

## FACE TO FACE WITH ARGENTINIAN TRUCO: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

*Nicolás Martínez Sáez (ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-7298-9036)*

*National University of Mar del Plata, Argentina*

*martinezsaeznicolas@gmail.com*

*Cuántas veces con un cuatro a un envido dije «¡Quiero!»...  
y otra vez me fui a baraja sobrando con treinta y tres.*

*How many times, holding a four, I accepted the envido,  
and other times I went to the deck, with spare thirty three.*

Celedonio Flores, “Cuando me entrés a fallar”, 1929.

**Abstract.** The card game *Truco*, popular in Argentina and Uruguay, originates in Spain, specifically in Catalonia and Valencia. Some authors, with considerable imagination, have proposed legends of a more remote origin linked to Muslims, perhaps because the four-suited playing cards, which entered Europe from the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt (1250-1517), may have derived from a trick-taking game with a peculiar card hierarchy similar to that of *Truco*.

During the 16th and 17th centuries in Spain, various card games emerged. Some, like *Flor*, were predominantly games of chance and associated with betting; others, like *Truc* or *Truque*, were trick-taking and more social, prioritizing intuition and strategy over luck. From the times of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata up to the 19th century, a card game developed and became popular in these lands, combining the strategy of *Truque* and the chance of *Flor*: *Truquiflor*. The South American gauchos expressed, through this game, their character and temperament, transforming it into a dialectical game, full of sayings and verses. *Truco*, which today is played with or without the flor, optimally embodies certain traits of the criollo character—most notably, an irreverence in the face of objective and indisputable adversity, capable of “scaring the devil himself.”

---

©2025 Nicolás Martínez Sáez. This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

**Keywords:** Cards game, Trick-taking games, Truco, Gauchos, Argentina

### **First trick: the arrival of playing cards in Europe**

We must play our first card: to regard *Truco* as a serious matter, which means, at the very least, treating it philosophically. I find inspiration in this task in the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, who, thinking on chess in the early twentieth century, observed that to take a game seriously is at once a lesson, a warning and a reproach to those who treat the most serious matters as mere play.<sup>1</sup> The Roman poets, such as Ovid, already understood this: in play—through the passion we bring to it—we reveal our true selves, and our character stands bare before us.<sup>2</sup> In opposition to those views that confine games to the innocent and the childlike, we comprehend it as a practice imbued with values, beliefs and ideologies. Johan Huizinga captures this insight brilliantly in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, when he warns that to know a game is to know its very spirit.<sup>3</sup>

For a hermeneutics of *Truco*, we must begin with a decisive event that, we believe, has hitherto been insufficiently studied in light of its social and cultural significance: the introduction of playing cards into Europe. This gave rise to unforeseen consequences like —though distinct and distant—to those brought about by the emergence of video games between 1980 and 1990 and by today’s betting *apps*. Like video games, playing cards produced new subjectivities, new forms of sociability and new metaphors for explaining the world and understanding ourselves. Likewise, as with today’s online betting *apps*, playing cards generated new ways of earning one’s bread “without the sweat of the brow.”

With high probability, the invention of paper is attributed to China during the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), and perhaps as early as the tenth century, playing cards spread from China to the Mamluk Empire in Egypt. Subsequently, by the mid-fourteenth century, cards reached Italy or Spain via maritime trading ports. This information first emerged in 1939, when the Israeli scholar of Islamic art Leo Ary Mayer revealed an almost complete

---

<sup>1</sup> Unamuno, Miguel de, “Sobre el ajedrez”, *Contra esto y aquello*, Buenos Aires, Espasa - Calpe, 1941, pp. 122-130.

<sup>2</sup> Ovidio, *Ars amatoria*, 3, 369-380.

<sup>3</sup> Huizinga, Johan, *Homo ludens* (Trad. Eugenio Imaz), Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2007, p. 14.

fifteenth-century Mamluk deck of cards, hand-painted in a late-medieval style and nibbled by rats. Mayer maintained that the deck comprised five suits (cups, coins, swords, polo-sticks and staffs). However, in the 1970s, Michael Dummett and Kamal Abu-Deeb, upon examining Mayer's paper, pointed out that the deck he described was not a single deck but rather a mixture of two distinct decks; consequently, Mayer had mistakenly distinguished the staffs from the polo-sticks. In conclusion, the Mamluk deck contained not five but four suits, with three court cards and ten numbered cards per suit (fifty-two cards in total).

This research corroborates the testimony of the chronicler Giovanni di Iuzzo di Covelluzzo, who maintained that in 1379 the Saracen-origin card game called *naib*<sup>4</sup> was introduced in Viterbo, Italy. This reference holds considerable etymological interest, since the Italian term *naibi* (abandoned in the sixteenth century) and the Spanish *naipe* (still in use today) both derive from the Arabic *na'ib*. This etymology furnishes further support for the theory that European playing cards owe their origins to the Saracens.<sup>5</sup>

Dummett and Abu-Deeb point out that in the Mamluk deck, the suits of coins and polo-sticks rank the numbered cards from 1 (highest) to 10 (lowest), whereas in the suit of swords, the ranking goes from 10 (highest) to 1 (lowest). By analogy, symmetry suggests that the cups were ranked in the same way as the swords. This peculiar ordering only makes sense in a trick-taking game, and thus we may infer the influence of Mamluk playing cards on the development of European games such as *Tressette* (Italian), *Truque* (Spanish), *Le truc* (French) and *Putt* (English), where the 3, 2, and 1 are ranked—in that order—above the court cards (10, 11, and 12).<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in Europe, there has been a tendency—inherited from the Mamluk deck—to divide the suits into two groups. In line with this, we find an observation by the Dominican friar John of Rheinfelden (1340–1377), who states that among the four suits, some are reputed to be good and others

---

<sup>4</sup> Dummett, Michael, *The game of tarot*, London, Duckworth, 1980, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Mayer, Leo Ary, "Mamluk playing cards", *The L. A. Mayer Memorial Studies in Islamic Art and Archaeology*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1971.

<sup>6</sup> Dummett, Michael & Abu-Deeb, Kamal, "Some Remarks on Mamluk Playing Cards", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 36, University of Chicago, 1973, pp. 106-128.

bad.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, this friar offers no information about the game he describes, though it is assumed to have been a trick-taking game.

In summary, by the fourteenth century, Europe had received from the Islamic world a deck composed of four suits, which featured a distinctive hierarchy in the value of its cards. This deck was used to play a trick-taking game which, though now unknown, may be considered a distant precursor to games that would later develop in the West—such as the Spanish *Truque*, from which the Argentine *Truco* is derived.

### **Second trick: moral criticism and the evolution of playing cards**

The earliest European references are not to specific games but to playing cards in general, and they emerge from political and legislative contexts in the form of prohibitions.<sup>8</sup> Despite—or perhaps because of—these restrictions, playing cards gained popularity in Europe by the fifteenth century, coming into conflict with a longstanding theological tradition and an anti-ludic mentality that had persisted since the early Christians. This outlook began to soften in the thirteenth century with the rise of the

---

<sup>7</sup> “In the game called cards, the cards are painted in different designs and are played with in various ways. In the commonest manner — the one in which they first reached us — four cards depict four kings, each of whom is seated on a royal throne. Each of them holds a certain sign in his hand, some of these signs being considered good but others signifying evil. Under these kings come two marshals, of whom the first holds the sign upwards, as the king does, but the other holds the same sign downwards in his hand. After this are ten other cards, of the same overall size and shape. The king's sign appears once on the first of these, twice on the second, and so on with the others up to and including the tenth. Thus the king is the thirteenth card, and there are fifty-two cards altogether.” See Juan de Rheinfelden, *Tractatus de moribus et disciplina humanae conversationis*. Cited by Parlett, David, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> In 1382, a municipal ordinance in Barcelona banned a number of games, including playing cards, and in 1384 the authorities in Valencia issued a similar prohibition, noting that it applied to “un novell joch apellat dels naips”. See Sanchis y Sivera, José, *Vida íntima de los valencianos en la Época Foral*, Aitana, 1993, p. 69. In Castile, in 1387, King Juan I issued the command: “ningunos de los de nuestros Reynos sean osados de jugar dados ni naipes en público ni escondido”. Cited by González Alcántud, José Antonio, *Tractatus ludorum. Una antropología del juego*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 1993, p. 78. However, Dummett criticises this reference, arguing that we know nothing of any playing card bans in Castile before 1476, since the 1387 prohibition only appears in an official Spanish legal code from 1640. See Dummett, Michael, *The Game of Tarot*, op. cit., p. 17.

