

Of Dice and Men

The role of dice in board and table games

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When it comes to games, dice belong to the oldest playthings or gambling instruments men have used to pass their time and/or make some money, and it is striking that still today it is hard to imagine the realm of board and table games¹ without them. Dominions fell, Caesars were overthrown, however, the die is still rolling – but is it also still ruling?

Trying to answer this question, we approach the topic from two angles, analysing first the historical and then the current situation. In the first part the authors would like to give a quick retrospection into the history of the die to highlight a few outstanding facts about dice and gambling in their sociocultural context. The second part then will discuss the current situation on the German board game market from a more technical and functional point of view: how dice are being integrated into board and table games, and how the outcome is being received. To narrow down the field we will concentrate on this specific range and leave out dice in casino games as well as in RPGs. The focus on German board games is due to the fact that they constitute one of the biggest board game markets worldwide and therefore provides a lot of material for the analysis, which at the same time does not exclude games from other countries. As a great number of dice games or games which include dice are produced every year or are simply republished (sometimes in slightly modified ways), it has been necessary to base the analysis on a manageable amount of data. To avoid listing

¹According to the definition of the Deutsches Spiele-Archiv Marburg, which uses the term to refer generally to all kind of games that can be played at a table; some of these games use a board, while others (like many dice games) make do without one (<<http://www.deutsches-spiele-archiv.de/index.php?id=28>>, May 2010). As can be seen, all board games belong to a more general set of table games.

unnumbered varieties of *Ludo* and to make sure the games mentioned have reached a wider audience, it has been decided to have a closer look only at the winners, nominees and recommendations of the German ‘Spiel des Jahres’ and the ‘Deutscher Spielepreis’, which will function here as data basis. While the ‘Game of the Year’ is appointed by a jury, the Spielpreis can be voted for by everybody, therewith including the players themselves.

When asked about what games with dice² come to mind, many people might think mostly of classic games like *Ludo*, *Backgammon*, *Monopoly*, *Yathzee* or *Risk*³. In Poland, the classic *Super-Farmer* with its 20-sided dice might also spring to mind. The question is, what characterises the die and in which functions, to which extent, and under which circumstances it is used in the modern games of our time. The main feature certainly is the fact that the die as an instrument of chance forms a counterweight to pure strategy and so enables even people of different intellectual capability to play on an equal footing, or at least to level out this difference to a certain degree. When rolling a die, the odds are the same for everybody (excluding only the trickster who knows how to manipulate dice⁴), which on the one hand can make a game more exciting than a battle of unequally skilled minds. But on the other hand, just leaving the whole outcome of the game entirely to fate might become boring, too, as the players have no way of influencing their odds. Therefore it comes as no surprise that most modern dice games use a combination of dice rolling and tactics to allow the players to act and make decisions, while at the same time offering them the thrill of challenging fate. Under such assumptions dice seem to have found their way into the arena of board games. What such combinations can look like and what peculiarities can come along with it, shall be analysed further.

A quick roll through the ages

Dice have been there for millennia. Most researchers estimate that they have been in use for about at least 5000 years⁵, and though their shapes and materials have varied over time, the passion for playing seems to have been the same all over the world. The German Games Archive in Marburg classifies all objects as dice and random generators if they are used to derive coincidental results. In that sense the term ‘die’ does not refer to a certain geometrical form, but to an object that is thrown or rolled by hand or with the help of a dice cup onto

²As ‘games with dice’ we count all kinds of games that in some form make use of a die, while ‘dice games’ are conceived of here as a more specific form in which the die can be seen as the main element.

³*Risk* can be considered as standing for a whole area of war simulation games, which are not as popular with German editors as with publishers in other countries.

⁴Leonardo da Vinci was only one of those who performed this art, creating maybe the most remarkable version of a crooked die by supplying the Spanish-Italian *condottiero*, lord and cardinal Cesare Borgia with a die which could be adjusted to any face required (cf. Bauer, 1999b, p. 104).

⁵Bauer (1999b, p. 1), who also refers to an assumption going back about 10.000 years, points out that this has to be considered only a rough estimate which probably will be revised by future archaeological findings.

a flat surface, though other random generators, like for example spinners or gambling tops, can also be used to chance upon a result⁶. In this wider sense even a coin could be seen as a die, more precisely as a two-sided die.

