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Ludus



BOARD TO PAGE TO BOARD

Native American Antecedents of Two Proprietary Board Games

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Abstract

The ways new games typically develop might be viewed as a continuum ranging from very gradual “evolution” based on mutations introduced to a single progenitor during play or recall, to sudden “intelligent design” based on a purposeful and original combination — or even invention — of ludemes independent of any particular lines of transmission.

This paper argues that two proprietary 20th-century games, C.A. Neves’s Fang den Hut! and Lizzie Magie’s The Landlord’s Game, were developed in a different way, a bit outside the typical continuum. It analyzes the games’ general typologies, and specific ludemes, concluding that both games are modern adaptations of traditional Native American games encountered, not through play or even contact with players, but through the seminal ethnographic publications of Stewart Culin. Specifically, Fang den Hut! derives from Boolik via *Games of the North American Indians*, and The Landlord’s Game derives from Zohn Ahl via *Chess and Playing-Cards*.

Prelude

How does a new game come to be? Historically, the usual answer must be that games are transmitted from person to person, usually directly through play. At some point one player introduces a slight variation, either consciously or not, and that variant game is then propagated. This is basically an evolutionary model. In this model games will tend to evolve very gradually from only one parent game and must be transmitted by human interaction.

*I would like to thank Sybille Whitehill, Rudolf Rühle, and Thierry Depaulis for helping me with materials and translations.

By contrast one can invent a game more or less from scratch, drawing from an ocean of free-floating ludemes at his disposal. This model — perhaps we could call it the chemistry set model — appears to be much more prevalent in the last century or two, probably because of sharp increases in the cultural prestige of invention and “newness”, the value and reach of patents and copyrights, and the fund of available ludemes upon which any given person might draw. In its extreme form (which must still be quite rare) the chemistry set model would generate new games, not from games, but from ideas about games. Of course, these models are not mutually exclusive, but fade into each other along a continuum.

I want to consider a special case falling somewhat between these two ends of the spectrum, in which a new game has a distinct progenitor which the inventor may never have experienced in play — the Jurassic Park model. Here a game’s description is captured in the amber of ethnographic or historical research and later revived and adapted by someone with no other necessary connection to the culture, or even era, from which the game arose. So here we are back to one parent but, unlike the standard evolutionary model, the transmission is indirect. The game travels from board to page to board.

We’ll look at two games. Both are proprietary 20th-century board games. Neither is, or was intended to be, an historical recreation of a game. Both their significant new adaptations and their sudden “Jurassic” jump from one milieu to another have obscured their actual lineage. But I will argue that they both derive from games preserved in ethnographic amber by Stewart Culin, and that their Native American skeletons are still clearly apparent underneath the skin.

Fang den Hut!

Introduction

Fang den Hut! (“Catch the Hat”) is a board game first published by Otto Maier Verlag in Germany in 1927, and still in print by Ravensburger. Ravensburger has subsequently published the game in several languages, including English (Trap the Cap), French (Chapeau... chapeau!), Italian (Caccia al Cappello), Dutch (Hoedje jagen!) and others. The English game Coppit (Spears Games, 1964) is a clone, and the American game Headache (Kohner Bros. Inc., 1968) is a descendant with variation. Let us call these, collectively, the “hat” games.

“Hat” games are running-fight¹ games. “Running-fight” designates a class of board games that essentially combines the method of race games and the goal of war games. Like race games, pieces are moved along linear tracks based on the cast of lots; but like war games, the object is to capture opponent pieces.

