

GAMBLING RESEARCH

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Gambling with the Enemy: An Interview with PhD Student Gabriel Yanicki

Gabriel Yanicki is a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alberta. His current research examines gambling as a vehicle for social interaction amongst early Native American societies of the U.S. Southwest¹. He was awarded an Institute scholarship in 2014-15.

How did you end up pursuing a PhD in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alberta?

I'm an archaeologist by training—I've worked on digs in the Middle East, the Caribbean, the U.S., and in every corner of Alberta. As an undergraduate at the University of Calgary in the late '90s, I wrote my Honour's thesis on a site in southern Alberta mentioned in the 1792 journal of a Hudson's Bay Company surveyor named Peter Fidler, who was the first European explorer to visit the area. The site he mentioned was a place called Old Man's Playing Ground; Old Man, or *Napi*, is the Creator figure in the tradition of the *Siksikaitapi*, or Blackfoot peoples, and the playing ground is what the Oldman River gets its name from. Fidler's account included a Piikani story about how when Old Man was making the world, he rested at the headwaters of the river, where it flows out of the Rocky Mountains, and taught all the different nations to meet there and play a game as a way of making peace. I tried, unsuccessfully, to locate the site and examined archaeological evidence for groups from east and west of the mountains visiting the area.

This locale is of considerable cultural significance, and as my career progressed, I always felt that there was something more I should do. In 2008, I approached Dr. Jack Ives at the University of Alberta about doing my M.A. on the same topic; Jack had previously served as Alberta's Provincial



Archaeologist, and he remembered reading my Honour's thesis during his time as head of the Archaeological Survey. He was highly supportive, and he encouraged me to work with traditional knowledge holders from several First Nations to delve further into topics that I had only touched on—for instance, the association between gambling and traditional games. This project was very successful, and my M.A. thesis has recently been published as a monograph by the Canadian Museum of History and University of Ottawa Press. As my work was winding down, Jack invited me to join him on his own project at the Promontory Caves, on the north shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. That invitation has turned into my current SSHRC- and AGRI-funded PhD research.

The primary aim of the Alberta Gambling Research Institute, a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge, is to support academic research related to gambling.

MISSION

To facilitate evidence-based broad research that informs gambling public policy and educates Albertans and the wider audience about the effects of gambling.

Your Master's thesis involved a fascinating study of the First Nations gambling games that occurred at Old Man's Playing Ground (Yanicki, 2012²; 2014³). What did that research involve, and what were some of the most interesting findings?

The roots of my study were primarily ethnohistorical: that is, I was looking at what a historical document written from an outsider's perspective had to say about the aboriginal peoples living on the Prairies during the peak of the Fur Trade.

Fidler was a great observer, travelling with a band of Piikani and making the first European contact with the Ktunaxa (Kootenay) the day he visited Old Man's Playing Ground. He was sort of an early anthropologist, the way he wrote about everything he saw. What he had to say about the gaming that took place there was especially interesting—he drew an elaborate sketch of the 35-yard-long playing field on the river's edge, carefully measured and drawn to scale; it was lined with fist-sized stones, and ten piles of stones were positioned around it, perhaps for umpires to sit and watch the game. Two contestants would stand at one end, and one would roll a small hoop, about four inches in diameter, along in front of them. They would then chase after the hoop and try to throw an arrow through it; as Fidler put it, "those that put the arrow within the hoop while rolling along is reckoned to have gamed." This same hoop-and-arrow game shows up in many other historic accounts. Pretty much universally, it is described as a gambling game in which spectators would place wagers on the outcome, with contests sometimes lasting for days.

The same game Fidler described also appears in the memoirs of other explorers such as David Thompson and Merriwether Lewis. In fact, from the Carolinas to the Gulf of Mexico, up the Mississippi River and on the California coast, early explorers all witnessed versions of the hoop-and-pole game; sometimes it was played with spears or darts instead of arrows, and sometimes it was played with a stone disc or large netted wheel instead of a small hoop, but the mechanics of the game were generally the same. In my study, I looked at how regional variants might indicate who was gaming with whom in prehistory.

A considerable portion of my research was dedicated to flood geomorphology and the prehistoric archaeology of the locale where the playing ground was most likely located. Unfortunately, the playing

ground was probably washed away in a flood sometime before the 1960s, but the same stories told about it in 1792—and probably long before that—are still being told today.



