

# Morra (game)

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**Morra** is a hand game that dates back thousands of years to ancient Roman and Greek times. Each player simultaneously reveals their hand, extending any number of fingers, and calls out a number. Any player who successfully guesses the total number of fingers revealed by all players combined scores a point.

Morra can be played to decide issues, much as two people might toss a coin, or for entertainment.



A postcard of boys playing Morra

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## Rules

While there are many variations of morra, most forms can be played with two, three, or more players. In the most popular version, all players throw out a single hand, each showing zero to five fingers, and call out loud their guess at what the sum of all fingers shown will be. If one player guesses the sum, that player earns one point. The first player to reach three points wins the game.

Some variants of morra involve money, with the winner earning a number of currency units equal to the sum of fingers displayed.

# History

Morra was known to the ancient Romans and is popular around the world, especially in Italy. In the Bible, it may have been referred to as "casting lots". In ancient Rome, it was called *micatio*, and playing it was referred to as *micare digitis*; literally, "to flash with the fingers". As time passed, the name became morra, a corruption of the verb *micare*. The game was so common in ancient Rome that there was a proverb used to denote an honest person which made reference to it: *dignus est quicum in tenebris mices*, literally, "he is a worthy man with whom you could play *micatio* in the dark". *Micatio* became so common that it came to be used to settle disputes over the sale of merchandise in the Roman forum. This practice was eventually banned by Apronius, prefect of the city. Roman colonies were located in Europe, Asia and Africa.

Today, morra can be found throughout Italy (notably in Sardinia, where it is called *sa murra*), Greece, the Teruel Province of Spain, Corsica, France, Portugal, Cyprus, Istria (Croatian, Italian and Slovenian parts),<sup>[1]</sup> Dalmatia in Croatia and Malta. There is also a variant in Spain called "Chinos" where coins are used instead of fingers. Morra played in Arab lands is called *mukharaja*. In southern France it is called *la mourre*, while in China and Mongolia it is *hua quan*, which translates as "fist quarrel",<sup>[2]</sup> and is played as a drinking game.<sup>[3]</sup> It is also popular in South and North American communities with large Italian populations, sometimes known as "Little Italy" in their area. In the city of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, an annual tournament is held in February. Money raised during the tournament is given to a local charity associated with Helping Hands.

The game of morra is described on the images in the Theban tombs of MK, Beni Hassan (tomb 9) and the 26th dynasty tomb of Aba (number 36).<sup>[4]</sup>

## Variants

The rules for morra can be altered in several ways.

### Odds and evens



Morra players in Italy



Morra players in Rome by Aleksander Gierymski (1874), National Museum in Warsaw

In this two-player version one person is designated the "odds" player while the other is labeled "evens". Players hold one hand out in front of them and count together to three (sometimes chanting "Once, twice, thrice, shoot!" or "One, two, three, shoot!"). On "shoot", both players hold out either one or two fingers. If the sum of fingers shown by both players is an even number (i.e. two or four) then the "evens" player wins; otherwise the "odds" player is the winner. Since there are two possible ways to add up to three, both players have an equal chance of winning.

In New York City and Long Island in the 1950s, the game was called "choosies," and would be invoked to resolve a playground dispute by one antagonist saying, "let's shoot for it." In Boston at about the same time, the term in use was "bucking up." In US Coast Guard wardrooms (officer's mess), players "shake out." It has also been referred to as "odds-on poke."

## **More fingers**

One variant of the game is to allow players to hold out any number of fingers, with the winner still based on whether the resulting sum is odd or even. For example, if there are two players and they each throw out five fingers, the resulting summation is even, so the "evens" player is the winner. Note, since only the parity of the sum matters, there is no functional difference between using only 2 or 4 fingers, etc.

However, if the numbers of fingers which each player may use is an odd number, and if the players pick their numbers uniformly at random from all possibilities (either owing to irrationality or an obligation imposed by a supernatural force), then the probabilities of the pairings being odd or even are not equal and the "evens" player will have a slight advantage. As an example, if players may use up to three fingers (and must choose 1, 2, or 3 with equal probability), then there are 5 ways to make an even pairing (1-1, 1-3, 3-1, 2-2, 3-3) but only 4 ways for an odd pairing (1-2, 2-1, 2-3, 3-2). With an odd number of permitted fingers, the "evens" player will have a slight advantage as there will always be one more way to make an even number, except in the extreme case of one finger each where the "evens" player can't lose. Obviously, however, under normal circumstances, the players are rational and not constrained by any supernatural force, so the game is fair as per the previous paragraph.