Traditional running-fight games have been observed with some frequency in Islamic cultures, but the only known traditional European running-fight games are the Danish Daldøs, its sibling the Norwegian Daldøsa, and its cousins the Sámi Sáhkku and the Icelandic Að Elta Stelpur. The rare and isolated occurrence of the running-fight mechanism in Europe has lead Alan Borvo, Peter Michaelsen, and Thierry Depaulis to conclude that it is not native, but that a common ancestor was probably imported from an Islamic area in the Middle Ages; Depaulis has put forward its most plausible travelogue to date.²

Though proprietary and not traditional, the “hat” games are European running-fight games too. Do they share a common ancestor with the Scandinavian family? Or do they descend independently from a similar Islamic game? I think that here too, the running-fight mechanism betrays a foreign influence, but that its source is quite different from that of the Scandinavian running-fight games.

Track the hat

Fang den Hut! is sometimes categorized with Ludo and Pachisi,³ and its board structure probably descends from members of this family, which were well-known in Europe before 1927. In Germany alone Parlett notes Mensch Ärgere dich nicht (from 1910) and Chinesenspiel (19th century) which is quite close to Fang den Hut! in board design (Parlett, 1999, pp. 49–50). These, like Pachisi, are race games. I have shown (Winkelman, 2012, pp. 58–59) that while evolving a running-fight game solely from a race game is *conceptually* quite simple, there is no documented example of this happening throughout the various and widely distributed Tables family. Similarly, the

¹RC Bell’s term (Bell, 1960). Parlett calls them “linear war games” (Parlett, 1999, p. 226), Depaulis “race games with direct capture” (Depaulis, 2001, p. 77), but each clearly designates the same type. Murray calls them “war games played with lots or dice,” but does not strictly segregate these from variations of Chess played with dice (Murray, 1951, pp. 94–7), making his term much broader and (I think) less useful.

²See their respective articles in *Board Game Studies* 4 (2001).

³David Parlett (Parlett, 1999, p. 50) classifies it as a Western derivative of Pachisi; see also the German and English Wikipedia entries (“Fang den Hut!” and “Coppit” respectively).

“hat” games would appear to be the only cases of the running-fight mechanism finding its way into the various and widely distributed Pachisi family (Murray, 1951, pp. 132–40 6.4), (Parlett, 1999, pp. 42–51). We should be quite suspicious that this particular mechanism has not evolved from within the Pachisi family, but instead has been imported into it from another unrelated game — or rather, that some unrelated game is now being played on a Pachisi-like board.

Of course it is possible that the mechanism was developed independently by the inventor, C.A. Neves.⁴ But, as Murray says, “we can only accept independent invention in the last resort when other explanations are impossible.” (Murray, 1951, p. 228). Here he is speaking of identical games, but I think the principle can be extended to matching sets of ludemes, the larger the set and the more distinctive its members, the stronger the argument for rejecting independent invention. So who’s the daddy?

On the face of it, the prime suspects should be the Scandinavian running-fight games. However they seem to have been unknown at the time outside their very local centers of play. Moreover all four Scandinavian games bear some resemblances to each other beyond the mere running-fight mechanism, whereas this is the only real resemblance between them and Fang den Hut!. It is therefore not likely that any member of the Scandinavian running-fight family is the progenitor.

Probably the most distinctive ludeme in Fang den Hut! — a feature it does not share with the Scandinavian *or* Islamic running-fight games — is that of capture by stacking.

If I land on an opponent piece, rather than sending it back to the beginning as in a race game, or permanently removing it from play as in other running-fight games, I place my piece on top of it forming a stack; hereafter the two pieces move as one, with the top piece (me!) in control.

⁴Rudolf Rühle (personal communication) summarizes information from Andreas Politz: *Otto Maier Verlag Ravensburg: 1883–1983, hundert Jahre Verlagsarbeit*: “Neves had a farm in Northern Germany and because of the bad times, he was in financial troubles and couldn’t hold it. He wanted to emigrate to Argentina. In the hope to get the money for the passage on a ship to that country, he offered Ravensburger this game. The year is not sure, 1926 or 1927. He got the money because the three brothers Maier found the game fascinating and a new idea.”

