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War is (not) a board-game

The function of medieval Irish board games and their players

Bachelor's thesis

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List of content

Abstract

Fidchell, *brandub*, and *buanfach* are medieval Irish board games whose existence is largely known because of medieval Irish literature. J. Huizinga and Roger Caillois have done research concerning the function of various types of games, among them agôn-games. Eóin MacWhite describes *fidchell*, *brandub*, and *buanfach* as battle-games. This thesis attempts to substantiate this connection by looking at the relationship between the players of medieval Irish board games in the Ulster Cycle. It concludes that there appears to be a (small) connection between players who have reason to battle their opponents outside of the board game, but their main role is more amicable than hostile.

List of abbreviations

When references are made to tales more than once, the following abbreviations are used:

AC – *Aided Conchobair*

ACC - *Aided Con Culainn*

ACMU - *Aided Cheltchair meic Uthechair*

ACR - *Aided Chon Roí*

AOA - *Aided Óenfher Aífe*

CC – *Compert Conchobuir*

CCC – *Compert Con Culainn*

CNU - *Ces Noínden Ulad*

EN – *Echtra Nerai*

FB - *Fled Bricrend*

LMU - *Longes mac n-Uislenn*

MCC - *Macgnímarada Con Culainn*

SCC - *Serglige Con Culainn*

SCCC - *Síabucharpat Con Culaind.*

SMDT - *Scéla mucce Meic Da Thó,*

TBC- *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

TEM - *Tochmarc Emire*

TEB - *Tochmarc Etaine beos*

Introduction

Fidchell, brandub, and *buanfach* are three medieval Irish board games.[1] They are interesting aspects of medieval Irish history, archaeology, and literature. This is because what the games exactly entail(ed) remains at the time guesswork and reconstructions of these games have been unsuccessful so far.[2] Archaeological traces exist which prove their existence beyond literature,[3] which is the main source of information. Their translations are often 'chess', 'checkers', 'draughts' or simply 'board game(s)'.

Despite the fact that it is largely unknown what the games exactly entailed, a connection between the games and the role of the players in society is made. Various sources point this out. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin states that the medieval heroes in tales played *fidchell* to affect their status in a positive manner.[4] Johan Niehues makes a further association between high status and playing *fidchell* and *brandub* by mentioning that the education of both games was part of the upbringing of young children by their foster parents.[5] According to the laws, this had the same necessity as learning how to swim or how to ride a horse.[6] Interesting in this regard is that Eion MacWhite defines *fidchell*, *brandub*, and *buanfach* as battle-games, which adds an extra layer to the playing of the board games.[7] The most common definition of battle is 'a fight' or 'a hostile engagement or encounter between opposing forces on land or sea'.[8] The purpose of this thesis is to find out if the relationship between players adhered to the role of battle-game that could be ascribed to medieval Irish board games. The hypothesis is that the connection between the players of the board games could be a reflection of a battle-like aspect of these board games. In simpler words, this thesis serves to examine if the players of medieval Irish board games were on opposing sides. This leads to the main research question of this thesis:

> Who were the players of medieval Irish board games in the Ulster Cycle and is the status of medieval Irish board games as 'battle-games' reflected in the relationships between opponents?

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[1] Eóin MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', *Éigse,* Vol. 4/1 (1945) 25-35.

[2] Lauren Dye, 'Game of sovereignty', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Vol. 18/19 (1998/1999) 34-41: 34.

[3] Square gaming boards have been found in Knockanoy in 1837 and Balinderry in 1932. These gaming boards did not come with a rulebook so it cannot be said with certainty to which board game these gaming boards belonged. In two places, Cush Co. and Mentrim Lough, gaming pieces seem to have been found, which match a description found in *Fled Bricrend* (Bricriu's Feast). A. Kelder, *De rol van fidchell en gwyddbwyll in verhalen in de Ulster Cycle en de Mabinogion*, BA thesis (Utrecht University 2011) 8; Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: the enigma of the Irish Iron age* (Thames and Hudson 1994) 121, 166; Dye, 'Game of sovereignty', 35-36.

[4] Ní Bhrolcháin, *Introduction*, 3.

[5] A type of upbringing that is characteristic for medieval Irish society. Around the age of seven children were sent for a period of around seven years to a foster family who raised the child. Not only was the foster family responsible for child care, but also for the education. This period of fosterage created a strong bond between the families involved. Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world AD 400-1000* (Portland 2014) 90-93.

[6] Niehues, 'Brettspiele', 228.

[7] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 31.

[8] J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, "Battle" Def. 1 and 1.1. *www.oed.com*, (Oxford 2018) http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/16260?rskey=Ro1zAb&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid. Last accessed: 15-10-2018

To find an answer to this question I have formulated the following set of sub-questions which I use to analyse my sources:

I.   Who are playing the board game and what is their status in society?

II.   Which board game is being played?

III.   Against whom is being played? Is there an established relationship between the opponents, and if so, what is the relationship between the opponents?

IV.   Are there players of the game with an established relationship who do not play board games against each other? If so, why?

To keep the narrative flowing I did not create a questionnaire whereby I answer each sub-question individually for each relevant excerpt. The games stand and fall by their players, so they are the main focus of the discussion. In the first chapter sub-questions I – III will be assessed. Sub-question IV will be discussed in the second chapter. At the end of the analysis the results are displayed in two tables which are based on these questions.

Previous research

As has been mentioned before,[9] not much is known or remains of the board games that were played in (early) medieval Ireland. When they occur in the literature of that time, the mentions are being translated as 'chess', 'checkers', 'draughts' or simply 'board game(s). It might be tempting to define these lesser known board games using better known ones, but historically speaking *fidchell, brandub* and *buanfach* cannot be the same as chess and draughts. In *History of Chess,* H. J. R. Murray states that chess is a game of Indian origin dating back to the seventh century. Its introduction into Europe did not take place at least five centuries later, which would mean somewhere in the twelfth century.[10] Draughts does not appear before the thirteenth century.[11] The first manuscripts that contained medieval Irish literature, and in them references to *fidchell*, *brandub*, and *buanfach*, can be dated to the seventh century, which places them earlier in the European timeline than chess and draughts.[12] Such translations are therefore merely convenient to show the nature of the games, which was battle-like and required skill and intelligence, but does not recognise them as individual games. A good example of this is that *fidchell* was only recognised as a game different from chess in the twentieth century.[13] Up until that point articles dealing with the topic of board games in medieval Ireland spoke of chess when possibly meaning *fidchell*, or *brandub,* or *buanfach*. Though the games from the past might be different, the modern form of *fidchell*, *ficheall*, is the Irish word for chess.[14] The same goes for *gwyddbwyll* in Welsh.[15] This shows a close relation between the games.

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[9] Introduction, 4.

[10] H.J.R. Murray, *A history of chess* (Clarendon Press 1913) 615-616.

[11] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 25.

[12] Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An introduction to early Irish literature* (Four Courts Press 2009) 2.