*eutrapelia*<sup>9</sup> paradigm, as seen in the books of Thomas Aquinas and Alfonso X. However, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, certain games—such as playing cards—were ultimately deemed to fall outside the bounds of *eutrapelia*.

For this reason, playing cards became a frequent target of preachers' sermons, as they had identified three major enemies to be fought: usury, sodomy, and gaming. Among them, the most emblematic figure is the Franciscan Bernardino of Siena, who, in his sermon *On the sin of gaming*, delivered in Florence in 1424, associated the symbolism of the four suits of playing cards with vices such as greed, lust, drunkenness, and violence.<sup>10</sup> In another sermon from 1425, he declared that the deck of cards was the *devil's breviary*.<sup>11</sup>

A century later, Protestant morality dealt another severe blow to gaming. The Reformation abolished the celebrations of holy days and other types of games, resulting in the austere Puritan society and the industrial world of work for those who believed in justification by faith alone.<sup>12</sup> Notably, Calvinist theologians such as Lambert Daneau (1530–1595) had no qualms about including playing cards among the devil's inventions in their 1566 translation of *De aleatoribus* by Pseudo-Cyprian (written towards the end of the second century AD), further adding that tarot cards were the first playing card game.

In response to this adverse environment towards gaming, numerous treatises on games emerged from the Spanish Counter-Reformation Catholicism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Many of these moralists and ecclesiastics interpreted and analysed card games through the lens of Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics, using the virtue of *eutrapelia* as a criterion to distinguish between honest games and those that are not. Nearly all the treatises associate playing cards with games of chance and betting, considering them dishonest, diabolical, evil, and dangerous.

---

<sup>9</sup> The virtue of *eutrapelia* was proposed by Aristotle in his ethical books, where he defined it as the middle between two extremes: the buffoon and the one who never laughs. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas reinterpreted it within a Christian framework as the virtue of playfulness, positioned between the offensive jester and the killjoy or boor who refuses to take part in play.

<sup>10</sup> Bernardino de Siena, *Sermón 26: Del peccato del giuoco*.

<sup>11</sup> Bernardino de Siena, *Sermón 42: Contra alearum ludos*.

<sup>12</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen, *Sobre la libertad, la alegría y el juego* (Trad. Leopoldo Márquez y José Martín), Salamanca, Sígueme, 1972, p. 24.

The entire world of playing cards was demonised. Moralists, employing ingenious etymologies, posited a diabolical, harmful, and dangerous origin for the term *naípe* (card) and other words linked to the world of gaming, such as *tahúr* (gambler) or *baraja* (deck).<sup>13</sup> From the very name of the inventor of playing cards, a certain Vilhan, they derived the etymology “vil-hambre” (“vile hunger”), which embodies a culpable passion—the “vile hunger” of gamblers. Vilhan was regarded by many treatise writers as a master of the evil arts, the patron of cheats, and the monarch of idleness.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the symbolism of the cards was associated with vices or excesses: coins signified greed, cups drunkenness, swords fights, and staffs symbolised how gamblers were left after playing—bereft of flowers and leaves.<sup>15</sup> During this period, a definition of the term *naípe* became established as an unbound book that, if it were bound, ought to be included in the catalogue of prohibited books.<sup>16</sup>

Now then, what are the specific games that have been the subject of such vehement moral criticism? Rarely do political-legislative ordinances, poets, or moralists name the card games actually played, and when they do, they seldom describe them. However, among the names of games mentioned are the following: *Sacanete*, *Quinolas*, *Trescientos*, *Hombre*, *Primera*, *Rentoy*, *Malilla*, and *Triunfo*. Generally, two types of games emerge: those in which stakes and chance play a predominant role, making them suitable for betting (as in the case of *Primera*); and others, which are trick-taking games, with or without trumps,<sup>17</sup> where the player’s skill, persuasion, and strategy outweigh the chance of the cards (as in the case of *Hombre* or *Triunfo*). The trump suit

<sup>13</sup> Numerous moralising etymologies can be found in the book of Francisco de Luque Fajardo, “*Fiel desengaño contra la ociosidad y los juegos*”, Texto preparado por Enrique Suárez Figaredo, *Lemir* 22, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Etievre, Jean Pierre, *Vilhan et Nicolas Pépin: les origines légendaires de la carte à jouer en Espagne*, *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, 16, 1980, pp. 203-235.

<sup>15</sup> Francisco de Luque Fajardo, “*Fiel desengaño contra la ociosidad y los juegos*”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>16</sup> “Libro desenquadrado en que se lee comúnmente en todos estados, que pudiera estar en el catálogo de los reprovados. Dixerónse naipes de la cifra primera que tuvieron, en la qual se encerrava el nombre del inventor. Eran una N y P, y de allí les pareció llamarlos naipes; pero las dichas letras dezian Nicolao Pépin. Tamarid piensa ser arábigo, y lo mesmo el Brocense.” See Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellano o española* (Primera parte), Madrid, Luis Sanchez impresor, 1611, Fol. 560.

<sup>17</sup> In some card games, the trump suit (*palo triunfo*) represents the highest-ranking suit.

(*palo triunfo*) is a European invention that even developed into a game bearing the same name.

David Parlett states that the oldest trump game is *Karnoffel* (Bavaria), dating from 1426, in which some cards have limited trump power over others and bear special names such as Pope, Kaiser, Devil, etc.<sup>18</sup> However, the game exhibited a peculiar feature: certain cards of lower rank and number could win against those of higher rank. The Catholic preacher Johannes Geiler of Kaysersberg lamented the “world turned upside down” presented by *Karnoffel*, in contrast to other card games where the cards of each suit followed a natural order with the king at the head, and higher-value cards always beat lower ones.<sup>19</sup>

In his didactic work *Diálogos escolares* (1538), the Valencian philosopher and humanist Juan Luis Vives refers to the game *Triunfo*, where, unlike in French card games, in Spanish ones some lower-numbered cards can win over higher-numbered ones.<sup>20</sup> This feature makes Spanish cards resemble Saracen cards, although, unlike the latter, the Spanish deck includes the Queen in place of the Knight and omits the tens from the numerical sequence.<sup>21</sup> Vives describes *Triunfo* as a game of cunning and wit, more of

<sup>18</sup> Parlett, David, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>19</sup> Dummett notes that during the Protestant Reformation, *Karnoffel*—which included cards such as the Pope, the Emperor (Kaiser), and the Devil—became a source of allegory for Protestant propagandists and satirists, who interpreted the defeat of the Pope card by lower-ranking cards as a symbol of Catholic decline. See Dummett, Michael, *The game of tarot*, *Op. Cit.*, p.184.

<sup>20</sup> “Lupiano: Ahí tenéis dos barajas de naipes enteras, una de España, y otra de Francia.

