A year ago a friend of mine, who knows of my interest for games, told me he had seen an object I had to search on the Internet—a ceramic tile with a game on it!

My reply was that a lot of these tiles—displaying games—were manufactured in the 17th Century. But he said, “No, no, this is completely different; this is an object for playing a game.”

At last, after a period of trial and error, there was a “hit” under the heading “SPELTEGEL.” The tile (inv. No. 08999) was part of the collection of the Nederlands Tegelmuseum at Otterlo (since 2006), and it was just what I was looking for.

To get additional information on the subject I phoned Mr. Johan Kamermans from the museum, and he was kind enough to mail me a copy of his article in the “Bulletin van de Vereniging Rembrandt” (vol. 17, no. 3, najaar 2007. Johan Kamermans, Speltegel, p. 23-25).

In the meantime Rob van Linden put a picture of the tile (Figure 2) on the website HONGS and also found a reference in a journal.

This tile, auctioned in 1977, is from the 18th Century (and not the mentioned 19th Century in the journal’s text). It became part of the collection of Mr. A.Vrij from Leenen a/d Vecht, who later sold it to the museum in 2006.

In his article, Mr. Kamermans also mentions a tile with a similar game in the collection of the “Museum voor Schone Kunsten” in Brussels, as well as four other tiles with a different game.

He refers to the publication “Vormen uit Haar,” author Jan Duus van Din and published in 1999—“Delft” uit de provincie; Mededelingenblad Nederlandsche vereniging van vorsten van ceramiek en glas 168/169—ISSN 0217-748X. He also, out of the sample in their library, sent me some photocopies of the pages with pictures of the boards of both kinds of games as published in the magazine. A few months later, I was lucky enough to locate a sample of the magazine in a bookshop in Amsterdam.

Are there more?

I think both Rob van Linden and I tried to find additional examples of these or other games on tiles, and/or to get more information about these kind of items or related objects. But as it turned out, these were it!

As far as we know, from the time around the last part of the 18th Century, no references to or mentioning of playing these games can be found in books, journals, or in told stories.

I also contacted Mrs. Valérie Montans of the Collective Keramiek en Glas (Department of Ceramics and Glass) of the “Kernzijdige Musea voor Schone Kunst en Geschiedenis” in Brussels. She did provide the “Sequence of Numbers” on one tile that was badly pictured in “Vormen uit Haar” and referred to their photographic library, where Mrs. Greet van Dierens provided a good photo, in high resolution, of the object nr. Ev. 399.
To put it in its historic context we must look at the evolution of the Dutch tile-baking industry from the turn of the century after 1700 A.D.

At the end of the 18th Century, the Dutch tile-baking industry, outside of Delft, in its struggle to survive, began to innovate. Looking for new items to market and sell, two different manufacturers, one located in Rotterdam, the other from Amsterdam, had developed and produced a game. From Rotterdam, two (maybe three) tiles featuring a game survived, and from Amsterdam, four such tiles promoting another game are still present.

I now had enough material and information about the tiles as pottery objects; now I would go deeper and look at the games themselves on the tiles.

In two chapters I will analyze both types of games, one per chapter.

CHAPTER 1: ROTTERDAM

Tiles from the Tile bakery “Het Wapen van Dantzig”: Hoogstraat, Rotterdam. Period: 1765-1780

A second tile (Figure 4) with a similar board is also known from the same period. It was manufactured at “Het Wapen van Dantzig” in Rotterdam, and in the collection of the “Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis” in Brussels/Belgium, Inv. No Ev. 388.

Recently, a third tile, shown above (Figure 5) depicting a similar board, has come to light. The image of this tile was seen on the Internet but soon thereafter it was removed. Its whereabouts at the moment are unknown.

Mr. Kamermann believes this tile is a forgery. A different picture may have been, through the use of Photoshop, placed in the above tile. Looking at the ring with the numbers shown on the Figure 3 tile at left, I also think it is a fake, but you never know.