## **Micatio**

Micatio (also known as micare) is a variation of morra that attempts to lessen the element of chance by including the sight and speed of the player, a calculation of probabilities, and a certain psychological flair. In micatio the two players "each raise the fingers of the right hand, varying each time the number raised and the number kept down, and call aloud the total of the fingers raised by both", until

one player wins the round by guessing correctly.<sup>[5]</sup> Winning the round earns the player one point. If the numbers thrown do not match the numbers shouted, no point is scored.

Additionally:

1. Hands must be in clear view to players and referees
2. One challenger cannot play after they see what the other has shown
3. The point is won by the player who guesses correctly the sum of all fingers displayed
4. If both players guess correctly, the point is unassigned and the game continues
5. The set is won by the player who is first to score 16 points in the first and the return game, and 21 in the deciding one
6. If both players tie the score when they miss a point to win, they play a 5-point tie-break
7. The match is awarded to the winner of two out of three sets
8. Players cannot challenge referees' decisions
9. It is an individual game, but you can also play with a mate against two others, as they do in the Championships
10. In such a case, two challengers start the game and the one who wins the point has the lead until they lose it

Micatio is also played in competitions with four-person teams. Team members compete one at a time, facing their opponent. Each team member plays four times, and a match consists of eleven points.

Micatio is still popular today in southern Italy,<sup>[6]</sup> and may have been played in Ancient Rome.<sup>[7]</sup>

## **Ones-and-twos**

Ones-and-twos is an elimination variant of the game, requiring more than two people. It is essentially a simplified version of rock, paper, scissors with only two choices. The loser is the "odd man out", or the minority choice in the case of large groups. For example: if there are ten players, and six happen to hold out two fingers while four hold out one finger, the four people holding one finger lose and are eliminated. The remaining six players move on to play another round. In this variant, the last round (between two players) is usually decided in the traditional manner.

This version can be played with any number of people, and is usually faster and easier than dealing with three variable combinations, as it eliminates the need for round robin tournaments.

A popular variant is often used to gamble for coffee. The aim is to be a part of the

minority and be eliminated. Rounds continue till two people remain and they then play paper scissors rock. The loser of the "showdown" then purchases coffees for all players. Depending on the rule set coffees can be sometimes substituted for food or other beverages of a similar, agreed upon value.

League tables are often created and thorough statistical analysis applied in an attempt to enhance play. However the effect of such analysis on outcomes is disputed.

## **Modular arithmetic**

The game can be expanded for a larger number of players by using modular arithmetic. For  $n$  players, each player is assigned a number from zero to  $n-1$ . On the count of three, each player holds out any number of fingers less than  $n$ , including zero. The person whose number is the remainder of the sum is chosen.

In this variant it is common to arrange all players in a circle, assign someone to be player 'zero' and assign numbers to other players counting upwards in a direction (usually clockwise). With this arrangement, once players throw out their numbers, they leave their hands in place and close their fingers one at a time as counting moves around the circle. When no fingers are left, the final player counted is selected.

## **Allowing zero**

Some variants of morra allow players to hold out zero fingers. If the total number of fingers is also equal to zero, the game is usually counted as a draw and replayed.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **Shish-Nu**

Shish nu is a variation of Morra where the rules are to hold out fists and stick out your thumbs only. The game works best with a large number of players. The game is played by every player holding out their fists with no thumbs raised. Then, all players say "Shish-Nu" and then the number of thumbs they guess will be up. The number correlates to the number of players in the game as well.

## **See also**

- Chopsticks (hand game)
- Matching pennies
- Rock-paper-scissors
- Spoof (game)
- Horsengoggle


# Notes

1. "Mora Istriana - Istrian on the Internet". Istrianet.org. 2008-03-11. Retrieved 2014-01-29.
2. Ifrah, Georges. *The Universal History of Numbers*. p. 51
3. The Finger-Guessing Game (<http://kaleidoscope.cultural-china.com/en/8K1303K1755.html>); an example of play can be seen in the movie *Flowers of Shanghai*.
4. Ifrah, Georges. *The Universal History of Numbers*. p. 52
5. Carcopino, p. 251-252
6. Morra Society (<http://www.morrasociety.com/>). Accessed May 3, 2012.
7. History of the Game (<http://morrafun.com/history.htm>). Morra Fun. Accessed May 3, 2012.
8. Morra (<http://www.frontier.net/~griffToe/morra.html>). Frontier.net. Accessed May 3, 2012.

## References

- Carcopino, Jerome. *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*.
- Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*.
- Ifrah, Georges. *The Universal History of Numbers*.

## External links

-  Media related to Morra (game) at Wikimedia Commons

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