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## Gambling in Ancient North America: The Bettor-wager Pattern in Continental Perspective

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**Abstract:** Gambling in ancient North America was primarily an intergroup activity. This position as a liminal practice, taking place on territorial frontiers and at large intertribal gatherings, puts gambling and the many traditional games with which it is associated on the very forefront of cultural transmission and knowledge exchange. The result is a shared fluency of gambling games that transcends barriers of language and ethnicity. Evidence of common methods and materials allows ancient, region-spanning social networks to be identified. Subtle variations demonstrate a repeated and ongoing negotiation between groups over time as objectives and participants change, with this evolution of gaming practices continuing to the present day. The freedom to adapt to changing conditions, contrasted with notions of a static “traditional” past, is not just a matter of sovereignty relating to Indigenous gambling games. It is a reflection of the nature of Indigenous gambling as it has always been.

*Keywords:* Indigenous gambling, archaeology, ethnohistory, North America

### Introduction

The Indigenous practice of gambling in pre-contact North America was primarily an intergroup activity. This was the conclusion made by the late Warren DeBoer (d. May 24, 2020), one of the few ethnohistorians to have seriously considered the archaeological implications of a near-universal, continent-spanning association between gambling and various traditional games. Citing ethnographic and historic accounts from every corner of the continent, DeBoer (2001, pp. 233–35) demonstrated the ubiquity of a common theme where gambling between members of the same close-knit social group does not make sense, and socially distant gambling partners are preferred. Nation by nation, the parameters vary, but the illogic of in-group gambling is typified by views from the Klallam, where “gambling games are always played with outsiders, for people in a village do not like to take each other’s money” (Gunther, 1927, p. 273), and from the Ndee (Western Apache), where betting against members of the same clan would be “like winning from yourself” (Goodwin, 1942, p. 375; see also Beals, 1933; Brunton, 1998; Desmond, 1952; Landes, 1971; Parsons, 1996; Smith,

1940; Spier, 1938; Vennum, 1994; Yanicki, 2014). More contemporary objections to taking winnings at other community members’ expense, as voiced by Diné (Navajo) elders and traditionalists who cautioned against building a tribal casino in the 1990s (Schwarz, 2012, p. 536), and those who observe a “cannibalistic” aspect to profiting from gambling excess (Manitowabi, this issue), reflect ancient and widespread concerns.

DeBoer is not the only scholar to have remarked on the intertribal character of gambling in ancient North America, nor on its extent. In a global cross-cultural study, economist Frederic Pryor (1976) identified “location in North America” as one of just four independent variables, along with the presence of commercial money, presence of socioeconomic inequality, and absence of reliance on animal husbandry, that together could strongly predict the economic significance of gambling in non- or pre-capitalist tribal societies worldwide. Drawing from the observations of DeBoer, Pryor, and many others, social anthropologist Per Binde (2005) identified North America, with the possible exception of its Arctic zone, as a “continent of gamblers” (p. 4), made all the more

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extraordinary by a relatively patchy distribution of gambling societies around the rest of the world, including in adjoining Central and South America.

Binde's (2005, p. 20) hypothesis that the intertribal character of Indigenous North American gambling can explain its prevalence and intensity serves as the launching-off point for this article. While in essence correct, the statement is rooted in a modest oversimplification, for not *all* gambling was intertribal. Counterexamples do, of course, exist, and it is the exceptions that prove the true nature of the rule. A more nuanced gradient of gambling intensity tied to the social distance between competitors helps establish gambling's important role in building ties and moderating intergroup competition (Flannery & Cooper, 1946; Sahlins, 1972; Yanicki, 2017, 2019; Yanicki & Ives, 2017).

In this paper, I will review how a preferential situatedness on the frontiers of societal interaction, wherever groups of people meet, has important implications for how the closely intertwined practices of gaming (here defined as the act of playing a competitive game) and gambling (the act of wagering on a game's outcome) are created and maintained. My approach involves a survey of the archaeological, historical, and cultural anthropological literature on Indigenous gambling in North America. One predicted outcome of gaming between competitors from different backgrounds, who do not necessarily even speak the same language, is that the mechanics of gameplay should be negotiated quite fluidly between and among groups over time. This should especially be true in historic situations where new prospective gaming partners come in contact, reflecting the degree of heterogeneity or homogeneity in the cultural landscape and the changing demographic compositions of groups themselves. A time-transgressive mutability in gaming styles is something the integrated archaeological and ethnohistoric perspective employed here is particularly well-suited to explore. This analysis offers a comparative understanding of contemporary Indigenous gambling in North America. Even as styles of play evolve, a tacit, mutual agreement endures, involving recognition of the socioeconomic utility of gambling.

### **The Social Position of Gambling**

Remarking on the prevalence of gambling among the Ktunaxa, ethnographer Bill Brunton (1998) found it to be "central enough to social life that it should be considered a cultural theme" (p. 573). This core significance is reflected in the very fact of gambling traditions being preserved in ceremonies, oral traditions, and creation stories continent-wide (Culin, 1907; Dye, 2017; Gabriel, 1996; Matthews, 1889, 1897; Yanicki, 2014, etc.). The many hundreds of traditional games played in North America, categorizable into such groupings as ball games like lacrosse, dice games, guessing games, and target-shooting games like hoop-

and-pole (Culin, 1907) are intensely agonistic contests—trials of superiority in which participants strive to prove themselves against their peers. Cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1955) felt such playful competitiveness to be a defining element of human culture. But to focus on the recreational aspects of gaming as an explanation for its prevalence, for instance by emphasizing gameplay's utility in childhood development (i.e., Barry & Roberts, 1972; Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962, 1966; Sutton-Smith & Roberts, 1964; Sutton-Smith et al., 1963; see critique in Binde, 2005), rather trivializes the importance of gaming among adults and fails to address the central importance of gambling, which is not commonly a feature of children's gameplay. While adults played games for many purposes, including in ceremonies of healing, identity affirmation, and renewal, a duality between their ritual roles and near-universal association with gambling has long been recognized, requiring us to account for gaming's economic and political functions (Culin, 1907; Eymann, 1965, p. 39; Stuart, 1972).

Gambling in ancient North America was not simply a matter of the acquisition of material winnings and the concentration of wealth; it also offered a pathway to social standing. While staked winnings were undoubtedly valued, a parallel can be seen between gambling and a practice known as prestige hunting (Yanicki, 2017, pp. 115–116). In prestige-based economies, the real benefit of hunting success is not simply to earn subsistence, but to gain the reputational benefit accrued through wealth redistribution. Chiefly and other high-ranking status is thus reckoned not just by the interpersonal debts and obligations accrued through sharing, but by the demonstration of one's personal, supernatural power that repeated success entails, comprising a succinctly agonistic form of peer-competition (Hawkes & Bliege Bird, 2002; Molina et al., 2017). Likewise, gambling was an accepted, and indeed highly valorized pathway to prestige—indirectly, by means of wealth redistribution and associated recognition of personal power, and even more directly through the wagering of earned social rank (Flannery & Cooper, 1946).

As an economic pursuit, gambling has been identified by cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972) as a relatively selfish form of exchange. Compared to the altruistic giving of a parent to their child, where the giver has no expectation of receiving anything in return, or to the cooperative equitability of gift exchange among peers, gambling competitors consensually engage in an "attempt to get something for nothing with impunity" (Sahlins, 1972, p. 195). This is a form of *negative reciprocity*: offering less in trade than the value one expects in return. Like other forms of inequitable exchange (i.e., theft, appropriation by force, capitalism), Sahlins argued that gambling in hunter-gatherer and other subsistence economies should be expected among trading partners who lack strong kinship or social ties, as indeed the ethnographic and

historic data show is the case. Across the breadth of North America, the cooperative and competitive biases expressed in gambling preferences and betting patterns (in which family and community members generally bet on their own affiliates) strongly reflect patterns of identity reinforcement among socially constructed in-groups and out-groups, of which kinship networks in human societies are a central part (Hogg, 2006; Sahlins, 1976; Tajfel et al., 1971; Turner et al., 1987; Yanicki, 2017).

