Gaming the Stage

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Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater. 

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As I argued in the Introduction, there are sound historical and theoretical reasons to study cards, backgammon, and chess as a largely self-contained group, and a material history of these games, taken as a group, is long overdue. Although there are useful studies of each of these games alone, there has been no attempt to historicize them as a collectivity.\(^1\) Certainly there are advantages to having independent accounts of the games, given the many ways they are distinctive from each other in terms of production process and reception history. Also, as I demonstrate in the forthcoming chapters, each game creates a unique experience of play for gamers and spectators, engaging and depending on different playing competencies. That said, any attempt to understand these games in their particularities must be grounded in an understanding of their overall game genre, the sitting pastime. This chapter aims in part to provide a material history of sitting pastimes in the early modern period in much the way scholars have for festive recreations and sports. The chapter synthesizes vast archival research on sitting pastimes that I and others have done: when, where, and by whom were these games played; what materials were used to play them; what were the social, political, and religious attitudes toward them. However, even as I present this archival evidence, I want to think critically about what it means to write a history of games, objects that present obstacles for traditional historicist approaches for much the reason theater has done so. Like early performances, games of the past become available to historians through their material traces. In the case of games, we have, for instance, material objects of play (gaming pieces, boards, etc.); books about game rules; pro- and antigaming treatises; court records that mention gaming activity; and legal statutes that govern when and where play is allowable and what can be played. Although I use all of these records in this chapter, I also underscore throughout my analysis the limitations of these materials as evidence. Archival records of playable media do not account in any straightforward way for the fact that games are meant for and transformed through play. The challenge of telling a history of games, like one of theatrical performance, is figuring out how to account for embodied practice.
This chapter lays out two key methodologies through which *Gaming the Stage* as a whole attempts to meet that challenge. One, as this chapter points to the insufficiencies of the evidence usually used in histories of sitting pastimes, it explains why the rest of this book relies so much on close readings of dramatic texts. I treat dramatic texts not as scripts for or transcripts of theatrical performance, a textual record of what went on during performance of a play, but as supplements to the kind of evidence usually considered in histories of gaming. In particular, scenes of gameplay in drama, regardless of whether they represent accurately how these scenes were staged, are valuable evidence for a history of sitting pastimes because they put games into action, showing through fictional representation what happens to a game when players engage with it. These scenes are, in effect, fictional laboratories for a historical study of gameplay. In addition to laying the groundwork for the book’s valuation of dramatic texts for a history of games, this chapter also begins to set up my particular approach to close readings of these dramas. Part of what I hope to show is just how much about the history of gaming we don’t know. Doing a history of games, indeed of any ephemeral object and embodied practice, is, we might say, a lot like playing a game of imperfect information. The past holds information that modern scholars want to know, and the aim of historical research is to provoke, compel, or coax the past into revealing what is currently hidden from us. Since the advent of New Historicism especially, historicist scholarship often takes the form of fact-finding missions, where history is the result of accumulation—the more data, the better the history—as well as a process of sorting and organizing what has been accumulated. But this sort of model of history making has its limitations, and these are especially clear when one is working with games and with theater. Both can be studied through their historical remains, but because both were created and transformed through embodied *play*, they also resist conventional historiography, which tends toward reification of timelines for events: this happened on this date. As tempting as it is to collect historical facts about games as a way to reconstruct their histories, collecting isn’t sufficient.

If historicist scholarship is a game of imperfect information, then, as I’ve argued elsewhere, our methods of historiography might be productively informed by one of the key methods scholars use in the field of game studies: playing as a mode of research. Reading about a game’s rules is enlightening, but even more so when combined with *phenomenological* engagement with the object of analysis; that is, rather than just read about the games, we can learn much about them by engaging our own bodies in the act of playing them. Although this method has been defined primarily for
research on modern videogames, it applies just as well to the study of analog games, including the analog games of the distant past. This method of knowing through play calls not only for a more ludic sensibility than tends to be found in history writing, but also involves questioning assumptions about the past’s strangeness. Just as we must revise earlier views of gaming as a “magic circle”—where players enter a space geographically, temporally, psychologically, and psychically cut off from mundane life, subjecting themselves to a set of artificial rules—so, too, we cannot see the past as a magic circle isolated from our own contemporary practices and perspectives. Studying the past involves not only playing with our objects of analysis, but understanding the “metagame” we play when we do this. By taking seriously the metagame as an essential and, indeed, innate part of the activity of playing with history, we not only become more aware of methodology and how it shapes the meaning of information uncovered about the past, but we recognize the ways our own historical moment, our own contexts for engagement with history, shape our understanding of the past. We need to game history in order to provide a history of gaming.

MATERIAL OBJECTS AND PRACTICES OF PLAY

What do we know (or think we know) about the history of sitting pastimes in England? Historical accounts of cards, backgammon, and chess generally agree that sitting pastimes, like so many objects of pleasure available to the early modern English, were an import from the Continent, where they had been introduced through cultural interactions (military and economic) with the Arab world. Historians regularly debate the origins of particular games—with a certain degree of national pride bound up in the question of initial inventor—but there is some consensus. Cards probably came to Europe from Egypt, where they were primarily used as part of fortune-telling tarot games; they migrated to Spain, then quickly to Italy, Germany, and France. In fifteenth-century France the tarot card deck was significantly altered to become the smaller fifty-two-card pack with which we play today. Historians point to the fifteenth century as the time when the English picked up the habit of playing cards, among many other things, from the French. Like playing cards, tables—what we generally call backgammon (the name of just one type of tables game)—is generally argued to have come to Europe, via Italy or Spain, from the Arab world, where a related game called nard was played in the early tenth century. Early European representations of the game show it played by four to seven gamers on a range of
differently shaped boards, including circles and heptagons. Although popular in the fifteenth century, tables is said to have been overshadowed briefly by chess until experiencing a resurgence in the early seventeenth century, when its rules and board underwent a transformation. The game that resulted was called backgammon in England (tric-trac in France, gammon in Scotland, tavole reale in Italy, Puff in Germany), and is identical to the game by that name that we play today.

Like tables, chess was also originally played on a larger board and with four players, each commanding an “army” allied with one other player’s army; as in tables, dice determined which piece would move. A two-player version of the game, without dice, is described in Persia as Shatranj in the early seventh century, and the game spread throughout the Arab world from there. Like backgammon and cards, chess likely came to Europe via Crusaders, first appearing in Spain and Italy before coming to England. The version of the game most Europeans and Americans play today dates to the end of the fifteenth century, however, when the rules of European chess changed to feature increased movement of the Queen piece (which, under the new rules, could move as far as the player wishes in any direction instead of one space at a time); the pawn’s initial move of two spaces; and the Bishop’s unrestricted diagonal movement. The new rules, which sped up the game significantly, quickly became adopted throughout Europe. And by the beginning of the seventeenth century, “chess had all the characteristics of modern world chess: professional players, international competitions, glorified star players, blindfolded players who amazed both nonplayers and experts alike, chess books with detailed analyses of playing systems, collections of games and interested public.”

Although scholars almost never historicize these sitting pastimes alongside each other, their histories show that cards, backgammon, and chess intersect and mirror each other in terms of how they came to Europe and what happened when they arrived. In all three cases, moreover, the games are said to have undergone changes from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, establishing the forms and rules with which we still play today. The story told of these games sounds quite familiar. It is a story of Renaissance Europe’s absorption, modernization, and transformation of Eastern objects and practices, emphasizing Western “improvement.”

The Western colonialist ideology of this historical account could use a book of its own, but let us bracket it so that we can consider the evidence on which it is based. In part, this evidence is surviving gaming materials, sometimes a tricky source of evidence since gaming objects are meant to be handled, compromising their capacity to survive over time. Gaming pieces
are easily misplaced and lost. Surviving gaming objects tend to be made of precious materials, including especially ebony and ivory, indicating that when gaming objects are preserved, it is because of their value beyond gaming.\textsuperscript{12} Somewhat less ephemeral than gaming objects are game boards, more substantial in size and cost, and a number of the boards used for chess and tables survive from the fourteenth century onward.\textsuperscript{13} These materials offer evidence of the close relationships among the three sitting pastimes, particularly chess and backgammon. Mobile boards existed as part of special hinged game boxes (Figures 1 and 2). Many have chess on one face and sometimes the game of merels (or Nine Men’s Morris) on the other; opening the box and laying it flat reveals a backgammon board on the inside, with spaces to store the pieces for each game.\textsuperscript{14}

Playing cards, though less durable because made of paper instead of heartier materials, present different obstacles to preservation. Many sets of cards persist, though, as part of print collections, for cards were a product of the printing press and, indeed, often sold alongside books. The production process was similar to that used for illustrations in books. Card illustrations were engraved onto wood blocks used for printing, with multiple cards placed together on a single sheet. Prints were then colored in by hand, the sheets cut, and the individual cards mounted onto pasteboard, defined in one seventeenth-century manuscript on gaming as “3 or 4 peices [sic] of white paper pasted togather and made verie smooth.”\textsuperscript{15} Many playing cards have survived in uncut sheets at various stages of the production process, as well as in the form of cut and mounted cards.\textsuperscript{16} Cards also survive because, before the tradition of printing designs on the backs of playing cards began, the backs were blank and could be used as scratch paper.\textsuperscript{17} Playing cards were also treated as useful printing waste, and bookmakers occasionally repurposed printed sheets of playing cards as bindings for other books.\textsuperscript{18}

Surviving evidence of playing objects from the early modern period reveals several interesting things and obscures some others. Notably, we find that the objects used for sitting pastimes have been altered very little, if at all, over the past four hundred years of their European history. Although some of the materials used to construct these objects have changed, their basic design has remained the same since the early modern period. The English still play with a fifty-two-card deck like that used by their early modern ancestors: the same numbering system (pips one through ten and court cards Jack, Queen, and King) and symbols for suits. Chess and tables boards have kept the same number of spaces and visual design (alternating black and white spaces for chess, oblong triangles for each point in backgammon), and the basic design of the pieces used on both boards have not
changed much either. One can even still purchase hinged gaming boxes with backgammon or checkers on one side and chess on the other. This appears to confirm the significance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for modern game studies, a field that tends to look to the mid- to late twentieth century (the advent of popular games like Dungeons & Dragons and the beginnings of videogames) as its modern point of origin. Surviving material objects of gaming rework game studies periodization to point to these earlier centuries as a vital moment in gaming history.

