

OLD CLASSICS, NEW CARD GAMES

By Joe Andrews

Card games have been part of American culture for more than 300 years. Some games, such as cribbage and whist, were introduced to the Colonies long before the Revolution. Since then, countless new card games with a variety of origins have become well-established in the United States. Since most of these games can be played with a standard 52-card deck, they are not normally sold under their own names.

During the past 40 years, however, several people have thought of ways to modernize and sometimes improve a classic card game, designed a customized deck for playing it, and marketed it as a proprietary game. Some of these new versions of old games have become classics in their own right. This article will explore four such games: Wizard, Uno, Hand and Foot, and Phase 10.

WIZARD (OH HELL)

Oh Hell is a trump game that first appeared in the late 1920s and was originally known under various names, including Up the River, Elevator Whist, and Shoot Your Neighbor. The idea was to try to predict the exact number of tricks you could win each hand, starting with the first deal of one card to each player, then a second deal of two cards per player, and third deal of three cards, etc. Each deal, you examine your hand, learn what the trump suit is, and then bid the number of tricks you expect to take. This game of skill and luck became very popular during the 1940s and 1950s, and a nice bright-red boxed two-deck set (illustrated with a cutesy "devil") was manufactured shortly thereafter. Oh Hell still has plenty of fans to this day.

Ken Fisher of Toronto, Canada, a published trivia and general knowledge expert, initially conceived of the game of Wizard in the early 1980s at his lakefront cottage in Ontario. He wanted to create a card game that could be played with three to six people. The Oh Hell model was used, and eight additional cards (four Jesters and four Wizards) were added to a standard deck. Now, he had a deck of 60 cards—a very useful number, because all of the cards can be dealt out (on the final hand) for any number of players up to six, without any cards left over. The larger deck dramatically improved the game, and the new cards added interesting strategy and play elements.

There were different variations, of which the most challenging is the "blind" bid. A special wheel

was designed to record bids. The actual numbers were not revealed until each player had dialed in his or her bid in secret. Occasionally, some very wild totals would be observed with many overtricks or underbids made, especially toward the end of a game. In the early stages, one-, two-, or three-trick deals had a very strong luck factor. Skilled players would usually overcome bad breaks as the game moved along. Although the Wizards represented the power in a hand, the Jesters had the unique feature of allowing a player to duck an unexpected trick, or extend a given suit in his hand. I am also convinced that "Duplicate" Wizard (played the same way as its contract bridge counterpart) could be a high-level competitive game of skill. In any case, the theme of making your bid exactly became the primary objective.

The initial run of 10,000 games in 1986 was met with a mild response. In time, the game took off, especially in Canada. By the mid 1990s, its future was guaranteed with the granting of world rights to, and manufacture by, U.S. Games Systems of Stamford, Connecticut. To date, more than one million Wizard games have been sold. The high-quality cards are beautifully designed with very lavish illustrations.

The popularity of Wizard, most notably in Germany and Japan, has created a wider global interest in the game. A new website (www.wizardcards.com) was created in 2003, and an annual live championship tournament in the Toronto area draws a very enthusiastic crowd of Wizard devotees.



Wizard cards are a trademark of Ken Fisher & U.S. Games Systems, Inc.

UNO (CRAZY EIGHTS)

Crazy Eights is an old game that is considered a children's classic. Players try to get rid of their cards by matching the suit or rank of the last card played. It is related to similar games called Switch, Mau Mau, and Last One. Its roots go back to the late 1800s.

Merle Robbins, an Ohio barbershop owner, "invented" the game of Uno in 1971. As the story goes, Merle had a disagreement with his son while playing Crazy Eights. He decided to create a game of his own, and combined the best features of Crazy Eights and its related games. The four colors of the Uno pack replaced the suits of a regular deck, and the Special Instruction cards ("Skip," "Reverse," "Draw Two," "Wild," and "Wild Draw 4") brought fun and excitement to the game. Best of all, Uno was a very easy game to learn.

Merle's family invested \$8,000 to have a run of 5,000 prototype games manufactured. At first, he sold the new games from his barbershop. Then local businesses got in on the action. Sales were booming, and the supply of games was almost depleted. Finally, the rights to Uno were sold to a funeral home owner in Joliet, Illinois. International Games, Inc. was then formed to market Uno. The game became an instant hit, and the new company was acquired by Mattel, Inc.

Uno is ideal for children. There is hardly a card player out there who has not tried a game of Uno, especially at family gatherings. I would not be surprised if someone were to organize a national live Uno Championship. In October 2006, *Guinness World Records* certified the largest gathering of dedicated Uno players when more than 300 people participated in a special event held in Charleston, West Virginia, to mark the 35th anniversary of the game.