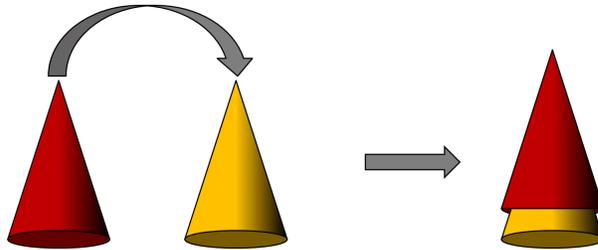


Figure 1: Capture by stacking.

This stack can capture or be captured by other pieces or stacks in turn. The ingenious hollow cone-shaped playing pieces (“hats” — a magnificent example, I think, of form following function) facilitate the procedure. The subjected pieces are out of play for the time being, but not necessarily permanently. When I return a stack that I control to my home base, then all opponent pieces in that stack are permanently removed from the game, but any of my pieces in that stack are now revived, and can re-enter the game along with my top controlling piece. Thus hope remains for members of a stack as long as it remains on the board.

This is similar to how pieces are captured in Lasca — a strategic board game similar to draughts and itself derived from the Russian game *Bashnya*. Lasca was first described by Emanuel Lasker in a booklet published in Germany in 1911⁵ (Parlett, 1999, pp. 271–72). So the timing, location, and language of this source are ideal. However, besides the obvious differences that Lasca is a purely strategic game played on a two-dimensional field, whereas *Fang den Hut!* is a game of mixed skill and chance played on a basically linear board, there are also differences specifically in the treatment of stacks. In Lasca, a piece or stack only captures the *top* member of another stack, leaving the second member in control of the remainder. Also, no piece is ever permanently removed from the board.⁶ Lasca therefore provides us with a possible forbear, but if a closer match can be found — a game with a greater number of related ludemes in common with *Fang den Hut!* and known in Germany before 1927 — then it will be the better candidate.

Erwin Glonnegger states that Neves brought a prototype to Ravensburger, adding: “Perhaps one of the ancient ‘Indian games’ found in Central

⁵It seems that German- and English-language editions of the rules were published simultaneously.

⁶“Privates” are swapped for “Officers”, but this is actually the promotion of a piece, not really its removal from play.

America was its ‘godfather’.”⁷ The reference is vague, but just the sort of tidbit that Glonnegger, as a director of Ravensburger, may well have picked up from old staff members or even a note kept with some archival materials. Fortunately, we can identify this game — not in my opinion a “godfather” but a proper father, even if his paternity is via “in libro” fertilization.

I believe the father is Mayan. Specifically the probably pre-Columbian Mesoamerican running-fight game Bul.⁸ Bul was first described as *Puluc* by Karl Sapper in German (Sapper, 1906, p. 284) and in more detail as *Boolik* by Thomas J. Collins in English as published in Stewart Culin’s *Games of the North American Indians* (Culin, 1975, pp. 141–3). These descriptions have been summarized by Bell (Bell, 1960, pp. 89–90) and Murray (Murray, 1951, p. 149 6.7.6) respectively. Lieve Verbeeck gives us a comprehensive discussion of Bul (Verbeeck, 1998), which is effectively a suite of closely-related games, stages of which correspond to the descriptions of Boolik/Puluc. Both Sapper’s and Culin’s descriptions were of course available in 1927.

As it happens, Fang den Hut! is analogous at many points to Bul: not only is it a running-fight game played with lots on an essentially linear board, but significantly, all details of the stack’s life-cycle, and the subsequent fates of the individual pieces match exactly. Here we must prefer Culin’s version as the inspiration for Fang den Hut!, as his description is both clearer and more comprehensive; not only is it more likely to spark the imagination of a would-be games inventor, but it also is more usefully explicit just at the points in which the “life cycle” of the stacks is described. Whereas Culin’s stacks mirror Fang den Hut!’s stacks, Sapper’s require a little inspired guesswork to complete the picture.