Other things that have been used for games of chance are for instance knucklebones and beaver teeth, astragali⁷, shells, sticks and wood or clay as well as all kinds of other primitive devices. One of the earliest, if not the earliest and original function of dice as an element of chance was probably to deploy them for the invocation of higher forces; as the outcome of a die roll is completely arbitrary, it could be interpreted as a decision made by the gods. In the beliefs of the Germanic tribes the Æsir (the 12 main gods) threw dice, and in the Old Testament the judgement of God could be passed by drawing lots⁸. Another famous example of the connection between dice and fate is Caesar's decision about crossing the Rubicon: As the story goes, while Caesar was still undecided whether to go or not, a shepherd took up a trumpet and marched ahead over the bridge. Caesar saw this as a sign, and pronouncing the proverbial "Alea iacta est", he resigned himself to fate and followed⁹. It can be said that at the early stage dice were an instrument of fortune telling, and, as the proverb shows, dice came to be seen as an embodiment of the unpredictability of chance. But tempting fate has also always been a passion of mankind, so throwing dice for testing one's luck, making decisions or simply betting money has been a permanent attraction throughout the history of the die. In the Middle Ages dicing schools and guilds appeared, since gambling with dice had become a favourite pastime and constituted a dominant element in the medieval gambling houses. In the seventeenth century, however, the hegemony of the die in games of chance and prediction had been broken by playing cards¹⁰, but nevertheless throughout the centuries the authorities felt obliged to impose restrictions and prohibitions. In some countries taxes had to be paid for producing or buying dice. But generally, no matter how strict the laws against gambling were, they never really succeeded in quelling the passion for games of chance.

Then again, as it happened in Frankenburg (Austria) in 1625, dice could also be used by the authorities as a cruel form of punishment: 36 ringleaders of an uprising were condemned to death, but half of them were meant to be pardoned. In pairs the men had to roll dice to see who would live and who would be hanged. This way of administering the law,

⁶ Compare: The German Games Archive's website: <<http://www.deutsches-spiele-archiv.de/index.php?id=26>>, access date: October 3rd 2009.

⁷ Anklebones of even-toed ungulates, e.g. sheep or goats, whose fall was regarded by some as more even and smoother. Cf. Barbara Holländer, "Das Spiel mit dem Würfel", in Bauer, 1999, p. 28.

⁸ Kastner (2007, p. 21) reminds of Saul trying to settle an argument that way.

⁹ "Eatur quo deorum ostenta et inimicorum iniquitas vocat. Iacta alea est" – *Sueton: Divus Iulius, 32f*. The episode with the shepherd, though, is only one version of the story. In other texts Caesar's decision is described slightly differently, but he always makes the remark, which means that he will go where fate will have him.

¹⁰ Pictorial testimonies of this era, for instance, display only peasants, artisans and soldiers playing with dice. An exception, though, were table and paper games (so-called running games), children's games and numerous Games of the Goose and Games of the Owl (Bauer, 1999, p. 6).

however, proved to be unsuccessful as in the following year another, this time well planned rebellion sprang up in Upper Austria¹¹.

Dice have made their appearance not only in fortune telling and jurisdiction, though, but can also be found in philosophy, religion and literature. Early written records of dice games in literature (already at that stage in connection with fraud) can be located in India in the ancient Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*, in which somebody uses a false set of dice. Also the *Ramayana* epos depicts a game in which the protagonist Rama wins a game against the ape king Hanuman by throwing dice with which he beats Hanuman's globes in a game of skills. Sophocles and Herodotes mention dice in their texts, and Plato even considers the hexahedron, the six-sided die, a symbol for the earth or, like his contemporaries, even for the universe (Kastner, 2007, p. 21), though he condemns the human habit of gambling. In the same way, in the Book of Revelation (21, 15-18), the heavenly Jerusalem is symbolized by a cube, and one should not forget to mention the cubical Kaaba¹² in Mecca, which is the central part of the Muslim pilgrimage. From the Middle Ages on, a large amount of literature on gambling and dice evolves, differing in topic and evaluation. On the one hand there are reference books¹³ which attempt to describe in a more or less objective way games and their rules, their mathematics and probabilities, on the other hand there are different genres of literature which comment on compulsive gambling, bad or sinful behaviour triggered by gambling, prohibitions, the damnation of gambling etc. Scriptures damning (amongst other pastimes) the handling of dice increase especially in the early days of Protestantism, and it is striking that on the paintings of the Middle Ages the soldiers beneath the crucified Jesus do not draw lots anymore but throw dice (Bauer, 1999, p. 93).

