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29 Games Nobody Plays Anymore

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You've played blind man's bluff and hide-and-go-seek. You have Marco Poloed, hot potatoed, and I-Spied. But you've probably never had to pull a peg out of the ground with your teeth because your knife wasn't as sharp as the others, or tried to knock a metal plate into a basin with the dregs of your drink. Here are 29 games you won't recognize, because no one plays them any more.

1. ABLE-WHACKETS (1700s-1800s)

Able-whackets is a card game that was "very popular with horny-fisted salts," according to *The Sailors Word Book* (1867). Although its rules are lost, what we do know is that the loser of each round would be whacked over the knuckles with a tightly-knotted handkerchief.

2. ARE YOU THERE, MORIARTY? (1800s-early 1900s)

Two players are blindfolded, given a rolled-up newspaper, and made to kneel down opposite one other. The first player asks, "Are you there, Moriarty?" to which his or her opponent replies, "Yes sir, I am here!" Player 1 then has to try and blindly hit Player 2 with the newspaper, judging where he is only by the sound of his voice. Player 2 can try to dodge the blow, but his knees must remain in place at all times.

3. BANDY-WICKET (1700s-1800s)

As well as being the name of a winter sport similar to ice hockey, a bandy is an L-shaped or J-shaped wooden bat. Bandy-wicket was an 18th century form of cricket played with bandies rather than cricket bats.

4. BARLEY-BREAK (1500s-1600s)

Three couples are each allotted to one of three squares drawn in a row on the floor. At the word "go," the couple in the center square—referred to as "prison" or "Hell"—must try and catch one of the other two couples. All three couples must remain holding hands throughout the game, but the two couples being chased can split up and change partners at any time to avoid being caught. (Jacobean playwrights, incidentally, also liked to use barley-break as a euphemism for sex.)

5. BLOWPOINT (mid 1500s-1600s)

Blowpoint probably involved players using a peashooter to fire wooden or paper darts at a numbered target (or else at each other), although some later descriptions suggest it was a form of archery in which arrows were shot through a hollow log at a target.

6. BUBBLE THE JUSTICE (1780s)

Bubble the justice was an 18th century version of a much earlier game called “nine holes,” in which players would take turns bowling a metal ball along a wooden board with nine numbered holes or “pockets” drilled into it. The aim was either to land your ball in each hole in numerical order, or to simply to score as many points as possible. It was renamed bubble the justice as this was one of only a few games not outlawed in a clampdown on games in London taverns in the late 1700s.

7. CHICKEN-HAZARD (1700s-1800s)

Hazard was a complicated Medieval English dice-throwing game. Chicken-hazard was a low-stakes version that became popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.

8. COCK-A-ROOSTY (early 1800s)

One player is chosen as “it” and stands opposite all of the other players, who are lined up on one side of a road in their “den.” One by one, each player in the den has to try and get past “it” to reach “home,” on the other side of the road. Oh, and everyone has to stand or hop on one leg the entire time.

9. COTTABUS (Ancient Greece)

Cottabus was a popular game among young men at Ancient Greek drinking parties. Although there were numerous different versions, the basics were always the same: players tossed the dregs of their drink at a metal basin, above which was mounted a loose plate or dish. The aim was simply to knock the plate into the basin with the wine, but men playing the game would often shout out their girlfriends’ names at the same time and the louder the sound of the plate landing in the basin, the better the relationship was deemed to be.

10. FOX-IN-THY-HOLE (Tudor England)

One player is the “fox,” whose job it is to catch all of the other players, who are “chickens.” As soon as a chicken is caught, the fox takes him back to his den where he too becomes a fox. The last chicken to be caught becomes the fox in the next round.

11. GRAND TRICK-TRACK (1700s)

Grand trick-track was apparently an even more complicated variant of chess that emerged in France in the 1700s. Its rules are lengthy and convoluted, but if you have an afternoon to spare you can find out how to play in *The Compleat Gamester*, 5th Edition (1725)

12. HIJINKS (late 1600s-1700s)

Its name has come to be synonymous with “shenanigans” or “tomfoolery,” but hijinks or high jinks was originally a drinking game popular in Scotland in the 17th and 18th centuries. Players would roll a die, and either the lowest scoring player or the first player to roll a designated number would have to take a drink or else pay some kind of humiliating forfeit.

13. HONEY-POTS (1800s)

One player rolls himself up into as tight a ball as possible. The other players then have to pick him up and carry him, as if he were a jar of honey being taken home from market.

14. HOT COCKLES (c.1300-1800s)

One player is blindfolded and made to kneel on the floor with his head in another player’s lap and his hands held, palms outwards, behind his back. The other players then take it in turns to strike his hands, one at a time, and the kneeler has to guess which of the other players has hit him.

15. JINGO-RING (1800s)

An early 19th century dancing game from Scotland in which a circle of girls, all holding hands or linking arms, would dance around another girl in the center, singing, “Here we go the jingo-ring, the jingo-ring, the jingo-ring! Here we go the jingo-ring! About the merry-ma-tanzie.”

