

# 1000s Ways to Play Monopoly /

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Since 1933, millions of people have been playing Monopoly all around the world. The game has been published in hundreds of different versions and translated in more than 20 languages. The rules never changed from the “original” ones written by Charles Darrow and everyone can read them because they are inside the game box but, oddly, only few people know them.

Why? Simply because since the first printing of the game the players started to hand down the rules orally, from father to son, in the same way our ancestors did in the past with the earliest board games. In this way, little by little, the rules changed and, today, we must think of Monopoly as a “game concept” that has been modified by players to satisfy their own way of playing.

But if the rules people usually use to play are not the original ones, actually also the printed rules that are inside the boxes of Monopoly are not so “original”, as we know thanks to the researches that Ralph Anspach made to defend his rights to print the “Anti-monopoly” game he invented in 1974.

### The beginning – a brief history

In 1933 Charles Darrow, a heating engineer, was out of a job. He decided to design a game which he called “Monopoly”. He took it to Parker Brothers in 1934, but they found “52 fundamental design errors”, so Charles Darrow started to produce the game by himself, selling it locally. In 1935 Parker Brothers reconsidered their earlier decision and acquired the rights to print Monopoly. In few weeks the Parker Brothers plant was producing something like 20,000 sets a week and Darrow, off course, became a millionaire.

This is the “official” even if legendary history you can still read if you buy a copy of Monopoly. Actually, 29 years before Darrow’s “Monopoly”, a woman called Elisabeth Magie, had designed a game called “The Landlord’s Game”, to promote the “single tax theory” of Henry George. It was 1904 and the board of the “The Landlord’s Game” was so similar to that of Monopoly, with 4 railroads, 2 utilities (water and electric), 22 rental properties, a “Jail”, a “Go to jail”, a “luxury tax” a “Parking” and... a patent, that was renewed also in 1924 when she had changed some of the rules, adding the “monopoly” concept. Maggie showed this game to Parker Brothers a lot of years before Darrow, but it was refused in the same way. We know that the Landlord’s Game has never been printed (even if Ralph Anspach is going to print a copy of the “original monopoly”), with the exception of few handmade copies that were played by the Princeton and Harvard students, who made (off course) some small changes to the original rules. Those changes led to another game called “Finance”, designed by Dan Layman and probably played by a man who was a good friend of Charles Darrow.

So, this is the brief history of the birth of Monopoly and even if nobody can really know if Charles Darrow copied or not the rules, it is likely that it happened. In any case, the rules of Monopoly that today everybody can read are not the “original” ones but a

sort of first evolution of the game concept invented by Elizabeth Maggie (even if we don't know if she copied the idea from someone else or not).

"First evolution", because also the rules written by Charles Darrow suffered an incredible number of changes made by the players in the last 60 and more years. So many are those changes that it is not hazardous to say that there are really thousands different ways of playing the game.

In the next few pages, I'm going to summarize only some of those changes, because what's really important is not to know all of them but to understand that similar changes can be found in different countries, "invented" by different peoples that never met each other.

As we are going to see, most of these rules have been created to satisfy the younger players who don't like to play with the too much "adult" original ones. In fact, if played in the right way, Monopoly is not a game based on luck (or at least luck is not as important as we think), and this is not good for kids who prefer simpler games. Unfortunately, kids are the most important "customers", because Monopoly is a traditional Christmas gift, and this is the reason why a lot of people had to change the rules to satisfy their children.

When kids grow up they remember the rules of the game they have played in the past and teach the rules to their children and so on. In this way, a lot of people simply don't know that the rules they became used to are not the original ones but a "family variation".

Before speaking about the rules I would like to tell my personal experience, that's the reason why I have started studying this phenomenon.

In 1987 I was a young employee of Editrice Giochi, the company that distributes Monopoly in Italy since 1935/1936 (we'll see the peculiar Italian history of Monopoly). EG had a sort of telephonic customer service and I was in charge to reply. I expected to receive a lot of messages of complaints about components missing or information requests about the new products rules. It's been a great surprise for me to receive hundreds of calls of people asking for Monopoly rules. The typical situation was: a group of students decide to play Monopoly (they have not played it since a lot of years) and after one or two turns they start arguing about the rules. Everyone is absolutely sure to know the right rules of the game, but they have lost the booklet. So they call EG's customer service and discover that nobody really knows the right rules because no one has never really read them.

I thought it was a typical Italian phenomenon, but in the following years, speaking with foreign colleagues, I discovered that similar "family rules" were adopted by players all around the world.

### **Free parking?**

In the game, there is only a space where nothing happens: the "Free Parking".

It seems that the presence of a useless space irritates most of the players and this is why a lot of family rules concern the "Free Parking". One of the most common is the following:

The money people pay due to taxes are not given to the Bank, but placed on the “Free Parking” space and when a player lands on this space can collect them all.

