

Facts & Curiosities

What the heck is a “jack” anyway?

When the index (the symbols and numbers in the corners of the cards) was invented in the mid-1800s, the third-ranking face card was a type of royal attendant known as the knave. This made things difficult because the obvious choice for a symbol, the K, was already needed to signify the king. (In some decks the third rank was a knight, but this presented the same problem.) Since the early 1600s, however, in a game known as All Fours, the knave of trumps was known as the jack. All Fours was a game of the lower class, and “jack” was virtually a synonym for “common.” But the need for clarity overcame class consciousness and J became the established index for the once knave and now jack.

Why is the game of billiards called “pool”?

A pool is a collection of something. Water can be pooled for swimming in; funds can be pooled to buy coffee for the office; and, more relevant to the question, bets on horse races can be pooled. In the 19th century, the places where such bets were taken, and race results listened for, were known as pool parlors. When their owners installed billiard tables to occupy the gamblers’ time between races, the association of “billiards” with “pool” became fixed in the public mind.

The term “billiards” itself apparently comes from the French word for ball.

Why is the lowest card (the ace) often the most powerful?

History is hazy on this. When cards were introduced into Europe in the 14th century, the king was ranked highest. But by the late 15th century, some games gave the one card a special value and it began to be called the “ace,” from the Latin “ās” meaning “the standard” or “the best.” This placement was much advanced during the French Revolution by those who supported the dominion of the lower classes over the royalty.

If an ace is the best standard, what is a “deuce”?

Simply a two-spotted card or die. From the Latin “duo” and the French “deux” meaning “two.” Likewise, the term “trey” simply means “three.”

Why is the ace of spades so fancy?

From the early 1600s until 1960, the British government imposed a special tax on playing cards. Printers were required to print — on the ace of spades — their name and a statement that the tax had been paid. The ace presumably was chosen because it had more available space for the message; why the spade suit was selected is unknown, although the ink color could have been a factor. Thus began the tradition of the manufacturer’s logotype and more and more elaborate designs.

Why is it called a “cue” stick?

The earliest known versions of billiards were indoor versions of croquet in which players knocked balls through a wicket and into holes on a table. When the mallet used proved too awkward to hit a ball lying close to the rail, a player would turn it around and poke the ball with the mallet’s handle. This handle was called a “queue,” another word for “tail.”

How did spin on the cue ball come to be known as “English”?

Both the leather tip and the use of chalk were developed in England in the first decades of the 19th century. The combination of the two dramatically increased the friction between cue and ball, thus allowing the imparting of useful spin. When these advances were brought to the United States by players from England, the spin became known as “English.” In England itself, players call it “side.”

How did jokers enter card decks?

History is obscure, even recent history. In Euchre, a game invented by the Pennsylvania Dutch, the jack of trump is the highest ranked card. This was also called the Euchre card or “juker card” and it evolved, apparently, into the “joker” during the 1860s. The joker became popular as a wild card in Poker games, and that is how it reached Europe. Examples of cards from the 1880s display the joker as a trickster or jester-like figure.

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Why four suits and fifty-two cards?

Other than the obvious correspondence between 52 cards/4 suits and 52 weeks/4 seasons, I have no idea how the numbers were determined. The first deck having 52 cards divided into four suits arrived in Europe from Egypt in the late 1300s. Each suit consisted of ten cards with pips and three court cards (king, viceroy, and under-deputy). These are long and narrow cards (about 10" x 3³/₄"). Being of Moslem origin, the court cards were illustrated with intricate abstract designs rather than portraits.

After whom are the current face cards modeled ?

The city of Rouen in France became a major card-producing center in the 16th century. Many of the decks sold in England were imported from Rouen, and the designs developed in that city became standard in the English-speaking world. Towards the end of the 16th century, the French began associating certain court cards with famous names from history, but the practice never caught on in England or America. Thus, today's cards aren't really modeled on anyone.

What do the card suits signify?

The suits of the earliest known 4-suit decks from Egypt were polo sticks, coins, swords, and cups. Italian and Spanish card painters changed the polo sticks to batons. German printers tended to use hearts, bells, leaves, and acorns. The French introduced card designs using the simple shapes of

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spades, diamonds, hearts, and clubs and flat colors that enabled them to mass produce cards using woodcuts and stencils. The card decks most commonly used today are still based on these French images.

As for the meaning of these symbols, well, if you look at a dozen different sources you will likely find at least ten different opinions — none documented and many stated as fact. Some say the diamonds are spear tips and stand for foot soldiers, some claim the spades are stylized swords and stand for the knights while the diamonds indicate merchants, or maybe the aristocracy. Some say the clubs are representations of clover or other farm products and thus represent the peasantry. Some view the clubs as a group of three coins representing merchants. Others think clubs are really crosses and symbolize the clergy, while the spades, being shovels, represent the farmers. The opinions regarding hearts are particularly diverse. Those who dwell on sacred hearts say they represent the Christian church; others, seeing the shape as a sort of shield, favor an aristocratic explanation; and still others, noting that the shape doesn't really resemble a biological heart, human or otherwise, see a stylized vulva and claim it as a symbol of womanhood, unless it symbolizes royalty (who claimed first right to every bride).

We'll probably never know what was on the mind of the original designer.

Do contemporary cards look very much like those early French designs?

Enough to be recognizably their descendents. But, there were two major changes in the mid 1800s. The first is the invention of reversible court cards. These meant that your opponents could no longer deduce some of your cards by watching you turn the face cards upright. The second advance is the addition of indices in the corners. These enabled holding all your cards in one hand while still being able to read them.

Why do some card decks feature oversized indices?

While useful to the visually impaired, the original intent of such a design was to enable players in Stud Poker games to read the cards lying in front of opponents across the table. ■

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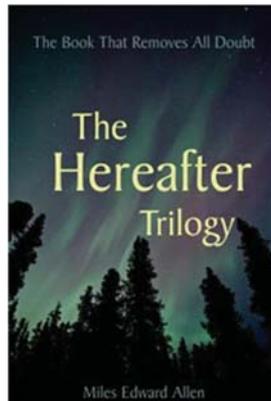
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