There’s something deeply comforting about a narrative like this for a historicist project like mine. Anytime a scholarly study defines a particular set of years, decades, or centuries for investigation, the inevitable question is, Why that period for that project? Past histories of sitting pastimes answer that question very neatly for me. Insofar as many gaming objects for these pastimes were standardized to take their modern shapes and designs in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, we can confidently label this the early modern period of gaming. But I cite this historical narrative about games less to bolster the historicist credibility of my own study than to foreground the methodology I espouse. If gaming materials shape the experience of play, something game studies scholars have emphasized especially in the past decade through their focus on technologies of gaming and platform studies, then there is much to be gained through the discovery that moderns share with early moderns a substantial similarity in our experience of cards, backgammon, and chess games. We play cards with a deck containing four suits, thirteen cards in each. When we play backgammon, we have the same number of spaces and counters to consider. When we think about which chess piece to move, our options are precisely those that were available to the early modern player. To be sure, plenty of historical and cultural differences separate modern players from their early modern counterparts, creating all sorts of differences in how we play. But the risks of sounding like a technological determinist or an irresponsible ahistoricist are outweighed by the benefits of recognizing historical continuities. I would submit that we can know something of what it felt like for early moderns to play or watch others play these games because we use essentially the same gaming materials they did.

ATTITUDES TOWARD GAMEPLAY

Of course, games are more than their material parts, and the experience of gameplay is also shaped by how the activity of gaming is perceived within
a particular culture. There are social, political, and religious differences between early modern England and contemporary Anglo-American culture in terms of attitudes toward gaming, though the differences might be arguably more of degree than kind. This section looks closely at the evidence on which scholars have relied most often to understand early modern English attitudes toward gaming: legal statutes, conduct books, and religio-moral treatises. One of my aims, as mentioned above, is to underscore continuities between early modern and contemporary perspectives. But I also want to use game studies methodologies—particularly attention to the formal properties of specific games—to intervene in the historical narrative that tends to be told about early modern attitudes toward gaming. Instead of examining how early moderns treated the broad category of “pastimes” (the strategy pursued by most prior scholars of early modern games), I hone in on sitting pastimes as a specific subset of games in order to reveal how legal, moral, and religious questions about games and gameplay indexed a whole set of epistemological concerns about the flow and control of information—a concern of political and religious authorities at the time. Instead of approaching games as yet another locus of cultural production that catalyzed political and religious tensions in the early modern period, I focus on what the formal dimensions of these particular games meant in the early modern politico-religious climate. This helps us see why games emerged as a source of so much controversy in the period.

Despite plenty of complaints in the early modern period about gameplay, the activity had its defenders, especially among writers of conduct books, who often presented games as useful for social improvement or education. Gerolamo Cardano’s book on probability in gaming, *Liber de ludo aleae* (written in the mid-sixteenth century though published posthumously almost a century later), explains that games such as cards and backgammon are “a means of gaining friendship, and many have risen from obscurity because of the friendship of princes formed in play.” That certainly would have been the case for men wishing to form friendships with King James I, who was known to take much pleasure in sitting pastimes. The king recommends “carts [i.e. cards] or tables” to his son in *Basilikon Dōron: His Majesties Instructions to His Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince* (1603), supporting the playing of these games especially during times of “foule and stormie weather” when outdoor sports are inconvenient or on the rare occasion that the king has nothing else to do. James Cleland’s conduct book *The Institution of a Young Noble Man* (1607) explicitly cites King James’s support for cards and tables, going further to argue that knowledge of these games is crucial to a nobleman’s social identity: it is a
“great simplicite and rusticitie in a Noble man to be ignorant of anie of them, when he commeth in companie.”

Many other seventeenth-century conduct book writers concur. Nicholas Faret’s handbook for social climbing, The Honest Man; or, The Art to Please in Court (1632), maintains that gentlemen will benefit from learning not just the usually recommended recreations, such as dancing, tennis, wrestling, hunting, shooting, and music, but also other “sports which are not so simply honest, but they many times prove profitable.” These games involving chance—including “games at Hazard”—are mostly beneficial for the social connections they help make possible and sustain: “great men” play them, and if one wants to “grow familiar in their companies,” one should know how to recreate in the way great men do.

The emphasis of many of these treatises on the training of gentlemen can seem somewhat alienating to modern readers, who no longer view cards, backgammon, and chess as elite pursuits. However, even in the early modern period sitting pastimes were hardly considered the province of nobility alone, and plenty of early modern authors maintain that the benefits of play are available to anyone, regardless of social status. Their comments on the value of gameplay, combined with the emergence in the period of games with educational content, uncannily anticipate the twenty-first-century movement of so-called “games for education” or “edutainment.” A manuscript at the British Library (dating most likely to the sixteenth century) on artificial memory concludes with information about how the lessons therein can be applied to chess and cards, suggesting the degree to which these games were thought to offer a forum for improving mental dexterity. Many early modern writers tout chess as capable of strengthening what early moderns called the “wit,” articulating the very logic about chess that has led English and American elementary schools today to include chess boards in the classroom and to sponsor chess clubs. Thomas Elyot’s Boke Named the Governour (1531) commends chess over other “games wherein is no bodily exercise” because it is a “ryght subtile engine, wherby the wit is made more sharpe, and remembrance quickened.” Pedro Damiano’s influential book on chess, which was published in England as The Pleasaunt and Wittie Playe of the Cheasts (1562), lauds chess for the ways it “breadeth in player[s] a certaine studye, pollicie, wit, forcast, memorie, with other properties, to make men circumspect.”

These early modern defenses of games resonate with current rhetoric around games for learning and the ever-expanding industry of edutainment. In a keynote address at the 2014 Games in Education Symposium, Lee Sheldon, the author of The Multiplayer Classroom—a book that teaches teach-
ers how to deliver educational content through games—advised teachers interested in educational games to find “‘balanced’ games” that occupy, in the words one attendee who blogged about the talk, “a middle ground where learning and fun intersect.” As they advocate for learning through gameplay, experts like Sheldon are careful to put to rest concerns that gaming is otherwise a waste of time. Games are beneficial when they occupy that “middle ground” state of both learning and fun, but not sliding too far into the latter. A similar anxiety about the unproductiveness of play gets articulated by early moderns, and early game makers used similar strategies to address that concern: they created games with educational potential.

The new wave in educational gaming is, in fact, a very old wave. Beginning in the early sixteenth and especially in the latter half of the seventeenth century, educational cards that offered, in the words of one publisher, “Pleasure and Profit” appear to have been all the rage, with dozens of different sorts of packs aiming to teach everything from grammar and geography to astronomy and history. Some of these games appear to have been designed explicitly for classroom use. For instance, Grammatica figurata; or, Grammar as a Card Game (1509), created by German humanist Matthias Ringmann and one of the earliest examples of educational playing cards, gives each of the eight parts of speech a figure: Priest is noun, Vicar is pronoun, King is verb, Queen is adverb, Monk is participle, Churchwarden is preposition, Fool is interjection, and Cupbearer is conjunction. The teacher likely facilitated play-based learning through the colloquiorum technique employed by grammar schools. For instance, he might call out for a verb, and the player discards that card if he has it. (For a much later set of grammatical playing cards, see Figure 4.) Another early German advocate of pedagogical playing cards was Thomas Murner, a Franciscan monk, who wrote a letter in 1502 about how he created a game of cards to help him memorize Justinian. In 1507 Murner published Chartiludium logicae, cards to be used for instruction in the art of reasoning. The deck has sixteen suits, each of which corresponds to a particular method of reasoning, such as “The Exception,” “The Supposition,” and so on. Though, like Ringmann’s deck, Murner’s is quite different from the typical fifty-two-card deck, where there are only four suits, it is clearly designed to align on some level with regular playing cards in that it comprises fifty-two cards total. Among the most famous educational cards were the set of four card decks created by French academician Jean Desmarests in collaboration with renowned Florentine engraver Stefano della Bella, for the explicit purpose of educating the young French King Louis XIV on mythical figures, famous kings and queens in French history, and geography—with individual
packs on each of those four topics. Although designed for the young king, the cards were intended to be distributed to a general public, as is evinced by Desmarets receiving a patent in 1644 for a monopoly on sales of the decks.

The English also rode the wave of educational card decks. In the British Library’s archives is part of the table of contents from a volume called The Boke of the New Cardys (1530), which advocates for cards to be used in learning a variety of grammar school subjects, including spelling, reading, and mathematics. The book offers lessons on each subject and then a set of games to help students test their knowledge. Although we do not have remaining examples of it, there are records showing that William Maxwell published sometime before 1615 Jamesanna; or, A Pythagorical play at cards, representing the excellency and utility of Union and Concord, with the incommodities of Division and Discord. The great majority of surviving English decks of educational cards date from the middle to the end of the seventeenth century. As I discuss further below, the subjects of these cards ranged widely, from history and geography to astronomy and mythology. Many of these decks seem geared toward users outside of formal institutions of learning. For instance, a set of astronomical playing cards that Joseph Moxon printed and claims to have sold at his “Shop at the Sign of the Atlas” in London has each of the four suits correspond to one of the four seasons that affect where constellations appear in the sky (Figure 3). Other decks were explicitly directed to young students. Among these are F. Jackson’s Schollers Practicall Cards . . . containing instructions by means of cards how to spell, write, cipher, and cast accounts . . . rules of calculation etc. (1656) and a deck of grammar cards published by John Seller. The British Museum holds a cut set of the latter, their front card advertising “These Cards Are Ingeniously Contrived for the Comprising the general Rules of Lillie’s Grammar, in the four principal Parts thereof, viz. Orthographia, Prosodia, Etymologia, and Syntax” (Figure 4).