[13] H.J.,Lloyd, 'The antiquity of chess in Ireland', *The journal of the royal historical and archaeological association of Ireland*, Vol. 7 No.68/69 (October 1886 – January 1887) 659-662.

[14] "Ficheall." *Foclóir Póca: English-Irish/Irish-English dictionary* (Baile Átha Cliath 2012) 364.

[15] H. Meurig Evans, et al. "Gwyddbwyll." *Y Geiriadur Mawr: the Complete Welsh-English, English-Welsh Dictionary* (Llandysul 2012) 274.

Literally translated, *fidchell* means something along the lines of 'wood-intelligence'.[16] This creates the premise that intellect was an important, maybe even essential, aspect of the game. The 'wood'-part is most likely a reference to the board that was used to play the game.[17] Further proof that *fidchell* probably originated much earlier than chess is that the word *fidchell* and the Welsh version *gwyddbwyll* can be etymologically connected. Scholars suggest that this would mean that the game goes back to prehistoric times.[18] There is also a Breton word for it: *gwezbouell*.[19] The ancestral form in Common Celtic has been reconstructed as *$widu$-k^w eillā* = *$widu$-* wood + *k^w eillā* 'understand'.[20] The specific origin of the game is unknown. This seems also to be the case among the medieval Irish people since they themselves ascribed the game to one of their deities, Lug, in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*.[21] MacWhite states in his article 'Early Irish board games' that *fidchell* was played with two players on a four-sided board which had straight lines, similar to a chess board. This is mentioned in *Sanas Cormaic*, a ninth century glossary,[22] and there it is stated that: '[…] it is different people that in turn win the game'[23] when giving the definition of *fidchell*. It appears that there was an equal amount of pieces for each player and the goal was to capture the opponent's pieces by enclosure. This differs from chess where one beats the opponent by beating their pieces.[24] The enclosure aspect of *fidchell* is more comparable with the method of playing of *go*, an ancient Chinese board game.[25] The goal of the game was to obtain more territory than the opponent, which also happened by the way of enclosure.[26] However, there is a small difference between the two games. *Fidchell* still has as objective to capture the pieces of the opponent whereas in *go* the players have to obtain the most territory.

The literal translation of *brandub* is 'raven black'[27]. This does not shed much light on the nature of the game.[28] According to MacWhite, who relies on the work *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn* by E. Knott, it was a game with unequal sides since one side had five pieces

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[16] Ernest Gordon Quinn, 'Dictionary of the Irish language', *Compact edition* (Dublin 1983) 305.

[17] Mark A. Hall and Katherine Forsyth, 'Roman rules? The introduction of board games to Britain and Ireland', *Antiquity* 85.330 (2011): 1325-1338: 1332. See also footnote 3.

[18] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 25.

[19] Timothy Harding, 'A Fenian Pasttime? Early Irish boardgames and their identification with chess', *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol 37. No. 145 (May 2010) 1-22: 4.

[20] Mark A. Hall and Katherine Forsyth, 'Roman rules? The introduction of board games to Britain and Ireland', *Antiquity* 85.330 (2011) 1325-1338: 1331-1332.

[21] Jan Niehues, 'Die Brettspiele des mittelalterlichen Irland und Wales', *Matthias Teichert (Hg.), Sport und Spiel bei den Germanen. Nordeuropa von der römischen Kaiserzeit bis zum Mittelalter, Berlin/Boston* (2014) 217-244: 231.

[22] *Sanas Cormaic* was a glossary that gives etymologies for Irish words and tries to connect them with one of the *tres linguae sacrae* (the three sacred languages: Latin, Greek and Hebrew) since there was a fascination for those languages in early medieval Ireland. Brent Miles, *Heroic saga and classical epic in medieval Ireland*, Vol. 30 (Cambridge 2011) 34, 152.

[23] John O'Donovan and Whitley Stokes (eds.), *Cormac's glossary* (Calcutta 1868) 75-76.

[24] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 31.

[25] Nicol N. Schraudolph, Peter Dayan and Terrence J. Sejnowski, 'Temporal difference learning of position evaluation in the game of Go', *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems*. Morgan Kaufmann Publishers Inc. (1993) 1-8.

[26] Schraudolph, Dayan and Sejnowski, 'Temporal difference learning', 1-2.

[27] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 26, 29.

[28] The game has been linked to the Norse and Swedish games of *hnefatafl* and *tablut*. Dr. Angela Gleason agrees with a connection between *brandub* and Vikings. This lessens the chance to encounter *brandub* in medieval Irish literature since that was partly created before the arrival of Vikings in Ireland. Harding, 'Fenian pastime', 18.

and the other side had eight.[29] The translation in *Dictionary of the Irish language* is not helpful either. It states: 'name of a board game like *fidchell* or *buanfach*'.[30] *Buanfach* suffers from a similar phrasing: 'name of a board game like *fidchell* or *brandub*'.[31] A possible literal translation for *buanfach* is 'lasting- blow', but sources are not certain of that and what that would mean for the contents of the game.[32]

The most notable work on what the games might have entailed has been written by Eóin MacWhite, who has been briefly mentioned before.[33] In his article 'Early Irish board games' he presents an overview of what is known about the games and what they might have encompassed.[34] At the end of the twentieth century, Lauren Dye published an article called 'The game of sovereignty' in which she examines *fidchell* as a symbol for the rule of the country by a king.[35] More recent work has been done by Timothy Harding, who published an article in 2010 called 'A Fenian pastime? Early Irish board games and their identification with chess',[36] and by Jan Niehues in his article 'Die Brettspiele des mittelalterlichen Irland und Wales' from 2013.[37] Those articles mainly focus on *fidchell* though they do mention the other board games as well.

Some comparative research has been done by Antoinette Kelder. In her bachelor's thesis Kelder compared *fidchell* to the Welsh *gwyddbwyll* and the role the games play in the narrative.[38] Julie Lynn Perenchio examines in her master's thesis the presence of games in medieval Irish mythology. She mainly looks at *fidchell* (which she calls chess) and poetry in the Fenian Cycle and only briefly mentions its appearance in *Fled Bricrenn* (Bricriu's Feast). She does not seem to take *brandub* or *buanfach* into consideration at all.[39] She also mentions that not much can be said of their, possible, overall function.[40]

In my thesis I will attempt to place *fidchell, brandub,* and *buanfach* in a social context. I will examine the way those board games are presented in the Ulster Cycle with the main focus on the relationship between players. By doing this, I attempt to create a small understanding of the social function board games might have fulfilled in medieval Irish literature instead of focussing what the games exactly entailed.