The adaptations introduced into Fang den Hut! are 1) the “wheel with spokes” track design, 2) safe spaces, 3) multiple individual players rather than two teams, 4) choice in both piece and direction of move, and of course 5) a cubic die rather than marked corn kernels as lots. Most of these probably hail from European Pachisi variants. And let us not forget the brilliantly functional stackable “hats”, which seem to be a genuinely new invention.

⁷Quoted and translated by Thierry Depaulis (personal communication) from Glonnegger: *Das Spiele-Buch* (1999).

⁸Bul is not the only New World running-fight game, but it seems to be the only one published by 1927. Thierry Depaulis (personal communication) notes an Andean running-fight game whose board is sometimes round with four spokes; “they use between six and ten pieces on each side [but] they do not have this very specific feature that is shared between Fang den Hut! and Bul, where the adverse captured pieces are brought back home by the victor. . . . The earliest satisfying description of this game, in its circular version, was published (in French) by Father Emile Housse, in his book ‘Une épopée indienne’ (Paris, 1939).”

All these changes, though, do little to alter the basic feel of the game, and Parlett's whimsical desire for a "World Boolik Federation" (Parlett, 1999, p. 226) may in a sense already have come to pass: if you have played any of the "hat" games (by firelight, of course) you have in essence played Boolik.

Though several possible sources have been discussed, the Mayan hypothesis (and specifically Boolik via Culin) is the only one that fully accounts for what I believe is the most distinctive characteristic of Fang den Hut!: namely, stacking capture, and its "life cycle". Possibly further research will uncover further evidence. However, we are on even firmer ground when considering the Native American roots of another even more popular race-like game... called Monopoly.

The Landlord's Game

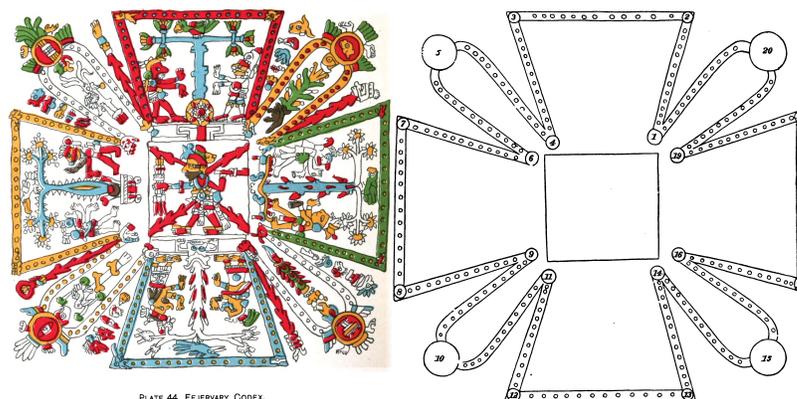
Before Monopoly, and before that

The prehistory of Monopoly is by now quite well documented and, to some extent, adjudicated. A board game called The Landlord's Game was described by Lizzie Magie as early as 1902, patented in 1904, and published shortly thereafter (Pilon, 2015, pp. 34–35). But the game propagated chiefly by word of mouth and in handmade copies through various communities, largely academic circles in the eastern United States. Many variants evolved with names such as Landlord, Finance, and Monopoly, often with streets renamed to fit the players' localities. One variant, developed by a Quaker community in Atlantic City, New Jersey, became the game Charles Darrow sold to Parker Brothers, who published it in 1935 along with the story that the game had been invented in 1933. In the 1970s, the game's first three decades were reassembled, bit by bit, primarily by Willard Allphin, Sid Sackson, and Ralph Anspach.

But at 1902 the track ran cold, and the prehistory of The Landlord's Game is largely silence. Strangely, while there has been great curiosity about where Charles Darrow got his game from, few seem to question where Lizzie Magie got *her* game from. Philip Orbanes and Ralph Anspach in their rather differently-framed histories do not even broach the topic. David Parlett suggests that generically Monopoly can be seen as a development of "primitive race games, such as Nyout" and of the Royal Game of Goose (Parlett, 1999, pp. 349–350); but this is simply to say that it has a track and that it has spaces with distinct themes and consequences.

