From Pompeii via Venus to Fifteen

Article by Fred Horn

The small story of a new life for, and the rebirth of, an old game.

Pompeii

In the famous monthly Games & Puzzles magazine, Issue No. 65 (October 1977), games historian R. C. Bell penned an article about game pieces found during an excavation in the old town of Pompeii, then shown at an exhibition in London. A similar lot of pieces have also been found in Herculaneum and Athens, along with a (possible) game board.

Mr. Bell’s writing wasn’t just out of interest in an old game, but as well meant to promote his own version of a game. Whittlecraft was about to introduce Bell’s version: Pompeii XV.

But fate took its toll. Back in the early 1980s when I was corresponding with him, Bell told me the firm went bankrupt before his game was introduced to the marketplace, and all of the games produced were destroyed. Only 25 examples survived and they were in Bell’s possession. He was kind enough to send me one, which is now in the Vlaams Spellenarchief in Brugge, Belgium.

To my surprise, my friend Nick Neuwahl told me a decade later Bell also had presented him with two examples of his game.

The modern version of an ancient game, Pompeii XV has been marketed under protecting copyrights and patent application by Whittlecraft. It will be available in most games shops from October. Many fascinating aspects of the game have come from the computer analysis but readers will undoubtedly want to find these out for themselves.

No rules have survived for the original game. In the article, Bell states:

“The development of the game has been done in conjunction with Whittlecraft, manufacturer of traditional board games. The game was analysed by computer from which emerged that it was probably played with 15 tallies and the rules must have approximated closely to those published.”

Whittlecraft advertisement
In the rules, Bell also describes some historical background.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The original board and counters were found in the excavations at Pompeii. The board was circular with scalloped edges and divided into twelve compartments. The board was made of solid silver, the pieces were made of bone and had Roman numerals on one face only.

Further examples have since been found in Athens and Herculaneum which was also buried by Vesuvius in AD.79. This indicates that the game must have enjoyed a degree of popularity throughout the Mediterranean.

No record of the original rules has survived. Research into the game and computer analyses of the probabilities indicate that the rules set out here must approximate very closely, to the way the game was played in Ancient Rome.

Most games rely on the throw of dice or the draw of a card to determine play. This imposes rigid limitations to the number of possibilities. Pompeii XV is different in that it is the counters themselves which are thrown and the way in which they fall determines the way in which they can be played. On the first throw alone there are over 30,000 different possibilities. To play the game through gives several billion possible permutations of play. From all these there are only eleven ways in which the counters can be placed on the board to achieve the perfect score.

Mr. Bell also wrote some nice words on the game rules:

"...the firm went bankrupt before his game was introduced to the marketplace, and all of games produced were destroyed."

VENUS

Although Bell was surely disappointed by the fact his game did not reach the marketplace, it never left his mind. When compiling his ultimate masterpiece, The Board Game Book (published by Marshall Cavendish Limited, 1979), for sure there would be room for the POMPEII game.

As it was probably not allowed to use its former name in the book, POMPEII was now referred to as: TO BED WITH VENUS, with slight changes in the rules and the suggestion that it: "...has been divided especially for this book."

But that is not true, because the only real difference is the amount—one less—of game pieces. Instead of the original fifteen pieces used (numbered 1 to 15), the total lessened to fourteen numbers, from 1 to 14. The game board still resembles the one found in Athens: the pieces are Goddesses, numbered 1 through 14.

At right, an example of the placement of pieces during the game on the 'abstract' board.

The name for this variant, TO BED WITH VENUS, sure has some double meaning!

About that, Bell says: "Stakes other than money may have been at risk, similar to those in strip poker."

The design for the board used in the book is really awful...it looks more like a failure of a clock face. >>
FIFTEEN

I was asked some years ago to develop a simple mathematical game involving addition and subtraction. Immediately Mr. Bell’s game came to mind, but of course I had to look for a new component to make it different from the original.

I decided to start with 20 discs (half a set of DAM discs) numbered 1 to 20, and a game board with 15 places to lay down the discs. But that really wasn’t anything novel—just the same game with more numbers! But what if the blank side of the disc was also used? That was the solution. As well, the sum of the numbers, using both sides, would have to add up to a total of 21.

The game thus changed into more of a puzzle game whereby the placement of all of your pieces became the goal instead of scoring the least points possible.

As always I checked my idea with my friend Nieck Neuwahl and asked for his commentary. As mentioned before I was surprised he knew the original Whittlecraft game. He opted for less pieces and a board with fewer numbers. His idea was to return to the amount of pieces used in To Bed with Venus (fourteen), with the sum of the numbers on both sides always adding up to 15.

After some play testing, it became clear the board should have fewer places (than the 12 in the original game) for the discs to lay down. The optimum was 10 places, in our case numbered 0 (zero) to 9.

In collaboration we gave a new life to R. C. Bell’s POMPEII xv, so we decided to name our puzzle game FIFTEEN: a) in honor of the old one, and b) because the sum of the numbers on both sides of all 14 discs totalled 15.

This game was developed in 2014. When we were content with our version, we didn’t look to market it, but instead dedicated it to the subject of mathematics for children. It can be found on the Dutch website http://www.math4all.nl/kaart/bejikt/fifteen/6115

But then in 2015, the small firm ROMBOL showed interest in our puzzle game.

To enhance the game with “something more” rather than just being a one-person puzzle, I developed a 2-player version with the same material and different rules added to the original ones.

In the end ROMBOL only wanted to publish the 2-player game (under the name “15”) and it has been on the market since 2016.


The aim—score a total of 100 points or more. Both players get 7 discs to throw. The player with the highest number in his set of 7 discs starts. Then turns alternate. By covering a number on the board with 1 (same number) or 2 discs (addition or subtraction), the player counts that number. Non-useable discs give minus points.

Then both players each get 7 discs again, throw again, etc.