16. JOHN BULL (1700s)

An old English pub game in which players would take it in turns tossing coins or stones onto a four-by-four grid of squares, randomly numbered from 1-16, in an effort to score as many points as possible.

17. KING ARTHUR (late 1500s-1600s)

Francis Grose’s *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1811) lists a game called King Arthur that was played by sailors in the 16th and 17th centuries. According to Grose, one crew member would play “King Arthur,” and would customarily be dressed up in ridiculous robes and made to wear a wig made of old rope. The King would be sat beside a tub of water, and one by one all the other members of the crew would be ceremoniously introduced to him and then made to pour a bucket of water over this head with the

words, "Hail King Arthur!" As Grose explains, "If during this ceremony the person introduced laughs or smiles (to which his majesty endeavours to excite him, by all sorts of ridiculous gesticulations), he changes place with, and then becomes, King Arthur."

18. KING CAESAR (Tudor England)

Hopping on one foot, the "King" must chase down all the other players and tap them on the head. As soon as they are hit, they become one of the King's "subjects" and can help him catch the rest of the players, but they too have to stand on one foot. The last player to be caught becomes the next King.

19. LOGGITS (Tudor England)

As mentioned in Hamlet ("Did these bones cost no more the breeding, but to play at loggits with them?"), loggits was an old Tudor game in which a stick would be pushed vertically into the ground as a target. Players would then take it in turns to throw smaller sticks towards it, and whoever managed to land theirs the closest won. Loggits was one of a number of games banned by Henry VIII in 1542 out of concern that it would distract his soldiers from military practice; the same statute banned quoits, all card and dice games, and even tennis.

20. MILKING CROMOCK (1500s-1618)

The only thing we know about milking cromock is that it was a gambling game popular in pubs and taverns in Tudor England. And we only know that because it was one of a number of games listed by name in a 1618 directive that made playing it illegal.

21. MOULD-MY-COCKLE-BREAD (1600s)

According to the 17th century writer John Aubrey, Mould-my-cockle-bread was a "wanton sport" that was once played by young women in northern England. As Aubrey explains, the women would "get upon a table-board, and then gather up their knees and their coats with their hands as high as they can, and then they wobble to and fro with their buttocks, as if they were kneading of dough with their arses." There doesn't seem to have been much point to the whole thing, but there was a rhyme should you want to try it out: "My dame is sick and gone to bed, And I'll go mould my cockle-bread. Up with my heels and down with my head, and this is the way to mould cockle bread."

22. MUMBLETY-PEG (1600s-?1960s)

The earliest description of mumblety-peg dates back to 1627, while more recent accounts suggest it was still being played as recently as the 1960s. The game involves players throwing knives into the ground, blade first, either aiming at a target or aiming just to propel the knife into the earth as deeply as

possible. In the earliest versions of the game, the loser would be made to pull a wooden peg out of the ground with his teeth, hence the name.

23. PAPSE (Medieval England)

The only thing we know about papse is that it was popular in the Medieval England, and the loser was hit over the head.

24. PLUCK AT THE CROW (1500s)

Pluck at the crow was a Scottish children's game, the only point of which seems to have been to tug and pull at someone's clothes as much as possible. It dates from the reign of Henry VIII, but there are no records of it later than 1570.

25. SHAKING IN THE SHALLOW (late 1700s)

The "shallow" in question here was a type of hat popular in England in the 18th century, and all that we know about shaking in the shallow is that it was a dice game that presumably involved players rolling the dice around inside the hat.

26. SNAP-DRAGON (1500s-late 1800s)

The aim of snap-dragon was to pick a raisin out of a bowl of burning brandy as quickly as possible without being burned yourself. Although it dates back to Tudor times (Shakespeare mentions it in several of his plays), it became a particularly popular party game at Christmas in Victorian England.

27. SPARROW-MUMBLING (1700s)

According to Grose's Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue (1811), mumble-the-sparrow was "a cruel sport practiced at wakes" (that's old village festivals, not funerals) which involved a player, with his hands tied behind his back, trying to bite off the head of a live sparrow that had been placed inside a hat. Thankfully, the player would only ever succeed in being repeatedly bitten and pecked on the face by "the enraged bird", which would either then be set free or kept as a pet. A later variation of the same game, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, involved holding one of the sparrow's wings in the mouth, and then "attempting to draw in its head by movement of the lips."

28. TAMBAROORA (1880s-mid 1900s)

Named for a town in New South Wales, Tambaroora is an Australian drinking game dating from the late 19th century. Players place a token amount of money (originally sixpence) into a hat, and then take

three turns rolling a die. The player (known as the “nut”) who scores the highest collects the money in the hat, buys all of the players a round of drinks, and keeps any left over cash for himself.

29. UP JENKINS (1800s-mid 1900s)

Two teams sit opposite each other at a table with their hands kept under it, out of sight. One member of one team secretly hides a coin or a button in one of their hands. The captain of the opposing team then shouts “Up Jenkins!” and the team who are hiding the coin have to place their hands, palms downward, onto the table. Their opponents then have to guess who is hiding the coin under their hand; if they’re correct they win a point, but if they’re incorrect, their opponents take the point.