The purveyors of educational cards position them as the ideal form of recreation, defining recreation not simply as a break from work but as a way to occupy oneself productively during a break from work. The case is made in interesting terms in the prefatory material for the grammar cards when they were sold in the form of a codex. Presumably these could be read in codex form, just like any other grammar book, or cut and mounted by the purchaser to be used as playing cards, and therein they evince in their material form the overlapping worlds of work and play in early modern edutainment. In an address to the reader/buyer, T. B. puts some pressure on the difference between these activities. He points out that it is im-
possible to be engaged in serious study all the time; people need a respite. But he notes that if this downtime is not carefully managed and directed, people risk falling into idleness. “[T]he mind then doth necessarily require some medium betwixt Idleness and Labour,” the aim of recreation being to “comforteth, and frameth the mind a new to weighty exercise.” Recreation is meant as a productive break from labor in order to return to labor, with the mind refreshed and energized, but not dulled. T. B.’s use of the term “medium” points in two different directions, both of which resonate with proponents of the modern “games for education” movement. Where medium means “intermediary” or “channel of expression,” T. B. urges buyers to think of cards as objects for delivering learning through games. Where medium means “a middle quality, degree, or condition,” cards provide a middle condition between idleness and labor, allowing the user to occupy a state that is neither of these extremes. In this, T. B. forestalls the kind of critique of games Robert Burton articulates in his recommendation in *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) that scholars avoid chess because it overworks their already overworked brains, a claim King James I also made about chess. Burton argues that when scholars take a break between sessions of work, they should occupy that intermediary time with vigorous exercise of the body so as to expel the melancholic humors of their sedentary daily lives, something chess cannot do because, as a seated game that taxes the mind, it is too much like study. In contrast to Burton, T. B. maintains that at least these particular cards can be recreational despite being both sedentary and mentally challenging because the work can be fun. T. B. asks, “what can be more delightful than to recollect (without any labour) the rudiments of so necessary an Art as Grammar is.” Learning grammar, he suggests, can feel like play. “What Recreation can be more profitable to a Student, or lover of good Letters than that which bring his mind those Rules whereby he is enabled to speak Congruously and Elegantly, and that per jocum without hindring him from his more necessary and grave studies.”

Educational games, then as now, attempted to counter cultural concerns about gaming as a sign of idleness and of unproductivity. Although today’s antigaming rhetoric carries similarly moralistic overtones—and is sometimes countered with similar techniques of designing games that allow people to work productively while they play—these were even more pronounced in early modern English discussions of gaming, a consequence of particularly widespread religious rhetoric about idleness as a sinful spiritual state. Additionally, in a society where church and state were more deeply and unquestioningly imbricated—where the king was expected to
be both leader of the commonwealth and leader of the church—religious arguments about gaming were expressed through political policies. In this politico-religious climate, sitting pastimes raised unique theological and moral problems.  

The lawfulness of sitting pastimes was debated vigorously throughout Europe during the medieval and early modern periods, and a great number of prohibitions against gaming tell a story of the state’s significant investments in controlling the who, what, when, where, and how of gameplay. In the mid-thirteenth century, Louis IX forbade his court officials and all subjects from playing tables, and there were repeated French prohibitions against gaming (1254, 1319, and 1369), as well as a 1397 prohibition against laborers playing cards on working days. The Spanish prohibited cards in their antigaming regulations of 1332 and 1387. More leniency for cards can be found in a German prohibition from the early 1380s, which exempts cards—along with bowls, horse racing, and shooting with crossbows—from gaming restrictions as long as bets are no more than one groat. However, in 1397 we find a statute against cards in the “Red Book” of Ulm. Regulations against sitting pastimes become more extensive throughout the fifteenth century, perhaps as interest in the games was spreading. In fifteenth-century France, Nuremberg and Augsburg (these two cities being key centers of card making, as was Ulm), there were bans against playing tables and cards, accompanied by public burnings of the objects used for these games. Regulations during this time seem most concerned with the gambling associated with sitting pastimes. A French law from 1430 allows card play as long as participants play for pins, not money; in 1496 England, cards were also permitted as long as players wagered only meat and drink, though in 1503, playing for any stake was considered unlawful. Tables was restricted more than other sitting pastimes. Even when chess was accepted by ecclesiastical canons, tables was still considered unlawful until the end of the fifteenth century, when its players were finally given some reprieve throughout much of Europe on the condition that they did not play for big stakes and that they were of a high enough status; apprentices and university students were still prohibited from tables.

In England, a series of laws about gameplay evinced a similar consensus that games were acceptable under particular circumstances of play. In 1541–2, when England’s Henry VIII issued his famous statute requiring the king’s subjects aged 7–60 to practice longbow, he also laid out several key policies regarding sitting pastimes. He banned common houses where games such as cards and tables were played unless these establishments advertised clearly, on “placards” placed outside the venue, which
were available there. The statute also restricted the playing of various games, including tables and cards, by “husbandmen, artificers, craftsmen, serving men, apprentices and labourers” to Christmastime and insisted the games be played in a master’s house or presence. That said, men of a certain status/income (£100 per year) could license their servants to play on their own.\(^{46}\) But this by no means suggested widespread acceptance of sitting pastimes. Edward Hall’s *The Triumphant Reigne of King Henry VIII* (c. 1548) describes a proclamation from 1526 made against “all unlawfull games accordyng to the statutes made in this behalf, and Commissions awarded into every shire for the execucon of the same, so that in all places Tables, Dice, Cards and Bowles were taken and burnt.”\(^{47}\) And in 1559 one of Queen Elizabeth’s injunctions in the first year of her reign prohibited clergy from spending their evenings at games like dice, cards, or tables.\(^{48}\)

The Elizabethan Canons of 1571 were the last injunctions against tables in England,\(^{49}\) and there appears to be a shift in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century toward greater tolerance and even support for sitting pastimes. Instead of outright bans, we find more efforts to regulate these pastimes through taxation. Perhaps governments realized that if they couldn’t stop gaming, they could at least make some money off of the popular activity—a strategy that persists today in, for example, state-sponsored lotteries. Moral concerns about gambling were arguably always really about economics, since gambling led to loss of money.\(^{50}\) In the case of cards, the bulk of which came into England from France, most regulations involved taxes on imports and exports.\(^{51}\) Proclamations tell a story about the gradual acceptance of games by legal authorities, but from a game studies perspective, what is interesting about this story is the way it highlights games as not part of a “magic circle,” separated from daily affairs, but as an emerging big business in which the state was (literally) well invested. The circulation of money in gaming created a microeconomy largely beyond the purview of the state and local authorities, so it is no wonder that legal proclamations allowing for gameplay repeatedly articulate the condition that gamers bet only small sums or less valuable objects, like pins.

Proclamations also offer evidence of how the state involved itself even more directly in the gaming economy. Throughout the seventeenth century, the English government supported the country’s fledgling card-making business—much as it bolstered other English manufacturers of luxury commodities—to help it compete with foreign imports. Toward the end of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, she granted Edward Darcy a patent to make cards in England.\(^{52}\) King James I took up the cause in 1615, issuing a proclamation to redress the concerns of English card makers who claimed
that imported cards were still stifling their business. He addresses the problem by appointing one Sir Richard Cognisby (the card makers’ choice) to be in charge of “viewing, searching, sealing and allowing” all playing cards, assessing a 5s. tax on imported cards. King Charles I continues this mission to create a more robust English card-making business. In 1628 Charles incorporates the Mistery of Makers of Playing Cards of the City of London, granting it the exclusive right to supervise the trade of cards in and around London. The company agreed to make enough playing cards to meet demand throughout the kingdom and to sell the cards “at as Cheap and low rates and prices” as imported foreign cards. The charter gives card makers extensive control over their trade, mandating that playing cards may only be made by Freemen of the Company, that is, those who have served out their seven-year apprenticeship, and also that cards would have to be sealed by the company’s Receiver (at a fee of 2s. per pack plus 1s. to the Receiver) with the seal showing the identity of the maker. Even these actions failed to stem the tide of imports, as evinced by several subsequent regulations. Charles I’s Proclamation Concerning Playing-Cards and Dice in 1638 mandates that all cards made abroad and imported had to be sealed in London and put into new bindings and covers. Parliament itself got involved with the cause in 1643, responding to complaints by “severall Poore Cardmakers of London, who having beene bred up in their Trades of Making Playing-Cards, are likely to perish with their Families” because of the many imported cards that continued to find their way into England and Wales. Parliament addressed the problem by ordering the seizure of foreign cards and prosecution of offenders responsible for them, since this is contrary to the “Lawes and statutes of this Realme.” King Charles II followed up with a proclamation in 1684 that, once again, forbids the importation of foreign playing cards, ordering them to be seized and destroyed. These proclamations demonstrate the English state’s persistent interests in games as big business, not so different from the current American gaming culture, where states support the building of casinos through arguments that the revenues from them will support state programs, including public schooling.

Arguably somewhat less familiar to us in our modern era of pervasive gaming are early modern religio-moral critiques of gameplay. In contrast to today’s ethical arguments that focus heavily on the narrative and symbolic aspects of a game (e.g., whether violent games prompt violent action by players), early modern moral authorities expressed most concern about the circumstances of play, particularly about when was an appropriate time to engage in pastimes, sitting or other. For laborers, holidays and Sabbath provided the only free hours possible for recreation, and thus sitting
pastimes were often associated with these days. Sitting pastimes had long been especially popular on Christmas. One of the earliest English references to cards, tables, and chess as a group is a late fifteenth-century letter from Margery Paston to her husband, John, describing the games that the Lady Morlee reported being played at her house on Christmas: there were “no lowde dysports; but pleyng at the tabyllys, and schesse, and cards; sweche dysports sche gave her folkys leve to play and no odyr.” The final phrase suggests that Lady Morlee gave permission to various dependents, probably including servants, to play at these, and only these, sitting pastimes during the holiday. The tradition of sitting pastimes on Christmas continued throughout the early modern period for a range of social groups. John Stow reports that “from All-hallows evening to the day after Candlemas-day,” people played “at cards for counters, nailes, and points, in every house, more for pastime than for gain.” The association of card games with Christmas was so strong that the Children of the Queen’s Revels, a theater company, are reported to have performed an entire card-themed play before Queen Elizabeth at Windsor on the night of St. Stephens Day (known as Boxing Day in England): “a Comodie or Morral devised on a game of cardes.” John Harrington observes that this probably satirical play “showed how foure Parasiticalle knaves robbe the foure principal vocations of the Realme, videlicet, the evocations of Souldiers, Scollers, Marchants, and Husbandmen.”