Theoretical framework

Research concerning the function of games in society did not really take off until the twentieth century. In 1938, J. Huizinga published his book *Homo Ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (Homo Ludens; A study of the play-element of culture). In this work he attempts to create a connection between games and how they are reflected in culture

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[29] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 31.
[30] Quin, 'Dictionary of the Irish language', 81.
[31] Quin, 'Dictionary of the Irish language', 89-90.
[32] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 26.
[33] Introduction, 4.
[34] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 25-35.
[35] Dye, 'Game of sovereignty', 34-41.
[36] Harding, 'Fenian pastime', 1-22.
[37] Niehues, 'Brettspiele', 217-244.
[38] Kelder, *De rol van fidchell en gwyddbwyll*, 1-30.
[39] Julie Lynn Perenchio, '"I am no mean player myself": Games and Recreation in Irish Mythology', MA thesis (Eastern Illinois University 2000) 1-46: 9-20.
[40] Perenchio, '" I am no mean player myself"', 42.

but also the other way around, how culture could be reflected in games. Huizinga's main focus is pre-medieval times. When he discusses medieval times he states that the connection between culture and games has been lost and that games have been degraded to what they are nowadays: pastimes.[41] He nuances this later on when he states that that is mainly the case for societies which were influenced by the ancient Romans, but that those which are derived from Celtic-Germanic origins still have an element of games in their culture.[42] However, the main focus of his research is the connection between the role of games and the religious aspect of culture, whereas my thesis is more focused on the social function.

The research on the topic continued and in 1961 Roger Caillois, using Huizinga's work as a foundation, published his book *Man, play and games* (original title: *Les jeux et les hommes*). Caillois added a social layer to the research by stating that competitive games are not simply individual pastimes, but merely ways to discover and recognise the better player based on the skill necessary for the game. He points to a social need to be able to create such a differentiation.[43] Caillois even goes as far to say that a game esteemed by people may at the same time be utilised to define the society's moral or intellectual character.[44] The sort of games preferred in a society is a reflection of the type of society. Societies which Caillois deems more advanced with aspects such as jurisprudence and an administration - the example he uses consists of the ancient Roman and Chinese society - seem to play games in which merit and intelligence are present. Societies Caillois deems to be primitive, it is not specified what he means with primitive societies, seem to prefer games where deception plays a key part.[45] There might be some truth in this statement though it comes across as an oversimplification. Societies are made up from variously different people and whether a society is primitive or not is defined by another society's opinions and traditions.

But before something can be said about the role or function of a board game, it needs to be determined what type of board game *fidchell* and the others are. Both Huizinga[46] and Caillois[47] provide various categories for various types of games but the type that is applicable here is the agôn-game. Caillois defines this as follows:

> "A whole group of games would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph. It is therefore always a question of rivalry which hinges on a single quality […] exercised. […] The point of the game is to recognise one's superiority." [48]

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[41] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: proeve ener bepaling van het spelelement der cultuur* (Groningen 1974) 176.
[42] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 176.
[43] Roger Caillois, *Man, play and games* (University of Illinois 2001) 15, 37.
[44] Caillois, *Man,* 83.
[45] Caillois, *Man,* 87.
[46] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 28-44.
[47] Caillois, *Man,* 12-15.
[48] Caillois, *Man,* 14-15.

The examples he gives are games like chess and draughts.[49] MacWhite, as has been mentioned in the introduction,[50] sees *fidchell* and *brandub* fitting this description as well. It is therefore reasonable to assume that *fidchell*, *brandub*, and *buanfach* can also be considered agôn-games. Strategic thinking was a major part of the games, as has already been established. It could be argued that playing an agôn-type game is fairer than fighting a battle since the circumstances are as equal as possible, albeit a bit forced.[51]

Approach and sources

In my thesis I focus on tales from the Ulster Cycle.[52] I have specifically chosen the Ulster Cycle and not the Finn, Mythological, or Historical Cycle because it is considered to be the largest cycle with about seventy-five stories and it has a wide range of characters.[53] This creates a large base for my research. Since the complete cycle is too extensive to examine as a whole, and there is no clear list of exactly which tales belong to the Ulster Cycle, I focus on the tales occurring in *Ancient Irish Tales*, by T.P. Cross and C.H. Slover. They have selected the most known tales, so it gives a valid reflection of the Ulster Cycle.[54] This selection contains the following tales:

Tochmarc Etaine beos (*TEB*; The wooing of Étaín again), *Compert Conchobuir* (*CC*; The birth of Conchobar), *Compert Con Culainn* (*CCC*; The birth of Cú Chulainn), *Macgnímarada Con Culainn* (*MCC*; The boyhood deeds of Cú Chulainn), *Tochmarc Emire* (*TEM;* The wooing of Emer), *Aided Óenfher Aífe* (*AOA*; The death of Aife's only son), *Serglige Con Culainn* (*SCC*; The sickbed of Cú Chulainn), *Scéla mucce Meic Da Thó* (*SMDT*; The tale of Mac Da Thó's pig), *Ces Noínden Ulad* (*CNU*; The debility of the Ulstermen), *Longes mac n-Uislenn* (*LMU*; The exile of the sons of Uisliu), *Echtra Nerai* (*EN*; The adventure of Nera), *Fled Bricrend* (*FB*; The feast of Bricriu), *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*TBC*; The cattle raid of Cooley), *Aided Chon Roí* (*ACR*; The death of Cú Roi), *Aided Con Culainn* (*ACC*; The death of Cú Chulainn), *Aided Cheltchair meic Uthechair* (*ACMU*; The death of Celtchar mac Uthechair), *Aided Conchobair* (*AC*; The death of Conchobar) and *Síabucharpat Con Culaind* (*SCCC*; The phantom chariot of Cú Chulainn). [55]

Generally, I use the translations found in *Ancient Irish tales*, except for the *TBC* and *TEB*. For *TBC* I use the translation made by Cecile O'Rahilly which can be found in *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*. This is the most coherent, oldest version of the tale.[56] For *TEB* I use the translation of Osborn Bergin and R.I. Best that appeared in Ériu.[57] This is because it is the third part of the tale *Tochmarc Etaine* (The wooing of Étaín), which is placed into the Mythological Cycle by Cross and Slover.[58] However, this third part can also be put into the Ulster Cycle and the

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[49] Caillois, *Man,* 14-15.
[50] Introduction, 4.
[51] Caillois, *Man,* 12-15; Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 90-93.
[52] Also known as the Heroic Cycle. Ní Bhrolcháin, *Introduction*, 41.
[53] Ní Bhrolcháin, *Introduction*, 41.
[54] Tom Peete Cross and Clark Slover, *Ancient Irish tales* (New York 1996) vii-viii, 127-129.
[55] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, v.
[56] Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, (Dublin: DIAS 1976) vii.
[57] Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best (ed. and tr.), 'Tochmarc Étaíne', *Ériu 12* (1934–1938) 137–196.
[58] Cross and Slover, *Anicient Irish tales*, v.

translation of Bergin and Best is, in my opinion, more coherent than the one found in *Ancient Irish tales*.[59]

When a board game is mentioned I refer to the original texts to prevent any confusion about which board game is being discussed, since the same translations are used for different board games. In case of *TBC* and *TEB* that means the same article and book, since for both tales the original text and its translation were published together.[60] For the other tales I use their corresponding editions. For *TEM* I use the edition by Kuno Meyer,[61] for *SCC* I use the edition by Miles Dillon[62] and for *FB* I use the edition by George Henderson.[63] *MCC* is a so-called *remscel*[64] of the *TBC* and is also included in the work of O'Rahilly, so from now on I will no longer make a distinction between *MCC* and *TBC*.