Hand game tokens

- Two tokens hidden in hands with elaborate gestures
- Competitors try to guess which hand the marked or painted token is hidden in



Hoop and darts

- Two competitors roll netted hoop and chase after it
- Darts are thrown through hoop as it rolls; closest dart to centre wins



Cane and beaver-tooth dice

- Tossed in basket, dice land either marked side up or down
- Dice were often a women's gambling game, but cane dice match a Hopi men's game

For me personally, the most interesting findings came when I interviewed elders and ceremonialists from a number of First Nations communities to learn more about the playing ground and traditional games. Far from being just a recreational or even economic activity, the hoop-and-arrow game figures in several of the most important ceremonies practiced by the Blackfoot peoples. Gaming and gambling, meanwhile, are activities that would typically take place between members of different, and usually rival groups—the old Blackfoot word for gambling is in fact synonymous with warfare. A number of researchers have noted the association in traditional societies between gambling and groups who are sometimes enemies and sometimes friends; thus, gambling was a mechanism by which intergroup trade could take place.

How do archaeologists and anthropologists know about the traditional gambling games played amongst First Nations groups? What games were played and why were they played? Are similar games still being played today?

Historical sources such as Fidler's journal are key sources of information about traditional gambling games. Around the turn of the last century, an

ethnologist named Stewart Culin, affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution, published a volume called *Games of the North American Indians*⁴ that compiled literally thousands of accounts of games from 229 aboriginal groups across the continent. This is the bible, if you will, of traditional gaming research, since Culin compiled, word for word, every historic account he could find of gaming from the onset of European exploration through to the heyday of field ethnography. It was a massive undertaking, and Culin's collaboration with some of the leading anthropologists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries led to a real awakening, at least for a time, to the central importance of games in traditional social and ceremonial life.

Referring so centrally to Fidler's journal and Culin's book puts me at risk of sounding book-smart and street-stupid, though. To learn something about traditional gambling games, a person really just needs to get involved at the community level. The hand game, for instance, is a guessing game in which two contestants face off; there are lots of variations, but one contestant usually shuffles two tokens, one marked and one unmarked, in his or her hands, and the other contestant has to guess which hand the marked one is in. Massive tournaments are put on

"...gambling was a mechanism by which intergroup trade could take place."

by a number of First Nations each year, and these draw contestants from all across the Territories, northern B.C., Alberta,

Saskatchewan, and even Alaska. The same can be said for intertribal hand game tournaments hosted by the Southern Piikani (Blackfeet) in Montana and by other communities all through the western United States.



I can't say that there has been a great deal of research in this area, but Bill Brunton, an American anthropologist who wrote about the Ktunaxa stick game (another name for the hand game) in the 1970s, described gambling as such a prevalent activity that it should be considered a dominant cultural theme. In my own research, the way gambling stories feature time and again in the oral traditions of peoples ranging from Blackfoot to the Navajo, I believe they strike to the core of how cultural identity is perceived and expressed.

That's not to say that all traditional games are still played today—for instance, none of the elders I spoke to about the hoop-and-arrow game described it actually being played. The practice might be one casualty of the cultural destruction wrought by the reserve and residential school era, particularly since the type of large ceremonial and intergroup gatherings where this game would traditionally have been played were prohibited by the Canadian and American governments for a considerable amount of time. In the case of traditional meeting places like Old Man's Playing Ground, access was also cut off; until well into the 1950s, First Nations people were not allowed off-reserve without a permit from an Indian

Agent, even to visit family on another reserve or to go shopping in town.