Bonita Freeman-Witthoft has gone a bit further (Freeman-Witthoft, 2007, p. 272), stating that Magie's use of a continuous track, rather than one with

a final end point, was inspired by a plate and diagram of the Fejérváry-Mayer codex in Stewart Culin's *Chess and Playing-Cards* published in 1898.



Figures 2 & 3: Calendrical Diagram from the Fejérváry-Mayer Codex: Reproduction And Schematic (Culin, 1976, plate 17, p. 802).

This is in fact a calendrical representation, and in *Chess and Playing-Cards*, Culin calls it a “divinatory, calendrical counting circuit” (Culin, 1976, p. 803), thus not a “great game of eternal circuits” as described by Freeman-Witthoft, though obviously it represents recurring cycles of time.⁹

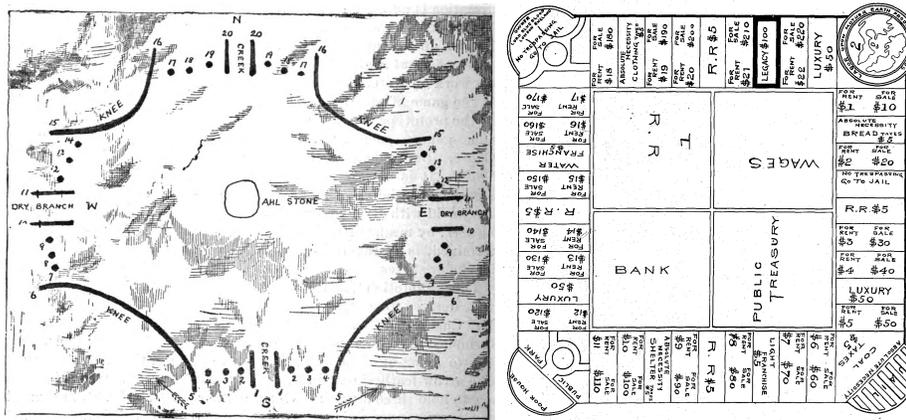
All this may have influenced Magie, but as we will see, Culin’s seminal publication affords us a much more satisfying progenitor for The Landlord’s Game.

Zohn Ahl

Zohn Ahl is a board game played by the Kiowa Indians of Oklahoma in the 19th century. Its definitive description occurs in Stewart Culin’s *Games of the North American Indians* (Culin, 1975, pp. 124–27), but this is too late to be an influence on The Landlord’s Game, so we will be concerned only with the almost identical description in *Chess and Playing-Cards* (Culin, 1976, pp. 687–88, 731–33). In both works, Zohn Ahl (as described by Hugh Lenox Scott) is linked with the Kiowa game Tsoñä (as described by James Mooney), which is either a slightly different account of the same game, or

⁹Murray also records his doubt that it is a board game (Murray, 1951, p. 147 6.7.2). Culin does compare it to the Zuñi divinatory game Sho’-li-we, but this game does have end points for each participant, and the similarity intended by Culin seems to be that of its four-part symmetrical design and possibly its symbolism, not that games are played on both.

a very similar variant.¹⁰ Because we are contemplating a “Jurassic Park” model the distinction is immaterial: the information transmitted does not have to be a single integral game tested for self-consistency by actual play with another person serving as the source, but rather may be any collection of ludemes presented together and kept together in the mind of the recipient. So for our purposes, both descriptions will be considered together as “Zohn Ahl”.



Figures 4 & 5: Zohn Ahl (Culin, 1976, p. 686) and The Landlord’s Game (Magie, 1904).