Some early modern religious figures argue that setting aside time on holy days and Sabbath for recreations was essential for keeping the peace and even for spiritual welfare. Nicholas Bownde’s treatise in defense of recreating on the Sabbath maintains that recreation is natural and necessary and that if there is not some prescribed time on the Sabbath for pastimes, the people will choose games over church, a much worse predicament. This position was advocated most publically and controversially by James I’s famous Book of Sports (1618), which declared it legal for people to engage in “lawful recreations” after church on Sundays and on holy days. Charles I, again controversially, rereleased the Book of Sports in 1633, adding prefatory and closing remarks that present recreation as not only lawful but spiritually beneficial. The document maintains that the right to recreate is made not only on behalf of the people but “for the service of God, and for suppressing of any humors that oppose truth.” Peter Heylyn’s History of the Sabbath (1636), dedicated to Charles I, defends recreations when played after services. Heylyn gives examples of how Protestants in Geneva and England have long practiced postservice recreation, for Sabbath duties end with the morning sermon. Some writers included sitting
pastimes among the allowable forms of recreation on Sabbath and holidays. Even Phillip Stubbes—infirmous critic of recreations, including theater—doesn’t condemn them completely. To be sure, his *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) complains about how “especially at Christmas time there is nothyng els used but Cardes, Dice, Tables” and so forth because these games are licensed at this time; he remarks that people ought to do “holier” things at such a holy time. But Stubbes also writes that if participants are not playing for money or gain and if the games are played between Christians as “private recreations, after some oppression of studie, to drive auaie fantasies” then these games are acceptable.63

The sentiment was by no means universally shared, however, especially as tensions between Puritans and royalists intensified. The Sabbath and holidays may have been the only free time available for gameplay, but they were precisely the times that religious authorities wished to protect for spiritual duties, their version of “recreation.” Antitheatricalist William Prynne’s *The Lord’s Day, the Sabbath Day* (1636) associates those who play games on the Sabbath, even after services have concluded, with papists. A poem he cites in his treatise describes how papists play after morning services, and this leads them into complete mayhem such that they have forgotten all that is learned in the morning and are unable to stop their sport to return to spiritual duties in the evening. Sitting pastimes, however sedate, are among the recreations that cause problems. The poem describes a “sort there is that doe not love abroad to roame, / But for to passe their time at Carts or Tables still at home.”64 Even this seemingly quiet and contained occupation turns raucous, for no matter the game, consumption of alcohol accompanies it: “[t]he God of wine doth never want in all their sports and play,” so every Sabbath ends up with “some drunken Fray,” the men unable to return to church for evensong.

Games become one fulcrum for escalating tensions over the course of the seventeenth century between Protestant reformers and royalists, and in terms of the debate about the timing of recreation, sitting pastimes were not much different from other ludic activities prior historians have discussed. However, in terms of the debate about allowable forms of play, sitting pastimes raised unique concerns. For although certain sins, such as idleness, were considered risks in any form of recreation, sitting pastimes carried their own, somewhat particular risks because of the ways information circulates in these games. In particular, an essential component of sitting pastimes is the extent to which they rely on chance, information that is unknown to any of the players. Because of their integration of this kind of information, the games raise a set of epistemological questions whose reli-
gious and spiritual implications went far beyond what constitutes a worthy use of one’s time.

For religious authorities from the period, the extent to which games involve chance was often the critical factor in determining whether a game was allowable. Indeed, authorities largely exempted chess from their criticism of sitting pastimes. Although medieval canon lawyers and theologians had debated whether chess play was sinful, they ultimately concluded that as a game of skill, chess could be distinguished from games involving some chance, like cards and backgammon, and thus was legal and ethical as long as players avoided the pitfalls that often accompanied gaming, such as pride and covetousness. In fact, medieval writers regularly use chess as an allegory for moralistic lessons—the most famous of these being Jacobus de Cessolis’s late thirteenth-century book *De ludo scachorum*, one of the first printed books in England. When Thomas Elyot advocates for chess in the fifteenth century, he maintains that the game is especially “commendable” if players have read such moralizations and can keep them in mind as they play. The conditions for accepting chess also explain why dice, solely a game of chance, was almost universally condemned. Backgammon and cards, however, were considered “mixt” games, involving some chance and some skill, and there was, thus, little consensus about them. Even Elyot, who generally favors sitting pastimes, is ambivalent on the point. In his chapter “Of other exercises, whiche if they be moderately used, be to every astate of man expedient,” he begins with a long condemnation of dice, and then writes that “Playinge at cardes and tables is some what more tolerable, onely for as moch as therin wytte [wit] is more used, and lesse truste is in fortune, all be it therin is neyther laudable study nor exercise.” He goes on to suggest that it is possible, much as he argues for chess, for virtuous men to use cards and tables to create games with a virtuous fictional narrative attached, such as “devising a bataile, or contentio[n] between vertue and vice,” and in these cases cards and tables offer “moch solace and also study commodiouse.”

For many religious writers, however, backgammon and even more so cards were problematic whatever the nature of the game played with them, because they involved more chance. Well-known antitheatricalist John Northbrook, like Thomas Wilcox and Richard Rice, is tolerant of tables but excoriates card play because it doesn’t require skill: “Playing at Tables is farre more tollerable (although in all respectes not allowable than dyce and cardes are), for that it leaneth partlye to chaunce, and partly to industrie of the mynde. For although they cast indeed by chaunce, yet the castes are governed by industrie and witte.” And Samuel Bird, who allows for
games within moderation, distinguishes between games that are primarily about “looking on” (hunting, hawking, stage plays) and games “wherein men are the chiefe dooers” (dancing, tennis, etc.).” Although he allows for a variety of these games in moderation, he rebukes cards along with dice, arguing that they are inextricably linked with gambling.

Early modern theologians often refer to the issue of chance in their decrees regarding which games are and are not lawful, but what is at stake in the concept of chance? A game studies approach helps reveal that what is really at issue in these debates is the question of who/what has control over information in a game. From a theistic perspective in which God knows and determines all, there isn’t really such a thing as chance or luck. God knows certain information, and the casting of lots was considered a way to figure out what God knows. This is why lots were historically used to adjudicate all sorts of important questions. For early critics of chance-based games, using lots for pleasure—to adjudicate matters that are mundane and trivial—is a waste of God’s time. As William Perkins puts it in his condemnation of “lusory lots,” it is sinful to “referre unto Gode the determination of things of [the] moment.” Similarly, Jean Taffin’s The Amendment of Life (1595) maintains that cards (again, like dice) are problematic because we “applie the lot and consequently Gods providence to our vaine and frivolous pleasures.” Certain games could, however, escape moral and religious condemnation if they involved more “honest industrie of the minde,” letting men’s wits, not God, decide the outcome.

Tables and cards present problems for religious commentators because they involve both perfect and imperfect information. The complicated nature of “mixt” games is discussed influentially in James Balmford’s A Short and Plaine Dialogue Concerning the Unlawfulnes of Playing at Cards or Tables, or Any Other Game Consisting in Chance (1593), which, as the title indicates, condemns both cards and tables for precisely the opposite reason that Perkins allows them. Written as a dialogue between a professor and a preacher, the treatise begins with the professor character saying that he understands why dice are unlawful, but would like the preacher’s opinion on cards and tables. The preacher responds that since these games “somewhat depend upon chance,” they are “some what evill,” exemplifying his overall point that “Lots are not to bee used in sport.” Although cards and tables demand some exercise of the wit, they still involve chance (the dice in tables and the shuffling and cutting in cards), thereby problematically “making God an umpire.” Balmford significantly expands on his arguments in A Modest Reply to Certaine Answeres, which Mr. Gataker B.D. in his Treatise of the Nature, & use of Lotts, giveth to Arguments in a Dialogue concerning the Unlaw-
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fulnes of Games consisting in Chance (1623), wherein he refutes Thomas Gataker’s influential arguments in support of games of chance.

Gataker recognizes that there is always some human industry involved, even in games that seem to comprise chance alone. He explains that although it is true that lots are used to determine which cards each player has, in “assigning each of them his chance,” chance is not all. There is “arte and skil beside that to be imployed by them for the managing of their game, and for the working upon that which casualty hath cast on them.” But Gataker’s pro-gaming argument goes further than prior treatises in that rather than arguing for particular recreations by questioning the extent to which they involve chance versus skill, he queries the foundational logic that informs antigaming writers. He theorizes a partnership between God and humans, in life and in games, maintaining that people use “Arte and industrie” to manage events even if God’s providence is ultimately guiding such events. Gataker simply has to accept these games because not doing so, he suggests, would end up leading to heretical conclusions. If we accept the notion that lots are the providence of God, he writes, then the fact that men can cast lots whenever they wish would mean that they have the power to make God work for them, at their pleasure. This, he says, is “absurd,” and that God has more important things to do than worry about the games humans play with cards or even with dice. God may know all, but it is ridiculous to ask what he knows about the outcome of a game.

Gataker, John Downe, and some other religious writers sidestep the tricky spiritual implications of lusory lots, instead shifting their focus to the ethics of gaming to argue that what matters most is the “disposition” of the gamester, not the particular game being played. Writes Downe, “although I allow the Games themselves, notwithstanding the Lot used in them: yet I condemne and detest . . . those foule enormities wherewith they are abused.” Jeremy Taylor, like Gataker, argues that cards and dice are not unlawful in themselves because chance is a feature of all human affairs; we can hardly condemn games on account of their integration of chance. He maintains that as long as the games can be separated from crimes and dangers, they can be used alongside other “innocent recreations and divertisements.” The key is that players should always use reason to make sure they don’t venture more than they can afford. And Perkins, even as he draws a line at games of hazard where there is no skill at all involved, goes on to say that playing chance-based games is acceptable if the stakes are small and players’ intentions are good and lawful.

The insistence on small stakes helped ensure that gamers did not become destitute as a result of playing, a condition that had economic as well
as spiritual implications. Perkins and others recognized that gaming was, as many argue today, an addictive habit. Gamers who found themselves losing repeatedly could be driven to commit spiritual sins (cursing God or cheating) and criminal acts (stealing). Writers describe the gamester as unable to stop playing out of a belief that good luck will persist or bad luck will change, resulting in a win. Richard Brathwaite warns, recalling the debate discussed above about the definition of recreation: “Hope and feare make his [the gamester’s] recreation an affliction. Hee ha’s no time to refresh his mind, being equally divided betwixt hope of gaine, and feare of losse.”

