

Emily Tran: From the University of Wisconsin—Madison, this is *Ask a Historian*. I'm Emily Tran.

Today on the show: Is the Game of Ur the oldest game in history? Professor Elizabeth Lapina talks to Professor Sarah Thal about the history of games. We'll learn that people have long played games for self-improvement, to demonstrate status, to show respect, and to win friendship or love. As Elizabeth explains, games reveal a lot about the relationships and boundaries within different societies. She says that games were important to people in the past, so they should be important to historians, too.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

Brooklyn: My name is Brooklyn and I'm 11.

Charles: My name is Charles and I'm 44.

Brooklyn: And I'm from Greendale.

Charles: As well as I.

Brooklyn: Is, is the Game of Ur the oldest game in history?

Emily Tran: We have just the person to answer Brooklyn's question here in the UW—Madison History Department. Professor Elizabeth Lapina recently co-edited a new book on the history of games called *Games and Visual Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Today we're listening to her conversation with Professor Sarah.

Elizabeth Lapina: Hello, I'm Elizabeth Lapina. I'm Associate Professor of Medieval History at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, and I study Crusades.

Sarah Thal: I'm Sarah Thal. I'm the David Kuenzi and Mary Wyman Professor of History, and I study Japanese history in the 18th and 19th centuries.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Elizabeth Lapina: Thank you, Brooklyn, for this wonderful question that I had to think about for a few days, because it leads to a much bigger question.

So, what, what is a game? We all know what a game is, but it's something that's not so easy to define. Well, so first of all, a game is something that you choose to engage in, so it's a voluntary activity—unless your kids force you to play a game but still, it's still your choice to say yes or no.

A game is something with binding rules. A game also implies the special feeling of, of not being, not continuing your ordinary day-to-day life. Your ordinary life is suspended for the duration of the game.

So, both animals and humans can, can play, can play games. So, when you throw a stick to dog, you are engaging in a game, sort of a game with your dog. So, what distinguishes a human game from a game that both humans and animals can play? And this is a actually quite difficult philosophical question.

So, the usual answer is that human games imply a degree of abstract thought. So, chimpanzees cannot play chess, as far as we know. Also, human games imply clearly identifiable rules, rules that are spelled out more clearly than games you play with your pet. Also, they imply a more conscious understanding of these rules.

So, when was the first game, and what was the first game played by, by humans? Well here, the answer is easy. We have no idea. We can guess that this was kind of an athletic competition, maybe. So, a prototype of Olympic games, but we have no traces left of the first, first game.

What Brooklyn means, I think, in her question, is she means, "What was the oldest board game in history?" And here we get in trouble again, because 'board game' is a very recent term. 'Board game' appeared only, as a word, appears only in the 19th century. So maybe we should use 'tabletop game.' But here once again, we get in trouble because throughout history, people did not usually play on tables; they played in a wide variety of settings that did not involve tables.

In the 13th century, in the *Book of Games*, games are split into three different categories: games played on foot; games played on horseback; and games played while sitting down. So, this is a category that dates to the Middle Ages, so well beyond the Game of Ur, but still, it's an older category than board games.

So, when was the first game played sitting down? Once again, we have no clue. Game of Ur survives only because it was a luxury item that was buried with a king. Most games have not survived. And sometimes, maybe they have survived but all archaeologists find is tokens, and they have no idea how those tokens were used, in what context they were used.

So, the Game of Ur is one of the oldest tabletop games. I will use this term, even though it's, it's not exactly correct. One of the oldest games in history. But *senet* in Egypt is a bit older than the Game of Ur, and it also survived because it was a luxury item buried with a pharaoh.

Sarah Thal: This is really interesting because in both of these cases, you know about these games because they were buried with very powerful people. What other evidence do historians have that they can use to learn about games?

Elizabeth Lapina: Well, first of all, what I think historians need to do and what historians have started doing is working with other scholars, because we don't have a lot of evidence, but we have different types of evidence.

We have references to games in literature. In the sagas, for example, we have visual depictions of games. We have miniatures or paintings of people playing games. We have— so, hardcore historical

sources. So, for example, laws banning games in this particular context or that particular context. And we also have archaeological evidence. So, in the in the volume I co-edited, scholars from all sorts of different disciplines came together to discuss games.

So, archaeological evidence can be, can be something as exciting as the Lewis chessmen, so one of the most amazing works of art from the Middle Ages. Much of the time it's much less exciting. So, I guess the most common type of archeological evidence we find of games from the Middle Ages is boards of a game called nine men's morris that nobody plays now, I don't think. And those games were scratched on stone, sort of [indistinct] graffiti of boards etched in stone, in all sorts of different contexts. For example, in monasteries, you go into cloisters—so, monastic courtyards—and there you find a board game as the board of nine men's morris. We assume that monks played this game during their free time.

