



# Traditional Indigenous Forms of Gambling and Games

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## Introduction

What are traditional Indigenous games? Gaming has been part of Indigenous cultures since time immemorial, with numerous different games having existed (some of which are still played today). There are countless Indigenous cultures across North America, all being unique in language, traditions, and practices. However, *similarities do exist* between certain games played by different tribes, likely due to travel and trade that occurred throughout history (Sommerfeldt, 2005). A few examples of traditional games include:

- ❖ Hoop and stick game
- ❖ Screaming game
- ❖ Hand/stick game
- ❖ Feather game

This project dives into traditional Indigenous forms of gambling and games, primarily focusing on **Blackfoot games** and seeking to grow an awareness of the long history and cultural relevance gaming has for Blackfoot Peoples. There is limited research that explores Indigenous gambling and gaming, with the research that *does* exist discussing games and/or gambling in the following ways:

- ❖ In a historical frame of reference; in the past tense (Sommerfeldt, 2005)
- ❖ With a focus on problem gambling (Williams et al., 2011; Belanger et al., 2017)
- ❖ By exploring cultural factors/definitions of gambling (McGowan, 2001; Belanger et al., 2017)

There is a lack of inclusion of traditional games in these discussions and a particular focus on problem gambling.

## Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to contribute to this field by providing information on traditional games through an Indigenous lens that explores gaming in the past and present.

- ❖ Questions being explored:
  - What are traditional Indigenous games?
  - What is their cultural meaning?
  - How have they changed throughout time and are they still played today?

The goal here is to emphasize that **Western gambling ≠ Indigenous games** or forms of gambling. There are things in place, such as culture and history, that make Indigenous games **fundamentally different**.

## Methods

### Interviews with Elders and Knowledge Keepers

Unstructured and open-ended interviews, lasting 30-60 minutes long, were conducted over the phone or through Zoom due to COVID-19. Participants were Elders and knowledge keepers from traditional Blackfoot territory, specifically Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika. Four interviews were conducted, and recruitment was done via snowball sampling. Elders were presented with potential subjects they could provide wisdom on, and guided the conversation naturally through their storytelling. When asked, the interviewer would remind each Elder of these talking points as the interview progressed.

- ❖ Interview topics of discussion:
  - Traditional context and cultural relevance of games

❖ Interview topics of discussion cont.:

- Descriptions of games
- Stories in which games may play a role
- Colonization's impact on games
- How/if gambling is a part of traditional games

### Analysis

A codebook was created by brainstorming possible relevant themes, with interview transcripts being coded using NVivo 12. Significant themes were identified by determining which codes were referenced the most. Once that was done, connections could then be drawn between major themes, with less common themes being allocated under related, larger themes.

## Results

Results are currently preliminary. There is a quantitative piece to provide information regarding games in the modern era that is not included here due to a small sample size. The number of times all of the codes were referenced in the interviews can be found in Table 1.

❖ Five most frequent codes:

- Gambling
- Games
- Evident change
- Relationships
- Song

These codes represent both the topics most discussed and the themes that are most important to the Elders when it comes to gaming. The conversations had with Elders who participated further uncover the themes behind each of these codes: gambling involves how it works and its cultural nuance; games reveal different games, how they're played, and why they were played in their traditional context; evident change covers how games have changed over time, throughout history, and between generations; relationships centre on the familial bonds that form while playing games and the depth of those relationships; song encompasses singing while playing, meaningfulness, traditions, spirituality, and cultural variety of songs.

### Gambling

“Yes, it's gambling, but it's also healing. It depends how you want to go through it.”

### Games

“It's really exciting to play the game, some people think it's simple; I always say it's sophisticated, we compare it to chess, which is a really sophisticated game.”

### Evident Change

“That's my favourite part is the youth, because I think that the youth are the ones that are going keep this game going even though it's changed so much since I was a kid.”

### Relationships

“If it wasn't for the family bonds people could make, I don't think there really would be stick game.”

### Song

“I think that the songs are the most important part of stick game.”

Codes	Number of Coding References
Gambling	31
Games	30
Evident change	29
Relationships	23
Song	22
Universality	21
Tradition	17
Belonging	16
Storytelling	14
Colonialism	11
Recreation	11
Skill building	10
Tournament	10
Strategy	9
Survival	8
Elder	7
Healing	7
Power	7
Spirituality	7
Entertainment	6
Conflict resolution	5
Pre-contact	5
Youth	5
Ceremony	3
Cheating	3
Continuity	3
Religion	2
Resistance	2

Table 1: Frequency of Codes in Interviews

## Conclusions

How does this research fit in the field? What does it provide?

- ❖ Definitions of traditional games and gambling
- ❖ Context for games through an Indigenous lens
- ❖ Contributes to a limited field, as well as diversifying/Indigenizing that field

**Games are complex** – they are full of tradition and cultural and personal meaning for those who play them. So, how can this project now inform future studies on gambling and work with Indigenous populations? By understanding traditional Indigenous games and forms of gambling in their cultural contexts, we can gain insight into certain behaviours, beliefs, and motivations. Future research from Indigenous perspectives that incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing is needed when exploring Indigenous populations, habits, or related topics and can be done without devaluing scientific methodology.

### Literature Cited

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### For Further Information

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