When gaming becomes a habit—more about winning money instead of gaining pleasure—it is no longer a defendable pursuit, becoming instead an affliction. Moral commentators frequently cite stories of men who put everything on the line for the game, and thus lose everything they have. Warning against this fate, Richard Crimsal’s ballad advises young men to “forsake lewd company[,] cards, dice, and queanes [prostitutes]” and gives the first-person account of one John Hadland, who spent all his money on these engagements and now has nothing, having lost all his money and his friends. Some commentators warn against sitting pastimes not because they are inherently evil, but because they set off a chain reaction of immoral and criminal activity. Roger Ascham’s Toxophilus (1545), a treatise advocating for archery, condemns cards (along with dice) for encouraging idleness, blasphemy, and dishonesty. Ascham goes on to write that men who choose these games instead of healthy pastimes like archery fall into a downward spiral of loss: “first, he loseth his goods, he loseth his time, he loseth quickness of wit, and all good lust to other things; he loseth honest company, he loseth his good name and estimation, and at last, if he leave it not, loseth God and heaven and all; and, instead of these things, winneth at length either hanging or hell.”

A century later, John Philpot describes the “seven constant Hand-maides” to unlawful gaming, which also spiral down from bad to worse: lying, swearing, adultery, beggary, and ultimately, damnation. Losing at games was storied to result in not only social and personal, but also spiritual degradation. A common immediate response to loss, writers point out, is swearing, which leads gamesters to commit the sin of blasphemy. Brathwaite teases that the gamester “remembers God more in Oaths than in Orisons.”

Ironically, it is Gataker’s logic that the outcome of games is controlled by men, and not God, that partly motivates sins around gaming. Even when only small amounts of money are at stake, gaming was seen to sow discord and lead to violence as players debate the rules to sway the outcome of a game in their favor. Bird offers several card game scenarios to
illustrate the dangers of this metagaming: “At Mawe, if the ace of hearts be turned up, when he that is to make, maketh this for it, then doth a mer-
vailous controversie arise, whether he that turneth it up should win the set, or he that winneth five tricks: then must wagers be laide.”87 The rules of games vary so much, and players familiar with variations can use this knowledge to their own advantage, arguing for the version of the rules that would best support their case for winning. Debate about those rules could spell the end of friendship, as Bird warns through a story about a card game gone awry when there was a disagreement about “whether the trumpe that was turned up at the last, should be a voide card, or no.” This mundane question led two men who had been “dailie companions” into an argument that drove them apart for “a quarter of a yeare after.”88 Quarrels, writers point out, often began because of accusations of foul play, which, they maintain, is rampant because gamesters do whatever they can to ensure a win. In effect, it is the belief that a player can change the outcome of a game that leads to the use of skillful argumentation, as well as cheating and crime.

Games were dangerous because they materialized through play weighty theological issues of the day. Indeed, as I discuss further in the next chapter, some Protestant preachers took advantage of the material analogy of games to help their parishioners think about faith as itself a game of imperfect information. For many others in this theistic society, however, gameplay touched a vein. The act of playing games arguably led users to espouse beliefs in atheistic concepts like luck; put pressure on theological arguments about the role God plays in human affairs; and resulted in righteous men behaving wickedly. In their writings about sitting pastimes, moral and religious authorities recognize, as do state officials who legislate against gaming for other reasons, that games cannot exist in a space outside of social, political, economic, and spiritual life, but rather are shaped by and impinge on it. It is their profound understanding of the game as metagame that informs their efforts to manage recreational activity.

THE POLITICS OF GAMEPLAY

Arguably, part of what drives these larger cultural debates about recreation is a recognition that games compete effectively for people’s attention, creating allegiances that are beyond and can supplant those of state and religion. One way that political and religious authorities attempted to re-capture public attention was by legislating or moralizing against games, as
we’ve seen, but another was to appropriate games to serve political and religious aims. Chapter 2 discusses in more detail the religious appropriation of gaming motifs in relation to cards, but here I focus on political appropriations. In the early modern period, games were frequently used as a platform for conveying political arguments and as a medium for propaganda, particularly during the English Civil War and Interregnum. One obvious reason for this is that, as discussed above, recreation was a hot-button political issue of the day, with James I and Charles I issuing decrees in support of gameplay as a way to assert their monarchic power vis-à-vis Parliament. But another reason is because the narrative content and formal features of games—particularly the ways they schematize information—made them well suited to political themes and arguments. And insofar as games encourage players to focus on the rules of play rather than what those rules might mean, games have the capacity to slip ideological content to players without their necessarily recognizing indoctrination. That said, such indoctrination is limited in its effectiveness due to the variable ways that players engage with games. Players manipulate gaming materials in all sorts of ways that game designers cannot predict, and even when players follow game rules closely, the unfolding of a particular match can often complicate or even undermine the ways game objects present politically loaded information.

All three of the sitting pastimes on which I focus have been used to communicate or comment on religious and/or political ideas, and their formal features help to explain why. Chess, used as a political allegory arguably since the game’s invention, stages a battle between two kingdoms, with capturing the enemy’s King as the condition for victory. Others have discussed extensively how chess was used as a political allegory in the medieval and early modern periods, something I address further in Chapter 4, and so at this point I would highlight only a few interesting details that are pertinent for the discussion at hand.\(^89\) One is that chess’s narrative elements, particularly the characters represented by gaming objects, address especially well the politics of the Interregnum, when England had executed its monarch and was governed by Parliament: the game presents figures from both the court and the populace, the pawns. What is more, the inclusion of Bishop figures in chess offers rich ground for politico-religious commentary. One pro-Parliament treatise allegorizes the English Civil War as a conflict between two sides of a chessboard, the White side as Parliament and the Black side as the royal army. It warns that if the King doesn’t “put the residue of His blacke Bishops into the same bag where their fellowes are,” then the game will just “continue in full force and vigor.”\(^90\)
Even backgammon, which has blank counters with no obvious allegorical meaning, makes its way into political commentary. Arguably this is because as it stages two sides playing a game of imperfect information, it raises questions about whether opponents can be trusted to play fairly. One particular anti-Catholic engraving was reused on a number of occasions, the names of the players changed to suit the particular political context. The Dutch version (c. 1598) depicts three Protestant gentlemen from the Netherlands playing backgammon and cards, against three monks, while the pope and a cardinal try to steal the winnings. A later British reissue of the cartoon (c. 1609) substitutes the reigning kings of England, France, and Denmark for the Dutch gentleman (Figure 5). This version was reprinted and updated in 1626, presumably to coincide with the coronation of King Charles I. In the reissued versions, King Charles plays tables against a monk who hides his face while a dog urinates on his foot. In the middle of the plate sits Henry IV of France playing his trump card in a game against a monk, whose highest card, we can see, is a knave—the name of the card as well as a colloquial term for a crooked or untrustworthy man. First produced at a moment when the French and English were negotiating a peace between Spain and the Dutch Republic, the print underscores these sitting pastimes as dramas of imperfect information to suggest—much like the anonymous pamphlet cited above allegorizing cards—that in the game of world politics, Catholics cannot be trusted.

The sitting pastime that appears to have worked particularly effectively to convey political propaganda was cards. Political issues, figures, and events often are allegorized through the theme of playing cards. Sometimes the allegory is a minor part of the text. For instance, the anonymous political pamphlet *Tom Tell Troath; or, A Free Discourse Touching the Manners of the Tyme. Directed to His Majestie by Way of Humble Advertisement* (1622) at one point compares King James I’s conflicts with the Spanish—the same subject allegorized in Thomas Middleton’s play *A Game at Chess*—to a card game of Maw, reputed to have been one of James’s favorite games. The author describes how the king is criticized in taverns for having played badly at the game of international politics: “Ever, in the very gaming Ordinaries where men have scarce leisure to say grace yet they take a tyme to censure your Majesties actions and that in their oulde schoole Termes. They say you have lost the fairest game at Maw that ever King had for want of making the best advantage of the five finger and playing the other helps in time.” The “five finger” is the ace of trumps, and according to the rules of Maw, whoever has the ace of trumps has the right to “rob the pack,” which means the chance to exchange some cards in one’s hand for ones that
have not been dealt out, thereby improving one’s hand. The intimation is that James had the advantage in the political game but failed to use it effectively and at the right time such that he lost his advantage and thus the game. The pamphlet goes on to tell James that his options are now limited because in the new political matchup, he must play against a known cheater, the Spanish, and the only remedy for the situation—as would be true in any tavern game where the opponent is suspected of cheating—is to quarrel. In this case, confrontation is especially risky because the opponent uses tricks in his fighting as well: “hee you played withall hath ever been knowne for the greatest cheater in Christendome. In fine, there is noe way to recover your losses and vindicate your honour but with fighting with him that hath cozened you. At which honest downe righte play you will be hard enough for him with all his Trickes.” Playing cards were used again as analogy c. 1630 in a pamphlet, now lost, that apparently took the form of a pack of cards. Published by the Habsburgs, it attacks Protestant Bohemia and especially Frederick V of the Palatinate, King James I’s son-in-law.

Perhaps because card play was espoused by royalists and criticized by many Puritans, a number of writers use card-playing imagery to reflect on the tumultuous tensions of the Interregnum. One royalist pamphlet, entitled The Bloody Game at Cards. As It Was Played Betwixt the King of Hearts and the Rest of His Suite, against the Residue of the Pack of Cards. Wherein Is Discovered Where Faire Play; Was Plaid and Where There Was Fowle (1642), compares the civil war to a game of cards, with the monarch as the King of Hearts and the commoners as pip cards who do not play by the rules. Even the title page keeps the political allegory afloat with the publication details listed thus: “Shuffled at London, Cut at Westminster, Dealt at Yorke, and Plaid in the open field, by the Citty-clubs, and the country Spade-men, Rich-Diamond men and Loyall Hearted men.” Cards prove especially fruitful for allegories about royalist politics because of the deck’s honor cards: a King and a Queen as well as a Knave, the perfect figure for the political imposter qua villain. What is more, the hierarchy of suits in the deck—with hearts at the top and clubs at the bottom—provides royalist writers especially an easy metaphor for the topsy-turvy politics of the Interregnum. A royalist treatise by Edmund Gayton, called Chartæ Scriptæ; or, A New Game at Cards Call’d Play by the Booke (1645) figures Charles I as the King of Hearts; the King of Diamonds is England’s two eyes that had been “sparkling” until now; the Queen of Spades is the Queen of Spain. Cromwell, though not named specifically, is clearly the person referenced in the description of the King of Clubs: “This is the worst of Kings, beware of him, / No King indeed, but a meere popular Pim.” It goes on to describe how he incites the
people: “he perswades to tumults the rude Club. / When swarmres of wasps, and hornets buzze: Then fly. / No honour in a Crowd for Majesty.”

