

Child's Play: Medieval and Renaissance Toys You Can Make or Find

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Toys You Can Make



Balls

Balls are a universal toy, found just about everywhere. *The Compleat Anachronist* issue “When Work Is Done: A Medieval Child’s Guide to Playful Pastimes” includes instructions to make a leather ball. We have been told that wrapping yarn very tightly into a ball makes a reasonable medieval ball. A wooden ball could be turned, carved or purchased.

a bell, and wool fleece. Begin by wrapping

Fig 1 Children playing, a book of heraldry (ONB 12820, fol. 182r), c. 1484-1486; Institut für Realienkunde.

A felled or felted ball is fun and easy to make. You need a basin of hot soapy water, a piece of fleece around the bell, and then dip the whole thing in the soapy water. Squeeze, press, massage and agitate the wet, soapy wool. The wool will felt together. Once the first layer has felted, add another and repeat

the process. Continue the process until you are satisfied with the size and shape of the wool ball. Rinse and allow the ball to dry. You can make a felted ball with something else inside or nothing at all. Starting with nothing to build around is harder.

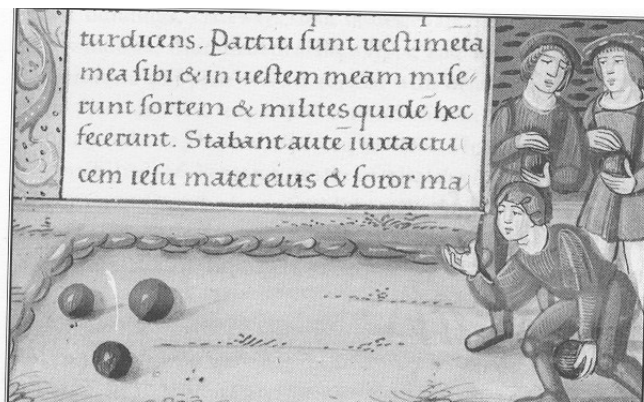


Fig 2 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Douce, 276, f. 12r

target over or the person who is able to get their bowling ball closest without knocking the target over.

Boules, bowling, and skittles

A Middle Ages bowling set is easier to assemble than a modern one because all you need is the same number of balls as players and a target. Once each player has a ball, pick a target – a feather, an upright stick, or a set of wooden pins – and start taking turns rolling the balls at the target. The winner can either be the first person to knock the



Cup and ball toy

You can easily find plastic cup and ball toys. We also managed to make our own out of wood. We took what was labeled as a candle cup and stuck a dowel rod into the hole in the bottom. Then we tied a piece of string about a foot long around the dowel rod just below the candle cup and knotted the other end through a wooden bead.

Fig 3 Modern cup and ball toy



Fig 5 Artist Unknown, Lady Arabella Stuart, 1577, Hardwick Hall.

Poppets: Dolls and figurines

Dolls and figures are ancient toys, and there is documentation for them being made from fabric, wood, ceramic, bone, “composition” (mainly paper pulp – paper mache would be similar), and metal. There are rag dolls from Roman Egypt, and carved bone dolls from Byzantium. German wooden dolls have been dated to the 1300s. They were made of



Fig 4 Bruegel, Children's Games

of painted wood, either one piece or with simple peg arms, and dressed in miniature fabric clothes just like those of the children who would have played with

them. These dolls can be recreated with wooden clothespins from your local craft store and scraps of fabric for the clothing. Much fancier dolls like the one on the left also existed and could be duplicated.

There are also a lot of figure toys that could be duplicated in clay. The bibliography lists a link to make a Viking toy horse like the one bottom left. If you or someone you know is into casting, there were also plenty of cast pewter figures like the one below.

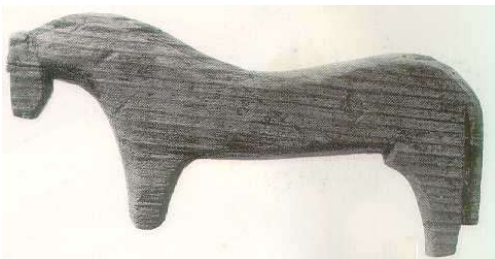


Fig 6 and 7 Trondheim horse; Medieval knight, Museum of London

Fits

A fit is a throwing toy. To make one, you need a scrap of fabric about two feet long and ten inches wide, a small bag of beans or birdseed, and a ribbon. Put the bag of beans in the middle of the fabric and fold in the fabric so that the bag is entirely encased in fabric. Pull the fabric tight around the base of the bag like a tail and tie a ribbon up tight on the tail against the bag. Now you too can throw a fit without tears.

Hobby Horses



Simply, a hobby horse is a stick with imitation horse's head on the end. The horse is ridden by straddling the stick. Paintings and illuminations show children playing with hobby horses, some of which are quite elaborate, with bridles, decorations, and reins.

There are many different ways to construct a hobby horse. For a quick hobby horse, we use a thick dowel rod, a sock (or some other casing for the head), and stuffing for the head, and rubber bands or duct tape, plus whatever decorative elements you wished. Put some stuffing in the head and pull the sock over the end of the dowel rod, leaving about 6 inches at the end to flop over and create the horse's head. Use the rubber bands or duct tape to secure the sock in place.

Figure 8 Bruegel, Children's Games

Jackstraws

You probably know jackstraws as pick-up sticks. Get a package or two of bamboo skewers. You can dye or paint them to make them more interesting.



Knucklebones (jacks)

Like many games, there are many variations on knucklebones. The version that is closest to jacks is the easiest one to make because all you need is something to toss in the air and a few of some item to pick up. Instead of bouncing the ball against the ground, you throw it up in the air and then pick up an agreed-upon number of knucklebones in each of a series of throws. The winner collects the most knucklebones. You can also make your own knucklebones of clay.