Valdaura: Esta de España parece que no está cabal.

Lupiano: ¿Cómo así?

Valdaura: Porque faltan los dieces.

Lupiano: Aquellas no suelen tener como las de Francia: porque hay cuatro géneros ó clases de naipes españoles, así como de los franceses. Los españoles tienen oros, copas, bastos, espadas. Los franceses tienen corazones, cuadrángulos, trifolios, vomérculos, ó palas, ó picas. En cada una familia hay rey, reyna, caballero, uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho y nueve. Los franceses tienen también dieces: y en los españoles los oros mas pocos, y copas mas pocas valen mas: los bastos y espadas al contrario. Mas en los franceses los mayores números siempre valen mas.

Castillo: ¿A qué juego jugaremos?

Valdaura: Al triunfo de España, y el que da los naipes se retendrá el naipe de muestra, si es as ó figura humana.”

See Juan Luis Vives, *Diálogos* (Trad. Cristóbal Coret y Peris), Madrid, 1817, p. 327.

<sup>21</sup> D’Allemagne, Henry René, *Les carts à jouer*, Tome 1, París, Librairie Hachette Et Cie, 1906, p. 197.

skill than of chance, played in pairs seated crosswise. Each player was dealt nine cards per hand, and small stakes were made to avoid playing “for nothing,” with players also calling *envidos*, *reenvidos*, and *envidos al resto*.<sup>22</sup>

From *Triunfo* to *Truque* there may be just a small step. However, even by the early 17th century, in the *Tesoro de la lengua castellana* (1611), the Spanish lexicographer Sebastián de Covarrubias did not register any card game under the name *Truque*. Instead, he identified *Truque* as a game resembling billiards.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, two card games are defined in the *Tesoro*: *Triunfo*, described simply as “a card game”,<sup>24</sup> and *Flor*, noted as “a cardsharps game”.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Covarrubias provides no further details about these games.

All of this leads us to speculate that, by this time, either the Spanish card game *Truque* was very little known or it did not yet exist as such.<sup>26</sup> One of the earliest reliable references to *Truque* as a card game is found in a collection of poems and satires by a Spaniard named Luis Antonio, who sought to offer his works as a form of entertainment in his book *Nuevo plato*

<sup>22</sup> Juan Luis Vives, *Diálogos*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 329-339.

<sup>23</sup> “Truco: Juego que de pocos años a esta parte se ha introducido en España, y trújose de Italia; es una mesa grande, guarnecida de paño muy tirante e igual, sin ninguna arruga ni tropezón. Está cercada de unos listones y de trecho en trecho tiene unas ventanillas por donde pueden caber las bolas; una puente de hierro, que sirve de los que el argolla en el juego que llaman de la argolla, y gran similitud con él, porque juegan del principio de la tabla y si entran por la puente ganan dos piedras; si se salió la bola por alguna de las ventanillas, lo pierde todo. Tienen otras leyes particulares, u por ser notorias no las pongo aquí.” See Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellano o española* (Segunda parte), Madrid, Luis Sanchez impresor, 1611, Fol. 56. The Baroque writer Alonso de Castillo Solórzano, in his book *Jornadas alegres* (1626), refers to the game of *trucos* as a ball game—that is, a kind of billiards. Likewise, the Spanish Jesuit Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, in his *Obra y días. Manual de señores y príncipes en que se propone, con su pureza y rigor, la especulación y ejecución política, económica y particular de todas las virtudes* (1641), distinguishes between games of (1) pure skill, such as chess; (2) pure chance, such as dice and some card games; (3) both chance and skill, such as backgammon and some card games; and (4) dexterity, such as *trucos*. Here too, *trucos* refers to a billiard-like game.

<sup>24</sup> Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellano o española* (Segunda parte), *Op. Cit.*, Fol. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellano o española* (Primera parte), *Op. Cit.*, Fol. 409.

<sup>26</sup> There is no evidence—nor do we believe it can be reasonably sustained—that the term *Truque* or *Truc* refers to a card game as early as the 15th century, as claimed by Francisco José Fuentes Pereira, “El truco: historia de una tradición”, *Sumuntán*, 14, 2001, pp. 123-152.

*de varios manjares para divertir el ocio* (1658).<sup>27</sup> One of his satires, according to the author, is addressed to a very materialistic lady and is not about card games per se, but uses them metaphorically to discuss love in relation to a female gambler who wins all the tricks, plays *Truque*, and cheats—*fullerías*, meaning trickery or deceit. The same poem also suggests that *Truque* and *Flor* were two distinct card games.

A year later, another probable reference to the card game *Truque* appears in the burlesque comedy *La más constante mujer* (1659), in which a man uses the card game as a metaphor for the fickleness of his romantic relationship with Isabel Borrromeo: “Que te gané ayer al truque, y te he vuelto a perder hoy” (“I won you yesterday at *Truque*, and I've lost you again today”).<sup>28</sup> A game like *Truque*, whose essence lies in bluffing, served as a fitting metaphor for the ups and downs and misunderstandings of romantic relationships.

Finally, in a book printed in the 18th century but attributed to the Spanish poet Lope de Vega (1562–1635), a man attempting to woo a lady suggests spending some pleasant time playing *Truque*, along with other games such as *mesa de Trucos* (billiards). However, while the man proposes playing *Truque* just for fun, the woman refuses the offer, stating that she's not interested in playing unless there are stakes: “Al truque jugar no puede, que tengo por experiencia, que no vale nada el juego, si no se envida tres piedras” (“I won't play *Truque*, for I know from experience that the game isn't worth anything unless you stake three stones”).<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> “En el garito de amor / jugaua con vna niña, / y no pienso parar más, / porque me ganó la dicha. / Quando la busco por suerte, / de tal suerte se desliça, / que al conocerla en la cara / por los pies se me despinta. / Si yo me rindo, ella huye, / pierdo quando se desvía, / paro corto, y dize que / no gusta de niñerías. / Dize que su juego es cientos, / y es porque tiene dos quintas / en las manos, que a qualquiera / gana baças, y repica. / Siempre que juega a la flor, / con declarada malicia / busca Reyes, porque dize / que las Coronas la obligan. / El juego del truque dize / que es mucho mejor que pintas, / pero si no es con tres oros, / nadie ha podido rendilla. / Y quando juega al rentoy, / no le falta la malilla, / con que en echándola el resto, / aceta, embida y rebida. / Iuega al hombre, y haze bien, / porque es tal su fullería, / que quando no la dan triunfos, / da codillo, y se retira.” See Antonio, Luis, *Nuevo plato de varios manjares para divertir el ocio*, Zaragoza, Juan de Ibar, 1658, pp. 70-72.

<sup>28</sup> Juan Maldonado, Diego la Dueña y Geronimo de Cifuentes, *La mas constante mujer*, Madrid, Gregorio Rodriguez, 1659, Fol. 217.

<sup>29</sup> Lope de Vega, *Relacion. El Premio del bien hablar, y bolver por las mugeres*, Sevilla, Francisco de Leefdael, 1700-1728, Fol. 8.