As can be seen, the cubic form, which has become the prototypical shape we now associate with the term 'die', as well as its function, are considered to be connected to magical or religious beliefs, while dice as gambling instruments have been regarded suspiciously and sometimes even thought to be an invention of the devil, as the preacher Bareletta claimed in the 13th century. About the same time, Louis IX of France tried to forbid the production of dice, which did not stop the people's passion for gambling any more than the burning of about 40.000 dice (next to cards and chess boards) in Nuremberg in 1452 after a sermon by the Franciscan priest Giovanni da Capistrano. In spite of such attempts, the temptation of challenging chance could never be eradicated, even though punishments at times were severe. There were objections to dice far into the 19th century, like for example in the United States where the Puritan view of dice being an instrument of the devil was so strong that it still continued to exert an influence two centuries on, as can be inferred from the fact that during the Civil War, soldiers only gambled in secrecy. When moving into battle, they left

¹¹ See also the novel by Itzinger (1933).

¹² *Ka'ab* is the Arabic word for 'die'.

¹³ An outstanding achievement of them is the book on games by Alfons X (1283), which has been newly published as *Das Buch der Spiele* in 2009 by the Lit Verlag.

behind their dice, so that if they should fall, they would not be dishonoured when their personal belongings were sent to the mourning family (Kastner, 2007, p. 24).

Still, people always fell for the game and sometimes became so addicted to rolling dice that they would not hesitate to gamble away not only their money and worldly possessions, but also their wives, children and ultimately even themselves into bondage. This, together with fraud, quarrels and blasphemy, were the main reasons for authorities to consider a ban on gambling. How far the fascination of the die reaches is demonstrated by references and allusions to dice in the arts¹⁴ throughout time. To name just a few examples: A Nordic Saga recounts the fateful dice game between the kings of Norway and Sweden about the province Hisling; Shakespeare refers to dice for example in *Richard III* (V, 4): “I have set my life upon a cast / And I will stand the hazard of a die” (as cited in Kastner, 2007, p. 26); in the realm of music one finds a composition Johann Philipp Kirnberger called the *Würfelmenuett* (dice minuet), and Mozart wrote an instruction on how to compose waltzes with the help of two dice and without the need of understanding anything about music or composing.

New game – new luck

The merging of dice and board games, which is most interesting for this analysis of dice in modern parlour games, has been evident in India, Persia and Egypt since as far back as about 4500 years ago. The oldest board games with dice are the two supposed predecessors of *Backgammon*, the Egyptian *Senet* and the *Royal Game of Ur*¹⁵, which are estimated to have been invented in about 2600 BC, with the latter most likely using six tetrahedrons as dice. Probably in a similar way gaming sticks, which have been found in India as well as Egypt, were employed. For the ancestor of *Ludo*, the Indian *Pachisi*, cowry shells functioned as dice, while the six-sided die is speculated to have been invented by the Arabs and Etruscans. As mentioned before, dice could come in many shapes, be made of a number of different materials and could show various numbers of sides. Even today, though the six-sided die is most common, there are amongst others 10-, 20- or 100¹⁶-sided dice, and also the 4-sided die, which resembles the tetrahedron of Ur, is still around. The most widely spread types of dice are probably the five Platonic solids¹⁷ and the pentagonal trapezohedron (10-sided). Though one encounters multi-sided dice in some games, their number is seriously

¹⁴Bauer (1999b, p. 8) also lists some relevant pictorial and plastic documents.

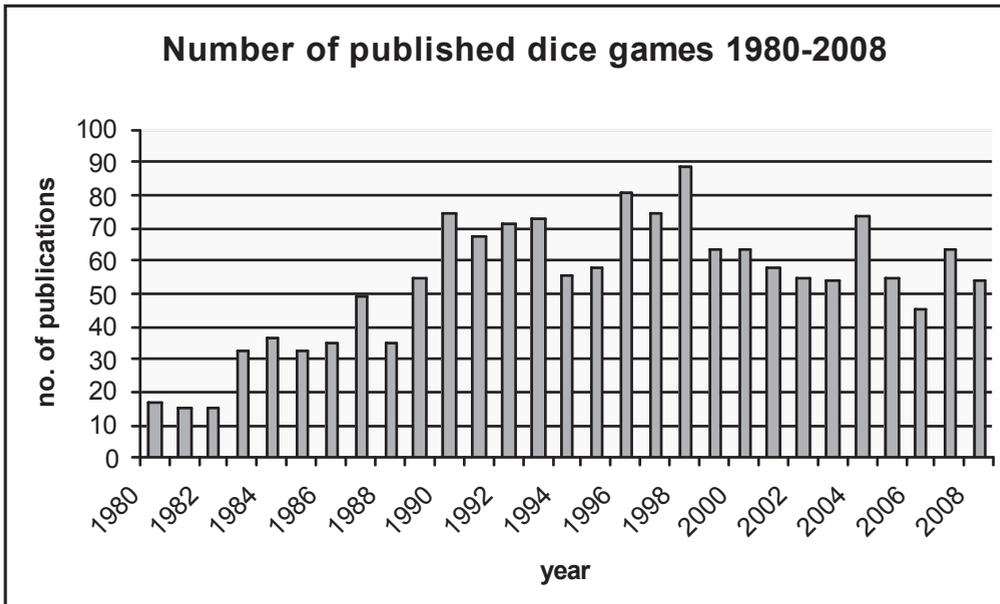
¹⁵Named after the ancient Sumerian city in Mesopotamia, which is today an important archaeological excavation site. Here two boards of the game were found by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920s. Speculative rules have been reconstructed.