The images on the two “similar” tiles below are for merchants, but on the tile shown in Figure 4 at left, it displays a moralistic statement because of the two fighting men: “Dat komt Door het Speellen” (Look where gambling leads to).

Typical Dutch! Trade is first, but after that, it still points to the moral.

As mentioned before, the Dutch tile-baking industry was in decline in the early part of the 18th Century. New products for emerging markets had to be found in order to survive, so some firms started to innovate. The firm “Het wapen van Dantzig” from Rotterdam thought of something different—a new product to strengthen their position on the market.

Going beyond their standard tile size of (13 x 13 cm. = 5 x 5 ‘dram’), they produced a much larger tile: 17 x 17 cm. and 17.4 x 17.4 cm. These new items were not to be just simple wall decorations, but instead were to be used as a tool for a game—the underlay part for a spinner. In the middle of the tile was a hole obviously designed for an arrow to circle around.

The Rotterdam Game and its Rules

But what kind of game board are we looking at? And what kind of game is played on or with the board?

In fact, it is not a game board per se, but a tool to play a game. Like the “Uilenborden” (see Addendum 1 which follows) from the 17th Century, it gives the information needed for a hazard-like game.

The hole in the middle of the tile is used for a pin with an arrow that can rotate around. In his turn, the player spins the arrow, and when it stops, the arrow points to information on how much the player must pay (“T” = text) or how much he can take (“T” = trick) from the POT = the stake, (which is filled before the start of the game or round by the players).

There are two instructions that differ from these: AL = Take all, and HL/HALF = Take half, thus, respectively, take all of the money or take half of the money out of the POT. When the POT is empty, the game starts over again.

In fact this was not so much of an innovation. It was just a different form of an already existing game. Deviating from the “Uilenbord,” players used dice to gamble. A number and a board with an information table indicated what to do next. Here, they were combined—the game material and information table, brought together by the one “Spinner.”
The Rotterdam Game Rules continued

In his article in the “Bulletin van de Vereniging Rembrandt” Mr. Kamermans suggests that the tile’s inner circle was used (perhaps) for gambling with higher stakes.

But the numbers on the inner circle certainly have no added value or meaning for the above described gambling game.

Could it be a SECOND game?

In my opinion, yes. There is another known game that can be played with this tile using just the numbers: HET RAD VAN FORTUIN (the Wheel of Fortune).

The object of the game is to get the highest score in as few turns as possible, without exceeding the total score of 100. There is of course a stake that has to be paid into first and which must be raised in subsequent turns.

In his turn, each player spins the arrow to get a number. If one player achieves exactly 100, he wins the pool immediately. If not, there are two possible ways to continue the game:

- a player is allowed to stop and hold his number or his added numbers as a total. But a player still has to pay the stake to stay in the game.

- When all players either stop, or are out of play, the player with the highest score wins the pool.

- b) a player must always spin the arrow to stay in play. If a player exceeds a score of 100, he is out of the game. Getting exactly 100 is an immediate win. The last player who stays in play also wins.

CHAPTER II: AMSTERDAM

Tiles from the Tilebakerij “Waar d’Oude Prima uithang”; Anjeliersstraat, Amsterdam. Period: 1760-1775

Collection of the Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis in Brussels/Belgium.

Inv. No Ev. 399

There are more similar looking tiles known, also from the same firm.

The tile above was a puzzle in itself. The photo, published in “Hermen uit Puur” (page 48; picture 32) was so vague that none of the numbers in the outer ring were visible.

After receiving a good picture from the Photographic Library (Figure 6), the picture in the magazine still looked different until I realized the print was a “mirror image”.

Rijksmuseum Amsterdam:
Inv. No. BK-NM-14115

None of these four tiles are the same size:

The first tile (Figure 6) measures 38.5 x 38.5 cm. The next three respectively are (Figure 7) 43 x 43 cm.; (Figure 8) 25.5 x 25.5 cm.; and (Figure 9) 23.2 x 23.2 cm.

The first two tiles also have raised modeled rims.