To see why Zohn Ahl should be considered the predecessor of The Landlord’s Game, it is vital to understand how Zohn Ahl is played. Most significantly, it is not a race game. “A race game” says Parlett (Parlett, 1999, p. 34) “is one in which players start with one or more pieces at one end of a linear track, advance them in accordance with the throw of dice or other lots, and win by being the first to get from start to home.” The fact that Zohn Ahl forms a closed loop does not disqualify it; other games, like Nyout, are circular, but still have a beginning and an end. But Zohn Ahl lacks a functional end since when a player completes the circuit, she continues around a second time. . . and a third. . . indeed there is no limit to the number of times a player may re-circle the board. There is a “start”, but no “home”. This is

¹⁰I take the view that they are differing accounts of the same game, and that only when both accounts are considered together is the complete game described. This is because, while both games call for a distinct fourth stave and for counters, only Zohn Ahl describes the use of the counters, and only Tsoñä describes the use of the distinct fourth stave. Thus each account can be seen as filling a lacuna of the other. This seems to be more or less the perspective of Bell (Bell, 1960, pp. 4-5) and Parlett (Parlett, 1999, pp. 38-40); however Murray (Murray, 1951, pp. 154-55) lists Zohn Ahl and Tsoñä as distinct games.

no mere semantic difference, but a really different kind of board game. And it raises the question, “How does a game with an endless track end?”

Nowadays, we’re quite familiar with this structure: progress around the board is merely a means to an end, that end being the accumulation of counters which indicate the real state of the competition. In *Settlers of Catan* we’d call these “victory points”; in *Monopoly* we’d call them “dollars”. This is just how Zohn Ahl is scored, and here we see the beginnings of what Parlett calls the “on-board/off-board” distinction which he uses *Monopoly* (among others) to illustrate, explaining: “the board is still essential to the play, but the winning is measured in terms of the other material.” (Parlett, 1999, pp. 346–47). Moreover, because “when one side wins all the counters, it conquers” (Culin, 1976, p. 688), we can infer that Zohn Ahl is a zero-sum game in which my gain is your loss. I win counters not from a pool (or at least not solely from a pool), but from you, my opponent.¹¹

Players lose a counter (and are sent back to “start”) in two ways: 1) if a piece lands on a space already occupied by an opponent piece the initial occupier is “whipped” back to start and loses a counter; 2) if a piece lands on the space designated as the “creek” it “falls in” and is swept back to start also losing a counter. Players *gain* counters by being the first to complete a circuit, even as they begin the next one. Let me rephrase that: you get paid when you pass “Go”.

Opportunity, motive, and recreation of the scene of the invention

According to Freeman-Witthoft, Lizzie Magie was “one of Culin’s friends” (Freeman-Witthoft, 2007, p. 272) making it almost certain that she must have read, or at least seen his *Chess and Playing-Cards*. Zohn Ahl has pride of place in this book. It is only the second board game described, and stands

¹¹Counters probably began divided evenly between teams, but it is possible that counters began in a pool. Even so, once the pool is emptied, in order to win “all the counters” they must be taken directly from the opponent. Interestingly, *The Landlord’s Game* does not necessarily end with the utter bankruptcy of opponents, but rather the winner is he who has the most money after all players have completed five circuits. The winner of the version in Magie’s (now Elizabeth Phillips) 1924 patent is he who first accumulates \$3000 (or other goal agreed to by the players). The total financial ruin of opponents, familiar in modern *Monopoly*, seems to constitute an unintentional return to the zero-sum Kiowa original. Strangely enough, in describing Zohn Ahl, Murray has the game ending after four circuits, very much like the 1904 *Landlord’s Game*’s five circuits, yet this manner of ending does not occur in Culin’s descriptions, either in *Chess and Playing-Cards* or in *Games of the North American Indians!* Could there be a third source that both Magie and Murray are following in this respect?

as the introduction to and representative of the dozens of Native American games in the following 120 pages.¹²

Moreover, in the Tsoñã entry (which is explicitly referenced within the Zohn Ahl entry) we read, “It would make a very pretty picnic game, or could be readily adapted to the parlor of civilization.”¹³ (Culin, 1976, p. 731). In creating *The Landlord’s Game* Magie is, it turns out, only following instructions!