¹⁶The ‘Zocchihedron’, named after its creator Lou Zocchi.

¹⁷I.e. the regular convex polyhedrons named after Plato: tetrahedron (4-sided), hexahedron or cube (6-sided), octahedron (8-sided), dodecahedron (12-sided) and icosahedron (20-sided).

outweighed by what we have come to consider the normal die which most often depicts one to six pips (or spots¹⁸).

The number of games which can be played with dice alone (or including them next to other gaming materials) is innumerable. The list of dice games or games with dice which have been published during the last 30 years on the German board game market is immense. The German Games Archive lists over 3.000¹⁹ titles. It classifies those games in four categories as 1) pure dice games²⁰, 2) start-goal-games, 3) search- and catch-games and 4) tactical dice games²¹. However, one has to note that some of these are the same games published over and over again in different years, different countries or different languages, and that the list also contains a certain number of advertising-games.



From these findings a few conclusions can be drawn. If games are published over and over again in different years, this might indicate that people like to adhere to time-tested

¹⁸A term favoured by John Scarne (1980).

¹⁹Of them nearly 1.300 games are without specification of their year of production, and therefore are not considered any further in this analysis. The list includes also about 1.600 dice games dating from 1980 to 2009. The rest of the games are those with a date but published before 1980.

²⁰In pure dice games, where dice are the main and essentially the only element, three dominant game types can be outlined as games of chance, guessing games, and games of skill.

²¹Another classification is given by Kastner, 2007 (who among other things reviews games for the Austrian Game Museum), who speaks of 13 families of dice games. This goes to show that on the one hand trying to classify dice games is still a very recent attempt, entering a new territory. On the other hand it demonstrates the complexity and number of dice games and that it is often not easy to specify the genre of a single dice game accordingly or to designate an appropriate genre for a certain group of dice games at all.

games (which holds true for publishers as well as for players), though one has to point out that the novelty factor dominates and more new games are published than old ones reprinted. As far as the ad-games are concerned, one has to consider two assumptions. Firstly, that they use popular mechanisms which the clients (or game authors themselves, too) have grown up with, because it is still a fact that many games for children make use of dice. Secondly, dice are a familiar game mechanism and are easily accessible for everybody, which might be an important factor in games used for advertising, as clients generally are not likely to be gamers.

Where dice are combined with board games, one of the oldest mechanisms is to utilise dice to move game pawns along a given track (sometimes combined with certain events), a mechanism which seems to have survived until the 1980s but then suffered a rapid decline in popularity, persisting nowadays almost exclusively in classics or games derived from such classics, as for example *Monopoly* or *Ludo* or children's games. During the last three decades the German board game scene has begun to become increasingly sophisticated and the game mechanisms more differentiated, rejecting the traditional types of dice game, which at times, though, are taken on again [e.g. *Liar's Dice*²² as a guessing game or *Tumblin' Dice* (2004) as a game of skill²³]. Also the element of hazard²⁴ seems to have been outbalanced today, changing the main function of dice: of being an incorruptible random generator operating in a certain spectrum of ways.