Gemeentemuseum Den Haag,
Inv. No. OCD 3101904

All four tiles have a Compass Rose in the inner circle. Also, the tiles have eight sections with one horsemen in each section pictured in the second ring from the inside. The outer (third) ring contains numbers.

Only two tiles (Figures 6 and 8) have survived and include the arrow, making it a complete “spinner.”

Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis, Brussels
Inv. No. Ev. 397

The research done by Mr. Jan Damill van Dam for “Hermen uit Puur” tells us more about who painted these tiles from Amsterdam. The painters for Figures 8 and 9 are, respectively: Adam Siebel and Gerrit de Graaf.
At first, the tile in Figure 6 did not give any clue because of its “mirrored” image. But in its proper position the top-right shield denotes the ‘initials’ CW and the year, Ao 1764. Although Mr. van Dam mentions other painters by their initials, he does not include a painter with the initials CW.

For the game painted on the tiles be only refers to it as SPEL (game) and gives no further information to which kind of game we are looking at.

In his article, Mr. Kamermans only relays, “Het bedrijf hier evenwens een kansspel met een ronddraaiende wijzer, maar veroor hertinnert reeds aan de ‘aleenspel’.” (It here concerns also a game of chance with a round-turning arrow, but further nothing reminds us of the ‘aleenspel’.) The reference used in the Musae is “a kind of ROULETTE.”

But is that a correct assumption?

When we look at the game of ROULETTE, the main features are the use of the “0” (zero), and a total of other numbers counting 1-36, and the use of two colors—red and black—for the odd and even numbers. The sequence of the numbers, starting with 1 and going clockwise is standardized:


And there are 4 series of connected numbers:

1) 1 - 20 - 14 - 31 - 9 - 22 - 18 - 29
2) 7 - 28 - 12 - 35 - 3 - 26 - 0 - 32 - 15 - 19 - 4 - 21 - 2 - 25 - 17 - 34 - 6 - 27 - 13 - 36 - 11 - 30 - 8 - 23 - 10 - 5 - 24 - 16 - 33

For ROULETTE it is just as important, besides using a spinner, to have a table (or a table-cloth) with all the numbers represented in sections for betting—to lay down your money or chips on the desired location.

I was unable to compare such things with the same features used on the tiles from Amsterdam. I did not trace any existence of a play-table or play-cloth, with identical numbers as pictured on the tiles, for the here described game (or maybe 4 games?).

The Amsterdam Game and its Rules

In fact, the game (or games) to be played with these tiles is (are) a mystery.

First the Horsemen:

• All of the tiles are comprised of eight sections, and within each section there is one horseman. Most of the men are sitting on their horse, but in Figure 7 two are standing next to their horse.

• Figure 6 shows four men moving/looking in one direction, and four men moving/looking in the opposite direction.

• Figure 7 displays two men standing and two men moving/looking counterclockwise and four men moving/looking clockwise.

• Figure 8 has five men moving/looking counterclockwise and three men moving/looking clockwise.

• Figure 9 shows all of the men moving/looking counterclockwise.

In his article, Mr. Kamermans describes these horsemen:

“Het geschilderde decor wordt op de tegels steeds gevormd door een reeks van acht ruiters die betrokken zijn bij een vaarwegchart.” (The painted setting on the tiles is always a succession of eight horsemen involved in a gunfight.)

I do not think this is correct. What I see represented are horsemen, sometimes with a "reaper" (Dutch for a "kind of scythe") in their hands. But there are no guns (rifles) or a fight. Does this have any significance for a (the) game? I have no idea!

It seems logical to think of only one game, executed in four different designs. But for three of the tiles (Figures 6, 7, and 9), the eight sections with the horsemen are directly linked with an amount of numbers in the outer ring. But in Figure 8, the distribution of the numbers is from the middle of each part with the horsemen. A different interpretation of the game by the painter?

The sequences of the numbers in the outer ring are different for all four tiles. Also, the amounts of the numbers differ—one with 48; one with 32; and two with 24.