Resilience in the face of this kind of opposition is another important aspect of this story. It is not insignificant that gambling games have, historically, featured prominently in cultural revitalization movements, for instance with the Pawnee Ghost Dance hand game. There are also many community-driven efforts today to re-engage First Nations children in traditional culture through games. But there's really a huge range of games that can be discussed here, including games of chance, like dice and hand games, and games of skill involving racing, marksmanship, and team play, many of which are alive and well today. For instance, no conversation on this topic would be complete without mention of Canada's national sports, lacrosse and ice hockey, which both share origins in traditional First Nations games.

notably, more than 240 bison- and antelope-hide moccasins, some of them with perfectly intact porcupine quillwork decoration, seemed utterly unlike anything from other well-preserved sites in the dry Utah deserts and mountains, but had strong similarities to moccasins still made by members of Dene communities in the Canadian subarctic today. Steward suspected that the people who lived at the Promontory Caves might have been the migratory ancestors of the modern-day Southern Dene—the Navajo and various Apache peoples—who linguistically (and, it turns out, genetically) share strong ties to the Canadian North. This site drew the attention of my supervisor, Jack Ives, for whom Dene migration and the origins of the Southern Dene has been a career-long research interest. In 2011, Dr. Ives resumed excavations at the caves, with a focus being the cultural identity of the caves' inhabitants.

“The caves are also filled with gambling materials.”

Steward anticipated that the material in the caves was about 1,000 years old. He was remarkably accurate for not having had access to radiocarbon dating; a broad array of dates from Steward's collections and Dr. Ives's recent excavations has shown that peak occupation took place between about A.D. 1240 and 1290.⁵ This was a critical juncture in local prehistory, as the Promontory people arrived just when a prehistoric culture, or group of cultures, known to archaeologists as the Fremont were last observed at sites in this part of Utah. The Fremont were quite distinct from the people in the caves, subsisting at least into the 12th century on maize horticulture and living in small villages of pit houses with wooden frames lined with adobe, or mud plaster. There are numerous indications from the caves, for instance in the form of ceramic and basketry fragments, that Fremont and Promontory peoples were somehow interacting with each other. This could have involved trade or the direct movement of people from one community to another, through processes like intermarriage.

The caves are also filled with gambling materials. Steward found many gaming pieces during his excavations in the '30s—for instance, a netted hoop and feathered darts used in a local variant of the hoop-and-arrow game, and many, many segments of split cane with diagonal lines

Your current research involves excavations of archaeological sites in Utah belonging to the Promontory peoples. Findings from your excavations there suggest these places were significant in terms of cultural interaction, trade, and gambling. Can you briefly describe this work?

The Promontory Caves, on the north shore of the Great Salt Lake, were first investigated in the 1930s by an influential archaeologist named Julian Steward. In his report on his two seasons of excavation at the caves, he described an assemblage of remarkably well-preserved artifacts left by a population of big game hunters. Most



cut on one side that are known from ethnological collections to have been used as dice. The rules of dice games varied considerably, but usually these were tossed together in a basket, and the ones that landed decorated side up were counted. Together with the small-scale excavations led by Dr. Ives, well over a hundred of these have been found, and that's probably just the tip of the iceberg. This isn't the only example of what, for all intents and purposes, seems like a gambling den in prehistoric North America. Paraphrasing the late Dr. Alan Bryan, a researcher from the U of A who, with professor emerita Dr. Ruth Gruhn, excavated a similar site in Idaho,⁶ the Promontory Caves could be thought of as the Las Vegas of Utah.



Could you speculate as to why there were so many of these gambling implements? Was this something of a casino or perhaps a place to manufacture dice?

The sheer number of cane dice that have been found in the caves, both by Steward and in the recent excavations, raises a lot of questions. Yes, they were probably being manufactured here, but they also seem to have been quite disposable. They might have been made from fragments of broken arrow

shafts, or reeds could have been gathered for the express purpose of making dice, but either way, people don't seem to have been all that interested in taking the dice with them when they left. The high numbers also probably reflect the cyclical, seasonal nature of occupation at sites like this; each time people came back over a period of many years, they left another layer of debris behind.

The casino analogy is not at all inaccurate. The people living in the caves appear to have been doing quite well, to the extent that they could afford to throw away or burn useful food items like grease-rich bones, which were often heavily fragmented and boiled during times of food scarcity. There are connotations in this of feasting, and perhaps the conspicuous display of excess. People from other groups could well have been coming to the caves, ostensibly to gamble, but the means by which this took place would likely have included a number of other interconnected social obligations on the part of the hosts involving ceremony and providing food for the guests.

How do you as an archaeologist perform the necessary “detective work” to link the discovery of a cache of 750-year-old cane dice in a cave with probable interactions between the Promontory and Fremont societies?