Considerable flexibility can be found, however, in the day-to-day application of these principles. In their pioneering ethnographic research on the social implications of gambling among the A'aninin (Gros Ventre) of Montana, Regina Flannery and John Cooper (1946) noted that gambling among members of the same tribal group was common, though strictly proscribed. Based largely on reckoning of kinship distance—a variable that can differ greatly across cultures based on consanguineal, affinal, and fictive terms—Flannery and Cooper (1946, pp. 409–414) defined a spectrum of attitudes towards gambling, which they referred to as the *bettor-wager pattern*. At the nearest extreme, between close relatives, gambling was usually prohibited outright, while between friends and individuals related through marriage, trivial wagers were often socially acceptable. Such small stakes could include bets to determine who would have cooking duty that night, or for trinkets like the arrows fired in a marksmanship contest. It is the highest-stakes contests, ones that could cause lasting harm to the loser and for which all else was likely but practice (Yanicki, 2017, pp. 111–12), that were limited to unrelated, socially distant competitors: rivals for power and prestige from other clans and age-ranked societies and members of other villages and tribes. At the farthest extreme, gambling was once again impossible, for there lay enemies against whom only the utmost hostility was reserved.

The gradient nuances of the bettor-wager pattern codified by Flannery and Cooper can be seen time and again in observations of Indigenous gambling from historical and ethnographic sources across North America. They offer great insight into some of the earliest historical accounts of gambling by European colonists in North America, from 17th-century New England, where Algonquian dice and lacrosse games were played “towne against towne” (Williams, 1963, p. 194) and “country against country” (Wood, 1634, p. 96). On the opposite side of the continent, they are at the essence of Verne Ray’s (1963) ethnographic description of Modoc practice in California, where “intertribal gatherings were invariably the occasion for intensive gambling and in these games the opposing teams were always from different tribes” (p. 124).

The terminology used here, of villages, clans, tribes, and nations, is admittedly imprecise, but this is deliberately so, as such identity labels alone are not necessarily prescriptive of a gambling relationship. There is an implied social calculation made by

individuals involved about whether or not to gamble. Personal life histories can transcend social boundaries, for instance through intermarriage or adoption, creating strong social ties and precluding gambling where it might otherwise seem likely to occur. And just as individuals’ membership in social groups is subject to change, so too are relations between groups. In this sense, gambling may better be understood as demonstrative of the quality of a relationship in a given moment. In some cases, the intensification of gambling could signify the deterioration of previously close bonds; in others, it could mark the amelioration of past hostilities (cf. Geertz, 1972). It is in this spectrum of changing relationships that we see the meaning behind DeBoer’s (2001) summation, where “gambling can be seen as an in-between or liminal activity, one playing out the ambiguities inherent in alliance, exchange, warfare, marriage, and other relations... who are typically situated far, but not too far, away” (p. 235).

### Games of Life and Death

In terms of what could be wagered in North American gambling games, the answer is virtually anything, and, as the bettor-wager pattern stipulates, the substantiveness of the wagers was context-dependent. One might reasonably surmise that the contestants were fairly closely related in a ca. 1770 Deh Cho hand game observed by Samuel Hearne, in which the stakes were merely “a single load of powder or shot, an arrow, or some other thing of inconsiderable value” (Hearne, 1795, p. 335). The annual gathering of more distantly affiliated Piikàni bands into large winter camps is reflected in the account of David Thompson, from the winter of 1787–1788, in which gaming was a constant occurrence, and some men “gambled away their things, even to their dried provisions” (Thompson, 1916, p. 358).

To this extent, men’s and women’s gambling can be considered more or less interchangeable, though men and women commonly played different games. Flannery and Cooper (1946, pp. 410–411) noted that the bettor-wager pattern of identifying gambling partners who were “just right” based on kinship and social distance applied equally to both sexes—at least as far as gambling for low stakes was concerned. Gambling for trinkets, decorations, and, more rarely, clothing, is well attested among women continent-wide (DeBoer, 2001, pp. 227–228), and women could and did gamble to the point where they “had nothing more to stake” (as reported among the Omaha by James, 1823, p. 217). However, disparities in wealth and ownership appear at the heart of claims such as that Anishinaabe women did not own enough property to gamble more extensively (Landes, 1971, p. 26). Similarly, while Piikàni men wagered horses and weapons on the outcome of women’s dice games, there is no evidence that women themselves wagered such stakes (Ewers, 1958, p. 155).

Thus, DeBoer (2001, 227) noted, it is with higher stakes that an asymmetry between men’s and women’s

gambling begins to emerge. Among the A'aninin, some of the most intense intra-group gambling contests took place between male rivals for standing within the larger tribe, for whom stakes could include a lifetime's worth of earned social rank and the loser could be left permanently disgraced (Flannery & Cooper, 1946). In the Algonquian contests reported by early American colonists, intervillage rivalries can be seen near their apogee, with wagers so high as to "exceed the beleefe of many" (Wood, 1634, p. 96) and potentially including wampum, clothing, houses, corn, or even the contestants themselves (Williams, 1963, p. 197). Though not universal and often frowned upon or forbidden, historical records and oral traditions show debt slavery, through self-wager or the wagering of wives and children, was a common outcome continent-wide (Cameron & Johansson, 2017). As with other very high stakes gambling, there is no record of women wagering their spouses or children (DeBoer, 2001, p. 227).

Carrying this disparity to its greatest extreme, accounts of the most intense men's gambling games at the intertribal level—that is, between the most socially distant competitors—show the blurring of the distinction between the choice to game or instead make war. Indeed, accounts are rife with examples of games being played between opponents who might otherwise be at war, but between whom, for a time, a cessation of hostilities was desired. In other cases, a dispute over gambling could lead to a flaring up of renewed conflict. The tension between gaming partners, and the possibility of conflict, is a pervasive theme in historical accounts (Flannery & Cooper, 1946; Vennum, 1994; Yanicki, 2014).

The interwoven nature of lacrosse and war in the symbolism, legends, and everyday practice of nations of eastern North America is particularly well documented (Becker, 1985; Converse, 1908; Speck, 1945, 1949; Vennum, 1994). Among some southeastern peoples, the equivocation between gaming and warfare is intimated in the interchangeability of terms for lacrosse: *hótti icósi*, "younger brother of war" among the Muscogee (Creek) and *da-na-wah'uwsdi'*, or "little war" among the Aniyvwiya?i (Cherokee; Hann, 1988; Vennum, 1994, pp. 213-214). The oldest surviving examples of Anishinaabe lacrosse sticks from the western Great Lakes, with a circular netted head, possess a noted similarity to ball-headed war clubs, and are in some cases even known as a "ball club" or "netted ball club" (Curtin, 1921, p. 379; Wulff, 1977, pp. 20-21; Vennum, 1994, pp. xii-xiii, figs. 2-3, 20a). An extraordinary example of a pre-1845 Cayuga lacrosse stick owned by the grandfather of Six Nations leader Deskaheh (Alexander T. General), collected by anthropologist Frank Speck in the 1930s (Penn Museum cat. no. 53-1-17), conversely features a carved hand clutching a lacrosse ball at its butt end (Becker, 1985, figs. 2, 3a; Eyman, 1964; Vennum, 1994, p. 81, figs. 1-2). To hold the ball in this way is a cardinal infraction in the rules of lacrosse; the imagery on this, one of the oldest

surviving Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) lacrosse sticks known, may evoke war club symbolism in which the ball is believed to be released to strike an opponent. The addition of two clasped hands on this piece may further evoke the Clasp Hands Dance, a rite practiced by warriors prior to embarking on the war path (Speck, 1949; Vennum, 1994, pp. ix-xiv).