Looking at the sequence of the numbers divided by the 8 sections, we find, starting with number 1 and going in a clockwise direction, the following pattern:

Note: the sections are separated by a ‘/’

For Figure 6 (48 numbers):

The painter made an error by using the number 27 twice and forgetting number 48!

For Figure 7 (32 numbers):
1 - 30 - 4 - 27 - 12 - 19 - 6 - 25 - 14 - 9 - 22 - 11 - 18 - 13 - 28 - 3 - 32 - 5 - 26 - 7 - 24 - 10 - 17 - 21 - 16 - 23 - 20 - 15 - 8 - 29 - 2 - 31 - continuing on with 1 ........

For Figure 8 (24 numbers):
1 - 24 - / 3 - 22 - 5 - 20 - 7 - 18 - 9 - 16 - 11 - 13 - 15 - 23 - 4 - 21 - 6 - 19 - 8 - 10 - 17 - 12 - 14 - continuing on with 1 ........

For Figure 9 (24 numbers):
1 - 23 - / 11 - 19 - 13 - 3 - 18 - 9 - 21 - 10 - 5 - 17 - 24 - 2 - 14 - 6 - 12 - 22 - 7 - 16 - 14 - 15 - 20 - 8 - continuing on with 1 ........

I cannot find any logic in the above. So, we are looking at “a game with such rules” that allow it to be played with different components?

Let us review what we know:

1) The game uses a “spinner.”
2) When the arrow of the spinner stops, it points to a certain number.
3) Perhaps the number is related to a section with a horseman.
4) Perhaps the “move/look” direction of the horsemen has a meaning.
5) No additional game material has been found.
6) Similar components are always used for games of chance where betting is involved.

The final conclusion has to be:

This is not a ROULETTE-like game because it lacks the most important number for such a game, the ‘0’ (zero).

In Addendum 2, several similar games are listed. However, none of them offer any clue as to how to answer either of these questions for this game—"how to play" or "which might be the rules."

It seems like the tiles can be used with its “spinner” for a kind of chance-like game, but the rules will stay a mystery.

I wish to thank the following individuals for their valuable help:

Johan Kamermans, Valérie Montans; Greet van Deursen; Thierry Depaus; Anas Horner; Nick Neuwahl; and Rob van Linden.

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In French I call these devices “tourniquets,” not “roulette.” They may have connections to Roman or Arabic figures, or they may have dice as pictured below. I strongly suspect the arrow to be modern.

Lhôtes refers to my old article in Le Vieux Papier “Loteries de salon” (1987), where I tried to trace the predecessors of modern roulette, like hoca, biribi (torbca), eagnoge, and other gambling games using numbered balls placed into a bag. But I did not study those employing a rotating “needle.”

Now, if you are interested in this kind of object, I remember having seen similar devices in an exhibition in Austria called “Drahendl” (or “Drehbrech”) which showed not dice but playing cards! But they were not made of ceramic material.


I queried the museum for more information, and I received a reply from Anna Horner. She mailed the following picture of their game board:

With this explanation: “We have one of those “Drahendl.” These are games which were especially played with at the “Krichug”—a feast and marketplace where all the people living in villages nearby would come to buy objects or animals, to meet, to dance, and to play. It is similar to a roulette game.

Our “Krichugsdrandel” is made out of wood with a painted surface. It is dated 1802. The Italian inscription round the circumference of the wheel reads as follows: “OERFA IL BENE PER NON CHADEREI MALE NON-STATE OCIOSE, INO MAYEDUE. 1802.”

The inscription warns the players they should keep in mind to play honestly: “Follow the good, not to be tempted. Repress your passion.”

We do not have an exact description of the Rules for the Game. We only know that it is seen as the “rural ancestor” of Roulette. There were complex rules, but not as complex as Roulette rules nowadays. There were different possibilities of setting chips with high and low chances to win or to lose. You will set chips and afterwards the hand will be moved—the hand is the ancestor of the ball in the roulette nowadays.”