By the second half of the 17th century, it is reasonable to affirm that the Spanish *Truque* must have developed as a card game and gained popularity alongside other members of a game family such as *Putt* (English), *Le truc* (French),<sup>30</sup> *Vitou* (French, Nice), and *Truco* (South American). These games seem to share several common features: (1) Four players can participate, forming two teams seated opposite each other. Each player is dealt three cards, and three tricks are played. The goal is to win two of the three tricks. The suits of the cards are irrelevant, as there are no restrictions on which card must be played in each trick. A trick is won by the highest-ranking card, regardless of suit; (2) When playing a card, a player can propose a higher stake (in points, not money) to their opponent. The opponent may accept, reject, or raise the stake; (3) The cards follow a rather unusual<sup>31</sup> ranking. In older versions like *Putt*, the ranking from highest to lowest is: 3, 2, Ace, King, Queen, Jack, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, and 4; (4) During the game, players may communicate with their partners through gestures—typically facial expressions—that are prearranged and codified. John McLeod notes that in Catalonia, *Truc* was played with a 40-card Spanish deck with the following ranking: 3, 2, 1 (Ace), King, Knight (Caballo), Jack (Sota), 7, 6, 5, and 4. In other Spanish regions, such as Valencia, it was played with 22 cards and even more elaborate forms, where certain cards ranked higher than the 3s. These are called *cartas bravas* (*brave cards*) and, from highest to lowest, are: ace of swords, ace of staffs, seven of swords, and seven of coins.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> In Sid Sackson's description, the French game *Le truc* only resembles the Spanish *Truque* in being a bluffing game played by two or four players in pairs, where winning two out of three tricks is necessary to win a hand. However, *Le truc* differs from *Truque* in two fundamental aspects: first, players are allowed to exchange their hand at the beginning if they are dissatisfied with the cards received; second, *Le truc* does not include the *envido* or *flor* combinations, which would later be integrated into the Spanish *Truque* and especially into the South American variants. These new combinations would elevate the players' emotions and ingenuity to the highest levels. See Sackson, Sick, *Un montón de juegos* (Trad. Pedro Jorge Romero), Barcelona, RBA, 2007, pp. 36-45.

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps for this reason, recently, a prominent Argentine board game publisher expressed some perplexity in the opinion forum about *Truco* on BGG: "One of the least consistent games I've ever played, but since it is considered a traditional game, I keep playing it." See <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/19969/truco/ratings?comment=1> (February, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> The *Diccionario de Autoridades* (Volume IV) from the year 1734 describes a game called *Matarata* as follows: "Juego de náipes entre varias personas, en que ván cada dos de compañeros, semejante al del Truque: sin más diferencia, que la de ganar a los treses el siete de oros, y a este el de espadas (los quales se llaman matas) a uno y otro gana el bastó, y a este la espadilla."

Additionally, players could earn extra points for the best combination of cards in the same suit through the *envite* or *envido* phase. The highest *envido*, 33, is achieved with a 7 and a 6 of the same suit.<sup>33</sup>

It is not clear which of the games in this family appeared first.<sup>34</sup> The Spanish *Truque* combined with *Flor* and became known as “Truque y Flor,” gaining great popularity in South America under the name *Truquiflor*.<sup>35</sup> There, cunning, bluffing, and persuasion were the keys to winning any game.

### Third trick: Truco in the Río de la Plata

The Spanish conquerors brought to the Americas a game that likely fused the strategy of *Truque*<sup>36</sup> with the chance elements of *Flor*.<sup>37</sup> This game became known under the general name *Truco* or *Truquiflor* in countries such

<sup>33</sup> McLeod, John, “Playing the Game: Truc, Vitou and Aluette”, *The Playing-Card*, 34/3, 2005, pp. 212-215.

<sup>34</sup> Dummett adds *Aluette* (French) to this family of games, noting that it was played with a 48-card Spanish deck and suspecting it to be the oldest of them all, dating back at least to the year 1502. In his view, this family of games originated in France, although he maintains that *Le Truc* (French) is derived from the Spanish *Truco*. See Dummett, Michael, *The game of tarot*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 30. Parlett states that *Le Truc* (French) dates back to the year 1583. See Parlett, David, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*, *Op. Cit.*, p 170. Thierry Depaulis argues that the Spanish *Truque* was preceded by the French *Le Truc*, which is mentioned in 1570 in the book of the French jurist and poet Étienne Tabourot. See Étienne Tabourot, *Les bigarrures et touches du seigneur des accords: avec les apophtegmes du Sieur Gaulard et les escaignes dijonnaises*, A Rouen, Chez Loys du Mesnil, 1611, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> Chamorro Fernández, María Inés, *Léxico del naipe del Siglo de Oro*, Gijón, Trea, 2005, p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> In the *Diccionario de autoridades* (Volume VI) from the year 1739, it is defined as: “TRUQUE. s. m. Juego de náipes, entre dos, quatro, ù mas personas, en que se reparten à tres cartas à cada uno, las que se ván jugando una à una para hacer las bazas, que gana el que echa la carta mayor por su orden, que es el tres, el dos, ás, y despues el Rey, caballo, &c. excepto los cincos, y quattros, que se separan. En este juego hai envites de tantos de tres en tres, diciendo truco, tres mas, tres mas nueve, y juego fuera, que es doce piedras; número, que [v.372] suele ser la talla del juego.”

<sup>37</sup> In the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (Volume III) from the year 1732, it is defined as: “FLOR: Juego de náipes, en que de una en una se reparten tres cartas a cada sugeto de los que juegan, y se hacen los envites y revites del mismo modo que al cacho. El que hace flor, que son tres cartas de un palo, tiene mejor partido: y caso que concurra otro, gana el que tiene más puntos, y siendo iguales es superior el que es mano. El dos vale doce, el as once, las figuras y el cinco diez, el tres nueve, el quatro ocho, y el siete y seis como pintan. El postre tiene el privilegio de que le valga diez la primer carta que toma, descubriéndola para que la vean los demás, aunque la tal carta sea seis, o siete. Quando no se hace flor gana el mayor punto de los que ocurren en una o dos cartas.”

as Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, and Venezuela.<sup>38</sup> Exported from the Iberian Peninsula to South America, it generally retained the same structure, although with varying card hierarchies, betting rules, and scoring systems.

Under Spanish rule, the preindustrial society of the New World played whenever they could. While the *tahúres* (gamblers), who lived off other people's money, were the minority, the vast majority played in general stores and military camps purely for entertainment. As Argentine historian Carlos Mayo points out:

The game brings together under the same rules those whom social stratification, the caste imagination, and racial prejudice insisted on keeping separate and apart. [...] There, seated at the same table and under rules that applied equally to everyone, one could see free men and slaves, whites, blacks, indigenous people, and mestizos, ranchers, overseers, and laborers, men and women, old and young, all sharing a game of Truco. «In the game, we are all equal», a soldier told a non-commissioned officer.<sup>39</sup>

The Spanish kings were deeply concerned about gambling in the Río de la Plata region. In 1680, King Charles II of the House of Austria enacted a law *De juegos y jugadores* (*On Games and Gamblers*) that applied throughout the territories of Spanish America.<sup>40</sup> This law did not mention any specific card game but rather targeted cards, dice, and tables indiscriminately due to their strong association with betting. With the rise of the Bourbons and the reformist project in 18th-century Spain, there was increased political control over gaming and entertainment, becoming less tolerant and more vigilant regarding the internal administration of the Indies.

---

<sup>38</sup> McLeod, John, "Playing the Game: Truc, Vitou and Aluette", *Op. Cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Mayo, Carlos, "La Argentina era una timba (A modo de conclusión final)", *Juego, sociedad y Estado en Buenos Aires (1730-1830)*, Buenos Aires, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 1998, pp. 158-160.

<sup>40</sup> "Juntase á jugar en tablages públicos mucha gente ociosa de vida inquieta, y depravadas costumbres, de que han resultado muy grandes inconvenientes, y delitos atroces en ofensa de Dios nuestro Señor, con juramentos, blasfemias, muertes, y pérdidas de hazienda, que de semejantes distraimientos se siguen, demás de los desasosiegos, é inquietudes, que se han causado, perturbando la paz, y unión de la república, por intereses de baratos, y naypes." See *Recopilación de las leyes de los reynos de las indias* (Antonio de León Pinelo y Juan de Solórzano Pereira), Libro VII, Título 2.