Conversely, warfare is sometimes referred to as a game, as in a speech by the Hoocągra (Winnebago) chief Little Priest (Will C. McKern papers, cited in Vennum, 1994, p. 214). Numerous authors have commented on an agonistic, game-like component of Plains warfare, in which opponents strove for social recognition or prestige through non-lethal victories, scored by performing such feats as touching an opponent, and termed 'counting coups' (Benedict, 1950, p. 89; Erodes, 1972, p. 47; Grinnell, 1923, p. 405; Hoebel, 1978, pp. 76-77; Lowie, 1920, pp. 221-222, p. 356; Turney-High, 1942, p. 103). Sociologists John Loy and Graham Hesketh (1995) suggested these parallels may indicate a role for gaming in instilling boys with the values and training necessary for the warriorship expected of them in adulthood. While intriguing, a description of warfare as inherently "playful," and the claim that "Plains Indian warfare was a game or a contest for prestige" (Loy & Hesketh, 1995, p. 81, p. 102), comes across as excessively rose-tinted, glossing over the harsher historical realities of internecine conflicts which could range from minor skirmish to massacre.

Rather than viewing warfare as play, authors such as Thomas Vennum, Jr. (1994), Timothy Pauketat (2009), Grant Stauffer and Kent Reilly (2017) have suggested that widely distributed forms of games like lacrosse, *chunkey* (the Mississippian form of hoop-and-pole), and the ball game moderated warfare by promoting the maintenance of peaceful relations over broad regions. While this assessment is, in my view, much closer to the mark, the question of whether warfare was extreme play or gaming is watered-down war may yet reflect a clash in worldviews between the participants in these cultural systems and the scholars describing them. Gaming and gambling can be deeply integrated into Indigenous philosophies of life and understandings of the world (Dye, 2017, p. 102; Pauketat, 2009). Such integration is rendered explicit in the following description of the role of the dice game among the Apsáalooke (Crow):

They believed that each man's fate was determined by the luck and the magical power of his dream guardian, the animal spirit with whom he had entered into mystical alliance during his puberty vision quest. Everything that happened to him depended upon the fortune of his guardian spirit in a stick-dice game. In the Other World a game was being played. On the one side were the guardian spirits. On the other were anthropomorphic gods. As the dice went, so went a man's career. When one of the spirit

guardians lost the game, his man died. The fatalism that was rationalized about the supernatural stick-dice game went deep into Crow life and behavior; their recklessness in war and the enormous losses in population which they sustained during the 19th century were believed due to the shifting play of the celestial dice game. (Eyman, 1965, p. 43)

Within this cultural context, direct, personal linkages exist between gamblers and the supernatural world, and by extension, between more functionalistic versus ritualistic aspects of play. These cannot be easily disentangled.

It is through this lens that we may perhaps best view the deeply interwoven parallels between gaming and warfare, as evident in points scored in Plains dice games being referred to by the same term as war coups, the *pugamágun* (war club) depicted on Anishinaabe (Chippewa) dice, and the war calumet or tomahawk depicted on a set of Nakota (Assiniboine) dice (Culin, 1907, 66, p. 173; Fletcher, 1915, p. 67; Schoolcraft, 1853, p. 72). The parallels also extend to the practice of gambling in general: the word for gambling in the ancient form of *Siksikapohwasin* (the Blackfoot language) preserved in ceremony and song is the same as the word for warfare. As explained by the late Piikàni ceremonialist Allan Pard (in Yanicki, 2014), this synonymy is not a mere coincidence, nor is it easy for outsiders to understand:

I know it's a hard thing for a white guy to get his head wrapped around this, but to the Blackfoot people, gambling was no different than warfare. Basically, you know, you're gambling, you're putting your life on the line when you go into war. And the same thing when you're gambling, you're putting some- thing on the line to play the game. (p. 242)

In the case of the hoop-and-arrow game, the life-or death consequences of gambling are illustrated by the Piikàni story and associated victory song of two contestants from enemy tribes playing for the ultimate prize of each other's scalps, an injury that could often prove to be fatal (Allan Pard, cited in Yanicki, 2014, p. 242; see Flannery & Cooper, 1946, pp. 401–402, for a closely similar story among the A'aninin). According to Pard, the victory song, incorporated into the Sun Dance, is sung

to symbolize the Sun Dance's capability to conquer our adversary. Not only people, but evilness and sickness and death. That's our ability to conquer adversaries.... So that's how those kinda stories have so much significance in our ways and in our culture, because those victory songs or Scalp Dance songs give us encouragement in life... and give us hope that

we can always conquer our adversaries and meet our challenges in life.

So basically, our ways, we say *matiksistapi*, meaning they weren't just pulled out of the air, they weren't nothing, they always have something significant. There's substance to how we, why we do things, and a reason, and usually that reason is told through these kind of stories, how they're related to this victory song. (Allan Pard, cited in Yanicki, 2014, p. 243)

This essential morality, so expressed, is a powerful illustration of the deeply connected nature of ritual, warfare, gaming, and gambling.

Examples of gambling contestants staking their lives on a game are commonly expressed in mythological terms, again speaking to a deep instilment within value systems and worldview. Stories of culture heroes battling powerful supernatural beings, with the loser facing death, can be found across the continent (Dye, 2017, pp. 98–99). Decapitation, a possible analogue for scalping, appears in the oral traditions of the Haudenosaunee, Osage, Ponca, Pawnee, Caddo, and other peoples (Curtin & Hewitt, 1918; Dorsey, 1906, pp. 236–239; Howard, 1965; Lankford, 2008, pp. 163–90; Weltfish, 1937, pp. 172–177). Ritual competitors may have reenacted or emulated aspects of mythical competitions in ceremonial forms of gameplay to maintain sacred covenants and seek propitiatory blessings (Frank Hamilton Cushing, cited in Culin, 1907, pp. 212–217; Dye, 2017; Stevenson, 1904, p. 480). However, observed historical and ethnographic gambling practice, generally using the same games, is for the most part limited to the other wagers described above.

An intriguing possible exception comes from the 18th-century observation by American botanist William Bartram of large plazas called *chunky-yards*, sunken rectangular areas situated adjacent to ancient earthen mound platforms in the Muscogee and Aniyvwiya?i territory of what is now Florida and Georgia (William Bartram, cited in Jones, 1873, p. 181). Bartram's "chunky" is recognizable from contemporary terms for a widely distributed variant of the hoop-and-pole game where a stone disc was used—*chungke* or *chunké* among the Muskogean-speaking Chahta (Choctaw), *chenko* among the Eno of South Carolina, and *tchung-kee* among the Mandan of North Dakota, now commonly referred to as *chunkey* (Adair, 1775; Catlin, 1841; Culin, 1907, p. 487; Lederer, 1672; Romans, 1776). Bartram's description of what may then have been playing fields for this game is provocative:

The *Chunky-Yard* of the Creeks, so called by the traders, is a cubi-form area generally in the centre of the town.... Near each corner of the lower and further end of the yard stands erect a less pillar, or pole, about twelve feet high: these are called

the *slave-posts*... and these posts are usually decorated with the scalps of their slain enemies: the scalps, with the hair on them, and strained on a little hoop, usually five or six inches in width, are suspended by a string six or seven inches in length round about the top of the pole, where they remain as long as they last.... The pole is usually crowned with the white dry skull of an enemy. In some of these towns I have counted six or eight scalps fluttering on one pole in these yards. Thus it appears evidently enough that this area is designed for a public place of shows and games. (William Bartram, cited in Jones, 1873, pp. 178–180)

Bartram did not observe these plazas in use during his explorations of the 1770s—many such plazas lay abandoned or repurposed in Aniyvwiya?i villages, while he was “convinced that the chunky-yards now or lately in use among the Creeks [Muscogee] are of very ancient date” (William Bartram, cited in Jones, 1873, p. 181). Nevertheless, among the Muscogee they were still “cleaned out and kept in repair, being swept very clean every day, and the poles kept up and decorated in the manner I have mentioned” (William Bartram, cited in Jones, 1873, p. 181).