And you find it all over the place. One of the strangest places that archaeologists have found nine men's morris is the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. So, one of the most important churches of medieval Christendom and there, one assumes that people were bored during service and they played nines men's morris. And we still have the graffiti of the of the board on a balustrade in Hagia Sophia.

Sarah Thal: That's fascinating. I'm curious: you mentioned your recent book. You've recently published a co-edited volume called *Games and Visual Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* and I'm wondering, why publish a book about this? Did games play a particularly important role in the European Middle Ages and Renaissance, or is there something distinctive about games at that time?

Elizabeth Lapina: Oh, well, I think we look down at games a little bit. Today, we think of games as something that children play, or sort of leisure, entertainment, something that's not, not serious. And up to today—and possibly even today—games were very serious business.

So, for example, take Snakes and Ladders. We all know Snakes and Ladders. I think it's a pretty boring children's game that my kids sometimes force me to play. But it was this serious, serious game for some people, for example the Sufis. So, Sufis are Muslim mystics who played Snakes and Ladders. They played Snakes and Ladders very differently from how I played, and the boards were very different from our boards. For them, Snakes and Ladders was a prop for meditation. So, their board was split into squares, and each square had a word, and some squares were connected with each other by either snakes or ladders.

So, they would throw a dice—so, those Muslim mystics—and they would advance to a square. They would read the word, they would meditate on this word, they would discuss this word with, with their teachers or with each other. And sometimes they would go up as you do in Snakes and Ladders, and sometimes you get demoted, you go down.

So, for example, your token moved to 'bad conversation,' and there would be a mouth of a snake on this, on the square. And you would move the token from 'bad conversation' to 'ignorance,' and this would be a catalyst for lengthy conversation about how bad conversation leads to ignorance.

So, Snakes and Ladders could be, could be very serious business in wide, in a wide variety of contexts both in Western Europe and in the, in the Middle East as well.

Sarah Thal: This is fascinating because you're talking about games— you know, in our society, we play games to have fun, we play games to win. And here, you're talking about games as a means of meditation or maybe even preaching. Are there are other things that people played games for that seems strange to us today?

Elizabeth Lapina: Oh, yeah. Well, in this case it's preaching, it's meditation, it's self-improvement, yeah, as well; so, you improve yourself by, by playing this game.

Also, well, we play, as you mentioned, we play games to win. And in the Middle Ages in different contexts, you didn't play games to win, especially with chess. You played chess to demonstrate that you belonged to the elite, that you belonged to the aristocracy, to the warrior aristocracy. And both men and women showed their belonging to this special class by playing chess. So, just by playing, you show that you belong.

And in many cases, it was not even important to win. In some cases, you lost. You lost intentionally and your opponent sometimes knew that you lost intentionally. This was a game, game within a game. You lost in order to show your respect for your opponent. You lost to a lady to win her love. You lost to somebody to show to show your friendship, your desire for this person's friendship. So you lost the game in order to win friendship or in order to win love.

So, so yeah. So, games were much more integrated in life than they are, than they are today, when they are really separated from our ordinary life much of the time.

Sarah Thal: It's interesting, it brings to mind people playing golf, you know, business associates playing golf with each other and networking through their golf games, right, and throwing the game.

Elizabeth Lapina: I wonder if you lose intentionally in golf, sometimes, just to show your— to push your opponent—

Sarah Thal: I'm sure. I'm sure some people do, yeah.

Elizabeth Lapina: —I don't play golf.

Sarah Thal: And you know, and it brings to mind for me, you know, here I study, you know, medieval and early modern Japan. And we talk a lot about the tea ceremony and poetry circles and sort of these cultural, you could call them— actually, poetry circles are essentially language games, poetry games that people play often sitting under the cherry blossoms admiring the trees. And, you know, very much these social interactions. And I, that's sort of what I envision people doing in the Middle Ages in Europe.

Were these games that were— mostly two-person games? Sort of, four-person games? Or were they more open-ended?

Elizabeth Lapina: Well, we have games such as chess that are obviously for two people, plus the spectators. So, often it was a spectator sport. You showed your skills and you showed your ability to play the game, to keep calm whether you lost the won et cetera to, to an audience. But of course with dice, many people played. So, dice was a game that everybody played. It was much more common and it could involve, and usually involved, multiple, multiple players.