By the mid-18th century, punishments for gambling included exile, forced labor on public works, heavy monetary fines, and whipping. Both players and those who allowed gambling were penalized. Around 1771, King Charles III of Spain issued a *Pragmática* (royal decree) for both Spain and the Indies that listed a series of prohibited games.<sup>41</sup> Unlike games such as *Flor*, which were explicitly named, neither *Truque* nor *Truquiflor* appeared on the list of banned games. This suggests that in the Río de la Plata region, these games likely went unnoticed by the political authorities.

Perhaps because in South America, *Truco* became more a game of soul against soul than pocket against pocket—a game where each match settled a matter of honor rather than money, a game whose nature was the mind’s free mastery over the monetary incentive of the bet.<sup>42</sup> And if bets were made, they likely did not carry serious consequences for the players; rather, small stakes were common, such as a prepared barbecue or a traditional Spanish stew.<sup>43</sup>

Over time, *Truco* became more creole and less European. Thus, we can say that *Truco* underwent a process of “de-Europeanization”. Variants evolved, including some played “with muestra” or “without muestra.” The “muestra” is not exactly a trump suit but a card revealed at the end, after dealing all cards, whose suit creates new “power cards” that change the hierarchy of the most valuable cards for *flor*, *envido*, and *truco*. In *Truco with muestra*, the highest cards—called “power cards”—are the 2, followed by the 4, the 5, the *caballo* (knight), and the *sota* (jack) of the muestra’s suit, which take precedence over the fixed hierarchy. By contrast, in *Truco without muestra*, the four highest cards are, in order: the ace of swords, the ace of

<sup>41</sup> “Prohibo, que las Personas estantes en estos Reynos, de qualquier calidad y condición que sean, jueguen, tengan, ó permitan en sus casas los Juegos de Banca, ó Faraón, Baceta, Carreta, Banca fallida, Sacanete, Parar, Treinta, y Quarenta, Cacho, Flor, Quince, Treinta y una embidada, ni otros qualesquiera de Naypes, que sean de Suerte y Azar, ó que se jueguen á Embite, aunque sean de otra clase, y no vayan aqui especificados; como también los Juegos del Birbis, Oca, ó Auca, Dados, Tablas, Azares, y Chuecas, Bolillo, Trompico, Palo, ó instrumento de hueso, madera, ó metal, ó de otra manera alguna, que tenga encuentros, azares, ó reparos, como también el de Taba, Cubiletes, Dedales, Nueces, Correguela, Descarga la Burra, y otros qualesquiera de suerte y azár, aunque no vayan señalados con sus propios nombres.” See Carlos III, *Pragmática Sanción, en fuerza de la ley, prohibiendo los juegos de envite, suerte y azar que expresan, y declarando el modo de jugar los permitidos*, Madrid, 1771, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Vidart, Daniel, “Genealogía y espíritu del Truco”, *El diario de la cultura*, Viernes 16 de Junio de 1995.

<sup>43</sup> Guarnieri, Juan Carlos, *Juegos típicos criollos*, Montevideo, DISA, 1970, p. 12.

staffs, the seven of swords, and the seven of coins. Among the most popular variants are *Uruguayan Truco*, or “*hasta el dos*” (with *muestra*), and *Argentine Truco* (without *muestra*).

In these developments and evolutions, the game carries the lyrical spirit and temperament of the South American *gauchos*.<sup>44</sup> They were great masters of *Truquiflor*, known as the “game of joyful singing” because it was traditional to announce *flor*, *envido*, and *truco* through rhymed verses, supposedly unique to each occasion and improvised on the spot. This poetry, easily improvised, became the most distinctive and original contribution that South Americans added to the European *Truque*, enhancing and enriching the gaming experience. Indeed, “quatrains or sextains that became famous for their wit and poetry”<sup>45</sup> have been documented, and even rulebooks written in verse existed.<sup>46</sup> It is no coincidence that the board and card game historian David Parlett once remarked that *Argentine Truco* must be the only card game in the world designed to be won by poets.<sup>47</sup>

In South America, the sayings and verses used—especially to declare *flor*, *contraflor*, or *envido*—were imbued with amorous themes.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the *fullero* (trickster) love that symbolized the Spanish *Truque* was transformed into a *gaucho* love with a strong courtly imprint: “Quisiera verte mi china arrimada a tu balcón luciendo en tus negras trenzas el regalo de esta flor” (“I’d like to see you, my *china*, leaning against your balcony, wearing in your black braids the gift of this flower”); “Una puerta, una ventana, una cortina, un balcón y en el balcón una dama, y en su cabeza una ¡flor!” (“A door, a window, a curtain, a balcony, and on the balcony a lady, and on her head—a flower!”);<sup>49</sup> “Para pintar a mi china no hay pinceles ni pintor, ni flores en los jardines comparadas con mi flor” (“No brush or painter could paint my *china*, nor are there flowers in the gardens to compare with my flower”), “Pa el amor soy atrevido y bravo como as de espada, pero nunca digo envido

<sup>44</sup> A mestizo who, in the 17th and 19th centuries, lived in Argentina, Uruguay, and Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil; he was a nomadic horseman skilled in cattle work.

<sup>45</sup> Villador, Amando, *Nuevo tratado y reglamento del juego truco, tute y mus*, Buenos Aires, Buchieri, 1946, s/n.

<sup>46</sup> Suarez, Casiano, *Dichos del truco*, Buenos Aires, C. S. ediciones, 1994, pp. 139-148.

<sup>47</sup> Parlett, David, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>48</sup> Even today, in the game of *Truco*, when a card is played face down and one calls out “*Truco*”, challenging the opponent with a “*Querer para ver*” (“Want to see”), something is expressed that alludes to the dialectic of love. Likewise, the signal for the ace of staffs (a wink) or the signal for the twos (a kiss) has often led to confusion—even between teammates.

<sup>49</sup> Suarez, *Dichos del truco*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 46-49.

exponiendo la jugada” (“When it comes to love, I’m daring and brave like the ace of swords, but I never say *envido* revealing my play”).<sup>50</sup> Distance, tension, gifts, praise, and seduction—all the elements of late medieval courtly love—are present in the game.

In addition to courtly love, *Truco* also came to symbolize another trait of gaucho behavior: irreverence toward authority. For the gaucho, the king was merely a figure in the deck to be played with.<sup>51</sup> Chronicles and gauchesque literature reveal how the gauchos’ preference for *Truquiflor* evolved into a practice for demonstrating skill and endurance.

In his book *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles* (1870), the Argentine military officer Lucio V. Mansilla describes a gaucho named Miguelito who lives among the Ranquel Indians and is skilled in card games, able to draw whichever card he wants, as no one can beat him at *Monte*, *Truco*, or *Primera*.<sup>52</sup>

Within gauchesque literature, we find references to the game of *Truco* in the work *Santos Vega o los mellizos de la flor* (1872), where Argentine politician Hilario Ascasubi uses the figure of the gaucho Santos Vega to portray resistance to modernity through his deep bond with Nature. He describes scenes of a somewhat primitive bourgeois society where a plebeian game like *Truco* was still played. The author attempts to show that no serious man plays *Truquiflor*, as the heated outbursts and shouts of the players “were enough to scare the devil himself.”<sup>53</sup> Ascasubi provides a detailed account of a full hand played between two pairs in the Uruguayan version of *Truco*, also known as *Hasta el dos* (with muestra).