Bartram insinuated that the plazas served multiple purposes; a central post could indicate use in a regional variant of lacrosse, or in the variant of the ball game played by the neighbouring Muscogean-speaking Apalachee (Bushnell, 1978; Hudson, 1976, pp. 220–221). Large plazas of this nature are a common feature at population centers of the Mississippian culture across the midcontinent and American Southeast, where chunky was widely played. At Cahokia, an ancient city near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, the earliest evidence for chunky in the form of distinctive, polished discoidal stones dates to about AD 600 (DeBoer, 1993; Pauketat, 2004, 2009; Perino, 1971). Among the motifs associated with the chunky player, an important iconographic theme of the associated Southeastern Ceremonial Complex depicted in stone carvings, shell gorgets, and other media, are both scalps, worn at the belt of a distinctive heart-shaped apron, and severed heads (Brown, 2007). Timothy Pauketat (2004) has emphasized the mythological character of these representations, referencing an episode from the Red Horn cycle of the Hoocągra in which the lives of the culture hero and his village are forfeited in a ball game played against giants (Radin, 1948, pp. 123–129). Bartram’s observation of an association between scalps, skulls, hoops, and playing yards in the Southeast is suggestive of a more literal reality.

More direct evidence of life-or-death stakes can be found in the fate of down-on-their-luck gamblers in the Aztec world, where gambling was an accepted, albeit risky way of life for some commoners (Evans, 2017, p. 268). Writing in 16th century Mexico, Dominican friar

Diego Durán reported familiarly all-consuming wagers among the Aztecs on the ball game, dice, and other games, with professional gamblers staking “jewels, stones, slaves, fine cloths, breechcloths, their homes, their wives’ jewelry. They gambled their lands, their fields, their granaries filled with grain, their maguey fields, their trees and orchards” (Durán, 1971 [1574–1579], p. 305). And, as elsewhere in North America, those with nothing more to lose could wager themselves as slaves, at which point, if no family members or other connections could pay off the debt, they risked being sold in the market for use as human sacrifices (Durán, 1971 [1574–1579], p. 281). There can be little doubt that death stood as a possible outcome of catastrophic losses in Mesoamerican gambling.

That is to say nothing of the widely attested association between human sacrifice and the Mesoamerican ballgame, sometimes interpreted as the fate of the game’s loser (Gillespie, 1993; Whittington, 2001). A fuller treatment of this subject is beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, imagery of decapitation, so widely represented in gambling myths across the continent, is also notably prevalent in Aztec and earlier Maya ballcourt iconography, including depictions of *tzompantli*, or racks for bearing human skulls (Gillespie, 2013, pp. 322–324; Miller & Houston, 1987, p. 62). Decapitation also plays a pivotal role in the origin story for the Mesoamerican ball game recorded in the *Popul Vuh* of the K’iche’ Maya, in which a contest against the lord of the underworld results in the loser’s head being used as a game ball (Goetz & Morley, 1950).

Another striking parallel can be seen in the frequent conjunction of the Maya glyph for ballplaying, *pitz*, with the glyph for war (Miller & Houston, 1987, pp. 62–63). If this is an extension of the same synonymy expressed in other North American gaming terminology, some insight may be gained into depictions of Mayan lords playing the ballgame against one another, not as mere recreation, but as deadly serious battles determining the fates of both rulers and their kingdoms. Whether these glyphic inscriptions refer to rulers being defeated through military conquest or a gambling game, the outcome may have been the same. Aztec sources appear to suggest this was the case. As noted by Danish archaeologist Frans Blom (1932),

Some of the games of the nobles were played for stakes and others were played to settle disputes. Several authors tell us of the game between Axayacatl of Mexico and Xihuiltemoc of Xochimilco. The stakes were several towns against the revenues of the market and the lake of Mexico. The lord of Xochimilco won the game and apparently was assassinated by the loser. (p. 500)

It certainly bears mention that the ballgame conforms to the themes of the bettor-wager pattern, extended to

highly complex societies, and the merger of gaming, gambling, and ritual on a grand scale.

The risk of severe injury through the act of *playing* competitive gambling games stands as a further potentially lethal outcome at the extreme end of the bettor-wager spectrum, where gameplay stood as a surrogate for war. The Mesoamerican ballgame is notorious in this regard, with players frequently being bruised, maimed, or knocked unconscious by the heavy rubber ball used in the game, and in some cases requiring bloodletting to reduce severe swelling (Durán, 1971 [1574–1579], pp. 315–316). Similarly, injuries arising from lacrosse could range from the minor to the severe, with broken bones and even deaths being known (Fogelson, 1962, p. 43; Lahontan, 1703, p. 18; Mooney & Olbrechts, 1932, p. 71). Vennum (1994, pp. 224–234) has outlined widely varied attitudes towards this risk of physical harm, and it is possible to identify elements of the bettor-wager pattern here as well. Injuries were reportedly rare in lacrosse games among the Mohawks of Kahnawake and Akwesasne, and violence was only noted to occur in contests against unnecessarily rough-playing Canadian teams (Beers, 1869, pp. 177–178, p. 205, p. 241). In other accounts from eastern North America, matches between groups that were historic enemies could sometimes only serve to defer hostilities. Disputes arising from intertribal lacrosse games have been known to descend into general melees, and to result in ill-feelings that nearly led or did lead to protracted, all-out war (H.S. Halbert, cited in Cushman, 1899, pp. 131–135; Fogelson, 1962, p. 135; Morgan, 1904, p. 280; Swanton, 1928, p. 148). Simmering tensions may have been an ever-present aspect of virtually any intertribal gameplay, a danger noted by Flannery and Cooper (1946) even in games of chance on the Plains. More intensely physical contests like lacrosse, in which players are equipped with symbolic war clubs, and in which the allegorical nature of gaming as warfare is made most directly manifest, could only amplify this risk.

### **Implications of Intergroup Gaming**

The aim of the preceding discussion of gambling stakes has been to show that, for the loser, the highest-stakes contests could have disastrous costs. To gamble, one would have to be willing both to take this risk and to impose it on others. That willingness is enabled, in part, by a sense of need to compete for status and resources, which are both limited and distributed unequally in society. Gambling offers a convenient shortcut to both, but at a potentially damaging cost to oneself or one's competitor. This cost is a fundamentally limiting factor, being a violation of the principles of cooperation and mutual benefit, or generalized reciprocity, that characterize close-knit social groups (Sahlins, 1972). The willingness to gamble, and the degree to which harm against a competitor is tolerated, are entirely predicated by the kinship bonds and social

distance between opponents. In ritual forms, this relationship can be seen as extended into metaphorical terms, as between mortals and non-mortals, humans and non-humans. There are a number of implications to the bettor-wager pattern, expressed here dually as a preference to gamble with out-group opponents, and for stakes to rise in accordance with social distance up to the point of an equivalency with war.

### *Loci of play*

In his review of Robert Textor's (1967) cross-cultural tabulations on gambling frequency, Binde (2005) noted that more than half (51.2%) of the 127 world cultures that lack games of chance also lack cities; of those, 75.4% have an average community size of less than 200 inhabitants. Thus, he argued, "gambling seems to be associated with societal complexity, and we may ask why" (p. 14). Demographics alone are explanatory enough. In areas with exceedingly low carrying capacity, band-level groups consisting of one or a few extended families with strong internal kinship ties can range over large territories in comparative seclusion for much of the year. In these settings, gambling should not be expected on a day-to-day basis, but would instead be limited to the few times a year when band-level groups convene. Unsurprisingly, a common theme expressed in the ritual aspect of many traditional North American gambling games is that they are played only at specific times of the year during such gatherings, as of the Cheyenne hoop-and-pole game (Meeker, 1901, p. 27), the Mi'kmaq plumstone dice game (Wallis & Wallis, 1955, p. 291), and many others.

For the archaeologist, evidence of where gambling games were played offers considerable interpretive potential. For the most part, it would be fair to say that evidence of such games is rare. Many, like lacrosse, strictly use perishable materials, and survivability is an issue. However, a few sites and locales have yielded sometimes vast numbers of objects associated with various ethnographically and historically attested games. Some of the larger examples include Pueblo Bonito, New Mexico, associated with the Navaho myth of the Great Gambler (Weiner, 2018); Wilson Butte Cave, Idaho, and villages in the Parowan Valley, Utah, where scores of tabular, two-sided bone dice have been found (Bryan, 2006; Hall, 2009); the Lake Midden site, Saskatchewan, and the Ice Glider site, South Dakota, where polished bison rib darts used in a Plains variant of the snow snake game number in the hundreds (Majewski, 1986; Walde, 2003); and the Promontory Caves, Utah, where excellent preservation conditions have allowed the recovery of cane, wood, and other perishable gaming pieces that could number in the thousands (Hallson, 2017; Yanicki & Ives, 2017). In other cases, singular objects or monumental features that are found in many different places, like chunky stones and ball courts, attest to the wide distribution of their associated games.