Currently, two mainstreams appear to be especially attractive, making use of the die as 1) a means for acquisition and 2) a means for combat. When dice are deployed for acquisition, typically the result of the die roll is used to gain something which is necessary for the game – like points, chips, cards, building materials, the possibility of certain actions and so on. This group might be divided again into two subgroups, where on the one hand 1.a) dice are used for direct acquisition of victory points and on the other hand 1.b) for indirect acquisition of victory points over a special distributional mechanism. In 1.a) the principle idea consists of the players being in direct competition for victory points, or elements like chips or cards being more or less equivalent to them, with the quite simple challenge of who acquires the most or the best out of a pool of limited items. The mechanisms of such games usually demand very little tactics and often consist of traditional elements like throwing doublets, streets or special combinations, and optically they tend to appear in the garments of classical topics like the ancient Rome (e.g. *Alea Iacta Est*, 2009) or Egypt, something fundamental like the Good vs. the Bad or angel vs. devil (e.g. *Engel & Bengel* [though not in the English version *Sharpshooters*], 1994), or the Wild West (a classical topic in relation to Poker; cf. *Los Banditos*, 2008, or *Dice Town*, 2009).

²²First published in 1986, but popular still today.

²³In this context one could mention *Dice Stacking*, too, though it is rather a performance art than a board or parlour game.

²⁴The die, of course, is still used in one of its oldest function in casino games, but, as mentioned in the introduction, this article will not concentrate on such pure games of chance.

The second subgroup 1.b) is distinct from the previous in that it employs dice as a device to distribute elements of the game, on which the real focus lies, thus letting the dice play rather a supporting (however not unimportant) role. Though more prevalent in modern gaming, it is not exclusive to recent times and so cannot be said to be a defining feature of recent genres. The underlying question here is, how the players benefit from a certain reservoir of building material, cards, actions etc. The roll principally does not lead directly to victory (points), but primarily to the handling of the acquired resources. This results in a relatively complex interplay of a randomly generated distribution of game elements and tactical considerations: what to expect before rolling or how to utilise the roll and, as the case may be, in which way to allow the other players to profit from it, too (e.g. *The Settlers of Catan*²⁵, 1995, *Yspahan*, 2006, *Kingsburg*, 2007, *Stone Age*, 2008).

The second mainstream mechanism is applied in many games which have combat as the central element. Often several dice are thrown to determine or modify combat strength or the circumstances of the combat. An important precursor and prototype of such games can be seen in *Risk* (1959), whose mechanism is to be found (more or less altered) in many Role Playing Games and war games. This mechanism still seems to be very popular among gamers, as a brief glance into the Top100 of BoardGameGeek²⁶ shows. About a fifth of the listed games use dice for military or sportive combat; however, only about five out of one hundred deploy them for more or less economic purposes like in 1.b). This might hint at an essential difference between German and international²⁷ players. While outside Germany (or on an international level) 2) seems to be favoured over 1), in Germany 1.b) appears to be more highly esteemed (compare below on award-winning games with dice). It is also to be observed in this context that 1.a) and 2) allow the repeated usage of traditional mechanisms and elements (sometimes slightly altered or just combined differently) varying only in topic or in being issued as a new edition, sometimes with another scenario²⁸. Games of the subgroup 1.b), on the contrary, display new or at least innovatively modified mechanisms, having seemingly a good chance of being awarded or favoured in ranking lists. While the quantity belonging to the games in which the die is used for indirect acquisition (1.b) is relatively small, the body of games which use dice for direct acquisition (1.a) or combat (2) encompasses a rather bigger number of games.

Another phenomenon which can be observed, especially in recent times, is the use of six-sided dice that depict one or more special faces, like in *Nicht Lustig* (2007), in which the face usually reserved for the six depicts a cartoon element. In other games, like *Blood Bowl* (1986, 1988, 1994 et al.), *Okko*, *Era of the Asagiri* (2008) or *The Settlers of Catan – Dice Game* (2007), some or all of the dice show special elements on each side, which are

²⁵As the milestone and most prominent representative of this subgroup.

²⁶<<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/browse/boardgame>>, access date: October 3rd 2009.

²⁷If one might assume that something like an international community of players exists – as for instance platforms like BoardGameGeek suggest.

²⁸Which does not signify necessarily that such games are therefore less successful or entertaining.

specially linked to the game theme. *The Settlers* dice game also represents another, currently very popular, trend; namely the publishing of dice versions as spinoffs of successful board games – as, for example, *Alhambra – the Dice Game* (2006), *Ra: The Dice Game* (2009), *Roll Through the Ages* (2009), *Kazaam Dice* (2009), but also of established classics like *Monopoly* (*Monopoly Express* 1991; updated version 2005) and *Risk* (*Risk Express* 2006).