It is essential to mention here that the sources used are fictional and thus are based on a fictional society. It is not a too big of a leap to use fictional literature as a reflection of non-fictional society since various research suggest that 'literature is a record of social experience, an embodiment of social myths and ideals and aims, and an organization of social beliefs and sanctions'.[65] There is a heavy debate going about possible traces of real society in the Ulster Cycle specifically, with researchers as Kuno Meyer and H. Zimmer arguing in favour of this and John Rhys and O'Rahilly arguing against it.[66] It is however generally agreed that "[…] literature reflects predominantly the significant values and norms of a culture",[67] which makes it suitable as a foundation for this research.

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[59] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Etaine', 138-139.
[60] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Etaine', 174-193; O'Rahilly, *Táin*, 1-124.
[61] Kuno Meyer, 'Tochmarc Emire la Coinculaind', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie 3* (1901) 229-263.
[62] Myles Dillon (ed.), *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dublin 1975).
[63] George Henderson (ed.), *Fled Bricrend: The feast of Bricriu* (London 1899).
[64] *Remscéla* are tales which narrate events that happened before the centre tale. They provide (essential) background information. Ni Bhrolcháin, *Introduction*, 42, 45.
[65] Milton C. Albrecht, 'The relationship of literature and society', *American journal of sociology*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (Mar., 1954) 426.
[66] John Ellis Caerwyn Williams, and Patrick K. Ford, *The Irish literary tradition* (University of Wales Pr. 1992) 17, 20.
[67] Albrecht, 'The relationship', 426.

Chapter One: Players in the Ulster Cycle: Opponents

As has been mentioned in the introduction,[68] I have read fifteen tales of the Ulster Cycle to see if they contain any mentions of board games. In six of the examined tales they occur. These are: *Macgnímarada Con Culainn (MCC)*, *Tochmarc Emire (TEM)*, *Fled Bricrend* (*FB),* *Serglige Con Culainn (SCC)*, *Táin Bó Cúailnge (TBC)*, and *Tochmarc Etaine beos (TEB).* I will refer to these texts with the abbreviations written in brackets after the titles. In the tales there are ten different players mentioned by name and some remain unnamed. Since I am specially examining the agôn-aspect of the games I will discuss the players with their opponents.

Eochaid Airem and Midir of Brí Leith

In the Ulster Cycle Eochaid Airem and Midir of Brí Leith only appear in *TEB* and do not play a role in the other examined tales. Eochaid is known as the king of Tara. His fate is almost entwined with the game. Not only did he earn part of his name, but he also lost his wife as results of wagers made before the game. Eochaid is the one responsible for this happening since he is the one who demands the wagers:

> "Ecraidh Midir ind fidchill iar sin. 'Imbir,' ol Midir. 'Ní immeór acht dí giull,' ol Eochaid."[69]

> "Thereupon Midir arranges the [fidchell] board. 'Do thou play,' said Midir. 'I will not play save for a stake,' said Eochaid."[70]

The stakes are explicitly formulated by Midir but Eochaid meets them equally. This Midir of Brí Leith is a king in his own right, since he is king of the *sídh*. *Sídh* is usually translated as 'fairy mound'.[71] It is also known in medieval Irish literature as the Otherworld and it is the place where supernatural beings live.[72] First, they battle for fifty valuable horses and Eochaid is victorious.[73] The second time, the stakes have increased: fifty boars, fifty gold-hilted swords, fifty cows, fifty rams, fifty ivory-hilted swords, and fifty speckled cloaks.[74]. Eochaid, after his second victory, also demands that Midir performs four tasks. One of these tasks is building a causeway over Móin Lámraige. To accomplish this, the folk of the Otherworld help Midir. To place the stones and clay they use oxen. Instead of placing the strain on the head of the cattle, as the men of Ireland were used to do, they are seen by Eochaid to place the strain on the shoulders of the animals. Eochaid then introduces this to the people of Ireland and therefore earned the nickname 'airem', which means 'ploughman.'[75] Feeling confident after two wins, Eochaid agrees that the third time the winning party can pick anything he wishes. Eochaid will

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[68] Introduction, 9.
[69] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 174.
[70] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 175.
[71] Quin, 'Dictionary of the Irish language', 541.
[72] According to Gaelic tradition, these beings are remnants of the ancients gods of Ireland, the Tuatha Dé Danann, and come therefore with significant magical powers. Welch, *Companion,* 523.
[73] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 175.
[74] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 175, 177.
[75] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 177, 179.

come to regret this since this enables Midir to win his wife.

Though it is never explicitly stated, it is plausible that Midir lost the first two games on purpose, to enable him to raise the stakes so that he could obtain what he desired. That he previously attempted to woo Étaín strengthens this theory. If this is indeed the case, then the way Midir manages to win what he wants displays a strategic mind, which is closely associated with the agôn-games Caillois talks about.[76] There is definitely a rivalry between Eochaid and Midir, which makes it appropriate for them to have a battle of some sort. By playing *fidchell* they strengthen its status as battle game. There is however a small discrepancy when the description of the gaming pieces occur.

> " 'Ata sund chena,' ol Midir, 'fidhchell nad mesum.'Ba fir ón, clar n-airgid 7 fir óir, 7 fu*ur*sundadh cacha hairdo f*ur*ri di líc logmair, 7 ferbolg di fighi rond credumae." [77]

> " 'I have here,' said Midir, 'a chess-board that is not inferior.' That was true: a silver board and golden men, and each corner thereof lit up by a precious stone, and a bag for the men of plaited links of bronze." [78]

MacWhite states in his article that *fidchell* is a battle game because it has two different colours to represent the opposing sides.[79] In the citation only 'fir óir', golden men, are mentioned as gaming pieces. It could however be that the pieces are two different shades of gold, as is the case by other players who had yellow-golden and white-golden pieces.[80] The specific use of the word 'fidhchell' rules out another board game.