These can be interpreted in a number of ways. Binde (2005) was correct to note that population size alone can offer greater opportunities for social relationships compatible enough for gambling to occur. His suggested parameters— “a plurality of social classes, regions with varying economic characteristics, and groups of people with different religion and worldview” (p. 14)—are valid elaborations of the ways individuals within large-scale societies can divide themselves according to multiple social identities that are salient at different times (Hogg, 2006). They are, however, an ellipsis to the most foundational in-group of all, the family or kin-group, from which the reckoning of social competitors and cooperators first begins. The identification of who can legitimately gamble with whom radiates outward from this very personal core.

As the ethnographic data from North America so aptly illustrate, larger population size is not a prerequisite for gambling to occur. Gambling is reported even among small hunter-gatherer groups, especially for small stakes. Larger annual events including rendezvous-type trade fairs, ceremonial gatherings, large winter camps, and communal hunts can provide the needed conditions for higher-stakes gaming to take place (Janetski, 2002; Wood, 1980; Yanicki, 2019). An example of the intermittence (or frequency) of such meetings can be found in the 19th-century records of the Mission of St.-Jean-Baptiste at Île-à-la-Crosse, a Hudson’s Bay Company post strategically located on the frontier of both Nihithaw (Woods Cree) and Dënesųłiné (Chipewyan) territory in what is now northern Saskatchewan. In a letter to his superior, oblate priest Henri Faraud (1863) wrote of his frustrations when a party of non-converts arrived to trade:

[T]he old hand game is waking up and seems to want to spoil everything again. The [here the author uses a racial epithet] had arrived on the eve of Ascension: on the feast day, many did not have the patience to wait for the instruction which followed Vespers; but immediately went out to join some of the non-praying Crees and others as well, I guess, and they played at the hand [game] all night. The evening of the same day I gave them a severe reprimand which seemed to impress them deeply, the next day the game seemed dead; but the next day another band having arrived, before even coming to see the priest, what do I say, even before entering the church, they started to play and only finished to come to attend the [May devotions to the Virgin Mary]. I took advantage of this moment to remind them of the impropriety and the culpability of their conduct.... Two days later the game resumed more than ever. (p. 2)

The reasons for the priest’s exhortations falling on deaf ears are clear; in retrospect, the placement of the mission seems comically ill-fated.

Rather than being an accompaniment to other activities, gatherings were also planned with outsiders for the express purpose of playing games. Large plazas in the Mississippian culture area, and the construction of stone-walled courts for the Mesoamerican ballgame reflect the willingness of groups of players to travel great distances to play in such contests. This is not restricted, however, to the larger population centers of ancient North America. The hoop-and-pole game stands out in this respect: among the Lakota (Teton Sioux), interest in the game was such that

[s]ometimes a band of Indians would go a long distance, taking with them their families and all their possessions, to gamble on a game between expert players. Such games were watched by interested crowds, and, as they offer many opportunities for trickery, fierce contests arose over disputed points, which sometimes ended in bloodshed and feuds. (Walker, 1905, p. 278)

Likewise, among the Dakelh (Carrier) of north-central British Columbia, the hoop-and-pole game “in times past... had a sort of national importance, inasmuch as teams from distant villages were wont to assemble in certain localities more favorable to its performance in good style” (Morice, 1894, p. 113). And a well-attested Piikàni creation story describes a playing field for the hoop-and-pole game on their territorial frontier with the Ktunaxa in southern Alberta, made for “different nations... to meet here annually & bury all animosities [sic] betwixt the different Tribes, by assembling here & playing together” (Fidler, 1792–1793, p. 17; Yanicki, 2014).

In smaller scales, gambling’s tendency towards liminality may mean that the locus of archaeological research, if focused on domestic activity, may not always be a setting where these interactions can be observed. A pathway towards the availability of gambling partners could yet be present in just such locales through the incorporation of outsiders into the residential group. At the Promontory Caves, a 13th-century AD site complex on the north shore of Utah’s Great Salt Lake, scores of two-sided, split-cane dice have been recovered, together with smaller numbers of dice made from split sticks, polished bone, and beaver teeth (Steward, 1937; Yanicki & Ives, 2017). Dice are a special category of gaming implement: across North America, the great majority of ethnographic and historic accounts describe dice to be a women’s game (80.9% of reported instances; DeBoer, 2001, p. 224). The caves are a residential setting, filled with debris from food preparation (principally bison), hide preparation, and moccasin repair. The several types of dice present do not represent stylistic change over time. They are instead found mixed in the same deposits spanning just

50 years of seasonal occupations by a small- to mid-sized band, probably 25–50 people or four to seven households (Hallson, 2017; Ives et al., 2014; Lakevold, 2017, pp. 143–152). There is every indication that Promontory women gambled on a considerable scale—a seeming break with the bettor-wager pattern, except that they were likely not closely related. The extent and diversity of gaming styles suggests women from different backgrounds were being recruited into this population (i.e., through intermarriage), and that they brought their own gaming traditions with them, as they did other styles of craft production such as pottery and basketmaking (Yanicki 2019, in press; Yanicki & Ives, 2017).

#### *Shared fluencies*

The Promontory Caves' gaming assemblage also illustrates another phenomenon associated with intergroup gaming: the negotiation of the rules of play. The question of what games were played at any time would come down a question of mutual intelligibility, requiring both sides to have a strong enough familiarity to feel that they had a chance to win. Intertribal gambling thus requires a shared fluency of games (Yanicki, 2017).

Given the ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity that has long typified many regions of North America, the neighbours with whom one wished to game were by no means assured of speaking the same language. Population upheavals associated with the onset of European colonization only served to amplify the diverse character of this social milieu, particularly on the Plains as numerous peoples from neighbouring regions took up a bison hunting lifestyle after the introduction of the horse (Binnema, 2001). In cases of high-stakes gaming, where opponents from other tribes were actively sought out, communication was an obstacle that needed to be overcome, but it need not have been a major one. The use of Plains Sign Language as a lingua franca made such communication possible, at least across the central part of the continent. The full extent of this language prior to European contact is not known, though it was in widespread use along the Gulf Coast at the time of the Spanish entrada (Clark, 1885; Davis, 2006, 2010; Wurtzburg & Campbell, 1995). Elsewhere, the poorly known sign language of the Interior Plateau and Chinook Jargon of the Northwest Coast may have served a similar role (Mallery, 1881). Practices such as sending children to be raised among neighbouring tribes, as among the Kiowa and the Apsáalooke (Mooney, 1898), and kinship structures that sought out exogamous intermarriage, leading to the formation of bands of mixed identity, would also have promoted widespread bi- or multilingualism (Berndt, 2008, pp. 42–45; Binnema, 2001, p. 13; Colpitts, 2015, p. 423; Innes, 2013, pp. 60–61, pp. 70–72).

Ultimately, these shared forms of communication are archaeologically invisible, but their end products are not. Evidence of common methods and materials in the

accoutrements of games allows region-spanning social networks to be identified, reflecting how groups historically came to terms in their gambling activity. In this way, games can serve as a useful proxy for social contact (Yanicki, 2017). DeBoer (2001) explored this premise by mapping out the distribution of dice game variants across North America. Regional clusters are clearly evident, both in the materials used to make two-sided dice (for instance plumstones in the Northeast, beaver teeth in the Northwest, etc.) and in the mechanics of gameplay (for instance whether four dice, six dice, or more are used, and whether dice are tossed in a bowl or basket or are thrown on the ground). Following DeBoer's lead, I have previously mapped out hoop-and-pole variants to show the existence of a gaming style shared by numerous peoples of the Northwest Plains (Yanicki, 2014).