The detective work for me has revolved around establishing that Fremont people were actually living in the area immediately around the caves at the same time as the caves were inhabited. Until now, it's actually been unclear whether the Promontory and Fremont coexisted or whether the Promontory people arrived after the Fremont were gone. I've been excavating at a newly identified village site down on the shore of the Great Salt Lake that appears to have been inhabited by Fremont peoples right up until the time the caves were first occupied, and after which much interaction took place.

The nature of this interaction can be difficult to discern, especially at open-air sites where preservation is not anything like what we are seeing at the caves. For instance, at the village site, there are no moccasins or cane dice. But I can use things like changing aspects of ceramic styles—for instance vessel shapes, decoration, and raw materials—to see how attributes that were initially unique to either community eventually were exchanged and merged,

either through the communication of ideas or the movement of the actual pottery makers themselves. I'm also hoping to use stable isotope analysis to show whether cane growing at the Fremont village site was actually the same raw material used to manufacture all the dice at the caves; this would provide a very strong indication that the residents of both sites were in direct contact.

Over time, as the Promontory people interacted with the Fremont, I suspect that new ethnic identities eventually emerged, and that the ancestors of Southern Dene peoples like the Navajo and Apache actually included members of both groups.

In your opinion, are there parallels between the tradition of gambling games that occurred at Old Man's Playing Ground in southern Alberta and those in Utah?

The parallels between Old Man's Playing Ground and the Promontory Caves are derived from the strong link between gaming and gambling in the historical and ethnographic literature; the question that most captures my attention, then, is who the people were that were involved. Gambling tends to have been frowned upon within families, and probably within small bands. There's an emphasis in oral traditions such as that told to Peter Fidler right through to First Nations gaming tournaments today on gambling games being an intergroup activity; therefore, the dice and other gambling materials at the caves point to the Promontory people directly interacting with their neighbours, people they weren't closely related to through kinship or other social ties. The sheer amount of gaming and gambling paraphernalia in itself, then, may serve as an indication of the status of the caves' residents as interlopers, meshing well with the hypothesis of Dene migrants from the north into what was then the Fremont world.

In your written publications, you've indicated that perhaps gambling and games served to facilitate the transfer of materials and ideas between different groups. Are you aware of any additional gambling "sites" or archaeological studies in your field that have also made this linkage?

There are certainly other archaeological sites where gaming and gambling were going on. Cities of the ancient mound-building Mississippian culture

like Cahokia, near modern-day St. Louis, had large central plazas where a hoop-and-pole game variant called *chunkey* was played using a rolled stone disc; in addition to the plazas and the chunkey stones themselves, players have even been found immortalized in statuary form. This is the same version of the game that Lewis and Clark saw the Hidatsa gambling on during their Corps of Discovery Expedition in 1804. Gambling was also common among spectators of the Mesoamerican ball game.



The explicit linkage between gambling and trade goods, however, remains rare. There is an extensive archaeological literature on prehistoric trade; by and large, the emphasis of this work is on identifying materials that could have been traded. That includes things like obsidian and other stone tool material that travelled thousands of kilometres from their geological sources and marine shell from the Pacific coast and Gulf of Mexico transported over the Rockies and far up the Mississippi. The mechanism by which those materials traded hands is very seldom discussed.

Fremont specialist Dr. Joel Janetski, who I've had the pleasure of working with on the Promontory project, is one of the few scholars I am aware of who has explored the relation between gambling and prehistoric trade. Looking at early historic records of Native American "trade fairs"—large gatherings where horses were the primary commodity of exchange—he noted that gambling was rampant at such meetings. He therefore reasoned that where gambling materials were found in association with trade commodities, one could interpret a site as having had a trade fair-type function. A graduate student of his, Molly Hall, explored this further with her work at a Fremont village site in southwestern Utah. Households that contained gambling paraphernalia—in this case, bone dice—were associated with higher quantities of exotic trade goods.

Are there any other thoughts about your preliminary findings that you'd like to share?

The key element that I am building from here, and which does not seem to be very much explored, is how gambling was a primarily inter- rather than intra-group activity. Gambling provides us with clues to social identity and the relationship between communities that are very hard to arrive at by any other means—for instance, the peaceful nature of a gambling relationship could be the means by which stronger social ties are eventually formed.