So to recap, we need only assume that Magie read her friend’s book on games, that her attention was drawn to one of its most prominent entries, and that her imagination was fired sufficiently to take up the explicit challenge to adapt Zohn Ahl to the parlor of civilization. What might the adaptation look like?

We’ll start out with a board of 40 points arranged in a square. The parlor of civilization is not accustomed to pieces moving on points, so the points will be transformed into little squares.

Nor will a two-team structure be as familiar in the parlor as a multi-player race-like game. The lots will naturally be replaced with one or two cubic dice.

¹²It is strange that Zohn Ahl, which strictly speaking is not a race-game, should have come to represent all Native American race games, but Culin’s lead has been followed often. One respect in which it definitely is representative of many Native American board games is its track of 40 points arranged, like many others, in a square. In hindsight, this characteristically Native American structure should have been enough to raise suspicions of *The Landlord’s Game’s* ancestry.

¹³Irving Finkel (personal communication) finds this level of approbation, coming from a 19th-century observer, to be quite extraordinary. James Mooney’s sympathetic assessment of the game and its players reads in full: “It is very amusing on account of the unforeseen ‘rivers’ and ‘whips’ that are constantly turning up to disappoint the expectant winner, and a party of women will frequently sit around the blanket for half a day at a time, with a constant ripple of laughter and good-humored jokes as they follow the chances of the play. It would make a very pretty picnic game, or could be readily adapted to the parlor of civilization.” (Culin, 1976, p. 731). I am reminded, by contrast, of my personal favorite “ethnographic” description of a board game, from an English nurse in Uganda where the natives played mancala by “dropping nasty little bits of rubbish into rows of horrid little holes!” (Bell, 1969, p. 75).

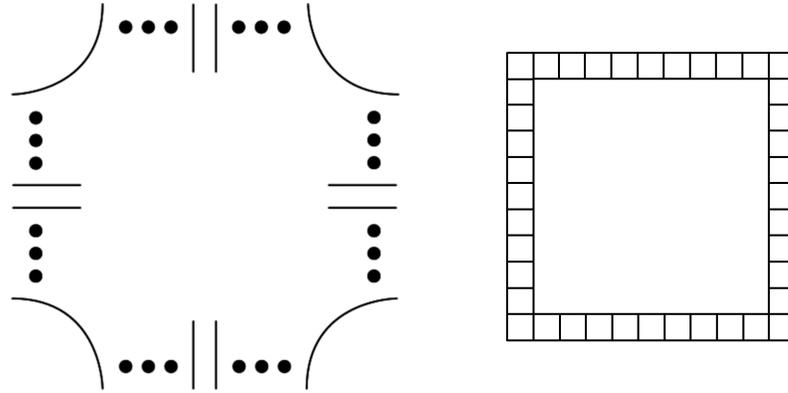


Figure 6: Zohn Ahl to The Landlord's Game: Hypothetical transformation A.

Players make multiple circuits around the square, which has a starting point, but no home; when a player passes the starting point, he gets a counter, and it is not a far stretch to think of this as a periodic wage.¹⁴ Some of the spaces have geographic labels and incur penalties, either of disadvantageous moves or a cost in counters, which might be paid to a pool (or “bank”) or directly to opponents. To accommodate the labeling of the squares, we’ll widen them, necessitating larger corner squares, which may still suggest the semi-circular corner design of the original Zohn Ahl board. We might even translate the central creek spaces into a more “civilized” mode of transportation.