In aggregate, historical and ethnographic accounts show game distributions as they stood long after the onset of European contact and cultural disruption, extending into the early reservation era of the late 1800s and early 1900s. They reflect population movements, the onset of new contacts and new negotiations about the forms of play, and to a large degree the status of gaming knowledge after severe impositions had been made by colonial authorities. This is not to say that mapped distributions are invalid representations of traditional practice; they are accurate depictions of living traditions as they and their bearers stood at a particular moment in time. Work with archaeological collections allows things to be taken a step further, comparing ancient distributions of gaming styles both to each other, at different points in time, and to ethnohistoric distributions. At the Promontory Caves, comparisons of the gaming materials of the bison-hunting Promontory people to those of their contemporary neighbours, wetlands foragers from the archaeologically known Fremont culture, show that the two populations did not participate in the same regional networks of contact, gaming, and exchange. Further, the Promontory assemblage shows the presence of game styles in regions where they are no longer played, drawing on influences from as far afield as the American Southwest and the Canadian Subarctic (Yanicki & Ives, 2017).

Meanwhile, evidence for the incorporation of varied women's traditions, as reflected in gaming styles and craft production, helps elucidate the conditions under which ethnogenesis takes place (Yanicki, 2019, in press). Intergroup gambling, for all the risk it entails, must also be recognized as signaling the intention to pursue more peaceful relations than the alternative. It may therefore play a pivotal early role in overcoming the suspicions and hostilities experienced by rival groups, and in building a shared history of positive contact from which closer ties, including alliance and intermarriage, can follow. The utility of the Promontory example to the interpretation of other sites may be somewhat limited—the presence of multiple gaming traditions

and intensive in-group gaming may have been short lived, disappearing within only a generation or two as community members came to a consensus on emergent gaming styles and descendants came to have close kinship ties that were prohibitive to gambling relationships. However, there remains rich potential for other social networks to be explored through evidence of shared gaming traditions.

#### *Fluidity of gaming vs. persistence of gambling*

One conclusion that can be drawn from the archaeological study of gaming distributions—almost so obvious as to go without saying—is that games change over time. This can be in terms of how games were played, where, and by whom. This is perhaps most evident from some of the more archaeologically visible games. The earliest archaeological evidence for the Mesoamerican ball game—a ball court from Paso de la Amada on Mexico's Pacific Coast, together with rubber balls, stone yokes, and ballplayer figurines from the Olmec heartland on Mexico's Gulf Coast (Diehl, 2004, p. 32; Hill et al., 1998, pp. 878–879; Ortiz & Rodriguez, 1999, pp. 228–232)—show the game's widespread distribution and contact between Olmec and early Mayan centres by 3350 BP. Where courts are used in the game, variability is pronounced, with vertical, stepped, or sloping walls all noted; the addition of stone hoops to courtside walls of later Aztec and Toltec courts (ca. 650 BP), not present in the earlier forms, is a striking example of the game's gradual evolution (Blom, 1932, p. 507).

Likewise, the most visible artifacts of the chunky game—discoidal chunky stones themselves—demonstrate a well-established progression in form between the 7th and 14th centuries (DeBoer, 1993; Perino, 1971; Zych, 2017, pp. 68–70). Pauketat (2009) has proposed that a gradual expansion in the distribution of chunky stones across the breadth of the Mississippian culture area, from the western Great Lakes to the American Southwest, could show efforts to use the game both to promote social cohesion and to assert political influence by Cahokian elites, with whom the game is particularly associated. To the north of Cahokia, on the upper Mississippi and western Lake Michigan, chunky stones appear at a broad range of sites both with and without evidence of additional Mississippian culture influences. Their recovery from mostly poorly provenienced contexts, however, leaves it difficult to determine how much this northern distribution is associated with a movement of Mississippian peoples and how much might represent the spread of a shared understanding of how to play the hoop-and-pole game (Zych, 2017, pp. 72–73, p. 82).

It is tempting to look for the point of origin of a single game and document its historical development, including its diffusionary spread outward from a core, as seen, for example, in Pauketat's (2009) arguments for chunky, Eaglesmith's (1976) claims for a Mesoamerican origin for ball games, and Culin's (1907, p. 31)

suggestion that the oldest forms of all North American games could be found in the Southwest. Among neighbouring, contemporary groups, the question of diffusion is not contentious: the transmission of cultural information through social learning is a key component of cultural evolutionary theory (Ammerman & Cavalli-Sforza, 1984; Boyd & Richerson, 2005; Boyd et al., 1997; Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1988, 1994; Moore, 1994a, 1994b; Richerson & Boyd, 2005; Shennan & Collard, 2005, etc.). But, a focus on the diffusion of individual gambling games risks missing a bigger picture of the structural principles underlying how and why games are played. It must be remembered that gaming is a contested activity with a strict requisite for willing partners. A chunky stone, a hand game billet, a plumstone die, or even a prepared plaza for a ball game or lacrosse, all are representative of a transactional exchange between two parties. The spread of gaming traditions between cultures, and their constant reinterpretation over time, are thus necessary conditions for their being played in peripheral contexts of cross-cultural contact (Yanicki, 2019, pp. 230–233). Refocusing on consideration of the intertribal character of gambling and participation in the bettor-wager pattern, highlighting the culturally informed values and personal agency driving such opportunities for exchange, yields some interesting points for discussion.

Pauketat (2009) has contended that the chunky game was used to “win the hearts and minds of distant people” (p. 20), effected through the spread of what he has termed the *pax Cahokia*. Judging from the distribution of similar mechanisms among other games across the continent, such a spread would have been greatly facilitated by virtue of being a familiar concept to virtually anyone in North America. As has already been noted, the political and economic aspects of gaming cannot be easily separated; indeed, they are often regarded as the same thing. Agreement could readily be found among different groups covering an enormous geographic area that a gambling game could mediate differences as an alternative to armed conflict, while simultaneously serving as a pathway to wealth and prestige. In this sense, the role of a game like chunky is far from unique—a widely understood *pax alea*, or gambling peace, might describe these circumstances more suitably.

The extent to which similar practices occur continent-wide, and to which stories of life-or-death gambling contests are integrated into creation stories and oral tradition, points to the antiquity of an underlying cultural theme in which the choice of game played is but a surficial expression. Even in such disparate cases as a hand game during an encounter between Subarctic caribou-hunting bands, or the pageantry and bloodletting that must have accompanied a ball game between Mayan lords, an acceptance of the social role of gambling is the thread that weaves the rich tapestry of North American gaming together. Though highly theoretical, such core values,

especially when they are integral to group identity, should be fairly impervious to change, while more peripheral elements, and those more recently introduced, should be expected to change quite fluidly over time (Boyd et al., 1997; Durham, 1992; Vansina, 1990; Yanicki, 2019, pp. 230–233). Thus, individual games, or even elements of individual games, diffuse readily across ethnic and linguistic boundaries (Crump, 1990, p. 119, p. 127; DeBoer, 2001, pp. 232–233; Parlett, 1999, p. 16; Steward, 1941, p. 246). The spread of games is not the same as the spread of gambling, however (Kroeber, 1948). The patchy distribution of gambling both in the Americas and elsewhere in the world is enough to support the observation that “gambling does not diffuse easily from one culture to another [because] it is integrated or woven into the patterns of cultures, active in its social functions” (Price, 1972, p. 164).

A distribution for gambling that permeates the social fabric of ancient North America, coupled with what should be a resistance to adoption of the practice, does not lend great support to Binde’s (2005, p. 21) assertion that gambling emerged relatively recently (i.e., after complex, sedentary societies had developed) and took hold among neighboring peoples because it harmonized with keenly felt notions of tribal honor. This rests on a highly tenuous proposition that the interplay between tribal affinities and gambling is somehow stronger in North America than elsewhere, which is not the case. Balinese cockfighting is a noted example which closely follows the bettor-wager pattern (Geertz, 1972; Stuart, 1972). Here, wagers are made not just for money but for the changed perception of status that winning brings, individual contests are seen as life-or-death metaphors, and betting reflects “concentric rings of alliance” in which “a man will bet on a cock which is owned by a kinsman, and in the absence of a close kinsman, one bets on an allied group rather than an unallied one, and so on” (Stuart, 1972, p. 26). The nested layers of identity that situate affiliated kin networks within tribes, and promote feelings of solidarity between members of the same in-group against those who are not, are most certainly present elsewhere. However, the *ubiquity* of gambling, as seen in North America, is not.