A less fortunate attempt was to establish collectible dice games on the market, inspired by the success of collectible card games. Most of the collectible dice games vanished quickly from the market and only a few (e.g. *Dragon Dice*, 1995, or *Diceland*, 2002) managed to survive, leading now something of a niche existence.

When trying to find some more or less reliable indicators for the popularity of dice games, it seems a sensible idea to concentrate on games which have been awarded a prize, nominated for one, or at least recommended by the jury²⁹. As a sound basis for this undertaking, we have chosen the list of games which have been distinguished by the Jury ‘Game of the Year’ (Jury Spiel des Jahres – SdJ) since 1979 and since 1990 by the voters for the Deutscher Spielepreis (DSP), focusing on the period from 1980 to 2009. Generally, these two institutions might be considered guarantors that the games in their lists have found a wider audience and therefore allow the drawing of some conclusions about the popularity of dice games during the last two to three decades. As both aim at slightly different target groups, the data covers not only the jury’s opinion as to which games might be suitable for families and casual gamers, but also the view of the gamers themselves, who can vote for the DSP, which therefore reflects also the preferences of the gamers who play a lot and keep track of what is going on on the board game market.

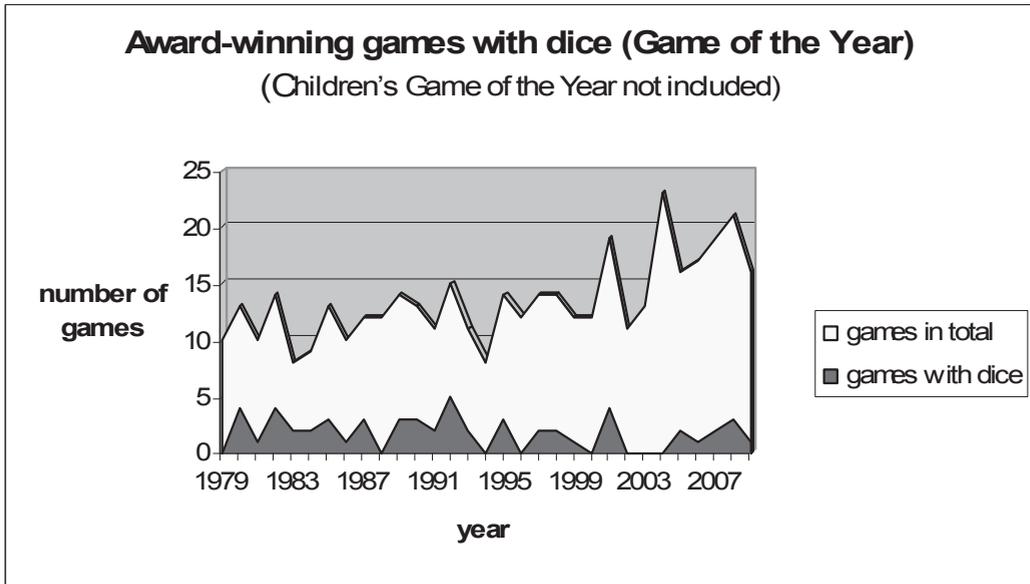
The comparison of titles shows that many of them appear on both lists. But while the DSP only publishes an enumeration of the three top games for families/adults plus one children’s game (and a special prize for an outstanding achievement in the area of board games or for the most exemplary rulebook), the SdJ now also gives a list of recommended games apart from appointing two winning games plus five nominees (and sometimes one or more special prizes). The list of the Game of the Year is therefore much more extensive.

Among the approximately 360 game titles on that list, it can be noted that almost no pure dice games have ever been nominated. Even as far as those games are concerned which cannot be called dice games, but which make use of dice in some form as one means of playing, the finding is that there are only eight games with dice among the winners of the award, of which just one is a real dice game³⁰ (*Liar’s Dice* (Germ. *Bluff*– 1993), and all of these have been awarded in the period from 1982 (*Enchanted Forest* [Germ. *Sagaland*]) to

²⁹ It would have been helpful also to check the findings in relation to the games’ sales figures, but to the author’s regret no such information was accessible.

³⁰ The definition of pure dice games as used by the German Games Archive: Simple archaic dice games do without game board. The aim is to surpass the roll of the other players or to bet on certain combinations. The pure pleasure of challenging chance (or in former times the gods of fate) constitute the appeal of those games. Today especially *Yahtzee*, as a representation of this category, has become a well-known classic. But also casino dice games like *Craps* or *Chicago* belong to this sub-category. Cf. <<http://www.deutsches-spiele-archiv.de/index.php?id=34>>, October 2009.

