

# A Definitive Assessment, or Almost

Written by Franco Pratesi

## Forward

The intention to present this assessment was stimulated by a recent commitment by Elettra Deganello and Michael S. Howard aimed at valorising my recent production in the historical sector of card games.<sup>1</sup> Reading that text and realising that, after all, I am not sowing in the desert, has pushed me to add my personal opinion on the topic, especially since I can take up again a sort of assessment that I already presented as the final chapter of a book.<sup>2</sup> That book was nothing more than a collection of numerous notes already published in *The Playing-Card* or posted online at [trionfi.com](http://trionfi.com) and [naibi.net](http://naibi.net); at the end, however, it seemed to me useful to add my general evaluation of the content, in the form of a metaphor to clarify the very limited nature of the whole set of my individual contributions.

I still consider what I wrote then valid, and I propose it again below – also translated by Michael – before adding any new comments.

## An insoluble game of solitaire

### Introduction

Since the last quarter of the fourteenth century, playing cards have represented the instrument most commonly used by players of games, in very different ways and only partly

limited by the frequent interventions of legislators. Information in this regard is obtained from the most disparate sources: local news, travellers' memoirs, police reports, passages from literary works. In this great abundance of information, the corresponding quantitative data is usually missing, such as how many packs of cards were used, how many were produced, how much they cost, and on the other hand to what extent the various games were played.

My attention in the sector has been focused precisely on the search for quantitative data. Particularly useful have been visits to the Tuscan archives and the possibility of inserting study results directly into web pages; this happened first at [www.trionfi.com](http://www.trionfi.com) and then at [www.naibi.net](http://www.naibi.net).

Regarding the long history of playing cards in Tuscany, I would like to limit attention here to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so as not to complicate the analysis too much. The intention is to evaluate the situation regarding what has been found and how much remains to be found.

For this purpose, it seems useful to use the analogy of a game of solitaire that you try to solve with the cards.<sup>3</sup> In the case taken as a model, the objective is to complete the picture so that all the cards are face up and arranged in order, as shown in the forty Florentine cards of [Fig. 1](#). It is a question of seeing where we are in attaining a solution.

<sup>1</sup> *The Playing-Card* 52, No. 4 (April-June 2024), pp. 40-42.

<sup>2</sup> F. Pratesi, *Giochi di carte nel Granducato di Toscana*. Ariccia 2015.

<sup>3</sup> [Franco offers the following explanation of the game he played as a child. Four rows of nine cards are placed face down on the table. These thirty-six places are where the Ace to Queen in each of the four suits will eventually go, if the solitaire is successful. There is also an empty column to the right where the Kings will go, but instead of putting a card there, the remaining four cards are set aside, still face down. One begins by turning up one of the four cards and placing it face up in its final place, taking off the one already there face down. Then one turns face up the card taken off and places it in its final place, and so on – except if the uncovered card is a King. In that case, it is placed in the tenth (initially empty) place in its row, and the game goes on by taking a card from those remaining of the four initially left aside. If all four are used before all the cards are face up, the solitaire is not successful.]

**First schema**

If one carefully examines the results of my studies on the history of card games in Tuscany in terms of locations and times, it becomes clear that the situation is similar to an archaeological excavation in the middle of an ancient city, in which only some preliminary surveys have been carried out. Certainly, the game of solitaire used as a model is still far from a solution; it is immediately clear that there are many missing pieces. So we could schematise the current situation as in Fig. 2; that diagram shows that there are few “discovered” situations compared to those yet to be discovered.

On the basis of the schema in Fig. 2, we can then understand that we are in an initial phase of research, which, however, has certain well-defined objectives: in short, we know exactly what is missing. Then we can be optimistic, as the unexplored areas will be discovered with the continuation of research; you just need to be patient and continue working.

Unfortunately, the real situation is much worse, because in our case the “cards” to be discovered are not so well defined. Consequently, we need to complicate our model a little, so as to bring it closer to the reality it is meant to represent.