Also in *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879) by José Hernández, considered Argentina’s foundational epic poem,<sup>54</sup> the gaucho known as Picardía boasts

<sup>50</sup> Henry, Rodolfo I., *Reglas oficiales del Truco*, Buenos Aires, I.N.D.I.A., 1976, pp. 15-16.

<sup>51</sup> The philosopher José Ortega y Gasset expresses this idea when he states: “La Revolución Francesa fue la gran jornada del gran resentimiento. Pero, en todo caso, ningún otro pueblo europeo ha odiado de verdad a los reyes que expulsó. América, viceversa, no los ha conocido: los reyes le son personajes distantes, criaturas legendarias de cuento o ballet, y ha jugado con ellos a la baraja. El rey es para el americano una figura divertida e increíble, como el ornitorrinco.” See Ortega y Gasset, José, “Del Imperio Romano”, *Obras completas*, Tomo VI, Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1964, p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> Mansilla, Lucio V., *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*, Buenos Aires, Imprenta, Litografía y Fundición de Tipos, 1870, p. 285.

<sup>53</sup> Ascasubi, Hilario, *Santos Vega o los mellizos de la flor*, Paris, Imprenta De Paul Dupont, 1872, p. 386.

<sup>54</sup> Lugones, Leopoldo, *El payador*, Buenos Aires, Biblioteca Nacional, 2009, p. 137.

of having trained himself in card games and of making a career out of playing. He claims to have an edge in card games through “legal tricks” and the cunning of an experienced player. In this way, he demonstrates his skill in defending his money: “En el *truco*, al más pintao solía ponerlo en apuro; cuando aventajar procuro, sé tener, como fajadas tiro a tiro el as de espadas, o *flor*, o *envite* seguro” (“In *Truco*, I used to trouble even the flashiest player; when I aim to win, I know how to hold back, like bandoliers, shot by shot — the ace of swords, or a sure *flor*, or *envite*”).<sup>55</sup>

It is worth noting that the Argentine politician and writer Domingo Sarmiento, in *Facundo o Civilización y Barbarie en las Pampas Argentinas* (1845), distinguished three types of gauchos and among them described the singing gauchos. He compared them to medieval troubadours who moved between the city and the countryside and fled from justice because they had to answer for stabbings, killings, and stolen horses or girls.<sup>56</sup> Although Sarmiento praised their creativity, he considered that the gauchos and their customs were opposed to the civilizing process occurring in Europe and therefore obstacles to overcoming barbarism. For this reason, from the perspective of the ruling elites of the 19th century, playing the plebeian game of *Truco* must have been seen as something contrary to the spirit of modern bourgeois progress.

#### **Fourth and final trick: Truco is Argentine**

Philosophically speaking, *Truquiflor* is a game resulting from the fusion between, on one hand, the chance of the *Flor*—often linked to betting and trickery—and, on the other hand, the cunning and strategy of the *Truque*. In his passion for *Truquiflor*, the gaucho integrated two phenomena that had been presented as opposites since the Greco-Roman and medieval worlds: luck (*týche* / *alea* / *ventura*) and skill (*téchne* / *ars* / *seso*). In the 13th century, the Spanish King Alfonso X “The Wise” organized a debate among scholars to determine which prevailed in the world: fortune, intellect, or practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Thus, in the game of *Tables*,<sup>57</sup> he envisioned the symbol of practical wisdom as an intermediate, mediating path between the fatality of fortune, symbolized by dice, and the dominant rationalism of

<sup>55</sup> Hernández, José, *El gaucho Martín Fierro y La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sopena Argentina, 1961, p. 193.

<sup>56</sup> Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo*, Buenos Aires, Beeme, 2009, pp. 47-48.

<sup>57</sup> Predecessor of modern *Backgammon*.

intellect, symbolized by chess. In South America, particularly Argentina, *Truco* became the symbol of creole practical wisdom, bringing together and preserving the adventurous, noble, and irreverent spirit of the Catholic Baroque in contrast to the rational, secular, and modern spirit that prevailed in Europe.<sup>58</sup>

Although *Truco* was a symbol of American practical wisdom, some did not see it that way — among them, the French sociologist Roger Caillois. Following Huizinga's thesis, Caillois asserts that every game reveals moral preferences, perpetuates customs, and reflects the beliefs of the culture from which it originates.<sup>59</sup> Thus, in his book *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958), he analyzes correlations between, on one hand, the favorite sports or games of each society, and on the other, the behavior of taxpayers towards the treasury or citizens towards the State. After considering golf as the quintessential Anglo-Saxon sport — where cheating would be easy at any moment but players nonetheless refrain — Caillois compares it to Argentine *Truco*, a game where trickery, cunning maneuvers, and coded, regulated, and obligatory ruses are the norm, relating this to the habits of Argentines themselves. The conclusion is clear and pointed: “Argentines behave towards the State or the tax authorities as they do in the game of *Truco*: we are always full of lies.” However, Caillois points out something “strange” about the game: the players' ability to evoke the names of the stakes (*flor*, *envido*, and *truco*) in the partner's mind without actually pronouncing them. Thus, he detects that certain mental habits within the game contribute to giving everyday life and public affairs a distinctly original character.

The use of clever allusion, a sharp sense of solidarity among partners, a tendency to deceive—half in jest, half in earnest—which is otherwise accepted and well received, but always with the expectation of retaliation.<sup>60</sup>

Now, in response to those who have viewed *Truco* as a symbol of a culture of dishonesty, as Caillois did, the gaucho philosopher Alberto Buena teaches

---

<sup>58</sup> Modern Europe tried, by all means, to subject chance to reason, finding in the primacy of Protestant conscience and in the absolute reason of German philosophy the ideological sources to draw upon for this endeavor.

<sup>59</sup> Caillois, Roger, *Los juegos y los hombres. La máscara y el vértigo* (Trad. Jorge Ferreiro), México, Fondo de Cultura económica, 1986, p. 138.

<sup>60</sup> Caillois, Roger, *Los juegos y los hombres. La máscara y el vértigo, Op. Cit.*, p. 141.

us that the starting point for analyzing *Truco* and its *ethos* must be “the preference for ourselves.” Generally, *Truco* has been a friendly game<sup>61</sup> where no one looks into others’ pockets nor searches rulebooks for penalties. If there were bets, they were very small because the game was played solely to win—for honor—seeking to guess and feel out the other players: this is what makes Argentines give their whole being to *Truco*, as the game allows them to be in their world as they wish to be.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, *Truco* expresses something that, in societies like Argentina, is the strongest social force and the most important cohesive factor: friendship.<sup>63</sup>

A ruling by National Judge Aguirre in 1947 made it clear that *Truco* is not a game of chance and betting, but of skill and honor. On that occasion, the police in the city of Resistencia had caught and detained four men playing *Truco* over the cost of their consumption at the grill restaurant of a certain Marcelino Meza. In the ruling, the judge demands the release of the detainees with the following reasoning:

The game of *Truco*, commonly known as the people’s game, cannot and should not be considered a game of chance, and therefore it is not included in the prohibitions of Law 4.097. Creole tradition regards the game of *Truco* as one of the means by which the Argentine gaucho had the opportunity to showcase his skills and develop his improvisational talents—noble and time-honored qualities of old Creole lineage—that inspired brilliant writers such as Hernández and Güiraldes to dedicate some of their finest pages in American literature to it. All this has led the legislator to not hesitate in excluding this game from the prohibitive law.