Fig 9 Bruegel, Children's Games

Mancala

You can buy an inexpensive mancala set at most toy stores, but you can also make one yourself. All you need for a simple mancala set is an carton for a dozen eggs, two small cups, and a bag of beans.

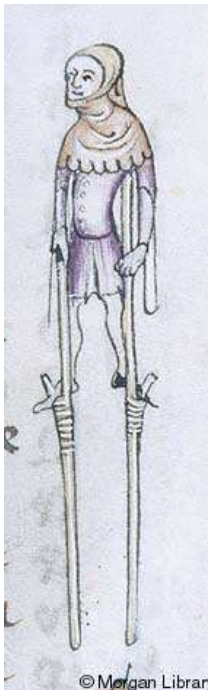
Marble games

Marbles pre-dated even the Romans. In the Middle Ages, they were made of stone, clay, or glass. Marbles are commercially available, but you could, if you were an eager stone cutter, potter or glass worker, create your own. There are two basic ways to play marbles: for fair (all players get their own marbles back) or for keeps/cutthroat (players keep whatever marbles they win).

You can play Nine Holes or Bridgeboard by making a bridgeboard. Get a sturdy piece of cardboard or thin wood and make feet for it so that it can stand vertically. Cut a series of 9 differently sized arches along the bottom of the board. Across the top of the arches, label each one with one number in this order: 6, 2, 3, 1, 5, 8, 7, 9, 4.

In Nine Holes, you attempt to shoot a marble through each arch in numerical order from 1 through 9. If you miss the correct arch, your turn ends. If you make the shot successfully, you keep shooting until you miss or put the marble through the wrong arch. The winner is the first person shoot through all 9 holes in order. An alternate version of Nine Holes is to make a miniature golf course out of whatever is around and play until the first person is able to complete the course.

In Bridgeboard, the players shoot through the arches and win the number of marbles painted over the particular arch from the board owner. In turn, the board owner collects any marbles that miss the board entirely.



There are plenty of other marble games out there with rules online. Look for names like Cherry Pit*, Ring Taw, Bun-hole, Castles or Pyramid*, Picking Plums, Hundreds, and Increase Pound. (Games listed with an asterisk are known to be from the Middle Ages or Renaissance.)

Fig 10 A man on stilts, Voeux du paon (PML G.24, fol. 40r), c. 1350, Morgan Library

Stilts

Dame Anthoinette Martel described how they pre-cut stilt pieces for construction at a previous Pennsic “I believe my husband and I cut 2x4s down the center (basically making 2x2s) Then cut those 4 feet long. The foot holds were an 8 inch pieces of 2x4s cut on the diagonal. we learned that holes for the nails to attach them needed to be predrilled so the kids could do the hammering.”

Ribbon sticks

These look like the ribbons used in rhythm gymnastics today. Take a dowel rod. Twist a screw eye into one end. Tie lengths of ribbon around the screw eye.



Tops and teetotums

You don't have to make your own tops – you can get a dozen wooden tops from Oriental Trading Company for less than \$6. But you can make them using wood findings from your local craft store. We found small wooden knobs with a hole drilled in them. We then took a bamboo skewer and chopped it into 2 inch lengths. The bamboo skewer piece goes into the hole and you have a top. Decorate as you wish. You can do something similar with a spindle whorl and a dowel rod or similar piece of wood.



The girl in the top image at left is holding a teetotum, a more specific kind of top used for an ancient gambling game. This can also be made by using wood pieces. Get a wooden block with a hole drilled through the center or drill your own. Stick a bamboo skewer or chopstick through the hole. Put the letters P, R, J, and F on each of the remaining sides. You will also need gambling pieces – candy, chocolate coins, pebbles – anything you want to use. For simplicity, we'll call the items being gambled coins.

Fig 11 and 12 Bruegel, *Children's Games*

To play this gambling game, each player contributes to a central pot. Each player then spins the teetotum and takes the listed action.

P – plunder – The player wins back the same number of coins she contributed to the pot at the beginning.

R – nothing – Lose a turn. The player passes the teetotum to the next player.

J – game – The player adds the same number of coins he contributed at the beginning to the pot again.

F – out – The player wins the entire pot and the game ends.

Minature versions of adult items

A lot of toys are miniature versions of adult items that you may be able to make or find. Items include: wooden swords, pots, jugs, doll cradles (dollhouses emerge at the very end of period).



Figure 12 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Bellows-Repairer*

Windmills, pinwheels, and scopperels

There are actually two kinds of windmill toys that fall in this category. The easier one to recreate is like a modern pinwheel, except that the pinwheel portion is perpendicular to the stick instead of parallel to it. Cut a windmill shape out of cardstock with 2 or 4 little flags on it. Punch a brad through the center of the cardstock piece and pin it to the end of the dowel rod. Leave enough room that the cardstock can still spin. Then hop on your hobby horse and charge the enemy, holding

your windmill like a lance.



Toys You Don't Even Have to Make (Modern Toys with Medieval Roots)

All of the following toys and games are still modernly available and date to the Middle Ages and/or Renaissance (with some variations in form or play):

Backgammon
Bocce
Checkers

Croquet
Curling
Dice

Skipping rope (jump rope)
Snakes and ladders (chutes and ladders)

Chess
Handball
Hide and seek
Hopscotch
Kite
Mancala
Masks
Parcheesi
Playing cards
Pull toys
Puppets
Quoits/horseshoes
Rattles
Rock, paper, scissors
Rolling hoops
Shuffleboard
Tag
Tiddlywinks

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