Perhaps the most interesting of the political satires, especially in light of my project’s emphasis on theater, is the faux drama *Shuffling, Cutting, and Dealing, in a Game at Pickquet* (1659), a satire of Cromwell’s government in the form of a dramatic dialogue among a group of men ostensibly playing the card game Piquet. Their commentary on the game is double-entendre for their political positions and actions.

In addition to being a thematic trope in political writings, cards were also themselves a medium for political commentary, and a number of themed decks were published in the late seventeenth century on topics including the Spanish Armada, the Presbyterian Plot, the Popish Plot, and the Rump Parliament. Such decks employ the systematic structure of card decks for organizing and presenting views on highly politicized historical events. For instance, one deck links four historically distinct events as part of a larger argument about the dangers of Catholics to Reformation England—the four suits rendering, respectively, the Spanish Armada, William Parry’s Plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth, the Gunpowder Plot, and the Popish Plot (Figure 6). With their template of suits and numbers, card decks are able to organize information into easily digestible chunks, whose relationship to each other could be presented without being explicitly argued. The convenience of the card deck template is well evinced in the case of nationalistic geography-themed decks. The earliest deck of English map cards about which we know was a 1590 collaboration between playing card maker William Bowes and well-known maker of scientific instruments and engraver Augustine Ryther: a fifty-two-card deck depicting the counties of England and Wales (Figure 7). Each card offers a map of a county and some additional verbal information about it, and the deck as a whole is organized into the usual playing card template of four suits of thirteen cards each, each suit corresponding to a particular geographical area. A portrait of Elizabeth I graces a cover card for the deck, which also includes a map offering a birds-eye view of London and several chorographic cards describing England and London.

Publishers of geography decks pick up on the games-for-learning rhetoric discussed above in relation to grammar-themed decks: the cards provide a way to learn ostensibly ideologically neutral “Universal” information “easily, pleasantly and familiarly.” But, of course, there is nothing “Universal” about the geographical information presented, just as there is nothing purely objective about the story the Spanish Armada deck tells about that particular historical event. Geography decks convey loaded ar-
arguments about space, borders, and citizenship, although their game format delivers these arguments in less overt ways than do many political pamphlets. A pack of cards that maps English and Welsh counties, for instance, uses the schematics of cards to depict counties as belonging not only to regions but to the nation as a whole (Figure 8). Although individual cards present counties as self-contained localities, each with their unique characteristics, all affiliate with/belong to greater regions, the suits. Local as well as regional differences (including, notably, differences between Wales and England), moreover, are subsumed by a sense that all counties and regions belong to the greater deck that is (here, literally) presided over by England’s monarch on the deck cover.

In Pierre du Val’s set of playing cards depicting all the countries of the world, the schematic organization of card decks does similar work, but on a global scale. Created in France, the cards present a distinctively French perspective on the information they present. As was commonly done in geographical card sets, the world is separated into four suits: Europe is hearts, Africa spades, Asia diamonds, and the Americas clubs. The association of a continent or part of the world with a certain suit is loaded with symbolic meaning that du Val, to some extent, encourages his users to investigate, even if he does not spell out the details. Nevertheless, that meaning is fairly easy to ascertain. Hearts is the highest-valued suit in many games and thus an unsurprising choice for the continent to which du Val’s France belongs. Clubs, often the lowest-valued suit, is associated with what the French would have considered to be the uncivilized lands of the Americas, while Asia, renowned for its treasures, is designated by diamonds, and Africa, historically raided for manual laborers, is designated by spades. The organizing principles endemic to playing cards help to imbue relative value to the countries within each part of the world, too. In du Val’s deck, the King card for the Europe suit is Le Roy de France, and the Queen is Italy, whereas Britain occupies the measly spot of pip three, while its other Protestant allies, Denmark and Norway, are relegated to the absolute lowest pip two position. By contrast, in a roughly contemporaneous English version of world geography cards, the King of the Europe suit is the British Isles, complete with a portrait of Charles II, and Catholic Italy is demoted to pip four. France is represented at pip eight, still below Protestant Germany at ten, and the deck reinforces British control over lands in the New World by having a portrait of Queen Elizabeth on the card for the American colonies (Figure 9). Another English geographical card deck, presumed to have been published in the third quarter of the seventeenth century by Henry Winstanley, keeps England as the King of Hearts (Figure
10), offering the precious Queen spot to England’s German allies, while literalizing the English derogatory view of the Italians by having them assigned to the Knave card. What’s more, the deck doesn’t bother to represent France at all.  

The meaning of card decks seems fairly straightforward when we look closely enough at their symbolic systems, but it is important to note that geographical cards are not simply a set of texts to be read, their symbolism decoded; they were objects to be used in play, and that play could complicate their symbolic meaning and political arguments. Any sense that the cards are meant only for display, not play, is belied by their prefatory material. In the English geography deck, the introductory card, “The Explanation of These Cards,” encourages the deck’s use in gaming by underscoring the correspondence between these and regular playing cards: “the use of these cards are the same with the Common Cards in all respects useing the Numbers in these instead of the spots on the Other.” And another preliminary card in the pack explains that the cards are “plaine and ready for the playing all our English Games, as any of ye Common Cards.”  

If the cards were used in games, the experience of playing with them could significantly complicate ideological and political arguments the decks make through their schematization of information. For instance, although world geography decks use the valuation schema of a deck to assert the superiority of some nations over others, these valuations are destabilized during gameplay. The English card deck that assigns Britain to the King of Hearts demotes the Turks (who must be hearts because they are also in Europe, the part of the world represented by the hearts suit) to the lowest-valued pip card, two. But during games of cards involving trumps, pip two could be just as powerful as a King from another suit, for if hearts is the trump suit, the Turk card can capture any card of any value in the other suits. In a game using these English geographical cards where the trump suit is clubs, the Chileans, presumably subjugated symbolically through their position as pip three in the low clubs suit, can handily capture Britain, whose King status provides no stable or natural superiority when a game is under way.

**SPECTATORSHIP, PERFORMANCE, AND HISTORY**

I have been suggesting that early modern materials of gaming are flexible symbolic systems whose meaning changes during the act of gameplay. The relationship between games and gameplay is, thus, much like that between dramatic plays and performance. Both games and dramatic plays use
scripts—the rule book and playscript, respectively—that are purportedly designed to authorize and define the actions of the objects (game pieces or actors) during performance. However, the relationship between scripts and theatrical performance is rarely straightforward in practice, for theatrical performance is authorized by a range of conventions and material practices that exist independently of any particular script. The same is true for games. Although this presents complications for studying the history of games, much as it has for studying the history of theatrical performance, some of the methods that have been used successfully to approach the latter prove fruitful, I suggest, for approaching the former.

The complex relationship between rule books and game practice is evinced by the terminology early moderns use to describe these aspects of gaming. Arthur Saul’s book on chess emphasizes a difference between the “lawes” of the game (what you are allowed and not allowed to do—what we would call rules) and what early modern writers termed the “rules” (how one navigates the game’s laws during gameplay). Saul writes about chess “That there is no Rule for this game” because everyone plays it differently—and therein lies the pleasure. In fact, if gamers play by one preset rule and do not take into account how their opponents play, adjusting strategy accordingly, they will lose. Modern gamers no longer use the term “laws”; “rules” has come to mean the same thing, and a third term, “strategy,” is now used to describe what early moderns called “rules.” When and how did the early modern term “rules” lose its association with strategy to refer, instead, to another script for play?

This shift in terminology arguably indexes changes in gaming practice during the early modern period, which resulted in part from the growth of the printing industry. Consider that before the printing press was used to publish gaming manuals, information about how to play sitting pastimes could be circulated only orally and in manuscripts. In the medieval period, such information was generally held and spread by clergy in monasteries and then outward to universities and schools. As literacy grew, players appear to have created their own instructional writings via manuscripts, essentially producing crib sheets for their own or others’ quick reference before or during play. Pasted into a commonplace book held by the British Library is a sheet entitled The Groome-porters lawes at Mawe, to be observed in fulfilling the due orders of the game (c. 1597), which lays out in several numbered points the method for playing the card game Maw. The practical function of these writings is evinced by their prose: dry and unembellished, with laws often numbered, perhaps to aid memory. Perhaps the most comprehensive of these manuscripts is Francis Willughby’s book of games
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(written in the seventeenth century, though not published until the twentieth), which offers a fairly detailed overview of cards, tables, and chess. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, as handbooks on many subjects were being published in print, so, too, were a number of books, or sections of books, devoted to instruction in sitting pastimes. These made it possible for communities of players to publicize their play strategies more extensively, and the result, arguably, is that strategies became so well known that they essentially operated as rules of play.

To be sure, the interest in writing up gameplay strategies was not solely a print phenomenon. A manuscript commonplace book at the Folger Library (c. 1650–70) contains a crib sheet for tables inside its back cover, presumably so that it could be accessed easily during a match. Entitling the sheet “Trickes with the Tables,” the author scratches out a series of numbers between one and six, probably representing some sort of dicing scheme, and offers a brief comment on a strategy for how “to bring a man from the other tables.” And many seventeenth-century books containing chess strategies remained only in manuscript, because players using them wanted to protect their play secrets. Yet print made it possible to circulate these strategies among much wider groups of players, and authors and printers capitalized on this new reading market. A posthumous reprinting of Saul’s book indicates that readers were hungry for books that would give them not only basic guidelines for play, but also possible strategies or “rules” as well. The first two parts of the book contain most of the same material from the first edition and in the same order, but the information is divided into two clearly distinguished sections: one concerned with introducing the pieces and how the game is set up (laws); the other covering strategies for winning at chess.