Manannán mac Lir and Fand

Midir of Brí Leith is not the only character of supernatural origin that can play *fidchell*. In *SCC* Manannán mac Lir and Fand are described to play *fidchell* against each other. Both Fand and Manannán are supernatural beings. Manannán is thought to be a dilution of an old, Celtic sea-god, although in *SCC* he is presented as a king from the Otherworld.[81] Fand is the daughter of Aéd Abrat, who is said to be a prince from the Otherworld.[82] The tale is concerned with Fand trying to convince Cú Chulainn to compete for her in a battle. He reluctantly agrees and later on they even become lovers. However, Fand is already married to Manannán, and Cú Chulainn is already married to Emer. The last one becomes jealous and wants to kill Fand. Fand perceives this as that Emer is more worthy of Cú Chulainn than her and leaves him. Howbeit, she is not sure if Manannán will take her back and starts singing a song in which she praises him:[83]

> "'Dánam thuc Manannán mass
> robam céle comadas:
> noco bérad orm ria lind

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[76] Caillois, *Man*, 12-15.
[77] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 174.
[78] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 175.
[79] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 31.
[80] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 229.
[81] Dillon, *Serglige*, 93.
[82] Dillon, *Serglige*, 93.
[83] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 195-196.

cluchi eráil ar fidchill.'" [84]

> "'When Manannán, the great one, espoused me
> I was a worthy wife for him:
> For his life he could not win from me
> the odd game at chess.'" [85]

In the edition of the text composed by Miles Dillon there is a footnote that states that 'cluchi eráil' can be interpreted as that they were equally matched at the game.[86] Manannán and Fand are married, though at least Fand does not take fidelity all too seriously. There is no apparent quarrel between Fand and Manannán, since the playing of *fidchell* happened before she started the affair with Cú Chulainn. Manannán could not hold a grudge against her because of that. Therefore, it does not seem suitable for them to play a game that could be a reflection of battle. The fact that it is explicitly stated that they were equally substantiates this since there was no apparent need to determine a superior party, which is the opposite of the purpose of battle.

Cú Chulainn and Láeg mac Riangabra

The lover of Fand, Cú Chulainn, is also familiar with board games. He is known as the champion and defender of Ulster.[87] Cú Chulainn is the nephew (or grandson) of the king of Ulster, Conchobar, but he is also partly a supernatural being. His father was the god Lug, though he was raised as the son of Súaltaim, his mother's husband. His mother was Deichtine, and she was either the sister or daughter of Conchobar.[88] In the Ulster Cycle, Cú Chulainn is described to play all three known medieval Irish board games, so *fidchell, buanfach* and *brandub*. His ability to play those games is mentioned in four of the examined tales: *TEM, SCC, FB,* and *TBC*.

The game Cú Chulainn favours is *fidchell*. Six times Cú Chulainn and *fidchell* are mentioned together.[89] Twice a connection is made between *buanfach* and Cú Chulainn, and the same goes for *brandub*.[90] Sometimes, the connection exists of a mere mention that he has the skill/ability to play a board game. This is the case in *TEM*, a tale in which he is forced to find a wife since the other Ulstermen are afraid for their wives and daughters. His ability to play *fidchell* and *buanfach* appears to be something that makes him desirable for women since it is being mentioned in a long list that sum up his positive attributes:

> "Ruscarsad mna Ulod co mor ara aine ocon clios[.] […] Batar buado imda foair. Buaid do cedus a gois noco tícced a lon laich, buaid clesomnochtai, buad mbuanfaig, buaid fidcealleachtai, buaid n-airdmessi, buaid faidsene, buad crotai."[91]

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[84] Dillon, *Serglige*, 27.
[85] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 196.
[86] Dillon, *Serglige*, 44.
[87] Welch, *Oxford companion*, 125-126.
[88] Welch, *Oxford companion,* 125-126.
[89] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 193, 230, 255, 269; O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 198, 229.
[90] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 230; O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 161, 198, 229.
[91] Meyer, 'Tochmarc Emire', 230.

"The women of Ulster loved Cú Chulainn greatly for his dexterity in the feats[.] [..] Many were his gifts. First, his gift of prudence until his warrior's flame appeared, the gift of feats, the gift of buanfach, the gift of chess-playing, the gift of calculating, the gift of soothsaying, the gift of discernment, the gift of beauty."[92]

Being able to play *buanfach* and *fidchell* is portrayed here to be highly recommendable. The context in which the mentions of *fidchell* and *buanfach* are placed is interesting. Most of the other feats mentioned in connection to them have all, in one way or another, to do with intelligence, except for the last one.[93] Harding and Niehues both make mention of the connection between intelligence and both board games, which is confirmed in this excerpt.[94] *Fidchell* and *buanfach* are not only mentioned as some of his feats, since in *FB, TBC,* and *SCC* he is referred to playing those games as well. In *TBC brandub* is added to his repertoire. When he is shown playing the games he always has the same opponent: Láeg, his charioteer. Not much attention is being paid to Láeg and not much is known about him. His father is Riangabra but nothing is made known about him. To put it bluntly, Láeg seems to be Cú Chulainn's sidekick and does not do much himself. Even in *SCC* when Cú Chulainn is incapacitated Láeg's role is to find a cure. He is not even allowed to do that alone and is placed under the protection of Lí Ban, the sister of Fand.[95] The close connection between Cú Chulainn, Láeg and board games is made most apparent when a description of them is given:

"Ara ara bélaib. Dá chúlaid ind arad frisna heocho. Na éisi ina ladair riam sair. Fithchell for .scarad eturra. Leth a fairne di ór buidi, anaill ba de ḟindruine. Búanbach foa díb slíastaib."[96]

"In front of him was a charioteer whose back was turned to the horses and who held the reins between his fingers in front of him. A chess-board spread between the two, half the chessmen of yellow gold, the other half of white gold. His thighs rested on another board game, a búanbach."[97]

Not only tells this passage us that Láeg is an exceptional charioteer, but also that Cú Chulainn and Láeg were closely associated with *buanfach*.[98] Because of the close relationship between Cú Chulainn and Láeg, there appears to be no competitive context when they are playing. This would mean that the battle-like aspect of those board games is not always relevant to the players. It is of interest that Cú Chulainn and Láeg do not share their status. Cú Chulainn is a warrior whereas Láeg is his helper, to phrase it bluntly. Their various statuses could take away the battle aspect and make the games simple pastimes. As a consequence, the winner is never made known.[99] In *TBC* a small bit of information is revealed:

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[92] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 154.
[93] In the cited Irish passage there is no word that describes his gift of discernment however, but the translator might have used a different source text.
[94] Harding, 'Fenian pastime', 3; Niehues, 'Brettspiele', 229-230, 238-239.
[95] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 181-182.
[96] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 116.
[97] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 229.
[98] *Buanfach* and *buanbach* are the same.
[99] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 193; O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 161, 198, 229.

"Dobered leth brandaigechta 7 fi[d]chillachta for a thigerna."[100]

"He [Láeg] used to win every second game of draughts and chess from his master."[101]

For this citation the translation is critical. MacWhite uses this excerpt as his source for his theory of alternate winning being characteristic of *buanfach*.[102] O'Rahilly states in the notes of her translation that she has chosen to translate the mentions of *buanfach* and *fidchell* with 'draughts' and 'chess' for convenience.[103] In the dictionary however, 'brandaigechta' is not translated or associated with *buanfach* but with *brandub*.[104] Either way, it could be the case that this alternate winning is not necessarily connected with one of those board games, but with the relationship between Cú Chulainn and Láeg. They are friends and do not have a reason to fight, which makes it illogical for them to play games that are associated with fighting. The same went for Manannán and Fand and in their case it was also explicitly stated that they were equally matched. This could mean that the board games indeed had an agôn-like role that was commonly known and even expected, since there is apparently a need to specify when there is not a battle context.

