

## PAST PLAY

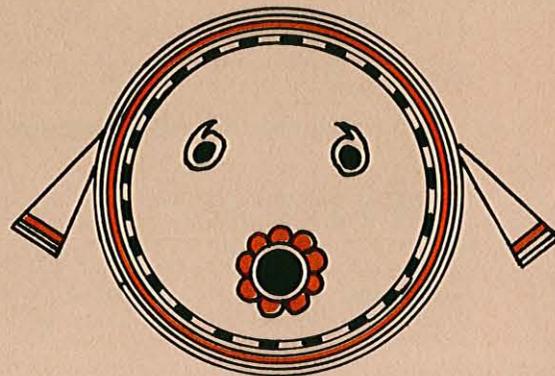
### Summer Exhibit 1985

There are some assumptions that must be evaluated before games and play can be looked at in the distant past. First, the assumption that leisure time is an invention of the modern age has to be abandoned. As a consequence of the industrial revolution, most industrialized peoples have come to believe that leisure time exists only in their "modern" systems and that non-industrial peoples must work continuously to produce enough food to live. But when such societies are studied by anthropologists they have discovered that rarely is all the time devoted to the production of subsistence. On many occasions, especially after the harvest season is over among native peoples, there are periods of inactivity which can generally be translated into our concept of leisure time.

A second problem to be addressed is the nature of the archaeological record. Sites often do not contain a complete picture of the activities of prehistoric societies. Many items have been lost due to destruction by natural forces or the inability of the archaeologist to recognize them for what they represented to the prehistoric people. Determining how an item was used often depends upon the training and experience of the archaeologist, who relies on knowledge of living people using similar items.

It is no surprise, then, that few archaeologists have attempted to identify games and to explain "play" as a part of the past. Oftentimes, items that can not be easily identified as to their function have been assigned to "ritual use" or "ceremonial activities." But if we consciously recognize "leisure time activities" as a valid category, it is possible that items previously unclassified can be explained.

Support for leisure time activities in native societies can be found in the present. Anthropologists have found that certain types of games can be found in widely distributed groups. This could be because games were introduced by Europeans. If this were the case, the name and other aspects of the game would probably reflect their foreign origin. However, this is not the case, as nearly all the Indian games recorded have names and terms specific to the tribal groups where they are found.



An alternative explanation would suggest that similar games come from a common time in the history of Native populations. These games would then have a very long history and, given the antiquity of man in the New World, would have come into the present with little or no modification. This is unlikely given the great diversity of native peoples in other aspects of culture such as language and environment. Nevertheless, similar games are found among widely different peoples. One possible explanation for this situation is that games may be similar because they fulfill a similar need or purpose within the societies where they are found. Thus, it can be assumed that prehistoric people of the Southwest played games similar to those found among people who occupied the area historically.

Anthropologists usually divide games into two categories: games of skill and games of agility. Another division could probably be added: games which prepare children for life as adults. These are games that develop role models. In our own society these games center around parenting and career development. Children frequently devote much care and affection to inanimate objects, such as dolls or stuffed animals. Toy stores are filled with doctor and nurse kits, tools of the firefighter and policemen, and kiddie computers. It can be presumed that the same desire to prepare children for adult life was present in pre-industrial societies.

Finally, a point could be made that prehistoric peoples may have had a slightly different perspective on leisure time: some social, recreational, and religious aspects of leisure may often have been inseparable. On the other hand, like modern societies, group activities like ballgames may simply have functioned to bring people together to reinforce their social values and to have fun!

Since archaeologists have not usually looked for games, it is necessary to re-examine the Southwestern archaeological record with these thoughts in mind. This exhibit is an attempt to do this, with the objective of uncovering possible examples of "past play."

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