Sarah Thal: Interesting. So, when I hear dice, you know, from books I've read and things like that, I get the image of dice games being, like, a man's game, that a bunch of men would get together and gamble or play dice, throw dice or something. Was that true and was there, were there games that were associated with different genders, for instance?

Elizabeth Lapina: Well, first of all, dice— for example, chess could be a dice game, really. Sometimes, chess was played in such a way that you threw dice in the beginning and your initial position was determined by, by the dice.

Sarah Thal: Wow.

Elizabeth Lapina: Yeah, so, so there was no clear distinction between dice and board games, what we call board games.

But different, different genders were definitely involved in different games through much of the Middle Ages. I'm, I'm a historian of the Crusades, and there was one, one chronicle where a man and a woman were playing dice at, during a siege. So, two crusaders—of course crusaders, some of them were women—So, two crusaders, one male, one female were playing dice during the siege, because sieges tend to be very boring, boring times for an army. And then they were ambushed and taken prisoner. So, there was a sortie from, from the town and they were taken prisoner and killed. Yeah, so we do have women playing dice, and men playing dice, including together, including with each other.

Of course, in this case, it's a bit complicated because, as with any primary source, we don't know to what extent this describes a real situation or it was just a warning: 'Don't play dice. Pay attention to what's going on. Pay attention to the siege. Don't interact with women unless you really have to.'

So, yeah, so both genders played games in different ways. As I mentioned, with chess in the context of courtly culture, you played chess as a man with a woman, but you were expected to lose, especially if you liked the woman, you try to lose.

In other contexts, men and women— So the women and men, they played, but not really as, as equals, because a man would not try his best in this case. But in some cases, they played as, as absolute equals, at least as far as we can tell from, from, from the sources.

For example, there's an old Irish tale from the ninth century—what used to be called the Dark Ages—and it includes a lament of an abandoned wife. So, a wife just doesn't understand why her husband left her. And one of the things she mentions is that she played a game of *fidchell* with him, and she was as good as he was at *fidchell*. She says, 'Well, our marriage-long score was even. I won as many games as he during our marriage. So why did he leave me? I was as intelligent as he was.' And she doesn't, doesn't, doesn't understand that. So, we can imagine those people, those couples in Ireland—well, upper-class couples in Ireland in the ninth century—playing *fidchell* together and really trying to win, both the husband and the wife.

Sarah Thal: This is interesting because it gives you a window into how people thought about the relationship of the genders and marriage, right? If clearly, she thought that, you know, 'Why would he leave? I've proven myself as equal,' and that's a good thing whereas, you know, we certainly know

of other historical times where the wife would be, 'Why did he leave? I shouldn't have won so many games against him,' or something like that, right?

Elizabeth Lapina: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

Sarah Thal: So, this sounds— this is fascinating because it gives us an insight into why historians study games. I mean, here, here, now we have this view of gender relations we might not have from another source. But why else do you study games? Because most people, many people, think of history as being about politics and wars and things like that. But it seems that games don't necessarily give you that much insight into that. So, why, why do you study games?

Elizabeth Lapina: Well, some historians say that you can diagnose a civilization by looking at the games that the civilization or this culture plays: which games are played, how they're played who is playing, in what context, et cetera.

So, just, just if we think about 20th century American history: Yeah, of course we can study the old diplomatic sources, et cetera. But our understanding of 20th century American history would be incomplete without understanding the game of *Monopoly*. And that same, same for the Middle Ages, especially since, in the Middle Ages—and before and after—many people defined themselves by those games. So, somebody who had a chessboard at home—this is all you had to know about this person, that he had an ivory chessboard at home. And this is all that mattered, because this defined him as somebody powerful, as somebody wealthy, as somebody sophisticated, as somebody belonging to the elite, and something that he celebrated—he or sometimes she, but usually still usually he.

So, so two reasons. First of all, yeah, we, we learn about the societies: about gender, about relations between different groups, about boundaries between different groups, either economic or ethnic or cultural or religious. We can learn about challenges to those boundaries as well, by looking, looking at games. So that's the first reason. And the second reason is games were serious to those people. Games were very important to them, so they should be important to us as well.

Sarah Thal: Can you think of an instance in which games are central to the politics of the time? Say, for instance, did, say, a revolutionary group or a rebellious group play a certain game that the authorities then clamped down on or something like that?

Elizabeth Lapina: I can think of several examples. Well, not, not, not the kind that you mentioned, but— For example, when a Muslim group called the Assassins wanted to become friends with, wanted to ally themselves with Louis IX, so crusader King Louis IX, what did they do? They sent him a chess set. So, this was a statement: 'Look, we're actually very similar to you. We have the same occupation, we are equally sophisticated, so let's become allies.'