Similar efforts to elucidate strategies can be found in the range of publications focused on chess gambits—opening moves that could operate as formulas for victory or at least advantage. When Francis Beale translates The Royal Game of Chess-Play (1656), a collection of gambits used by the famed player Gioachino Greco, his dedicatory letter to Montague, Earl of Lindsey, explains that part of the point of his book is to enable those who are “but small Proficients” at chess “to take a greater delight” in “this Pastime,” while also helping experienced players like the Earl. Again, the book’s organization recognizes the two distinct aims of game instruction. For beginners there is the “very plaine” set of “Instructions” that are already in print. A separate section of “Gambetts” offers players some understanding of the “rule” or strategies of play, providing ninety-four gambits that show exactly which moves would lead to a victory if performed just so
by both sides. Beale affirms the importance of this section by reciting the old adage that chess has laws but no rule of play: “The consideration, that to finde out a certaine Rule for this Princely Game of Chesse, is generally . . . esteemed to be impossible, was the first cause that invited me to publish these Gambetts, which doe, in a very great measure, supply the defect of such an advantage.”

Ironically, in spelling out these gambits so clearly, making it possible for anyone to follow them, the book may well turn rules into laws. In fact, they tell so much about how to play well that Beale asks for the protection of the Earl: he fears that those who have already seen these gambits, which have been circulating in manuscript, will be angry that he is making them available to the masses through print; players who once had a monopoly on strategy risk losing their advantage if their opponents know what is at stake in a particular opening move.

When John Cotgrave publishes his description of games for gentlemen in his Wits Interpreter (1655), the distinction between rules and laws has all but dissolved. Cotgrave ends his description of the card game Gleek with a caveat that he has done his best to give a full account, but “if by accident, any other difficulties not here mentioned arise in play, they may easilie be resolved out of these Rules here set down, examining them by the Rules of Reason.” Here, the terms rules and laws are blurred or perhaps interchangeable, as if the discussion of strategy has become so widespread and expected that the rules are now virtually like laws. When Cotton publishes his thorough game instruction manual almost twenty years later (reprinting much from Cotgrave), he cautions against taking rules for laws, maintaining any set strategy will compromise the player’s game. Nevertheless, the emphasis of his text is on strategy. Although the book includes a short, straightforward list of the “Laws of Chess,” the bulk of it is devoted to describing particular moves that will help the player gain advantage. In fact, Cotton does not even bother to lay out the laws of the “commonly known” card games Ruff, Honours, and Whist, describing only strategies for winning at these games and advice on how to spot cheaters.

Given their extensive discussions of strategy, these gaming instruction books would appear to offer historians valuable evidence not only about how games were supposed to be played, but how they were played. Yet Cotton’s dual investments in describing strategy and cheating schemes offers a subtle warning not only to the gamer but to the historian of games who takes these descriptions as hard and fast evidence of gameplay. Once there was no clear distinction between laws and rules because the circulation of gaming manuals meant that everyone was well versed in strategies, then players were bound to find new ways to game the system, to manipu-
late the laws via new, less widely known strategies and/or through cheating. The distinction between cheating and using novel strategies is less obvious than it may seem at first glance. Some of my readers might insist that in strategy, one attempts to win the game by working within the laws, whereas in cheating one wins by violating those laws. But as scholars in game studies have shown, games are defined as much by efforts to violate regulations as to follow them.\textsuperscript{114}

The history of games substantiates this claim, as we can see how game objects and “laws” evolved as a response to and prophylactic against cheating. Cheating, that is, has driven the development of games. Willughby’s gaming book explains, for instance, that the dicing box players use to throw the dice in tables is there to prevent “cogging”—the use of “sleight of hand or anie trick” to roll a particular number on the die.\textsuperscript{115} As I discuss further in Chapter 4, the “touch rule” in chess developed to prevent sleight-of-hand manipulation of chess pieces. And the stipulation in card games that someone besides the dealer cuts the deck before it is dealt is meant to help prevent the dealer from arranging cards to benefit his or her hand, something I address further in Chapter 2. Early modern writings about sitting pastimes, including nonmoralizing and quasi-scientific accounts as well as texts affirming the usefulness of gaming, almost always address cheating and imply its inevitability in these games, even in the best of circumstances. In the same sentence that Cleland advocates for noble men to learn cards and tables, he submits that learning to play well will help gentlemen avoid being cheated by fellow players: “yea I would wish you to bee so perfit in them al, that you maie not be deceived, or cousened at play.”\textsuperscript{116} Mentions of methods of cheating appear frequently and often seamlessly alongside dry game descriptions. Randle Holme’s section on cards, written in the early to mid-seventeenth century (published in 1688), provides long lists of well-known games, terminology used by gamesters, and “general laws of card playing,” concluding with a section on “Names given to false and ch[e]ating cards,” which, though it contains only three items (far fewer than the entries in other sections), appears to be essential enough for inclusion.\textsuperscript{117} Willughby’s manuscript, which is uninterested in the morality of gaming, still provides a list of five “Waies of Cheating” with the dice in tables\textsuperscript{118}.

1. Playing with severall pare of false dice. . . . Dice are false when one side is heavier then the other, the die allwaies resting on the heaviest side
2. Wetting a side of the die, with spittle, sweat, earwaxe &c. which makes it rest on that side.
3. Slurring, which is a trick to make the die slide & not tumble over.
4. Throwing the dice just one upon another; the undermost will never change the side it is thrown upon.

He leaves the fifth point unwritten, suggesting he is planning to fill in more kinds of cheating, perhaps when he witnesses them or remembers them. Whatever his intention, the still-to-be-written point intimates that there are so many ways of cheating that any list is bound to be incomplete. Cardano, who, like Willughby, is far more interested in intellectualizing than moralizing sitting pastimes, represents card fraud as so inevitable that good players must be proactive in defending themselves against cheaters. Cardano describes an “art” to handling one’s cards so that they cannot be seen by opponents: in Primero “it is customary to uncover the cards from the back and from above as little as possible so that kibitzers [spectators who may be colluding with one’s opponent] cannot see anything; a great part of the art appears to consist in this, and players boast about their skill in this respect.” In other words, players should expect opponents to cheat and so develop skills to limit repercussions for their game. Cardano goes even further to complicate the distinction between fraud and strategy, between “cheats” and “prudent” players. His description of techniques for “recognition of the cards” struggles to articulate the difference between strategy and cheating. Of cheating, he writes:

in its worst form it consists of using marked cards, and in another form it is more excusable, namely, when the cards are put in a special order and it is necessary to remember this order. Such players are accustomed, when they know where the desired card is, to keep it on the bottom and to deal out others, which chance alone would not call for, until they get the suppressed card for themselves. But the other players in the first-mentioned class carry out very dangerous frauds which are worthy of death, as in fact the latter is also, but it is more concealed. Those, however, who know merely by close attention what cards they are to expect are not usually called cheats, but are reckoned to be prudent men.

Cardano presents a continuum between “prudent men” who pay “close attention” to the cards and “dangerous frauds” who use marked cards, with an imprecise middle ground occupied by those who use creative dealing to keep a certain card for themselves. Although the latter two kinds of action
would seem like obvious forms of cheating, Cardano does not lump them together, offended much more by those who use marked cards, a practice he thinks deserves the punishment of death. Even more interesting, when he describes the players who “know merely by close attention what cards they are to expect,” he intimates that even this sort of action, what we call the strategy of card reading, produces some disagreement regarding its lawfulness. In saying that players who do this are “not usually called cheats,” Cardano implies that on the rare occasion they might be.

Even moralizations of sitting pastimes tread a fine line as their expressions of outrage about cheating end up providing readers guidelines for employing cheating successfully in their own play. Gilbert Walker’s *Mihil Mumchance, His Discoverie of the Art of Cheating in False Dyce Play, and Other Unlawfull Games* (1597) observes the inevitability of cheating in dice and cards—“there is no game though it be never so laudable, yet is it abused by Cheating companions”—and announces that his aim is to disclose all the tricks of cheaters so that his reader will be able to spot them in others. However, he cannot help but worry that his readers will apply what they have learned: “Therefore I purpose to let you understand some part of the sleights & falshoods that are commonlie practised at Dice and Cardes: opening and revealing the thinge, not so that I would learne you to put them in use, but to describe and lay open the wicked snares, and hookes that are laid to picke Gentlemens purses.”

Writing three quarters of a century later, Cotton grapples with the same paradox. He insists that he writes his comprehensive description of games not to make new Gamesters, “but to inform all in part how to avoid being cheated by them.”

Texts that describe methods of cheating offer interesting evidence about the performance of early modern sitting pastimes, substantiating an intriguing intersection between games and theater: that these games were social and communal events often played before spectators. The accomplices of cheaters could easily masquerade as game spectators, explain several writers. Walker tells of one gamester who had a woman sit close enough to see the cards of his opponent and use the guise of sewing to communicate the contents of the opponent’s cards: “by the swift and slow drawing of her needle, give a token to the Cheator what was the Cosens game.” Cardano goes into significant detail about the dangers of playing before a crowd, whether its members are intent on foul play or not:

you can scarcely avoid folly if they are against you, or else injustice if they are for you. They can injure you in many ways: for example, by giving your opponent open advice and information, which is
twofold evil, since it not only helps their side but also provokes you to anger and disturbs you; . . . Others will annoy you by their disorderly talk, even without giving definite information. Some will purposely consult you on serious business; some will even be so impudent as to provoke you to anger by quarreling with you; other will make fun of you in order to make you angry; others, more modest than these, will indicate to your opponent by foot or by hand that the decision he has made is not the right one; others again, a little farther off, will do this with a nod, perhaps with no other purpose, it may be, than to help him by filling your mind with suspicion. Still others will state falsely how the die has fallen; other again will worry you by accusing you of such things.

Successful players need to do more than manage their own game; they must also tune out the hubbub of the crowd around them, without being negligent in watching for those who might conspire with an opponent in a foul play scheme.