On the contrary, I would suggest that the answer to the uniquely clustered North American distribution of gambling societies can be found in their shared early history. It is very difficult to detect when gambling first began to be practiced in the Americas. Circularly arranged stone impressions similar to the playing boards used with some dice games date to approximately 5,000 BP in Chiapas, Mexico (Voorhies, 2013). It is doubtful that these were the first games played on the continent: most traditional games rely on perishable materials that are not preserved at archaeological sites. Intriguingly, it is among Indigenous populations of the Western Hemisphere who are genetically most distinct from Ancient North

Americans—South Americans, whose ancestors diverged 14,000 to 17,000 years ago, and Inuit groups, whose ancestors spread out from Northeast Asia several millennia later—that gambling is least prevalent (Moreno-Mayar et al., 2018; Reich et al., 2012). Though genetic affinity is not strictly correlated with culture, the sheer intensity of gambling heritage from the Subarctic to Mesoamerica, especially in relation to neighbouring regions, may offer some indication that the seeds of the bettor-wager pattern were already in place at an early stage of human dispersal across North America. Could the propensity to gamble be attributed to the cultural equivalent of what is known to geneticists as a founder effect, present in a small founding population and infinitely varied among its descendants? If this is the case, the rich and varied record of North American gambling games is the product of parallel and repeatedly intersecting historical developments extending into deepest antiquity.

### Transitions to the Present

The archaeological study of gambling games is, by necessity, greatly informed by contemporary practices, oral traditions, ethnography, and historical accounts. The very identification of what constitutes a “gaming piece,” as archaeologists frequently describe such objects as dice, hand game billets, or other more enigmatic finds, is heavily dependent on the analogies that can be drawn from games as they are currently known (Hall, 2009, p. 31; Yanicki & Ives, 2017, pp. 145–147). Without those analogues, it is highly doubtful that games could be archaeologically detected—and, I suspect, some evidence of prehistoric gambling in North America may be missed, out of a lack of familiarity with non-perishable components of games that are most likely to survive.

Just as archaeology is informed by modern records of gaming, archaeology in turn informs us that these games are not static. Historic and ethnographic accounts provide but a snapshot of gaming styles and geographic distributions, principally as they have stood in the centuries since European contact. The resulting view is “essentially ahistorical, collapsing different moments and periods in chronological time into the concept of a time before much contact with the West” (Binde, 2005, p. 21–22). Historic descriptions of gaming practices can reflect population movements that are the consequence of European colonization, in addition to many other subtle effects. Thus, for example, European trade goods were readily incorporated into various guessing games, to the extent that one traditional game, in which an object is hidden in a moccasin, became known to the many settlers who adopted it as the bullet game (Culin, 1907, p. 267, p. 343). Likewise, while the hoop-and-arrow game of the Siksikaitapi is ancient, the museum specimens of the hoops used in the game feature brass and coloured glass trade beads and twisted metal wire (Yanicki, 2014, figure 2.2). There is no inconsistency implied in such

observations. It is the nature of gaming to be fluid as gaming partners change, as knowledge of particular gaming styles is exchanged, and as new innovations within living traditions continue.

As we view the full record of North American gambling games as they have been played at certain places and at certain times, it is important to remember, too, that there is a danger in identifying any particular game as belonging to a particular group. Styles are distinctive, and accounts are almost as varied as the number of people who played them. These marks of individuation can attest to who, within a community, had the right to make the material trappings of a game, or who owned them, but the minimum number of participants in a gambling game remains two. Gambling games are designed to be shared, as players seek opponents from whom they have something to gain. This is the transactional nature of such gaming, where the objects themselves serve not so much as a representation of the identity of one party or the other so much as of the invitation to an exchange between both. This demands a degree of flexibility, so as to be not only familiar to a prospective opponent, but familiar enough to convince them that they, too, can win.

That is not to say that games do not have a certain directional *lean*: clusters in various game styles speak to the presence of peripheries and cores within regional gaming networks—multiples of them, as differing styles of shared gaming fluency developed over time. The waxing and waning in popularity of these variants may reflect the fortunes of their bearers, both in having something for which opponents wish to gamble and in having amicable enough relations to pursue gambling as a form of competition. These conditions were also subject to change. While the proliferation of a game could then reflect widening membership in an interconnected social network, the decline or replacement of that game could signify that system's diminution or collapse. Thus, the decline of *chunkey* in the Midwest and as far as the eastern Great Lakes coincides with the decline of Cahokia and other Mississippian-affiliated culture centers in the 13th through 16th centuries, concomitant with Haudenosaunee coalescence and the emergence of lacrosse (Engelbrecht et al., 2018; George, 2001; Pauketat, 2009).

Interruptions to traditional gaming practices, and particularly to the economic and political functions of gambling and the ceremonial complexes which supported them, can be linked to European contact and colonization. There is no small animosity expressed by Christian missionaries to gambling practices as a barrier to religious conversion, as in Father Faraud's (1863) letter to Bishop Taché. Shifts to Western modes of commerce and impacts of disease and warfare likewise impacted participation in gaming networks. These processes were amplified by Canadian and American governments' restricting Indigenous peoples to reserves, prohibiting large gatherings like potlatches

and sun dances, and forcing children's attendance at residential schools, reducing or eliminating their access to traditional knowledge and language (Yanicki, 2014, pp. 31–33).

The genocidal consequences of interference in these core cultural practices are pointedly illustrated in the abolition of the Apalachee ball game by Spanish missionaries and colonial authorities at Mission San Luis, near present-day Tallahassee, Florida, in 1639 (Hann, 1988, p. 328; Milanich, 1995, p. 96). Without the game, which played an important role in striking intertribal alliances and initiating joint military actions, the 50,000-strong Apalachee were consequently prevented from recruiting allies in actions targeted against them by British-allied forces. Further, they were at the same time prevented from engaging in the very activity that could ceremonially mitigate such disputes. By 1704, the Apalachee had been decimated by warfare and slave raids, and the mission itself had been destroyed, leaving only a small refugee population. After suffering decades of additional depredations, the few hundred surviving Apalachee finally resettled in French-controlled Louisiana (Hann, 1988; Horowitz, 2005; Milanich, 1995; Stauffer & Reilly, 2017, pp. 44–45).

In another example of the direct suppression of gaming activity, Louis Meeker (1901, p. 30), who resided for a time with the Oglala Lakota, wrote:

Recently [the hand game] became so popular upon the Pine Ridge Agency it was necessary to prohibit it entirely.... I am creditably informed that the Ogalala agreed to abandon their games in a treaty with General Sherman in 1868.... Some say Sherman's treaty stopped the field games. Others say they were superseded by the Ghost Dance, and never again used at the great gatherings.

The Ghost Dance mentioned by Meeker was a spiritual movement that spread among Indigenous peoples of the western United States in the 1890s. Tacitly resisting the devastating cultural, territorial, and demographic losses they were experiencing, peoples that adopted the practice incorporated the reenactment of traditional practices into a ceremony aimed at their revival, each group selecting what they felt most essential to please the spirits of departed ancestors (Kehoe, 2006). The hand game was one such practice so selected by several peoples, in the process being transformed from a gambling game to a ritualized performance that "was never played by band against band or tribe against tribe" (Lesser, 1933, pp. 309–311, p. 322). In the Pawnee Ghost Dance, while carefully preserving the hand game's rules and songs, the game shifted from an interpersonal competition to an exercise in building community cohesion. War symbolism, arguments, and material stakes were eliminated, though some games still allowed winners to avoid burdensome tasks like cooking duty or the

obligation to rise early (Lesser, 1933, pp. 311–313). Though not explicitly aimed at their preservation, resistance against the loss of gaming traditions through incorporation into religious practices can also be noted elsewhere, as with the hoop-and-pole game's inclusion in Siksikaitsitapi ceremonies, and both hoop-and-pole and lacrosse's inclusion within Haudenosaunee sacred rites (Engelbrecht et al., 2018, p. 168; Eyman, 1964; Fenton, 1936, pp. 8–9; Allan Pard, cited in Yanicki, 2014, pp. 238–239, pp. 242–243).

