocity between overarching social, cultural and political notions and simple-looking games. It secondarily focuses on how to use games as sources in historiographical research through selected Early Modern games in which various textual, visual and ludic approaches are executed. This way we will have a unique chance to interact with historic games (our primary sources) and experience how socio-cultural matters were incorporated into game mechanisms.