Collectie Piet Bénard, Glrum weilingcatalogus 2003 (boumenning voor publiek gegeven aan 1: Hanno door Glrum)

Addendum 2 — “Similar Objects”

In my search for similar objects I found an example in “Lhôtes.” Photo at right. However, the game table is from nearly a century earlier, and only the photo is given without any further description.

Thierry Depaulis’s name is within the text, but there is no explanation for, or object of, or interpretation of the game you can play with it.

I asked him: “Can you give me more information?”

His answer: “Unfortunately I do not know more than you.”

Wheel of Fortune;
Inv. No. F 1574
Spruce, dated 1802, Trentino

The Wheel of Fortune was a popular game on market and feast days, and an added attraction at the rifle range.
Thereafter she did send me a longer article: "Drehwal, Travnel, Drehbrett—Bauerisches Dreipiel mit aufgehaltener Spielkarten," with more of these games out of their collection and an extended description of the rules.

A lecture's worth, but not now and not in relation to the ceramic game tiles. We can find two more examples in books on games published in Germany.

1) In "Das Spiele-Buch" Erwin Glonnegger, 1999; ISBN 3-9806792-0-9

On page 62 there is a picture and a description of a game titled GLÜCKSRAD:

II) SPIEL, SPIELE, KINDERSPIEL

Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg 1985

On page 48 there is a picture and a description of a game with the title EIN OFFEN KARTENSPIEL:


Fribourg, 3—"Lecture in Fribourg"

Niek Neuwahl refers to a lecture which Mr. Giampaolo Dossena should have held on BGS in Fribourg: Wheels of Fortune, among the foremen of Roulets.

Mr. Dossena was unable to participate and Niek read his (original Italian) text in English.

I have added parts of this text, as explication, to the list of pictures.

His list of pictures presented was:

1. Nobilissimo gioco della Mea (Petaia-Mea), Venice, end 18th Century, Dossena 2000, page 45

Both Games are missing an arrow/spinner.

But Glonnegger gives for game I—rules for a game that must be played with four dice, and in my opinion, this has to be correct because the ring with the numbers start with number 4. This also corresponds with the use of "Nietenfelder"—"not paying fields" on the most thrown numbers (think of the Gauss-function when using 4 dice).

In game II, the rules referred to a "Zieger" and that must be the missing arrow.

Addendum 3—"Lecture in Fribourg"

Last year an 18th century Italian game had been discovered in a villa near Florence. "Mea" is a feminine name like others we find in Italian games.
These games feature a round table, generally divided by rays into 12 or 24 sections like clocks. Each section bears a number and/or an image. In this engraving above from Bologna, there are 12 sections.

The round table bears a pin in its center, with an arrow connected to the pin. The arrow is spun, and rotates until it stops upon one section. Mr. Donnera refers to the arrow as “random mover.”


On an engraving from France, first years of the 19th century (game with 12 sections, we see how these games were played.


Sketch for a ballet, with at least 20 sections. With only Roman numbers.


A printing which had to be superimposed to the round table (having a hole for the pin and 24 sections).

No picture available


See Addendum 2.


Made of steel, 2 meters high, and still in use in Nevada (54 sections). Each section refers to a certain combination of dice, so for example, 5+2 is different from 6+1 and 4+3.

We find the same principle (combinations, not just total value) also in other games, especially in the Italian game called Pela il Chiù.

No picture available


No picture available


Let’s look at another variety. In some Wheels of Fortune games, the round table does not incorporate the arrow. Instead, dice are used as the “random mover.”

No picture available


See Addendum 2.


It is time to go back to il Nobiliissimo Gioco della Mea from which we started. Besides the one discovered in Villa alla Petraia near Florence (Petraia-Mea), we know of another one, very similar and with the same name, discovered a few years ago by Mr. Alberto Fiorin in Museo Correr, Venice.

Both have 24 houses on the border of the 24 sections. In each house there is an image of a person, a comic character, an object, a fruit, or an animal. The choice seems to be fortuitous. Under each image there is a line in Italian or Italian-Venetian language which defines it. Another line over each image, shows a P (“Poni”) for pay, or T (“Tina”) for take, and gives the losing or winning amount.