It’s a nice rule because it gives an opportunity to grow rich thanks to the taxes paid by other players, and this is a funny idea, but also gives to the poorer players a chance to survive a little longer, and that’s interesting because most of the family rules have been “invented” to make the game less “cruel”. We know that the object of Monopoly is to bankrupt all the opponents, and the rules are perfectly balanced to let one of the player reach this goal in a reasonable time (often less than 2 hours). If players can get money even if they don’t have properties, the game can become virtually endless. This is why it’s important that taxes go to Bank and not to other players.

Another family rules concerning the Free Parking space is the following:

When a player lands on this space, he collect \$ 100 as salary (half of the salary you collect when you pass over “Go”). Usually, this rule come with another popular one: when you land on “Go”, you collect a double salary (\$ 400). In this way we have three different salary levels and not a single one. It’s easy to understand that also this rule helps people to collect more money during play, giving the players more chance to pay and to survive the bankruptcy.

The third family rule says: when you land on “Free Parking”, you can move your token wherever you want collecting the salary if you pass over “Go”. This is a strange one, because on one side gives the player the opportunity to collect more money (passing over the “Go”), but on the other side speeds up the play, giving the players a sort of special power to move their token to important spaces.

The “Free Parking” space has been also the subject of an official “add on” printed by Parker in 1936 under the title “Stock Exchange”. The box contained a paper overlay that changed the “Free Parking” space to “Stock Exchange”, a set of stock certificates cards and “Advance to Stock Exchange” cards to be mixed with Community Chest and Chance. This official “add-on” didn’t fare very well and today is a collector’s item (see Bruce Whitehill, *American boxed games and their makers, 1822-1992*, Radnor, PA, 1992).

## Building of houses and hotels

The game rules say that if you own all the properties in a color-group you may buy houses from the Bank and erect them on those properties. Everybody know this rule, but only few people know that you can buy houses and hotels in every moment of the game, even if is not your turn to play. To do that, you have to stop your opponent’s turn before he rolls the dice and this is the most important rule of Monopoly, because most of the game strategies depend on it. Usually, people play in two different ways:

1. You can buy houses or hotels only at your turn.
2. You can buy houses or hotels only when you land on one of your properties.

If the first rule is simply wrong, because eliminates the auctions that happen when there is shortage of houses and two or more players want to buy the last ones (and this is another important “strategic” situation) the second one is a real “disaster”, because buying houses become a matter of pure luck, not to mention the game length.

The important “house shortages” rule, depends on the amount of houses (32) and hotels (12) that are not enough to build on each property. As an important strategy, you can take advantage of this situation particularly if you own low value properties.

A funny thing happens when publishers receive complaints about the poor quantity of houses and hotels inside the game box. A lot of people who don't know that “building shortages” is one of the most important rule of the game accuse the publisher for stinginess!

## Loans

For Monopoly is a “cruel” game, rules don't allow loans between players. If you don't have enough money to pay a rent or a tax, you bankrupt and must retire from the game. All your properties are turned over to the player who made you bankrupt or to the Bank (in case of bankruptcy due to a tax payment). In this second case, the properties are immediately sold by auction.

Another important rule is that you can't deal with another player on a credit basis. By example: you can't offer one or more turns of payment exemption in order to get a property. Useless to say, those rules are normally ignored by players.

## When family rules become “official”

There is a country where a sort of “family” rules became the official ones of the game and this country is Italy.

When in 1935 Arnoldo Mondadori, owner of the most important Italian book publisher, received from the States a copy of Monopoly, he showed it to one of his best translators: Mr. Emilio Ceretti. Mr. Mondadori decided that he wasn't interested in publishing a game but he gave this opportunity to Mr. Ceretti who wanted to start his own business. It's important to note that in 1935 Italy was ruled by the “fascist laws” that didn't allowed the use of foreign name and also didn't like the distribution of foreign products, particularly if coming from the English or American markets.

This is why the first change Mr. Ceretti had to do was the title of the game that became “*Monopoli*”, written with the final “i” because *monopóli* (look at the accent position) is the Italian translation of “monopoly”, but pronounced as the American word, with the accent on the second “o”. When Mr. Ceretti tested the game for translating the rules, he decided as anybody else, to make some changes. In this way the Italian version of the game is different from the original one and the copyright on the Italian rules is owned by EG, that's a company still independent from Hasbro (owner of Parker Bros.).

The two most important changes made to the original rules are the following:

1. At the beginning of the game some contracts are randomly distributed to players. Off course, this random distribution can lead to totally unbalanced starting situations making the game even more luck based.

2. The starting “liquid assets” depend on the number of players, while the original rules say that each player is given \$ 1,500 regardless of the number of players. Even if this rule is justified by the fact that the Italian players have to pay immediately the contracts they got at the beginning of the game, usually they have more money parti-

cularly in the first turns and, as we have already seen, more money means less chances to quickly go to bankruptcy.

This means that the Italian version of Monopoly is more “luck based” than the original ones. Despite that the Italian players have made changes similar to that made by all the other players in the world.

But the question is still the same: why different people in different countries have changed the game rules in the same way? I have no answer.

According to Alex Randolph, the true pleasure to play Monopoly is that you really own part of the game when you get a property and this is more important than winning.