While I have argued that the forms that gambling games take should be seen as relatively fluid in historical perspective, the central importance of gambling, integrated as it is within value systems and worldview, should not. In his analysis of the external factors that could bring about such drastic, systemic changes to a core cultural institution, Alexander Lesser (1933, p. xxi, pp. 336–337) was unsparing in his judgement: forced assimilation wrought enormous cultural destruction and offered only superficial alternatives in its place. Revitalization movements like the Ghost Dance hand game are both resistance to and rejection of the imposed values of the dominant society, filling a void in unfulfilled social, intellectual, and spiritual needs. In this setting, the “old games” are retained as a memory, but not extinguished, while operating within the heavily policed constraints of the reservation era.

Nevertheless, the bettor-wager pattern, and particularly the practice of gambling in intergroup settings, has persisted in much the same form as it always had. While travelling the Cochrane River in northern Manitoba in 1939, American adventure-writer P.G. Downes met the main body of the Barren Land Band of the Etthén heldélj (Caribou-eater) Dené, living off the land. Downes wrote at length of the encounter and of his meeting with the group's leaders, including the following about the renowned elder Casmir, or Kasmere:

Many tales are still told of his prowess. He was the first ‘chief’ of the Brochet band.... [I]t was Kasmere... who dictated whatever complaints and slight policy they had. For Kasmere was the greatest hunter and the most expert gambler of them all. No one but Kasmere went to the distant Barrens and there gambled at ‘udzi’ for dogs with their hereditary enemies, the Eskimos. (Downes, 1943, p. 117)

Even at this late date, echoes of themes found throughout the preceding discussion can be found in this brief but remarkable passage: the hint of hunting and gambling prestige going hand-in-hand, travelling great distances for the express purpose of gambling, and *udzi*, the Dene hand game, being played between opponents who might otherwise be at war. Downes reinforced his point, describing how “[s]ometimes four or six men will engage in a sort of mass combat. The

greatest battles have been waged between different bands and peoples,” recalling games between Dene and Nihithaw, or Kasmere's contests against the Inuit, “in which not only wealth and gain but prestige and glory were the stakes” (Downes, 1943, p. 239). Tournament-style play of the hand game today continues to hold much of this character, in which teams drawn from individual communities over considerable areas gather to compete against one another for large cash prizes.

The involvement of barrenlands Inuit in this practice is noteworthy for its rarity. Attesting to the exceptional nature of this contact is Downes's (1943) observation that Kasmere “was the only Chipewyan I had ever heard of who could speak [Inuktitut] and speak it well” (p. 116). Culin (1907, p. 32), suggested that the widespread popularity of the hand game may be a comparatively recent phenomenon, due to suppression of tribal warfare in the colonial era. Similar claims have been made for lacrosse (Stauffer & Reilly, 2017). Be that as it may, it was not only Inuit being drawn into bettor-wager pattern gambling. Downes also related the growing legend of Del Simon, an independent Canadian fur trader who established a post at Nueltin Lake, in what is now Nunavut.

Among many other things he was renowned through the country as a particularly fortunate hand when it came to any game of chance, even *udzi*. The story is still told of the year he passed through Brochet. When he stopped he was asked what he was out to do during the coming fur season and he replied, ‘Trapping!’ and slapping his pocket he continued, ‘Yes, sir, and I got all my traps right here, fifty-two of them.’ When he came down to Brochet at the end of the winter hunt, he had a larger pack of furs than any trapper, white or red, in the country. (Downes, 1943, p. 251)

Though the story is somewhat apocryphal—Downes attributed a certain “Paul Bunyan”-like quality to Simon's fame—the account also reinforces a key observation made throughout the continent. Returning again to Culin's ethnological work, while he found at the turn of the last century that a large proportion of the traditional games he sought to collect were in the process of being abandoned, gambling continued relatively unabated, especially through the use of playing cards (Culin, 1901a, 1901b, 1901c, 1907). A direct replacement of old games for European-derived ones is sometimes made explicit, as with the Walapai dice game *tawfa* for cards (H.P. Ewing, cited in Culin, 1907, p. 208). It is further signified by cards being used in ritual settings, as with the distribution of a deceased person's belongings among the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate (Yarrow, 1881, p. 195), and by the names for older gambling games being applied instead to cards (Culin, 1907, p. 60, p. 155, p. 182). Horse racing and other “non-

traditional" games have also taken on aspects of agonistic competition for wealth and prestige in recent centuries, while at the same time broadening opportunities for the participation of non-Indigenous contestants (Cliff, 1990; Mitchell, 2020).

### Conclusions

In this paper I have only scratched the surface of the rich record of traditional Indigenous games that have been and continue to be played across North America. As the many ethnohistoric examples explored here show, there has long been a fascination with individual games: their distinctive equipment and rules of play, and their associated songs, ceremonies, and origins in ancient oral traditions. This fascination culminated, to a degree, in Stewart Culin's (1907) efforts to document every known variety of Indigenous North American game. Numerous examples were missed in this work, but it has nevertheless long stood as an unchallenged authority, so much so that Alfred Kidder once rather infamously declared the study of games to be "a sucked orange" (Kidder, 1958, p. 322). Like DeBoer (2001, p. 244), I must contend that it is not.

If I were to allow myself just one complaint against Culin's work, it is with the encyclopedic nature of his approach, and his interest in tracing lineages of games to ancestral, original forms—a focus which rather misses the forest for branching, phylogenetic trees. This is not to belittle the cultural significance of any single game, which in many cases is profound. Many of these games also doubtless do share common origins, but this is not the only thing that binds them. My aim in this paper has been to show that, amidst the sometimes-boggling array of traditional games in Indigenous North America, a unifying thread can be found in the closely associated act of gambling, and more precisely in the bettor-wager pattern (Flannery & Cooper, 1946) that stipulates who can gamble with whom. The ensuing constraints on competition, or lack thereof, based on kinship and social ties provide a key to understanding the political and economic importance of games, and to the differences in scale between intragroup and intergroup gambling. The bettor-wager pattern lies at the heart of the frequent equivocation between gambling games and warfare. This deep embedding of the economic and political utility of gambling may reflect historical ties between societies better than any individual game.

This same emphasis on gambling as a unifying theme, more so than the histories of individual games, reveals any divide between ancient and contemporary gaming practices to be an artificial one. As a partnered activity, there is an unremitting requirement for gambling games to be mutually intelligible, and consequently to change in accord with changing social landscapes. In terms of the question of sovereignty, as it relates to continent-wide Indigenous gaming and gambling practices, it is this freedom to adapt that I wish most to emphasize here. Gambling across Native

North America does not arise from an externally imposed, Western logic: as any historical examination of the subject shows, it is a deeply embedded and ancient cultural practice. Its logic is one of Indigenous continuity (cf. Simpson, 2014). It is quite reasonable that associations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, as between Indigenous communities with each other, should manifest the same calculus of intergroup gaming. These processes are not passive, but rather reflect conscious and strategic choices, adapted to present conditions and needs and challenging notions of a static, "traditional" past.

There is a clear benefit to this flexibility, reflecting sociopolitical considerations about with whom one wishes to pursue the complexities of a gambling relationship, and economic considerations pertaining to what can be obtained by that relationship. Most readily today, this includes currency—in part given the necessity of playing on terms satisfactory to the commodity holder, but also given currency's unique ability to be converted into other resource and status gains. For many Indigenous peoples, surficial choices of games played and commodities won or lost continue to coincide with more fundamental aspects of traditional worldviews and engagement with the supernatural world, as well as with enduring principles about how winnings are to be distributed (for an example of how modern casino revenues are used to reinforce community interdependency, see Cattelino, 2008). This would suggest that the adoption of non-traditional games by Indigenous peoples cannot simply be dismissed as a matter of assimilation, or abandonment of traditional practice. Rather, such adaptations can be seen as the continuation of ongoing processes of ethnomorphosis, or ever-changing representations of self-determined identity, as has been done for as long as players of different games have come in contact with one another.

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