That Cú Chulainn did not have to win the games that he played, does not mean he does not commit to playing them. In *SCC* they get really caught up in it:

"Is and ro boí. Cú Chulaind 7 Lóeg oc immirt f̃idchilli, 7 níro airigset na mná chucu."[105]

"And there she [Fann] found Cú Chulainn and Lóeg, and they were engaged in the chess-play, so that they did not perceive the women's approach."[106]

Whereas in *SCC* there are no consequences of the interruption, in *FB* Cú Chulainn reacts differently:

"'Tair do acallaim ind ríg ocus na rigna" ol in techtaire. Bá and bói Cúculainn oc imbert fidchille ocus Lóeg mac Ríangabra a ára fessin. […] La sodain dolléci fer dina feraib fidchilli don techtaire, co m-bói for lár a inchinne."[107]

"'Come to speak to the king and queen," said the messenger. Cú Chulainn at the time was busy playing chess with Loeg mac Riangabra, his own charioteer. […] He hurled one of the chessmen, and it pierced the centre of the herald's brain."[108]

Conchobar, Fergus and Ailill

Playing board games seems to run in the family. Cú Chulainn's uncle (or grandfather) Conchobar is mentioned playing *fidchell* in *TBC*. Conchobar is the king of the Ulstermen. There is nothing that can be said about his skill as a *fidchell*-player since it is not told if he wins

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[100] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 82.
[101] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 198.
[102] MacWhite, 'Early Irish board games', 30.
[103] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 277.
[104] Quin, 'Dictionary of the Irish language', 81.
[105] Dillon, *Serglige,* 24.
[106] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 193.
[107] Henderson, *Fled Bricrend*, 76.
[108] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 269.

or loses the games he plays. At first, it is not even known against whom Conchobar plays. The first introduction of Conchobar in relation to *fidchell* is when it is described as being one third of his day:

> "Is amlaid domel Conchobar a ḟlaith: trían ind laí oc décsin na macraide, a trían n-aill oc imbirt ḟidchille, a trían n-aill oc ól chormaconid gaib cotlad de."[109]

> "This is how Conchobar spends his time of sovereignty: one third of the day spent watching the youths, another third playing *fidchell*, another third drinking ale till he falls asleep therefrom."[110]

It is important to know that the person giving the description, Fergus mac Róich, has reason to hold a grudge against Conchobar and might not be inclined to paint a positive picture of him. This description must therefore be taken with a grain of salt since no king can in reality spend his day playing games, drinking, and sleeping. The fact that the game *fidchell* is chosen to be part of this description tells us that there was at least some relationship between Conchobar and *fidchell*.

This claim is corroborated later in the tale when Conchobar is described playing the game against Fergus mac Róich, the same character who earlier on described *fidchell* as one third of a day of Conchobar. Their playing of *fidchell* substantiates the role of *fidchell* as battle-game. As has been briefly touched upon, Fergus has reason to be resentful towards Conchobar. Fergus used to be king of Ulster, but he lost his kingship to Conchobar after the mother of Conchobar, Ness, tricked him.[111] Previously, Eochaid and Midir used *fidchell* as a way to work out their differences and the same seems to apply here, to a certain degree. The game between Conchobar and Fergus differs since no winner or loser is made known. This is the fault of Cú Chulainn since the game between Conchobar and Fergus is literally crashed by Cú Chulainn, who runs into the playing board while he is fleeing from the boys Conchobar normally watches:

> 'Forrumai nónbor díib thorom-sa 7 Conchobar. Bámar oc imbirt fidchille. Lingid-som dano tarsin ḟidchill i ndegaid ind nónbair. Gaibid Conchobar a rig.'[112]

> 'Nine of them came past me [Fergus] and Conchobar where we were playing chess. Cú Chulainn leapt over the chess-board in pursuit of the nine. Conchobar seized him by the forearm.'[113]

The game fades into the background as Conchobar is more concerned about finding out who the boy is who crashes his game than Conchobar is about finishing the game. Fergus does not press to continue the game as well. No end result derives from their playing, so while Huizinga's theory is applicable about man-to-man combat in the setting of a board game being a peaceful way of waging war between two opposing parties, the rift between Conchobar and

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[109] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 13.
[110] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 136.
[111] Patricia Ní Mhaoileoin, 'Patterns and Problems in the Heroic Biography of Fergus mac Róich', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* Vol. 32 (Harvard University 2012) 214-228: 220.
[112] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 14.
[113] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 137.

Fergus is by no means solved this way and might not even be the actual cause of their playing.[114]

Fergus mac Róich does not only play against Conchobar. He also plays *fidchell* against Ailill. Ailill was the king of Connaught and therefore an enemy of Ulster in *TBC*. The attentive reader notes that Fergus was an Ulsterman, so his connection with Connaught might appear illogical at first. Fergus had however fled to Connaught after his exile by the Ulstermen where he became the leader of the army against Ulster.[115]

The exact reason for his exile is not clear. In the tale *Longes mac n-Uislenn* (The exile of the sons of Uisliu), it is Conchobar who is held responsible for the exile of Fergus. Fergus felt betrayed by Conchobar and left.[116] Some say that that tale is made up to make Fergus seem more honourable, since a seventh century poem blames Medb, queen of Connaught and the wife of Ailill, for his exile. In this poem it is suggested that he was either forced or seduced by Medb to leave Ulster.[117] Leaving your land for a woman is quite the opposite of honourable, whether it was willingly or unwillingly.[118] About this other version, it has been suggested it was there to explain the presence of Fergus in Connaught. Whatever the reason was, the result is the same: Fergus is in Connaught.

There is however a relationship between Fergus and Medb in *TBC*. After Ailill found out that they slept together, he challenged Fergus to a game:

> "Congairther Fergus do Ailill do imbirt ḟidchille. […] 'Suid sís trá,' or Ailill, 'co n-imberam fidchell. Is fo chenn do thíchtu.' "[119]

> "Fergus was summoned to Ailill to play chess. […] 'Sit down then,' said Ailill, 'so that we may play a game of chess. Your arrival is welcome.' "[120]

This seems a serious reason to instigate an agôn-type game. Ailill has various reasons to hold a grudge towards Fergus. If not for the sleeping of Fergus with Medb, then Fergus' shimmering loyalty towards Ulster – Fergus never does anything that could actually put the men of Ulster at a disadvantage - could do the trick. However, neither the result nor any consequences of the game are made known. Medb's infidelity does come up but angry words are not exchanged about it and the tale continues. This is partly because the love triangle between Ailill, Medb, and Fergus appears to be underdeveloped.[121] That some animosity exists between Ailill and Fergus becomes clear in the death tale of Fergus. In it, Ailill kills Fergus because he sees Fergus and Medb in an intimate embrace so it must have bothered Ailill at least at one point.[122]

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[114] Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, 91-92.