Furthermore, the game played among buddies for the cost of refreshments—as anticipated—takes place in all social orders for the amusement and entertainment of the participants, and this cannot be

---

<sup>61</sup> In his treatise, Amando Villador says: “El truco amistoso debe tener todas las características de toda reunión amable de manera que, hasta una grosería que pueda soltar al corneta que nunca falta, sea disimulada por los presentes sin tomar a pecho lo que, en otra oportunidad podría ser ofensa pura o incongruencia. El truco, centro de tertulia amena, debe ser ambientado de amplísimo optimismo, de franca camaradería, y saludable entusiasmo, de manera que jamás dé lugar a consultas del reglamento, es decir que se ha de poner en práctica el antiguo aforismo «entre amigos honrados, cumplimientos excusados».” See Villador, Amando, *Nuevo tratado y reglamento del juego truco, tute y mus*, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>62</sup> Mafud, Julio, *Psicología de la viveza criolla*, Buenos Aires, Distal, 1984, p. 161.

<sup>63</sup> Mafud, Julio, *Psicología de la viveza criolla*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 86-87.

considered a violation of the applicable law, especially since the price of a round was limited to the modest sum of fifty cents per game.<sup>64</sup>

Situations like those described show that *Truco* is a game more closely aligned with the spirit of *eutrapelia*—the medieval ideal of honest recreation—than with the modern drive for monetary gambling.

Another trait makes *Truco* a genuine expression of the South American creole identity: an irreverence toward authority, which is mirrored in the peculiar and ironic hierarchy of its cards, inherited from the Arab-Spanish deck. Remember that many of the nominally lower cards beat the higher ones, and suits are irrelevant when it comes to winning a round. In this way, the *Truco* table itself embodies irreverence, and even the folk sayings reflect this attitude: “Una carrera corrieron el sapo y la comadreja, y el sapo al aventajarla le dijo: *truco*, en la oreja” (“A race was run between the toad and the weasel, and when the toad overtook her, he shouted: *Truco*, in her ear.”);<sup>65</sup> “Con las cartas que yo tengo, tampoco me asusta el cuco, y si es que no me detengo yo le digo *flor y truco*.” (“With the cards I hold, even the bogeyman doesn’t scare me; and if I don’t hesitate, I’ll say to you *flor* and *truco*”).<sup>66</sup> And even if a player admits, “con *flor* me achico” (“I shrink when I see a *flor*”), the opportunity dealt by *Truco* may still give him a shot at revenge.

Irreverence, in this context, means not backing down in the face of the most adverse and unfavorable circumstances, but rather reaffirming oneself even when it’s impossible to “gather suit.” This opens the door for lies, bluffing, and deceptive words to become highly effective psychological tools for the chosen moment. In summary, the *Truco* teaches that the one at the bottom can sometimes win the one at the top. Playing is nothing more than a manifestation of the cult of courage. At the table, each player is like a small god, assigning whatever value they wish to their cards.<sup>67</sup> That’s why *Truco* has often been called a poor man’s game: because “you have to speculate with the useful yield of a single cent and draw strength from weakness.” It’s always an act of bravery when boasting hits its mark: “accepting a ‘vale cuatro’ with a jack and losing it sets the tone of incompetence for the rest of

---

<sup>64</sup> Díaz Usandivaras, Julio & Díaz Usandivaras, Julio Carlos, *Folklore y tradición. Antología argentina*, Buenos Aires, Raigal, 1953, pp. 168-169.

<sup>65</sup> Henry, Rodolfo I., *Reglas oficiales del Truco*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Suarez, *Dichos del truco*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> Mafud, Julio, *Psicología de la viveza criolla*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 163.

the game.”<sup>68</sup> As Amando Villador says, since everything in *Truco* is healthy mischief and trickery, the true charm lies in those playful feints that some players pull off with such cunning.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the players show more courage in their singing than the courage they have in the cards.

Lastly, *Truco* expresses another trait inherent to the Hispanic American sense of time—one that stands in contrast to the fast-paced Anglo-American notion of time. As Buela affirms, “ours is not «time is money», but rather «only delay of what is yet to come», as Martín Fierro says. It is a way of maturing along with things.”<sup>70</sup> For this reason, the beauty of *Truco* lies in playing it slowly—without becoming dull<sup>71</sup>—looking opponents in the eyes, persuading, confusing, lying by telling the truth, waiting, joking, and showing off. Thus, even with a seven of cups, one can boldly shout “vale cuatro!”—a superb gesture of irreverence that echoes the cunning and mischief of ancient plays.<sup>72</sup> In the *magic circle* of *Truco*, time suspends itself: one player becomes all players, one call becomes all calls. One burst of anger holds every past rage, and one moment of joy contains all past joys. The game allows for an ideal repetition of a past that is gone, giving it a new meaning through present experience. *Truco* has fulfilled this metaphysical task on South American soil.

Today, *Truco* has become Argentina’s *de facto* national game, and in this sense, we would like to recall Villador’s words: “For now, *Truco* is ours. We made it Argentine, with the sly crouching of the tero, the bravery of the jaguar, and witty verses with creole flair down to the bone.”<sup>73</sup> Many of us believe that *Truco* is the true national game<sup>74</sup>—an element of the

<sup>68</sup> Martínez Estrada, Ezequiel, *La cabeza de Goliath*, Buenos Aires, Capital Intelectual, 2009, p. 201.

<sup>69</sup> Villador, Amando, *Nuevo tratado y reglamento del juego truco, tute y mus*, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>70</sup> Buela, Alberto, “Pensamiento y tradición nacional”, *Infobae*, (14 de diciembre de 2020). <https://www.infobae.com/opinion/2020/12/14/pensamiento-y-tradicion-nacional/>

<sup>71</sup> Villador, Amando, *Nuevo tratado y reglamento del juego truco, tute y mus*, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>72</sup> Jorge Luis Borges captured in verse the metaphysical experience into which *Truco* immerses us: “Una lentitud cimarrona / va demorando las palabras / y como las alternativas del juego / se repiten y se repiten, / los jugadores de esta noche / copian antiguas bazas: / hecho que resucita un poco, muy poco / a las generaciones de los mayores / que legaron al tiempo de Buenos Aires / los mismos versos y las mismas diabluras.” See Borges, Jorge Luis Borges, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1970, p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> Villador, Amando, *Nuevo tratado y reglamento del juego truco, tute y mus*, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>74</sup> Curiously, there is another game that became Argentina’s national sport: *Pato* (*Duck*). It was declared the national sport in 1953 by President Juan Domingo Perón. *Pato* is a traditional horseback game that resembles *polo* and traces its roots back to the 17th century,

homeland<sup>75</sup> and an expression of our creole identity. Perhaps nowhere else in the world is *Truco* played as much as in Argentina.<sup>76</sup> And today, in the face of the hegemonic avalanche of global, homogenized forms of entertainment served through our smartphones, it would be far better for the game to return to the pubs and social clubs, fostering spaces of friendly sociability. It is the responsibility of the elders to preserve and pass on the best of our ludic tradition to new generations—before the political and economic establishment decides the fate of *Truco*, alienating its essence or turning it into a boring museum piece.

## References

- Antonio, Luis, *Nuevo plato de varios manjares para divertir el ocio*, Zaragoza, Juan de Ibar, 1658.
- Ascasubi, Hilario, *Santos Vega o los mellizos de la flor*, Paris, Imprenta De Paul Dupont, 1872.
- Barnes, Pablo M., *Juego de naipes*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Molino, 1943.
- Buela, Alberto, *Hispanoamérica contra Occidente*, Buenos Aires, CEES, 2021.

---

originating with the *criollos*. Historically, the game was played with a live duck inside a leather bag—hence the name “Pato”—although today, a leather ball with six handles is used instead. Two teams of four riders each compete to pick up the ball and score by throwing it through a vertical hoop placed on the opposing team’s side of the field. The game demands exceptional horsemanship, skillful ball handling, and strong teamwork.