And, and with chess, it's quite interesting because when crusaders came to the Holy Land, they discovered they had much more in common with the Muslim elites than they had their own peasants. They also played chess and chess was something that really defined them. So, this is just one example of chess playing an important part in politics.

Also, in the, when in the 15th century, non-aristocrats, wealthy merchants, wealthy burghers, tried to, tried to break into the upper classes and to show that they were as good as the upper classes,

what did they begin to do? They began to play chess. They began to learn the rules and learn all this imagery associated with chess.

So, one of the oldest books that were printed in the 15th century was about chess, because all those wealthy merchants wanted to learn more about chess, wanted to learn all the imagery associated with chess. And this book is quite, quite interesting because it depicts different figures as different members of medieval society, and including, including all the pawns for different types of artisans in this, in this, in this case.

Sarah Thal: That's fascinating because then it explains one reason why chess is such a long-lasting game—because it's been associated with power and prestige, right? And also, why it turns up in so much literature, all these references to being somebody's pawn or checkmate or—right?

So, do you find— And you mentioned this different chess set with the pieces representing other people in society. Do you have any sense of when our current chess sets, these pieces became— the identity of these pieces became stable? Because they, they certainly suggest to me a kind of medieval European theme. Were they? Were they castles and knights and, and the queen and king and pawns in medieval Europe?

Elizabeth Lapina: Yeah, well, just first to go back to your point about chess and power. Chess was also believed to be training for war. This was believed to be training for general strategic thinking, the same kind of thinking you would use in warfare. So, this is why this was a aristocrat's game par excellence.

Yeah, when it came to chess, none of those games were stable. All of those games changed all the time. And they were played in weird, weird ways, like, like I mentioned, using, using dice. And also, chess was a game of gambling. You always—nearly always—played with stakes. So, it was not just, just entertainment. It was gambling.

When the figures, modern figures, emerged, I'm not sure. I know they underwent a lot of transformations, including one of the most important transformations, the appearance of the queen as the most powerful figure. This was one of the biggest changes. So, from the wazir, so from sort of a prime minister, to the king, to the queen, who is much more powerful than the king.

Sarah Thal: I've never thought of it that way. That's fascinating. So, if, if chess and other games were caught up in gambling, were these— I mean, now we have all sorts of rules about gambling and, and state-run gambling, you know, lotteries, things like that. What was the role of games in terms of gambling and did the authorities tried to control them?

Elizabeth Lapina: Oh yes, they did, yeah, because— Well, in Western Europe it was believed, sometimes rightly, that gambling was accompanied by alcohol and by violence and promiscuity. So, the problem was not gambling itself but the things that gambling led to. And of course, playing with a different gender, that in some people's perspective was problematic as well.

So yes, we do have various attempts to control gambling, especially by specific towns that would either try to ban gambling, but that was a problem because gambling could be taxed. So, they did what, actually, modern political entities do, towns, et cetera, states. They established, I guess,

[indistinct] casinos. So, places where you could gamble. Sometimes those places could not sell alcohol at the same time, sometimes they could. Church authorities also tried to limit gambling.

One of the ways was to limit stakes; to say, 'If you are a non-noble, you can only gamble so much in one day.' Well, of course, those limits were not necessarily followed, and we know this, we know it because, because new bans appeared, new ways to control gambling, and none of them really worked.

And sometimes, punishments were very severe for gambling when there was a ban. For example, during one of the Crusades, if you gambled more than a specific sum and you were a non-noble, you would be keelhauling, so dragged beneath the ship's body. So, quite a, quite a gruesome punishment for gambling too much, for losing too much money.

Sarah Thal: Fascinating. It's really interesting to me all of this study of games *now*. Before this volume that you and your colleague put out, you and your colleagues put out, did people study games much in Middle Ages and Renaissance?

Elizabeth Lapina: Well, I think there's a, there's a preconception that games are unchanging, that we always play games the same, the same way. And the association of games with childhood: it's something that children do, so it's not interesting. So, this has persisted for quite a long time.

And even when other historians began to study games, medievalists, actually were late, latecomers to this to this field. And even archaeologists— Now, archaeologists go back to what they found, and look for whether they actually found some games before because they were not looking for games, they were not interested in games until relatively recently.

So yes, there was a stigma attached to studying games. Why do you study games? It's just not, not interesting, unchanging, not important. So, this is a relatively new, new subfield in medieval studies, I mean, 20 years old.

