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The history of games could be a history of technology

Among the British Museum's thirteen million objects is a beautiful game board and set of counters or tokens, fashioned from wood and inlaid with shells forming rosettes and eyes. The Royal Game of Ur was excavated from a royal cemetery in what is now southern Iraq and is dated to 2600-2400 BC. It demonstrates that board games are embedded deep in human history and that their key formal aspects are surprisingly persistent: after four and a half millennia this object is immediately recognisable as a board game and can still be played. Unlike other archaic art forms such as painting or epic poetry the board game suggests a persistence and continuity of modes of reception or use, of the social behaviors and relationships that attended it and that it engendered. Its scale, formal organisation of grid and tokens, the nature and number of tokens all strongly suggest the number of players, the mode of gameplay, even the positioning of the players in relation to the board, and with a little more imagination perhaps the duration of particular playings, its possibilities for gambling and so on. In this sense it is a technical object, a machine for generating and sustaining playful behaviour. Its technological characteristics rather than its symbolic or communicative nature are key to its cultural significance and longevity.

All games consist of tangible and intangible techniques and technologies. Ancient games exploited the physical characteristics of animal knuckle bones and gravity for the harnessing of chance or fate, the randomising technics that underpin gambling from Ancient Rome to contemporary casinos. Game boards from Ur to chess to Mario Party augment cognitive and imaginative processes: marking and storing the position of tokens and their algorithmic relationships, shaping and driving ludic movement, interactions and accumulation. In this regard, board and card games and gambling games with dice or bones trouble historical and cultural periodisation. For game studies the ontological emphasis in considering the relationship between non- or pre-digital games and digital games has often been on the continuity of a game-as-form regardless of platform. The game, it is asserted, consists in its rules not in its material instantiation at any particular point in history. Chess is the same game whether is played on a wooden board or in virtual space. However, if we insist instead on a critical attention to games as always-already technological then a more nuanced cultural-historical dynamic opens up.

Games are generally, though by no means always, of a scale that fits with the ergonomics and mechanics of the hand and the co-location of human bodies - dice (or bones) that are small enough to be shaken in a loosely held fist, cards that can be fanned and shuffled, boards that can be sat around. Though digital games are often (though by no means always) released from the ergonomic demands of co-located players, their interfaces and peripherals are still anthropomorphic, determined by the hand (controllers) and eyes (screens), as well as ears. Even the ruleset itself can be considered technical, a procedure or set of techniques for organising game objects and their players in time and space. At the very least then, material changes to ludic machines change the bodily techniques and perceptual technics required to play, and hence drive changes in playful behaviour and sociality.

The challenge for game history in this regard then is less that of tracking continuities and identifying changes in material and technical form, gameplay, etc. and more one of recognising and acknowledging the complex and nonlinear relationships that constitute ludic technicity over time. This would include mechanical devices, abstract rule sets, cultural and social formations and reformations, the immateriality of imagination and sociality, and the materiality of aesthetics and kinaesthetics. Game history then could also be game archaeology, game paleontology, game ethology. It might also address the obverse of this argument: that history of technology might not only, or even not primarily, be the history of the development of tools and instrumental technical systems, but rather one of playful and interstitial technics, of corporeal and cognitive pleasure and sociality.