Fig. 1. Solitaire solved, with one pack of cards.

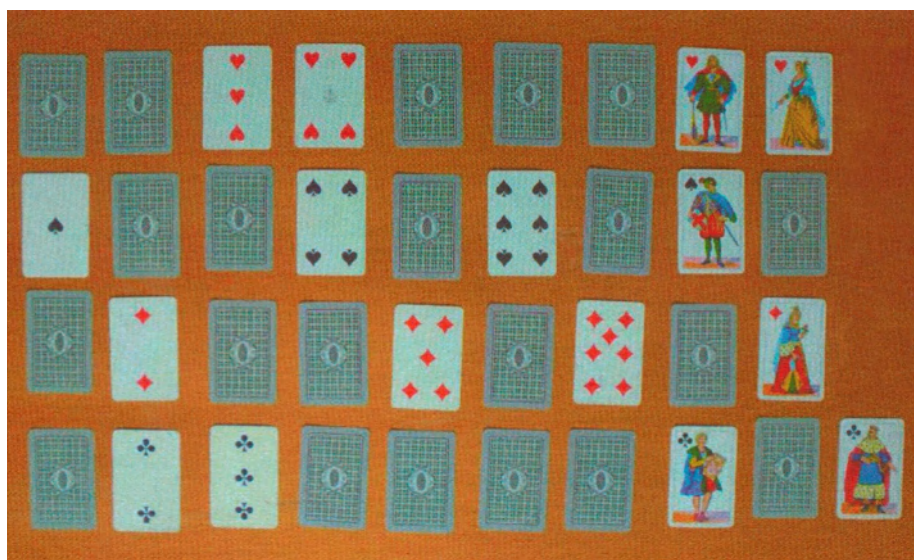


Fig. 2. First schema: unfinished solitaire, with one pack of cards.

**Second schema**

If the situation were the one schematised in Fig. 2, it might remind us of a buried city that a team of archaeologists is excavating: surveys have been made here and there to understand how to better organise the follow-up to the excavations. In our case, however, it often happens that next to the first survey made, there exists nothing more to dig up. We have found more or less rich documentation for a given place and time, but then nothing has been preserved in neighbouring places and times.

Therefore, if we want to continue with schemas on the solitaire model, we have to move from Fig. 2 to Fig. 3. At first glance, not much has changed, but now the next research objectives are no longer there, at least in the majority of cases. It may happen that some other cards will be revealed, but we know from the start that many of the missing pieces will never be found.

Another seriously negative side of this situation is that, unlike the surveys planned by archaeologists, there is no criterion for continuing the research on the finds under study. An archaeologist can get a sense of where the most valuable finds will be in the city being excavated, but in our case, the selection of data unearthed is almost always completely arbitrary: certain documents have been preserved, others not, and usually not based on their importance, but in a completely random manner.

### Third schema

We have arrived at a representation of our knowledge about the subject that appears rather pessimistic; however, things are even worse than that. In fact, it is not enough, in our analogy, to use just one pack of cards, but the packs involved should be more than one, and moreover, of different types. In fact, if we analyse the content of the information obtained, there are not only the limits of time and place, different from time to time, but the subjects also change. We always remain, obviously, in the sector of card games, and always within the strict limits in time and place gradually defined by what little has been preserved for us; however, it is found that some pieces of information concern the card games played, others the card games prohibited, others the packs of cards purchased, others the annual budgets of a given gaming venue, others the packs produced, others the customs duties on cards; and so on for other sectors.