Sarah Thal: I guess it's related to, you know, us taking games more and more seriously in our society now with, you know, universities starting games studies programs and, and people, students, learning computer science in order to design games and the recognition that games really, as you say, are not just— Just as in the medieval period, games now are not just for children as well, right?

There's all sorts of— There's a whole boom going in board games and as well as of course video games that are getting so fascinating and sophisticated. What do you think about the current games about the Middle Ages, whether they're board games or video games? Do you run into any ever?

Elizabeth Lapina: Well, with video games, I ran into *Civilization* when I was much younger, and this was not a very productive encounter.

Sarah Thal: [Laughter]

Elizabeth Lapina: And so, I realized quickly that it was taking over my life, and that I was not getting enough sleep. And I just did not— stopped playing *Civilization*, and never really looked into other games since, because I just know that it's not, not, not good for me. And my children are too small to introduce me to this world of video games.

But at the same time, I don't think there's only one way to engage with history which is our way, academic way. There are plenty of different legitimate ways to engage, engage with the past. And also, well, as long as they're having fun with history, that's, that's great, because history is a lot of fun. And if this is the idea that video games convey, awesome.

And I know I've had several students who played *Assassin's Creed*, and who then went on to write essays, research papers on the Assassins because it was the game that inspired them. And those were excellent papers using primary sources, engaging with historiography, et cetera. So, sometimes video games of historical subjects lead to interest in history and desire to learn more and brings students to my classroom, which is which I think is awesome.

Even if it doesn't, even if video games just remain sort of a hobby that doesn't lead to a history major, I still, I think it's great to put oneself in the shoes of somebody, somebody from the past, to identify with somebody from a different culture. Also, some of the best video games—once again, I don't know them firsthand, I know secondhand—such as *Crusader Kings*, for example, it just shows you that history is not about facts and names and dates and memorizing those. But it's about real people and decisions they make, and those decisions have consequences, and this is how history, history is made. And I think it's a very important idea to understand and this is found in video games.

Yeah, with board games, I have not— Well, *Carcassonne*, but I don't think *Carcassonne*— It's a fun game, but I don't think it's really, really medieval. That doesn't introduce you to too many medieval topics other than just, well, there were castles and monasteries, et cetera.

Sarah Thal: But it does seem to appeal to this, I don't know, this fantasy that people have of going back to a pre-industrialized world. You know, so many—whether they're games or, you know, fantasy books or movies or whatever, seemed to envision, sort of, a medieval European, usually European world of, of castles and guilds and, and nobility. Why do you think that is? Why do you think we're so fascinated by medieval Europe now in a fun way?

Elizabeth Lapina: Well, before we discuss the fun way, I just would like to mention that there is a less, unfortunately less fun way, or quite disturbing way to engage with the Middle Ages, which is to use medieval imagery and some parts—usually misunderstood—of medieval history to prop up different ideology, usually white supremacist ideologies. And this, this subculture that is interested in using the Middle Ages but in a very specific way to push their ideology, to find a basis or foundation or legitimacy, so they think, of their ideology. It's still, it's very much present, for example, in the gaming world. And I'm not saying it's the fault of games, of game designers. I'm not saying that people who are playing games are white supremacists. But the subculture, is, is there. And if you play games, you should be aware that you can possibly encounter it. But you can, you can stay away from it.

So why, why the Middle Ages? Well, all sorts of different reasons. I think it's just the strangeness that attracts us, the difference from, from today's world. So, it's— I guess it's a way to escape today's world. And then you can study it seriously and realize that you don't escape it. Many of the same problems that we encounter they also had, many of the same issues they also had, or they date back to the Middle Ages.

Sarah Thal: Great. Well, I guess we've ranged far afield from the original question about Ur, but this has been a fascinating foray into medieval Europe, games and entertainment and gambling and society. I mean, I can see why you and your colleagues have gotten so interested in using the lens of games to look at this period, because it just, it seems to provide a very different perspective that really highlights the importance of everyday life and social difference and all the, sort of, politics that go along with that, that we don't usually think of because we're, you know, in school often we're thinking oh, kings and queens and guilds and wars and that kind of thing.

So, this has been absolutely fascinating. Well, thank you so much. This is great.

Elizabeth Lapina: Thank you, Sarah. This was wonderful.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

Emily Tran: We're always looking for questions about the past to bring to our historians. You can send your question for historian to outreach@history.wisc.edu.

Today's episode of *Ask a Historian* was produced and edited by me, Emily Tran. Special thanks to Christina Matta and Andrew Wells.

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Thank you for listening and take care.