1997 (*Mississippi Queen*). After the turn of the millennium only two dice games for children have managed to win the award ‘Children’s game of the year’³¹. On the whole, though, if one takes all the nominations, recommendations and special awards into account, more than 70, which is about a fifth of all the game titles on the list, are games which in a more or less dominant form make use of dice. It is striking, though, that after the year 2000 the vast majority of these titles are children’s games.



The DSP on the other hand has never had a pure dice game as winner, and while there is a high amount of congruence when comparing the titles on both lists³², only two games with dice have won the DSP award so far (in 1992 *The Flying Dutchman* [Germ. *Der Fliegende Holländer*] and in 1995 *The Settlers of Catan*)³³. No more than six have been nominated since 1990, when the award came into existence, and of those six most were published in the last decade of the 20th century. The latest nominee containing dice as a vital element was *Stone Age*, which won the second place in 2008. The fact that the lists of the SdJ, as well as what the voters of the DSP opted for, show a high amount of overlapping confirms the

³¹ In 2004 *Spooky Stairs* [Germ. *Geistertreppe*], which uses a die with one special side on which a ghost is shown, and in 2006 *The Black Pirate* [Germ. *Der schwarze Pirat*], which makes use of two special dice – one flag die and one depicting ships and the pirate.

³² Of the 74 titles on the list of the DSP only 19 do not also appear on the SdJ-list – although the rankings on both might differ.

³³ Strictly speaking, one could also mention *The Pillars of the Earth* (2006, Germ. *Die Säulen der Erde*). Here, however, the (tax) die constitutes only a marginal element, the omitting of which would not affect the game too much.

assumption that the titles have been highly popular recently and will be known to a wider audience. Therefore it might be safe to utilise this data as a basis for further conclusions.

In the first place, dice (or maybe more precisely, certain forms of their usage) seem to be less appreciated by players themselves (who vote for the DSP and can be considered well versed in board games) than by the SdJ who sees itself in the position to choose for those who do not devote as much time to games as the frequent players. This leads to the second conclusion, that dice for one thing are considered to be for those people who think of *Monopoly* and *Ludo* (or *Mensch ärgere Dich nicht* [1910], respectively), when referring to board games, and that dice of course are one of the main elements in children's games. This downgrading of dice reflects itself in the games listed. If games containing dice are nominated for an award, they are usually not pure dice games or games with a central traditional dice mechanism. Instead they make use of the dice as a more or less important item of the game mechanism, sometimes even merely as a marginal element, but in some cases they introduce a new inventive way to deploy them (e.g. *The Settlers of Catan* 1995, *Yspahan* 2006, *Stone Age* 2008). It can also be observed that dice come into vogue and go out of style again over the years. There has been a tendency since the 1980s for fewer and fewer games with dice to be nominated. It seems, though, that rock bottom was hit in the period around the turn of the millennium, especially between 2002 and 2004. Since then a slight upward tendency can be noted with nominations of games like *That's Life!* (2005³⁴, Germ. *Verflixxt*), *Yspahan* (2007), *High Score* (2007, Germ. *Würfel Bingo*), *Stone Age* (2008), or to a certain degree *Pack & Stack* (2009, Germ. *Zack & Pack*), as well as with the recent trend to publish spinoffs.

The die is cast – some final comments

The die has never lost its popularity, though in modern times certain fluctuations can be observed. Today there are more diverse designs, materials, functions and even forms of the die (or indeed devices with the function of a die) than ever. Some have been lost over the millennia, but many more have been gathered or invented in the recent decades. It is worth noting that older literature on dice (cf. Scarne, 1980) does not differentiate as clearly between different kinds of subcategories of dice games as newer texts³⁵ do, and that it is not always easy to draw a distinct line between 'pure' dice games and games with dice, or to subdivide these main groups again unequivocally (especially as the usage of dice has grown more complex, since game designers are trying to figure out new ways of applying the die to the board game, with a strong tendency towards combining elements from different groups). While the role of the dice in the casino or war simulation games is clear-cut in its basic function, the situation is more complicated in the context of board games. And though

³⁴The following years indicate the year of nomination.