If we want to continue with our solitaire analogy, we will end up with something like that seen in Fig. 4. The impression can only

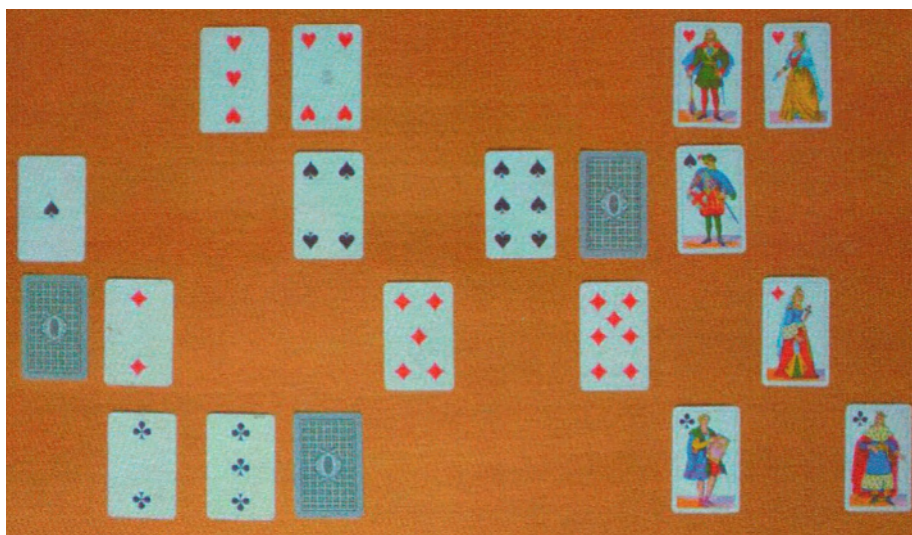


Fig. 3. Second schema: insoluble solitaire, with one pack of cards.



Fig. 4. Third schema: insoluble solitaire, with multiple packs of cards.

be one of despondency, now no longer just because of the various “boxes” left empty in our schema. In short, ours is not a game of solitaire with one pack missing some cards, but one with a few cards from several different packs, each of which could be reconstructed for only a minimal fraction of the total.

### Conclusion

My attention was focused on the quantitative aspects of card games in Tuscany, and I managed to collect a fair amount of data. Here I face the problem of putting in perspective the data found by comparing it with the data missing, which is much more numerous. I took as a model of the situation the task of solving a

game of solitaire; proving to be a useful model, the game is found to be in an incomplete stage and above all, impossible to complete.

To shift from metaphor to metaphor, my research efforts allowed me to insert some stable stones on a long path that was almost completely devoid of them. I have written this note to warn those who expect sooner or later to find themselves walking along a perfectly paved road; they must instead convince themselves that between one paving stone and another, there will always remain large empty spaces to challenge anyone who intends to continue on the path.

### Update

Today I find the assessment mentioned above a little too subjective. As for me personally, nothing has changed since then; on the contrary, the time interval considered may be substantially extended, down to the fourteenth century. However, I glimpse something more and better, something that makes the picture less negative in its perspective. In particular, the discussion applies to my Florentine territory, with such a long and important history that had not received due recognition, despite the enviable richness of the documentation preserved here. So let me try to explain myself better using another metaphor.

Examining my production, it seems to me as if I had been for many years a manufacturer of mosaic tiles: some tiles of great value, such as of gold or silver, many others of ordinary value, such as of ceramic or coloured terracotta, but certainly a notable number of tiles. My problem, ten years ago, was that I already did not glimpse any possibility of using my tiles to complete one or more finished mosaic masterpieces; then, I did not glimpse that possibility; now, I see clearly that none exists.

However, this does not deny that someone may be able to use my tiles to finish a large mosaic, or several! It would only be enough, for example, for a Dummett No. 2 to attend to it for a certain time. In short, I am more optimistic now than I was a few years ago. Up to a certain point, however. To further dampen my hopes, I see an enormous literature on the subject, in continuous growth, with many articles and entire books dedicated to the cards, and especially the tarot, and it seems clear to me that many authors have no need to add my pieces to finish their mosaics; there are some capable of making an entire mosaic with only two or three tiles. Luckily, there is no deadline, and in the meantime, other tile manufacturers will also be able to contribute, which is not a despicable profession after all.

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