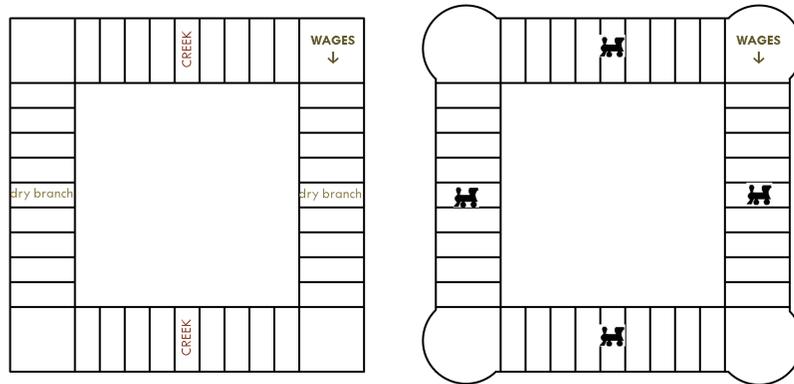


Figure 7: Zohn Ahl to The Landlord's Game: Hypothetical transformation B.

¹⁴Although in Zohn Ahl, it is only the *first* player to pass the starting point who gets the counter.

Finally, note that even the original Kiowa division of 40 points into 24 plain dots, four creek points, four dry branch points, and eight curved points is closely mirrored by the 22 lots, four corner squares, four railroads, and ten other squares of The Landlord's Game.

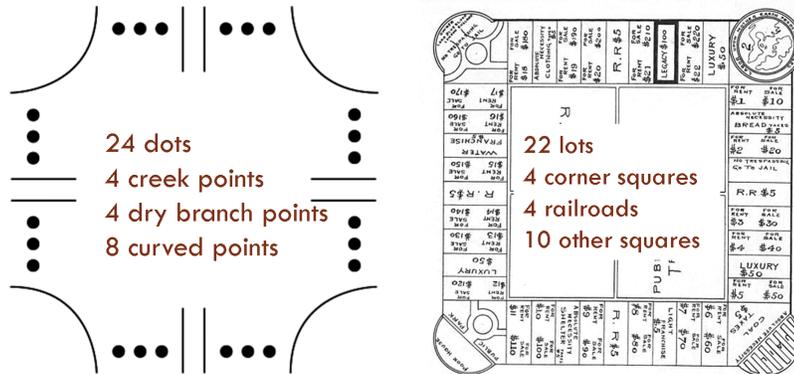


Figure 8: Zohn Ahl to The Landlord's Game: Hypothetical transformation C.

Since there is no home space, the game is won by the player with the most counters, the action on the board functioning as a means to that end.

Every aspect of Zohn Ahl reappears here recognizably,¹⁵ and with one major exception, I have just described — broadly but fairly accurately — most of the salient features of The Landlord's Game. And without, I think, taking very much liberty with how anyone might adapt Zohn Ahl to the parlor of civilization. The exception of course is that I did not mention the players' purchase of, and remuneration for, spaces on the board, and the rather complex economy which goes along with this. This is no small omission; it has been and remains Lizzie Magie's great and enduring contribution to the world of board games. That The Landlord's Game had a predecessor with most of its salient features in an embryonic state does not diminish the importance of her genuine contribution, but it does allow us to evaluate her development of the game in perspective. The Landlord's Game did not spring forth fully-formed from the forehead of Jove — or Juno. No game does.

¹⁵Except bi-directionality: in Zohn Ahl one team circles the board clockwise, the other counterclockwise... but really, even this feature might secretly have crept in to Magie's rules: the first player to complete five circuits may make subsequent moves in either direction.

Conclusion

It seems fitting that Monopoly's bona fides as the most American of board games — for better and for worse — should be authenticated by the revelation that the Native American Zohn Ahl is its direct ancestor. And it is bitterly ironic that this gift of the Kiowa to America and to the world should result in the daily reenactment of the reduction of opponents to abject poverty through the parceling up and exclusive ownership of land.

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