Ancient Games: Crash Course Games #2

Crash Course: Games
https://youtube.com/watch?v=H1lv3cOmlzM
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/H1lv3cOmlzM

Hi I'm Andre Meadows and this is Crash Course Games. You've got games in your house right? You know the ones you play on family game night. Games like Monopoly, Life, or modern ones like Ticket to Ride or Settlers of Catan. Do you have a drawer, filled with dice? Or maybe even have one rolling around in your pocket right now? Dice in there.

Well believe it or not, board games and dice games are the result of thousands of years of human development, and they've led directly to the massive variety of games we play today. In some ways, that dusty Yahtzee game in the hall closet? That's the end result of human history, man.

[Theme Music]

Games have been with people from the very beginning of civilization, and probably even earlier than that. As soon as we dropped from the trees, outran the lions, and put a few buildings together... We got bored, and started playing games. Some estimates put the dawn of games at 5,500 years ago. Fun fact, that was actually when they started programming Duke Nukem Forever.

Pretty much every civilization we've studied, played games. The Ancient Egyptians had Senet. While the Ancient Chinese had Go. The Romans were playing Backgammon, or Tables, as they called it. Ancient Aztecs in South America had a game known as Patolli. I don't know if we can confidently say that games were ubiquitous, but I am comfortable saying pretty much everyone in history has played games.

Let's start with what is probably the most ancient of ancient of gaming technology: Dice. Dice are a part of a lot of games and to get a little mystical about it: Dice symbolize the chance and randomness involved in many games. They serve to remind us of the randomness of the universe. For thousands of years, dice were actually made from bones, teeth, horns, tusks, and even sheep knuckles. Sheep knuckles are still used today in Mongolia for both games and fortune telling. You've heard the phrase "Rollin the bones"? It literally meant bones at one time!

Now why sheep knuckles? Sheep knuckles are durable, roll well and have unique sides. The flat, concave, convex and twisted sides, each side has a recognizable shape, each with their own meanings. The Greeks called knuckle bones, Astragali and used them to add chance to a game. Basically it was a way of leaving some parts of the game up to the gods.

But Astragali weren't just for gaming. Remember when I talked about dice as reminders of randomness of the universe? Well, Ancient Greek fortune tellers and mystics would roll these bones as a way to assign order to some of that randomness. They used dice to get life advice from the gods. These Astragali were seen as messengers of higher authority. And everything from when to marry, to who will get sick were determined by these little bone fragments bouncing along the floor. Wonder how they would be at the Powerball?

Now knuckle bones took a long time to become the dive we know today. Archaeologists have found them in sites dating as far back as 800 BC, though they probably could go back even further. Over time, people adjusted and crafted knuckle bones into the dive you recognize today. Slowly the sides were worn down and sculpted. Symbols and holes were added. And dice evolved from unique organic bones to uniform plastic cubes with little dots or pips across their surfaces. Don't worry sheep, your knuckles are safe.

And cubes aren't the only regular shaped dice evolved into. A lot of role-playing games today use the D20 or 20 sided die but its not actually a modern creation. In 2012, archaeologists discovered a D20 crafted out of serpentine in Egypt dating back to the Ptolemaic Period; somewhere between 300 and 30 BCE. It has Greek letters on various sides, but no one knows for sure what it was used for. That could be one really long game of Dungeons and Dragons.

So even though dive and ancient games began to take a more playful nature, the mystical hand of chance (not to be confused with the master hand of Super Smash Bros) was always present and shaped why and how games were played. One of the earliest examples of this can be seen in the Ancient Egyptian game of Senet, which roughly translates to "passing". The game itself has been found or represented in hieroglyphs from even before the dynastic periods of Egypt, around 3,000 to 3,5000 BC, and through the middle and late dynasties.

Senet involved a grid of 30 squares arranged along a rectangular design with 3 rows of 10. The majority of squares are blank minus several at the end which contained very specific hieroglyphs and symbols. but with time being time, the exact rules have been lost. Kind of like when you lose your instruction manual in a video game. But through research of temple paintings and hieroglyphic text a solid assumption of the rules has developed.

Senet started off as a secular game and there are many hieroglyphic references to drinking wine, playing Senet and calling it a day. But over time, the game took on an increasingly mystical nature. Senet evolved to indicate how a player would fare in the afterlife. They mystical side of gaming had infiltrated the play side, and people would play the game to see if they were blessed by the gods. The idea was that a good Senet player was destined to have a pleasurable afterlife, while a player who lost constantly probably wasn't going to fare that well. Which seems like a bad deal to me as I don't know how to play Senet. But Senet was by no means the only ancient game. All of your favorite ancient civilizations played games. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Let's look at Ancient China, where they had the game Wei-Chi or as it is known more commonly, Go. Some archaeologists estimate that Go has been played for upwards of 4000 years. In fact, it's oldest game we know of that's still played in its original form.