[115] Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'Fergus, Russ and Rudraige: A brief biography of Fergus mac Róich', *Emania* 11 (1993) 31-40: 31.

[116] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 239-247.

[117] Patricia Ní Mhaoileoin, *The heroic biography of Fergus Mac Róich: A case study of the heroic-biographical pattern in Old and Middle Irish literature,* Dissertation. (Galway 2015) 55.

[118] Ní Mhaoileoin, *Heroic biography of Fergus Mac Róich*, 58.

[119] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 33.

[120] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 155.

[121] Doris Edel, 'Çaught between history and myth? The figures of Fergus and Medb in the Táin Bó Cúailnge and related matter', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, 49-50 (1997) 143-169: 166.

[122] Ní Mhaoileoin, *Heroic biography of Fergus Mac Róich*, 90-92.

Other players

Not all mention of the games consist of the mention of a player and his opponent. *Fidchell* makes an appearance in the eulogy of the last character mentioned by name associated with a board game, Fer Diad. Not much is made known about his character in *TBC*, or in other tales. It is known that he trained with Cú Chulainn in Scotland and had therefore the same battle-skills as Cú Chulainn, except for the *gáe bulga,*[123] the weapon that ultimately killed him.[124] The parentage of Fer Diad remains unclear in *TBC*. The only thing told about that is that his father was someone named Dáman, and that Fer Diad was fostered with Cú Chulainn.[125] His only appearance is in *TBC* where he is killed by Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn, deeply saddened by the loss of his foster-brother by his own doing, starts praising him by listing some of his positive attributes:

> " 'T'orsnac arcait báin
> immo do láim soír
> t'fĩt[h]chell ba fiu móir
> do grúadh c[h]orcra choín.' "[126]

> " 'Your ring of white silver
> on your noble hand
> Your chess-set of great worth.
> Your cheeks were rosy and beautiful.' "[127]

It can be stated that technically in this case it is only said that he had a *fidchell*-set and it is not made clear whether or not Fer Diad also had the skill to play *fidchell*. The ownership of a *fidchell*-set, and therefore the implied ability to play *fidchell,* is apparently seen as appropriate to mention in a eulogy. During the whole eulogy Cú Chulainn abundantly praises Fer Diad by, amongst other things, saying that Fer Diad was brave, a noble warrior and a great champion. He also lists some of Fer Diad's costly possessions. Aside from his *fidchell*-set, which is apparently of great worth, Fer Diad also had a golden-rimmed shield and ornamented girdle.[128] Fer Diad is alas not associated with *fidchell* or other board games in another way so no opponents that he might have had are known. It is therefore not possible to say if *fidchell* fulfilled a battle-role for Fer Diad. A vague link between *fidchell* and battle can be established since Fer Diad was known as one of Ireland's fiercest warriors and he is connected to the game. However, since no descriptions of him playing *fidchell* or of his skills concerning the game are given no definite conclusions should be drawn from this excerpt.

Aside from players of board games whose names are known, there are also some players of board games who are not mentioned by name. In *SCC* the Ulstermen are waiting to start their yearly assembly but they have to wait since not everyone is there yet. As a way to pass the time

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[123] The *gáe bulga* was a special spear with barbs which required a unique throwing technique with the foot. O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 207.
[124] Welch, *Oxford companion,* 551-552.
[125] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 194, 196.
[126] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 94.
[127] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 208.
[128] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 207-208.

Sencha, the present druid, proposes that they should play *fidchell,* among various other activities:

> "Asbert Sencha íarom: 'Imberthar fidchella dún coléic, 7 caniter dréchta, 7 agat clesamnaig.' Dogníther iárom aní sin.[129]

> "Then said Sencha, 'Let us for the present engage in games of chess; and let the druids sing, and let the jugglers perform their feats'; and it was done as he had said."[130]

It is a shame that no names are mentioned so no new characters can be associated with *fidchell,* but it is still worth mentioning since the playing of *fidchell* is being proposed at a warrior's assembly. The playing of agôn-games might fulfil a different role here however than it does for the other characters. As we have seen, most of the characters playing agôn-games have a type of quarrel between them which gives them cause to play a battle-game. When there does not appear to be a cause, it is mentioned that the players are matched equally. In this case, the (possible) players do not have a rift between them since they are all Ulstermen, but it is also not stated that they are matched equally. This mention of *fidchell* paints the game as a pastime which does not have any relevance to social circumstances. *Fidchell* can still be associated with battle, but this is in the same way as the case of Fer Diad, since the players are easily connected with battle simply because they are warriors.

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[129] Dillon, *Serglige*, 1.
[130] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 177.

Chapter Two: Players in the Ulster Cycle: Non-opponents

In the previous chapter characters that play against each other have been discussed. To create a complete picture it is also necessary to look at the characters who do not play against each other, but could reasonably be expected to in the examined source material. This immediately rules out Eochaid and Midir since they do not occur outside their own tale and could therefore not play against one of the other characters. Láeg will also not be taken into consideration since it has already been established that he largely serves as a sidekick for Cú Chulainn.[131] It would therefore be unfitting to expect him to play against others.

On the other hand, Fand, Manannán, Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn, Conchobar, Fergus, and Ailill all act in various combinations in the same tales but most of them play only against one other character. Fergus is the exception: he has played against two different opponents.[132] A possible explanation could be that Fergus is theorised to be the original main character of *TBC*.[133] This would make him the most important character and being the sole character, having two different opponents would emphasize his more prominent role in the *TBC*. In accordance with the hypothesis that medieval Irish board games could serve as a representative for battle there is another character, besides Ailill and Conchobar, of which could be expected that he plays against Fergus; Cú Chulainn. Fergus sided with Ailill and Medb in *TBC* after all and Cú Chulainn opposed them as one of the Ulstermen. However, there is a special bond between Fergus and Cú Chulainn. Fergus used to be the boy's foster-father and could be considered his uncle, since Fergus was a brother of Sualtaim, Cú Chulainn's (earthly) father.[134] Despite being on opposite sides during *TBC* Fergus and Cú Chulainn do not fight each other directly, although they do meet each other, which emphasises their connection.[135] The fact that Cú Chulainn does not appear to play against Fergus does therefore undermine the supposed role of *fidchell*.

There is a second character Cú Chulainn could have been expected to play against; Ailill. Their circumstances are largely in agreement with those of Cú Chulainn and Fergus. Both are on opposed sides in the *TBC* and both are skilled in the game. The easy explanation would be that they never meet and therefore cannot play. It could however be expected that, if *fidchell* indeed had such an important role, that a meeting between Cú Chulainn and Ailill would occur.