A number of rule variations have been introduced to make the game more competitive. A rule tweak that I personally prefer allows a Draw Two card to be covered with another Draw Two to force the next player to draw *four* cards (or play another Draw Two card, increasing the penalty to *six* cards). It can really get bloody if everyone has more than one Draw Two card! Another option is to require successively played Wild Draw 4 cards to cancel each other. This encourages saving a Wild Draw 4 card

near the end of a hand. Updated and newly designed packaging has helped to add new fans to the legions of Uno players. An estimated 150 million games have been sold since its introduction, a truly astonishing number.

Uno cards are a trademark of Mattel, Inc.

HAND AND FOOT (CANASTA)

The game of canasta (Spanish for "basket") originated in Uruguay a few years prior to World War II. After the War, its popularity migrated to Argentina, Brazil, Central America, and eventually, to the United States. It was the rage of the early 1950s, and almost overtook contract bridge as the number-one partnership card game in America. U.S. Playing Card Company (Bicycle) manufactured special double-deck canasta sets and promoted the game. However, as time passed, the enthusiasm waned, and bridge established itself as the top partnership game, thanks to the efforts of its great players such as Charles Goren.

The original rules of Canasta evolved into what is now called the "Modern Version." This game is played with two standard decks plus four jokers. A point value is applied to each card and the deuces and jokers are wild. The threes have special functions of their own. Each player is dealt a hand of cards, and there are stock and discard piles. There are various melding intricacies and many rule variations.

Hand and Foot, a variation of canasta, appeared on the scene in the early 1970s. There is no real "inventor" of the game; and there is no source that gives any particular person credit for Hand and Foot. Custom decks have been around for more than 25 years, and there are various websites where the game may be played online. The Tranco Company (Richmond, Michigan) manufactures a multi-deck set with instructions, rules, and special cards. This is still a partnership game for two pairs of players. *Five* decks are used, including two jokers per deck, for a total of 270 cards. Each player is dealt two sets of cards, usually 11 cards per set (some play 13 cards per set). One set is called the "Hand" and the other is called the "Foot." The rest of the deck is the "stock." Each player's Foot is placed facedown on the table. The Foot is not seen until a player has depleted his Hand via melding and discards. The object of the game is to get rid of all of your cards—first from your Hand, and then from your Foot.

The melding is somewhat different from Canasta. Melds are defined as "clean" (no wild cards), "dirty" (one or two wild cards), or "all wild." A meld of seven cards is called a "pile." Each completed meld has a point value. There are other twists, including the requirement for partner to have picked up his Foot, and asking partner's permission to go out. Some groups prefer to play a partnership ("social") version of the game, and relax the requirement to count the point values of the melds. There are no penalties, and four or more cards of the same number maybe be placed on the table. Then, either member of the same team can add cards to that meld, reaching the required seven-card total. Each side must complete three clean and three dirty melds, thus creating a race to deplete the hand, and then the foot. The first team out wins the game. Before playing Hand and Foot, it's important that participants discuss and agree on all rule variations.

Hand & Foot Cards are a trademark of Tranco Company Inc.

PHASE 10 (LIVERPOOL RUMMY)

Liverpool Rummy was created in the mid 1930s as part of the rummy craze during the Depression years. Card playing was very popular at that time, and bridge and rummy games involving celebrities were front-page news in many papers.

Liverpool Rummy is a multi-player, multi round game. Two decks are typically used for four or five players. There is an interesting auction feature that allows a player to buy the top card from the discard pile. The basic premise is to complete the required melds for each of seven rounds. There are many variations, as well.

In 1982, Kenneth R. Johnson designed a game called Phase 10, which is geared toward older children and adults. Loosely based on Liverpool Rummy, it features 10 progressively difficult melding levels (called "Phases"). A custom two-deck set is part of the standard packaging, and the numbers on each card are large and quite distinct. The real difference between Phase 10 and its cousin is the use of "Skip" and "Wild" cards, which become very prominent during the play of the hand. A player must also decide between laying down a meld (and thus allowing another player to discard unwanted cards on the exposed meld) or keeping the meld in his hand (and risking losing it if someone else goes out). The pace of the game changes as the difficulty levels increase. There are variations including a specified number of hands for a game, or limiting the number of Phases required to end the game. The game is best played with four persons; however, three to six people can participate. Phase 10 can also be played in a partnership format, in which both members of a team must complete the Phase requirement for each deal. Partnership

play adds strategic decisions about discarding key cards or skipping the play to your partner at the right time.

Phase 10 is manufactured and distributed by Fundex Games, Inc., of Indianapolis. A number of new versions have been released, including Phase 10 Mobile, Phase 10 Twist, Phase 10 for Kids, and Phase 10 Masters. More than 32 million games have been sold since its release. A Phase 10 live event in Indiana a few years ago drew more than 80 players and was extremely competitive.



Phase 10 cards are a trademark of Kenneth R. Johnson & Fundex Games, Inc.

Joe Andrews is the author of The Complete Win At Card Game Books.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand on a steering wheel. The hand is wearing a blue leather glove. The steering wheel is dark with a silver horn button. The background is dark.

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