



El Mundo – Four Player Backgammon

History

El Mundo (lit. The World) aka Tables of the Four Seasons aka Four Player Backgammon is a tables game from the 13th century.

This reconstruction is based off of the rules found in Alfonso X's *Book of Games* (1283) as translated by Sonja Musser Golladay (2007). The *Book of Games* is the only known description of how this game is played, and the only known reference to the game. Each color in the game not only corresponds to a season but also one of the four elements and humours. Green

represents spring, air, and blood; Red represents summer, fire, and choler; Black represents autumn, earth, and melancholy; White represents winter, water, and phlegm.

Setup

The board is divided into four sections, each with 6 spaces. Each player gets 12 pieces of one of the four colors: green, red, black and white, and are seated at one of the sections, in that color order. All of the pieces begin off the board. Each player rolls one die – high roller plays first (re-rolling ties).

Play

Each player in turn rolls 3 dice and enters 3 of their pieces onto the spaces in their section of the board. The spaces within each section are counted 1 to 6, from left to right, and you place your pieces into the space which matches your die roll. When all of your pieces are on the board you begin moving them counter clockwise around the board based on the die rolls. Your goal is to get all of your pieces into the section opposite you and then have them exit the board (bearing off). Only when all of your pieces are in that section may you bear them off. The first player to bear off all of their pieces is the winner.

Each turn you roll all three dice. Each die is treated separately; if you are unable to use one or more of the values rolled, it passes to the player on your right to try and use. If he can not use it, then the next player gets it and so on around. If none of the other three players can use it, it is lost. When all three dice rolls have been used (or lost), then play continues with the player to the right of the original player.

As in modern backgammon, a single piece on a space by itself (called a blot) may be hit. That is, if you can land on it by exact count of the die, you remove the piece from the board and return it to its owner. That player must then re-enter the piece on their turn, before he can move any other pieces around the board. In this game, if you can hit a piece of one of the two players to your right, you must. Hitting a piece of the player to your left is optional. Two or more pieces on the same space are safe from being hit, and an opponent may not move a piece onto that space.

When bearing off, all of your pieces must be in the section opposite your starting section. If a piece of yours gets hit, you must re-enter it and get it back to the opposite section before continuing to

bear off. To bear a piece of you must move it one space beyond the end of the opposite section. Pieces are born off by exact count, though a higher die roll can be used to bear off a lower (closer) piece if there are no higher pieces left.

Game Summary

- 12 pieces per player. Pieces start off the board.
- Roll one die each - high roller goes first.
- Roll three dice to bring pieces onto your starting section of the board. Spaces are numbered 1-6 from the left to the right. Play passes to the right (counter clockwise).
- When all of your pieces are on the board you begin moving them counter clockwise around the board.
- If you can hit a blot of one to two players to your right, you must.
- If you can not use a die roll, it is passed to the player on your right to try and use, and on around until it is used or would come back to you. Play continues normally after this.
- When all of your pieces reach the section opposite you, you may begin bearing them off.
- The first player to bear off all their pieces wins.

Reconstruction Notes

Hitting blots - Musser's translation says "And also in this game if a roll is made that can reach the pieces of the two players to his right, and he should find one of them uncovered, he is to hit it." There are no specific rules about how far you are expected to go to hit a blot. In play, we have let people re-enter pieces without worrying about hits that could only be made after they re-entered.

Re-entering blots - The translations from above continues: "And that one whose piece it was, is to return it to where it was first entered." Alfonso does not specifically say how pieces are re-entered. The rules I give are a mix of the initial placement and modern rules (must bring pieces back in before moving any others).

End game - Musser's translation says "And the player who first should bear off his pieces will beat the player to his right and so on around." While it is obvious that the first player to bear off their pieces has won the game, it isn't clear to what end the remainder of the players continue.

About the Book of Games

Los Libro de acedrex, dados e tablas, ("The Book of chess, dice and tables") was commissioned by Alfonso X, king of León and Castile, during the 13th century and completed in 1283. The manuscript is 98 pages long and contains 151 illustrations. There are 144 games, variants and problems (including 103 chess problems) described in the book. For many of the variants, this is our only source for how they were played.

Sources

Musser Golladay, Sonja (2007). "*Los Libros de Acedrex Dados e Tablas: Historical, Artistic and Metaphysical Dimensions of Alfonso X's Book of Games*" (Doctorial dissertation, University of Arizona, 2007). On-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/6syt4c> (1441 page, 6 MB PDF file)

Reconstruction By

Michel Wolffauer (mka: Mike Knauer)
mike@knauer.org

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<http://www.knauer.org/mike/sca/classes/>