(N.B. This refers directly to the “Utienbord” F.H.)

Biribissi is purely a board. ("Random mover" is the drawing of lots as in a lottery). Many examples of Biribissi have 36 numbers. There are 13 different types of possible bets.

In some Biribissi boards, the images belong to exact categories, for instance; Woman, Fruits, Men, Flower, 4-Footed Animals, or Birds. We find them listed with their names in a book on Biribissi, printed in Florence in the first half of the 19th century.

13. Biribissi, Venice, end 18th century, Fiorin 1989, page 8


(N.B. The focus here was on the (possible) diverse kinds and different roads that, in the end, led to the development of the game Roulette as we know it today.

Thanks to Nick Neuwahl and Cosimo Cardellincchio for their help with Addendum 3.

None of these gives more insight into the unknown rules for the Amsterdam tile-game.

Addendum 4 — Mr. Dossena’s article on the subject of Addendum 1 in “Ludica” — the journal of the Benetton Foundation.

Provided by Cosimo Cardellincchio

Ludica, annali di storia e civiltà del gioco, 10, 2004. Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche’Viella
Addendum 5 — A different look at the tiles from Chapter 2.

When looking at the tiles from Amsterdam, as a game or as part of material for a game, the conclusion at the end of that chapter seems logical. However, when I showed the concept around for commentary, Road Pit came up with a completely different perspective.

He remembered these wheels were used at charity events, as a kind of lottery he knew as Tombola, and that the ‘instrument’ used was also sometimes called “Rad van Femius” (Wheel of Fortune).

It is funny how your memory works, because I had completely overlooked this possibility. I do know from my youth when we visited “Kermissem” fairs, this name was used for an attraction that was also sometimes called: “Gelukrad, altijd Prijs” (Luck-Wheel, always a prize).

In a booth there was that round Wheel with numbers from 1 up to ..., and the whole enclosure was loaded with all kind of ‘prizes’ shown with a number. You’d pay your money, the owner turned the Wheel until it stopped, and you could choose a prize that corresponded with that number out of many prizes available. Of course, the business owner knew exactly where the Wheel would stop for the less expensive prizes! Only once in a while a better prize was given away.

In the book “Créateur de Changes, Les lotteries en Europe” (ISBN 978-2-88375-025-8) on page 123, there is an image of that kind of booth as a children’s play object:

Pictured at right, is LOTERIE MODERNE.

And, on the same page, LOTERIE ALSACIENNE is shown.

This is material for children’s play, but it is not a game.

We can see that the numbers are directly related to a prize which can be obtained, however, no game rules are involved.

In the same book on page 67 there is also the picture of a different device, other than a Wheel, for the same purpose: to arrive at a random number out of a series from 1 to .... It is titled Kakselorum.

But this cannot be a ‘normal’ lottery because when a number has been indicated, it is now considered out-of-play and cannot continue to be used.

With Tombola, as I know it, each time the Wheel is turned, all of the numbers have an equal chance to be pointed to when the wheel stops.

From what I remember at charity fairs, they did pack all of the prizes in numbered sacks, with the possibility of a “NIET”—an empty sack! Another way to get money for the charity fund.

Perhaps this mechanism of directly connecting a number to a prize may be the solution for the use of the tiles from Amsterdam.

Let us imagine that the manager of a pub, a coffeehouse, or what-have-you, has all kinds of small ‘give-aways’ hung on the wall, all with a number associated with it. A customer can pay and try his luck by turning the arrow on the tile. When it stops he wins a prize. Or, maybe the owner hung a list of how much to pay the customer on a certain number. A kind of “one-armed bandit” ‘avant la lettre!’ And a direct link to the old Uilenhorst! 

In the book “SIEFF DER STADT” from the Wien Museum (ISBN 978-3-7001-12998) on page 36, we can find a picture where the name Tombola is directly linked to a lottery game. On the lid is an image of a “Wheel.”