The game consists of a solid line grid where players take turns placing either a white or black stone. The goal of the game is to control or surround the majority of the board. Go is a little complicated and players have a lot of possible choices. And by a lot, I mean there are 10 to the 761st power moves available to a player. In chess, you only have 10 to the 120th power. That's a lot chess but you're no Go. While human chess players have been beaten by computers as far back as the 1980's, humans playing Go are just now being beaten by special computer programs. Which is pretty impressive for a 4000 year old game.

In south America, Patolli was played across Meso-American cultures. This game, played between 200 BC and 1000 AD, was a series of four lines on two axis that intersected in the middle forming a cross. The object of the game was for players to move their pieces along the lined tracks based on the throws of beans or stones. The Aztecs even had a God of Patolli named Xochipilli. Betting on Patolli was common, and players would bet everything from gold to plants to food to even furniture. The game was so common and popular that Aztecs could be seen carrying Patoli mats around with them during the day, just itching for a game. Huh, it is like the first Gameboy. This game encompasses the main pillars of ancient games: Fun, mysticism, skill and chance. No matter the land or people these main themes keep popping up time and time again.

Thanks Thought Bubble. So a lot of these ancient games have

fallen off popularity today, But all of them illustrate the core principles of fun and engagement that drives people to play games. These games are the ancestors to those table top games in our cabinets, and the video games on our phones and consoles. And you can still easily buy a copy of Senet or Backgammon, and the Honinbo God tournament in Japan has a grand prize of over $400,000. These games have staying power. And trust me - you figure out a way to add microtransactions to them, they'll be in your phones in not time.

But those aren't the only ancient games that we still play. Mancala is more of a game type or mechanic like dice. But it dates back at least as far as the 4th Century or even further and has survived all that time. Pretty much in its original form. Games all over the world, from the traditional Bao le Kiswahili in East Africa, and many modern Euro-style board games use the Mancala mechanic of transferring a counter along a continuous track.

The familiar children's games shoots and ladders also has ancient origins. And by ancient I mean it goes even further back than 1952, when Milton Bradley introduced the game in the United States. It's based on the game Snakes and Ladders, a game that was bought to England during the 17th Century from India, where it was played as early as the 2nd Century BC.

In India, the game was played for fun but it also delivered a moral message to the kids who played it. The ladders were virtues that could lead a player to a higher spiritual state, while the snakes represented sins that could drag a person down to a lower plane of being. If you ask me though, the moral message of Shoots and Ladders is a little muddled given that the game is completely random. Or maybe I am missing some deeper message about free will here. Now this makes for a completely different change of philosophy about Candyland.

The beautiful thing about history is that there is always more to learn. Archaeologists are digging up previously unknown games all the time. The Royal game of Ur was discovered in Iraq during the 1920's in a royal tomb. Like a board game from a garage sale, the Royal game of Ur didn't include rules, so archaeologists just made up rules. Until the cuneiform tablet was discovered much later. Sadly this rule set was incomplete and there's still a lot of debate among gaming experts as to ow to play the game.

In 2015, another new game was found in a 2,300 year old tomb in Qingdao city in China. Archaeologists found a handmade 4 sided die made from an animal tooth alongside 21 game pieces with numbers and a broken piece of game board. Sound like the beginning of a Goonies sequel, like, there's one half of the board game piece, we must find the other half and then we Will find the treasure! The game is believed to be called Bo, or Liubo the last time it was known to be played widely was over 1,500 years ago. The rules for this game are incomplete like the rules of the Royal game of Ur and your guess on how to play it is as good as mine. Actually it is probably better than mine, I have no idea how to play it.

We could go on and on listing games but we're running out of time. Or your internet attention span. So we should get to the point of all of this history. People have been playing games for a long time, and while games have obviously evolved since the days of sheep knuckles, Mancala, the Royal game of Ur, and Senet. Those games, and the mechanics that make them work are still at the core of the games we play today. And it's not just the mechanics of those games that survived. While we may no longer believe that games can predict what kind of afterlife is in store for us, or who we should marry, the best games can not only forge connections across the small group of friends on game night, they can connect people over centuries and across continents. And we're still only on our way to having an answer to the question of why we play games. I think the connection that we feel with each other and with history are clearly a part of it.

Thanks for watching and I'll see you next week. I gotta go work on my Mortal Kombat game. *whispers* My afterlife depends on it.

[Theme music]

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