The same goes for the combination Ailill and Conchobar. It could be that the stakes were too severe to resolve them with a board game. In the other cases, where a board game was played between opposing sides, the results only affected the players themselves, or those close to them, but the majority of people was left in peace. It appears that even though medieval Irish board games resembled war and combat, they did or could not replace it.

In *SCC fidchell* also appears but does not play any role that can considered to be in accordance with agôn-games. It is played as a pastime and though Fand has no specific grievance towards

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[131] Chapter 1, 14, 15.
[132] See footnotes 112, 119.
[133] Ó hUiginn, 'Fergus, Russ and Rudraige', 31.
[134] Ó hUiginn, 'Fergus, Russ and Rudraige', 32.
[135] Ní Mhaileoin, 'Patterns and problems', 223.

Cú Chulainn, Manannán might feel the need to battle Cú Chulainn.[136] The issue is resolved by talking however and it is never mentioned that *fidchell* could be used as a way to solve their issue. This undermines the role of *fidchell* as agôn-game since it has been show that *fidchell* could be used to solve a dispute over a woman, as seen in *TEB*.[137] It seems to be that the role of *fidchell* as an agôn-game does not only depend on the players, but also on the tales in which it occurs. *Fidchell*, as well as *brandub* and *buanfach*, do adhere to the characteristics of agôn-games but it seems to be more in an amicable setting than a hostile one.

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[136] Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish tales*, 197.
[137] Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 181, 183, 185.

Conclusion

The central question of my thesis was:

> Who were the players of medieval Irish board games in the Ulster Cycle and is the status of medieval Irish board games as 'battle-games' reflected in the relationships between opponents?

To find an answer to that question I formulated a set of questions which were used to analyse a selection of tales of the Ulster Cycle. As a result of this analysis, two tables can be made. These tables can be found in the appendices on pages 27 and 28. Each table is subdivided in the *fidchell, brandub* and *buanfach.*

When looking at table 1, it becomes clear that *fidchell* is the game that occurs the most. Both *brandub* and *buanfach* appear less frequently and are only mentioned in relationship to Cú Chulainn and Láeg. These two characters are friendly towards each other, and, opposing my theory, do not seem have a reason to play an agôn-game against each other. Therefore, despite the fact that *brandub* and *buanfach* can considered to be agôn-games, they are most likely not seen as a replacement for a real battle.

Fidchell is the game that is played by the largest variety of players. Most of the instances where *fidchell* is played the circumstances adhere to the theory that *fidchell* could be a reflection of a battle between the players. As can be seen in table 1, Eochaid and Midir, Conchobar and Fergus, and Ailill and Fergus all have reason to compete. When they play, it is mostly in accordance with the role Huizinga and Caillois ascribe to agôn-type board games. The battle-game status MacWhite ascribes to them is found in the animosity that exists between those players. However, the reason for playing is, even if there is an animosity, to pass the time and not to actually solve their issues.

The one exception to this is are the games between Eochaid and Midir. There is a definite outcome to their game which is advantageous to the winner. The game cannot be seen a replacement for battle despite of this, since only Midir knows the true reason for playing. This makes their games more the result of trickery than a replacement of battle on equal grounds.

When there is no quarrel or other type of animosity, and therefore no need to determine a superior person, as is the case with Manannán and Fand, and Cú Chulainn and Láeg, it is specifically stated that the players are equally matched. This is also a small confirmation of the regard towards *fidchell*, and maybe for *brandub* or *buanfach* as well. It cannot be said with any certainty for which of them this is the case, since sources provide conflicting information.

There does not seem to be a clear connection between the ability to play one or more of medieval Irish board games and the status of the players, though there are various small indications which point to the importance of it. One of the most obvious seems to be Cú Chulainn when he attempts to woo Emer. As said, his ability to play both *fidchell* and *buanfach* is mentioned in a list which consists of other positive attributes. It is also worth to note that Cú

Chulainn and Láeg are recognised when they are being described with *fidchell* and *buanfach* as part of their description.

In table 2 it is shown that there are several players who could be expected to play against each other but did not. Ailill and Conchobar are the most prime examples of this since they share the ability to play and definitely can considered to be enemies. Their non-existing game together with the lack of playing between Fergus and Cú Chulainn, Cú Chulainn and Ailill, and Cú Chulainn and Manannán undermine the hypothesis and places the role of *fidchell* in another light. Not only the players seem to be determine the role of *fidchell*, but the tale in which a game occurs seems to have influence as well.

Hence it can be concluded that medieval Irish board games definitely can be considered as agôn-games, but their role as battle game seems to be more in an amicable way than as a true replacement of battle. There is no real hostility between players when they are playing. This does not necessarily mean that the consequences of the games are minor, as can be seen in *TEB*, but that was more a result of trickery and the hostility only came after the playing of *fidchell*.

Discussion

More research needs to be done before anything definite can be said about this topic. I worked with a selection of tales of the Ulster Cycle, so the remainder of that cycle needs to be examined and the other literary cycles are worth looking at as well. But this thesis already shows that medieval Irish board games were mainly a way to pass the time despite their agôn-aspects.

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Appendices

<u>Table 1</u>

Subquestion 2

Fidchell

Players	Connection between opponents	Reason for playing	Would-be opponents according to hypothesis
Ailill vs. Fergus Mac Róich	Fergus slept met Ailill's wife	Ailill challenged Fergus after he found out he was sleeping with his wife	Yes
Conchobar vs. Fergus Mac Róich	Conchobar's mother stole Fergus' kingship	Pastime	Yes
Cú Chulainn vs. Láeg	Láeg is the charioteer of Cú Chulainn	Pastime	No
Eochaid Airem vs Midir of Brí Leith	Rivals who want to marry the same woman	First two games for wealth, third game for the hand of Étaín	Yes
Fand vs. Manannán	Married	Pastime	No

Brandub

Players	Connection between opponents	Reason for playing	Would-be opponents according to hypothesis
Cú Chulainn vs. Láeg	Láeg is the charioteer of Cú Chulainn	Pastime	No

Buanfach

Players	Connection between opponents	Reason for playing	Would-be opponents according to hypothesis
Cú Chulainn vs. Láeg	Láeg is the charioteer of Cú Chulainn	Pastime	No

Table 2
Subquestion 3

Fidchell

Players	Connection between opponents	Would-be opponents according to hypothesis
Ailill vs. Conchobar	Rivalling kings in *TBC*	Yes
Ailill vs. Cú Chulainn	Opposite sides in *TBC*	Yes
Conchobar vs. Cú Chulainn	Uncle and nephew	No
Fergus mac Róich vs. Cú Chulainn	Fergus was the stepfather of Cú Chulainn; also on opposite sides in *TBC*	Yes
Fergus mac Róich vs. Láeg	Connected through Cú Chulainn	No
Fand vs. Cú Chulainn	Lovers, both cheating on their spouse	Maybe
Manannán vs. Cú Chulainn	Cú Chulainn was the lover of Fand, Manannán's wife	Yes