³⁵Cf. the respective classifications of Kastner (2007) and the German Game Archive.

a great number of dice games are published every year³⁶, not many of them make it to the top ranks of the players' awareness. Judging by the choices of the 'Game of the Year' jury³⁷ and the elections for the DSP, it must be concluded that there is a tendency to view games dominated by dice as designed rather for casual gamers and, of course, for children. Board game experts on the other hand appear to consider dice games or games with dice as inferior to (or maybe simply less interesting than) proper strategic games operated by other mechanisms (e.g. by cards). Only once has the SdJ been awarded to a pure dice game, while at the DSP games with dice hardly ever make it to the final three. In both cases, though, the fluctuations in popularity are visible – especially with the SdJ, which has been in existence a decade longer than the DSP. From the 1980s to the turn of the millennium fewer and fewer games with dice were nominated or recommended, although more were produced³⁸.

Recently, though, the trend seems to have reversed itself slightly, and games with dice are returning from their marginalised niche in the children's corner. As mentioned before, spinoffs of successful games keep appearing, and more and more games are published which try to use dice innovatively or at least combine classic techniques in new ways. The spectrum of functions of the die has been enhanced not only in the last century, but especially during the last two to three decades, spanning a range from the vital component to merely a marginal element, and triggering a certain shift of preferences. And pushing, too, a permanent urge for new games combining popular mechanisms (or parts of them) into new entities or introducing altogether new ones. It is, also, remarkable that most of the game authors dealing with dice stick to the classical six-sided one, only varying in the number of dice deployed. One seldom comes across dice with more or less faces or uneven dice. Instead the authors experiment increasingly with dice depicting special elements or symbols and with different functions and ways of using them after rolling. The reason for the unquestioned hegemony of the six-sided die over the other forms (and over devices to create random results) might be seen in its long tradition as the classical form of the die³⁹, or it might simply be the case that six sides usually create a sufficient probability factor or even provide the ideal relation between simplicity and complexity (four faces may be too few and eight faces too many); yet another reason might be the aesthetics of its shape, which even enjoys spiritual and religious appreciation.

While the unpredictability or (partial) arbitrariness of dice might be rejected by strategic minds, it adds a not too incomputable element of chance for those who play games for fun and enjoy the pleasure of rolling the dice. All in all, as has been shown in history, the

³⁶Judging by the list provided by the German Games Archive, for which the authors would like to express their thanks.

³⁷Jury 'Spiel des Jahres'.

³⁸According to the data of the German Games Archive, an average of 33 games per year in the 1980s, 71 in the 1990s and 58 in the 2000s (only considering those games for which a year of publication was given).

³⁹Maybe the fact that this form (in comparison to the other Platonic solids) was the easiest one to be produced might have contributed as well.

die itself will certainly survive many more centuries, if not millennia to come, though it is quite uncertain which dice games or games with dice will survive the next hundred years. The way dice are designed and put to use, though, will surely range from time-tested classic gambling games to all kinds of new variations which game designers will be able to mastermind. So the die reveals itself as a gaming piece which is at the same time enduring and convertible, like a source never running dry, always allowing to draw from it anew. It might be in this sense, as Alexander Randolph suggests: „Perhaps the die is the philosopher’s stone for which men have been looking for eternities. They have already found it, only without knowing it” (Bauer, 1999a, p. 365).

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Kości i ludzie. Rola kości w grach planszowych i stolikowych

Streszczenie

W sferze gier kości należą do najstarszych rekwizytów lub narzędzi hazardu wykorzystywanych przez człowieka dla rozrywki i/lub zarobku. Kości istnieją od tysięcy lat i choć ich kształt oraz materiały, z których zostały wykonane, różniły się na przestrzeni dziejów, pasja związana z ich używaniem pozostała niezmienna. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu zaprezentowanie zarysu historii kości, podkreślenie kilku istotnych faktów dotyczących roli i miejsca kości i hazardu w sztuce, religii i społeczeństwie na przestrzeni wieków. Po umiejscowieniu kości w kontekście historycznym nastąpi analiza obecnego stanu rynku gier planszowych

w Niemczech pod względem roli, jaką kości odgrywały dawniej, oraz zmian, jakie nastąpiły w sferze gier planszowych w ostatnich trzech dekadach.

Of Dice and Men. The role of dice in board and table games

Summary

When it comes to games, dice belong to the oldest playthings or gambling instruments that men have used to pass their time and/or make some money. Dice have existed for millennia, and though their shapes and materials have varied over time the passion for playing with them has been the same the world over. This article is intended to give a brief retrospective into the history of dice, highlighting a few remarkable facts about dice and gambling in the arts, religion and society throughout the centuries. Having placed dice in their historical context, the current situation of the German board game market will be analysed with regards to the question of the role which dice played until modern times and of the recent developments which have been taking place in popular board games over the last three decades.