The likelihood of facing the sorts of distractions Cardano describes would have been high in the case of sitting pastimes. Games of cards, tables, and chess, especially in public settings like taverns, typically had spectators present. Their sport was not only to enjoy a good match, but also to make money off of its outcome. In the five illustrated scenes of gameplay that grace the frontispiece to Cotton’s *The Compleat Gamester* (cards, backgammon, hazard/dice, cockfighting, and billiards), the only scene that doesn’t include spectators is billiards (Figure 11). Chess may have been even more of a spectator pastime in the early modern period than it has become in the modern age of competitive tournaments. Chess problem collections (which date from the mid-thirteenth century and onward) were partly about encouraging new or more sophisticated ways for spectators to gamble on a game in play. The problemist could invite onlookers to bet on the likely outcome of a particular position demonstrated on the board; problemists knew the outcome, and so could be quite canny. Indeed, Richard Eales argues that some problems in early collections “were made deliberately unsound” so that problemists could cheat unaware gamblers. Additionally, exhibition matches not so different from those staged today occurred throughout the mid-sixteenth through the seventeenth century, as Italian chess players traveling to find patrons played before noblemen and at court. (One of these players, Gioachino Greco, toured England in 1622 and 1623.) The translator of Damiano presumes there will be specta-
tors at chess matches and warns players, “talke not with any other stand-
inge by” lest the player become distracted and lose the game,\textsuperscript{127}

Turning sitting pastimes into spectator sports may have encouraged cheating, but it also and, indeed, simultaneously appears to have encouraged game development. Perhaps the most interesting example of this comes not from gaming manuals but from fictional representations of games. Chess historians, in fact, credit one particular chess poem, Marco Girolamo Vida’s \textit{Scacchia ludus}, for helping spread knowledge of modern chess rules throughout Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Especially notable about Vida’s poem is that Vida revises a mythical tale of chess’s beginnings, giving it a theatricalized setting, where spectatorship and cheating play a crucial part. In the poem Jupiter introduces the game of chess to all the gods and then, after describing the pieces and how they move, calls upon Apollo and Mercury to play a match before the other gods. Cardano’s description cited above of the dangers that ensue as spectators take sides is illustrated well, as Venus and Mars battle each other indirectly through their support of different players, Venus backing Apollo and Mars backing Mercury.\textsuperscript{128} The poem’s readers act as audience to the fictional game itself, as well as to the metagame played by the spectating gods.

Much as a staging of chess spectatorship enabled Vida’s readers to learn chess by watching the metagame, so, I would suggest, theatrical stagings of sitting pastimes have pedagogical value for modern scholars interested in writing a history of these games. Spectacles of characters gaming the game, as the rest of my book shows, complement the kinds of evidence most often used in gaming histories. Although I have drawn on the latter evidence to produce the kind of thick description of sitting pastimes that scholars have provided for early modern festive recreations and sports, I have also attempted to show its limitations. One limitation of the document-based histories of games that most historians employ is that these imply that certain ideas can be dated to the time a text about them is written, and this conveniently supports efforts to produce overarching historical narratives about sitting pastimes—even my own. Consider, for instance, my claim that as legal authorities became more permissive (and even supportive) of sitting pastimes in the late sixteenth century, religio-moral critiques of these pastimes increased. Such a conclusion certainly can be supported by printed documents (fewer royal proclamations against gaming and more published sermons condemning it), but it is also true that royal proclamations are merely one piece of evidence representing official views on games. Local regulations, whether written down or not, may have continued to be as
harsh as ever, possibly even explaining the need for intervention from more permissive royal authorities. Indeed, in his *Book of Sports*, James I claims that he feels compelled to write his declaration because his progresses through the kingdom have revealed the harshness of local regulations against games on Sabbath and Holy Days. Even then, it is difficult to ascertain with certainty whether local regulations relaxed in response to James’s declaration. These sorts of limitation would confront any historian on any subject, but games are particularly resistant to overarching narratives of historical change. For example, consider my claim that the period of investigation for my study can accurately be called the *early modern* period of gaming insofar as this is the time that the rules of backgammon and chess change to become those rules we use today, and the gaming materials currently used for backgammon and cards standardize at this time as well. Such a claim neatly validates my book’s focus on gaming in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century drama. And although it can be substantiated for the most part, it arguably oversimplifies a more complicated story about how games change over time. It is not possible to date with certainty when changes to a particular game occur, for a game may undergo changes in patterns of play well before those changes are captured in a written document, and certainly well before that document would be published. For instance, changes that defined the “new” chess evolved slowly over the late Middle Ages, not in one fell swoop.129 Even with the advent of print, knowledge about games, then as today, is circulated orally as much if not more so than through written documents. Although game objects and writings about games can be archived, gameplay is an embodied practice that typical archives cannot capture easily, if at all. As the early modern distinction between rules and laws underscores, guidelines for gameplay and the material setup of a game in no way dictate how a particular match would be played. Surviving game objects and published rules provide the plot for theoretical play scenarios, but they do not indicate how games work and change in practice, or how the practice of gameplay affects the objects and rules of a game.

With that in mind, let us return to the analogy with which this section began, an analogy that proves useful for historicizing games: game rules are to gameplay as dramatic texts are to theatrical plays. Consider that, contrary to the assumptions of many in and out of drama studies, the dramatic script does not necessarily exist prior to and thus authorize performance.130 As William B. Worthen argues, the “force” of performance comes, for instance, from other sources, including the many conventions of theatrical institutions themselves.131 We can say much the same about game rules. When a
group sits down to a game of cards, their match is less simply a reiteration of the game’s rules than it is a citation of the conventions of gameplay—in this case, shuffling, dealing, revealing, bluffing, table talk, and so forth. The analogy to dramatic performance can help us think differently about the gaming objects and written gaming regulations that we find in archives. If we resist presuming that these texts are scripts that authorize, we can better attend to them as texts in their own right, subject to the “practices, economies and rhetoric of print” that Worthen argues give dramatic texts their performative force. A telling example is Beale’s translation of Greco’s The Royall Game of Chesse-Play, which presents itself as a chess instruction manual and includes an elementary introduction to the game taken from Saul’s Famous Game of Chesse-Play. If treated as a script for gameplay, the text is a fairly straightforward, even dry account of how to play chess. But if we use the methods of book history to think about how the text operated as a book, a more complex story emerges, showing the ways the Greco–Beale book uses chess as a rhetorical weapon against Cromwell. Eales observes that not only is Charles I featured as a crowned monarch on the book’s frontispiece, but many of those involved in the publication, including the writers of prefatory poems (one of whom was Richard Lovelace) and the book’s printer had well-known royalist sympathies.

Just as it makes sense to study The Royall Game of Chesse-Play as a book, it also makes sense to study the game it describes as a game. Even if Greco–Beale’s rules present one script for how to play that game, this script is hardly the authorizing one. Indeed, just as the print history of early modern drama offers evidence that performances shaped the scripts of early modern plays in all sorts of ways, so the “laws” of a game and even the design of gaming objects evolve in response to gameplay scenarios. As we have already seen, game objects might have been developed or redesigned in response to newly discovered ways of cheating, such as the case of dic- ing cups used for tables. Alternatively, the games and their laws might be transformed to create more pleasurable gameplay, the most significant example of which may be the development of “new chess,” which significantly sped up the play time of a game that many found tedious. The point is that if there was a relationship between the rule books/gaming objects and gameplay (and, as in the case of theatrical performance, there wasn’t always a relationship), then the relationship worked in both directions simultaneously. Rule books and objects attempted to script gameplay as a practice as much as they were sculpted and transformed by it.

How, then, can we produce a history of sitting pastimes in the early modern period that accounts for gameplay as a practice? One way is to
supplement our studies of the archive with attention to repertoires of embodied actions associated with gaming that have been handed down from the past to the present as games have been taught by one generation to the next. Our methods here are not that different from the methods we might use to study the traces of performances past. Instead of thinking of rule books and gaming objects as static traces of these games of the past—as so many histories of sitting pastimes have done—we can view them as prompts for future reenactment, a reenactment in which scholars themselves can and, I would suggest, must engage. For it is by putting these objects into play that their fuller histories can be uncovered. A consequence of such an approach is that we might take more seriously the practices of reenactment groups like the Society for Creative Anachronism, an active site of research on medieval and sixteenth-century sitting pastimes. Perhaps most SCA participants reenact games to relive the past “as it was,” but that need not be the sole or even an essential objective of these practices. Enacting a game might, in fact, lead the player to discover problems in the ways the game is represented in texts, leading to new questions about archival “sources.” At the very least, playing medieval and early modern games enables participants to investigate with their bodies how certain games feel in play, helping to explain, for example, why Primero was associated with politics in Elizabethan England, as some early modern writers suggest. Playing Primero might help us understand how the game encourages, in John Hall’s phrase, “a dexterous kinde of rashness.” What is it about the rules of Primero and how they shape use of the cards that rewards a player who can make rash decisions with dexterity? As this example underscores, I do not mean to suggest that the archive—with its written documents and material objects of gaming—serves no purpose or is necessarily in tension with an embodied repertoire of actions. For certainly the texts of gaming, such as books about regulations and strategy, inform today as much as they did four hundred years ago. The archive is essential to reenactment practices. My point, rather, is that a robust history of gaming must put repertoires of ludic action into conversation with game scripts, whether these are gaming objects, books of laws, or manuscripts regarding strategy.

Live reenactment such as that conducted by the SCA is not the only way to enact archival materials, however. In the chapters that follow, I suggest that scenes of gaming within drama are optimal resources as well. Dramas stage a conversation between the repertoire and the archive. Particularly when they enact gameplay, dramas highlight the archive’s aliveness and performativity. This (re)enactment is all the more interesting when we con-
sider that the plays were performed live before spectators, much like the games sometimes represented in them. The archive and the repertoire of gaming come together in the embodied action of theatrical performance both onstage and in the theater more broadly. It should not go without saying that they also come together through the efforts of me, the embodied historian of literature and games. The historian is less a discoverer than a maker of evidence, collecting and connecting scraps of information about the past from a host of different realms of knowledge. And one key source of that knowledge is the critic’s own body. What we discover about the past through archival work is necessarily shaped not only by our training and personal or political investments but also by our own perceptive practices. What we find in the archives is partly a function of how we look at what we find. To explore how game scenes worked onstage and to understand what they taught their audiences about theatergoing, I refer often in the chapters that follow to what it feels like to play these games, feelings I can report because I’ve had them myself during play or because my familiarity with the games enables me to imagine what it feels like to play them. Just as game scenes in drama invited their on- and offstage spectators a chance to play along, so they make possible, and indeed call out for, a ludic mode of engagement from modern readers. Perhaps, then, we might think of historians not only as makers, but as gamers, who play with the material they find in archives. Like all gamers, historians do not simply follow the rules that govern these materials and their uses, but create the rules in the process of play. So let’s play. Cards, anyone?