<sup>75</sup> Gainza, Juan Eserverri, *El truco criollo*, Mendoza, Talleres gráficos D’Accurzio, 1961, p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> It is paradoxical how little attention this phenomenon has received in Argentina, being mostly noticed only by the marketing departments of large companies, some of them foreign.

Over the past few decades, *Truco* has frequently been used as a theme in advertising campaigns. Just to name a few: the *Primer Campeonato Nacional de Truco* (2002), organized by the Clarín media group; *Salvemos al Truco* (2022), a campaign by the vermouth company Cinzano; and *Cuando retrucamos pasan cosas lindas* (2024), launched by the fast-food chain McDonald’s. The latter even sparked the spontaneous creation of a *Facebook* community of over 2.000 members, who exchange cards in order to complete a *Truco*-themed deck inspired by the Argentine national soccer team (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/770804965042467>).

- Buela, Alberto, “Pensamiento y tradición nacional”, *Infobae*, (14 de diciembre de 2020), <https://www.infobae.com/opinion/2020/12/14/pensamiento-y-tradicion-nacional/>
- Borges, Jorge Luis, “Truco”, *La prensa* (1 de enero de 1928).
- Borges, Jorge Luis, “Truco”, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1970.
- Brunet y Bellet, Joseph, *Lo joch de naihs, naihs, o cartas*, Barcelona, Imprenta La Renaixensa, 1886.
- Caillois, Roger, *Los juegos y los hombres. La máscara y el vértigo* (Trad. Jorge Ferreiro), México, Fondo de Cultura económica, 1986.
- Chamorro Fernández, María Inés, *Léxico del naipe del Siglo de Oro*, Gijón, Trea, 2005.
- Cotton, Charles, *The compleat gamester*, London, R. Cutler, 1674.
- D’Allemagne, Henry René, *Les carts à jouer*, Tome 1, París, Librairie Hachette Et Cie, 1906.
- Díaz Usandivaras, Julio & Díaz Usandivaras, Julio Carlos, *Folklore y tradición. Antología argentina*, Buenos Aires, Raigal, 1953
- Dummett, Michael & Abu-Deeb, Kamal, “Some Remarks on Mamluk Playing Cards”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 36, University of Chicago, 1973, pp. 106-128.
- Dummett, Michael, *The game of tarot*, London, Duckworth, 1980.
- Étienvre, Jean Pierre, *Vilhan et Nicolas Pépin: les origines légendaires de la carte à jouer en Espagne*, Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez, 16, 1980, pp. 203-235.
- Étienvre, Jean Pierre, *Envites del talante literario en tiempos áureos*, Madrid, Iberoamericana, 2019.

- Étienne Tabourot, *Les bigarrures et touches du seigneur des accords: avec les apophtegmes du Sieur Gaulard et les escaignes dijonnaises*, A Rouen, Chez Loys du Mesnil, 1611.
- Francisco de Luque Fajardo, “Fiel desengaño contra la ociosidad y los juegos”, Texto preparado por Enrique Suárez Figaredo, *Lemir*, 22, 2018.
- Henry, Rodolfo I., *Reglas oficiales del Truco*, Buenos Aires, I.N.D.I.A., 1976.
- Hernández, José, *El gaucho Martín Fierro y La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sopena Argentina, 1961
- Huizinga, Johan, *Homo ludens* (Trad. Eugenio Imaz), Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2007
- Fuentes Pereira, Francisco José, “El truco: historia de una tradición”, *Sumuntán*, 14, 2001, pp. 123-152.
- Gainza, Juan Eseverri, *El truco criollo*, Mendoza, Talleres gráficos D’Accurzio, 1961.
- González Alcantud, José Antonio, *Tractatus ludorum. Una antropología del juego*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 1993.
- Guarnieri, Juan Carlos, *Juegos típicos criollos*, Montevideo, DISA, 1970.
- Juan Maldonado, Diego la Dueña y Geronimo de Cifuentes, *La mas constante muger*, Madrid, Gregorio Rodriguez, 1659
- Juan Luis Vives, *Diálogos* (Trad. Cristóbal Coret y Peris), Madrid, 1817.
- Lope de Vega, *Relacion. El Premio del bien hablar, y bolver por las mugeres*, Sevilla, Francisco de Leefdael, 1700-1728.
- Lugones, Leopoldo, *El payador*, Buenos Aires, Biblioteca Nacional, 2009.
- Mafud, Julio, *Psicología de la viveza criolla*, Buenos Aires, Distal, 1984.

- Mansilla, Lucio V., *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*, Buenos Aires, Imprenta, Litografía y Fundición de Tipos, 1870.
- Martínez Estrada, Ezequiel, *La cabeza de Goliat*, Buenos Aires, Capital Intelectual, 2009.
- Mayer, Leo Ary, “Mamluk playing cards”, *The L. A. Mayer Memorial Studies in Islamic Art and Archaeology*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1971.
- Mayo, Carlos, “La Argentina era una timba (A modo de conclusión final)”, *Juego, sociedad y Estado en Buenos Aires (1730-1830)*, Buenos Aires, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 1998.
- McLeod, John, “Playing the Game: Truc, Vitou and Aluette”, *The Playing-Card*, 34/3, 2005, pp. 212-215.
- Moltmann, Jürgen, *Sobre la libertad, la alegría y el juego* (Trad. Leopoldo Márquez y José Martín), Salamanca, Sígueme, 1972
- Ortega, Juan Carlos, *El truco*, Buenos Aires, Librería del parque, 1982.
- Ortega y Gasset, José, “Del Imperio Romano”, *Obras completas*, Tomo VI, Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1964, pp. 51-110.
- Paez, Jorge, *Del Truquiflor a la Rayuela. Panorama de los juegos y entretenimientos argentinos*, Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1971.
- Parlett, David, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Peris i Celda, Josep Ernest, *Reglamento del Truc* (Trad. Sara Milián Cebolla y Salvador Giménez Albert), Valencia, 1958.
- Pratesi, Franco, “Il gioco del Tressette”, *NAIBI.NET*, (30 de diciembre de 1989), <https://www.naibi.net/A/31-TRESSET-Z.pdf>

- Pratesi, Franco, “Carte da gioco in Europa prima del 1377? Aragona”, *NAIBI.NET*, (21 de Junio de 2016), <https://www.naibi.net/A/515-ARAG1377-Z.pdf>
- Sackson, Sick, *Un montón de juegos* (Trad. Pedro Jorge Romero), Barcelona, RBA, 2007.
- Sanchis y Sivera, José, *Vida íntima de los valencianos en la Época Foral*, Aitana, 1993.
- Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino, *Facundo*, Buenos Aires, Beeme, 2009.
- Suarez, Casiano, *Dichos del truco*, Buenos Aires, C. S. ediciones, 1994.
- Tobelem, Mario, “Los Trucos del Truco”, *La Revista del Snark*, Buenos Aires, 2, 1976, pp. 12-13.
- Unamuno, Miguel de, “Sobre el ajedrez”, *Contra esto y aquello*, Buenos Aires, Espasa - Calpe, 1941, pp. 122-130.
- Van Rensselaer, John King, *The Devil's Picture-Books: A History of Playing Cards*, New York, Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1890.
- Vidart, Daniel, “Genealogía y espíritu del Truco”, *El diario de la cultura* (Viernes 16 de Junio de 1995).
- Vidart, Daniel, “El truco: entre la norma y la invención”, *El diario de la cultura*, (Viernes 9 de Junio de 1995).
- Villador, Amando, *Nuevo tratado y reglamento del juego truco, tute y mus*, Buenos Aires, Buchieri, 1946.
- Von Leyden, Rudi, “The search of ganjifa”, *The India Magazine*, June 1983, pp. 28-39.