Stories of gambling also tell us that the commodities being exchanged between groups through gambling including things that are not always readily visible. This could include not just exotic goods like obsidian and shell and high-value items like horses, after their introduction to the Americas, but more basic staples like clothing and food. In more extreme cases, stories of gambling also speak to the transfer of individuals across communities; Navajo oral tradition, for example, includes stories of wives and children being traded to pay off gambling debts, and entire communities finding themselves in servitude. Taken literally, these stories are of direct relevance to questions of the formation of group identity through interaction, gambling, and trade that I am exploring in my ongoing research.

- 1 Yanicki, G. (2014). *Gambling with the enemy: Culture contact on Promontory Point, ca. A.D. 1240-1290. Controversial Topics in Gambling: Alberta Gambling Research Institute 13th Annual Conference. Banff, Alberta, April 4 [Poster presentation].* <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/50256>
- 2 Yanicki, G. M. (2012). *Old Man's Playing Ground: An intergroup meeting and gaming place on the Plains/Plateau frontier. Available from University of Alberta Education & Research Archive.* <http://hdl.handle.net/10402/era.24974>
- 3 Yanicki, G. M. (2014). *Old Man's Playing Ground: Gaming and trade on the Plains/Plateau frontier. Mercury Series Archaeology Paper No. 137. Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization/University of Ottawa Press.*
- 4 Culin, Stewart (1907). "Games of the North American Indians." *Accompanying paper in Twenty-fourth annual report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1902-1903 by W.H. Holmes, pp. 1-811. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.*
- 5 Ives, John W., Duane G. Froese, Joel C. Janetski, Fiona Brock, and Christopher Bronk Ramsey (2014). *A high resolution chronology for Steward's Promontory Culture collections, Promontory Point, Utah. American Antiquity 79(4):616-637.*
- 6 Dr. Bryan informally referred to Wilson Butte Cave, Idaho, as "the Las Vegas of Idaho" (Ruth Gruhn, pers. comm., 2014).

Conference 2015 Update

Online registration is now available for individuals interested in attending **Conference 2015: Critical Issue in Gambling Research**. Register by Friday, February 6, 2015 to receive the discounted early conference registration rate. The conference takes place **March 26-28** at the **Banff Centre**, in Banff, Alberta.

Examples of confirmed topics and speakers at this event include:

- **The Leisure Benefits of Gambling – Dr. Jonathan Parke** (Responsible Gambling Trust, London, UK)
- **Positive Play: What Can We Learn From Examining Non-Problematic Playing Practices? – Dr. Richard Wood** (GamRes Limited, Montreal, Quebec)
- **Modernization of Canadian Charitable Gaming: Are Bingo Halls 'Slots Parlours' in Disguise? – Dr. Kevin Harrigan** (U. of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON)
- **Do Urban Casinos Affect Nearby Neighborhoods? – Dr. Haifang Huang** (Dept. of Economics, U. of Alberta, Edmonton, AB)
- **Effect of Smoking Bans on Gambling Behaviour – Dr. Daniel McGrath** (Dept. of Psychology, U. of Calgary, Calgary, AB)
- **Stock Market Trading: Investment or Gambling? – Ms. Jennifer Arthur** (U. of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia)



The [Preliminary Conference Program](#) provides details regarding the entire roster of speakers and their presentation topics.

Annual Report 2013-14 Now Available

The Institute's 2013-14 Annual Report has been posted on the web site. Contents include: About the Institute; Gambling Research at the Partner Universities; Research Activity; Communicating Gambling Research; Consulting and Collaborating: A Coordinated Approach, and; Audited Financial Statements.



Strong Institute Representation @ the 10th Annual Responsible and Problem Gambling Stakeholders Symposium

Institute-affiliated research coordinators and Board Members were invited to be part of the Alberta Gaming & Liquor Commission's annual responsible and problem gambling stakeholders symposium held in Leduc on Tuesday, October 21st. Event attendees had the opportunity to learn about successful problem gambling prevention programs and initiatives from other North American jurisdictions, gambling behaviours of the "millennial generation," powerful first-hand accounts from Albertans discussing their relationship with problem gambling, and highlights of Institute research as presented by Dr. Nady el-Guebaly, Dr. Darren Christensen, and Dr. Garry Smith.

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