

Unique or Distinct...Variation or Error???

Looking at Casino Chips with a Discerning Eye

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Casino Chip collectors find it challenging ...and sometimes frustrating ... to keep up with the various regular or commemorative chips issued by today's casinos. Even if the collector specializes in a certain type or geographic area of chips, the task of staying abreast of new issues and even new discoveries of obsolete chips can be daunting. Fortunately, specialty publications like the quarterly *CC>CC Casino Chip and Token News*, *Gaming Times*, *Casino Collectibles Magazine* and various other publications and dealer lists make the job somewhat easier. Specialty books, such as Herz' *Nevada Gaming Checks and Chips*, Black's *Atlantic City Casino Chips and Tokens* book and *The Chip Rack* directory are also excellent volumes for the serious collector. Dealer offerings at chip conventions are also a source of information and comparison of chips on the market.

The purpose of this article is to offer an additional method of classifying chips, or at least thinking about chips, in order to make the collector's quest for new items a bit easier. At the outset, let me be clear that I am not proposing an alternate way of listing or describing chips from the hobby/industry standards that have evolved (for example, the description of chips by casino name, mold type, color, inserts, hot-stamp or inlay shape and wording, etc.). Instead, this article describes how to look at chips with a discerning eye ... in published lists or in a dealer's/trader's notebook of chips ... to help you answer that perennial question: "Do I have this chip in my collection?"

Many collectors work from a "want list" of new chips (or rare older chips) that they want to obtain for their collection. Knowledge of the existence of a "wanted" chip may be as simple as knowing that a new casino has opened, and that you're interested in its regular-play chips (and also Grand Opening chips, etc. as available). Other times, a "wanted" chip is known to exist from its display in a book or list, an auction catalog or a dealer's display. However, some chips are very similar to each other, and small distinctions sometimes mean a considerable difference in scarcity and price. Knowing which chips have similar looking "cousins" can help in hunting for the specific chip you want. It also helps in communicating specifically with a dealer/trader, so a mix-up does not occur between the chip you're seeking and the chip available for sale.

Four Broad Categories for Classifying Casino Chips

All chips fit in exactly one of these categories (well, there is a bit of "gray area" as explained later). Briefly, the four categories are:

Category	Brief Definition	Example(s)
Unique	A specific chip which was made in only one distinct style. Either you have it or you don't. You can quickly scan this category of chips (in lists or dealer books) then keep moving. Note: NOT one-of-a-kind chips.	New York-New York \$5 chip Orleans-Las Vegas \$1 chip
Distinct	Two or more similar chips with minor, but distinct differences which can be definitively described.	Orleans \$5 regular issue vs. Orleans \$5 Grand Opening
Variation (or variant)	Slight differences in chip color, very minor differences in two hot-stamp dies or center inlay graphics. Also referred to as "variants" or multiple types (e.g. Type-1, Type-2, etc.)	Fitzgerald's-Las Vegas: 25c chips- 2 shades of green
Error	A design or manufacturing error which does not meet intended specifications. Usually available in only very limited quantities, but occasional larger-volume errors exist.	Imperial Palace-Las Vegas \$5 "20th Anniversary" chip with misspelling "Editon"

Let's look at each Category in more detail, with some additional examples.

Unique

This classification is reserved for any chip manufactured in only one style, even if thousands of copies exist. (Again, note that I am not defining unique as a one-of-a-kind chip, like the Holiday Inn-Atlantic City \$1 chip). Here's an example of a unique chip, using a narrative description:

Flamingo Hilton-Las Vegas \$5 chip picturing 3 flamingos in the newly remodeled Flamingo Hilton grounds. This Paul-son chip has a "Flamingo Hilton \$5" house mold (stamped twice in circular form), round full-graphic multi-colored center inlay, base color is red, with three 1/2 inch inserts, each in side-by-side (sxs) colors of pink and dark green. The actual writing on the chip says "\$5 ... Flamingo Hilton ... Las Vegas, NV" Standard size - 39mm diameter and round. Both the obverse and reverse sides are the same. Issue date: circa early 1996. Regular issue on tables. Thousands of chips in circulation (common).

The narrative describes all the typically noted features of a casino chip, but since this so-called "3 flamingos" chip was only issued in this one style, it is sufficient to remember it as the Flamingo Hilton-LV-\$5 3-flamingos/fg (full-graphic) chip ... or some similar shortcut method of noting this chip. Either you have it or you don't, but there aren't any discrete spellings, multiple mold types, or known variations or errors to be concerned with. In reviewing dealer books at a chip convention, for example, you can glance at this chip, know that there's only one "unique" version, and keep going.

Many chips fit in the "unique" category, whether regular-issue or commemorative style chips. Limited edition / commemorative chips, in particular, are manufactured with only one unique graphic or subject, so unless the limited edition is part of a set of chips, it usually can be classified as "unique". A chip classified as unique should not be easily confused with other similar chips. However, in this era of numbered limited edition chips, if the only difference is in the specific printed/stamped number, the chip can still be considered unique.

Distinct

Chips classified as "distinct" belong to a family of two or more chips which are similar in many respects, but can be distinguished from each other in at least one concrete way. Continuing to use Flamingo Hilton-Las Vegas chips to illustrate, let's look at the recently released \$5 "Bugsy Siegel / 50th Anniversary" chip. There are two distinct versions:

- Regular issue (without number)
- Numbered issue (001 - 5000) with number beside Bugsy Siegel's head.

Except for the addition of the printed number, these two chips are identical; hence, the distinct difference is unnumbered vs. numbered versions of the chips. The difference, though small, can be specified easily in a catalog of chips or in a dealer's chip inventory. You don't necessarily need the actual chip in hand (or a photocopy of it) in order to distinguish which chip is which -- a simple chip list which specifies regular/unnumbered or numbered is sufficient -- as long as the list preparer is accurate.

Differences in chips can be categorized according to one of the following distinctions in most cases:

Type of Distinction	Explanation for Differences	Examples
Regular vs. Numbered	Chip produced in limited quantities, with number; additional larger quantities produced without number for general use.	Flamingo Hilton-\$5 "Bugsy / 50th Anniv" chip. Numbered (5000) and unnumbered.
Mold design differences	Similar chip manufactured with two or more different molds, usually due to reorder at a later date. Original, older mold usually more valuable, but depends on supply and other factors.	Golden Nugget \$1 chips - produced in C&J, H&C, "GN"-House and "Golden Nugget"-House molds.
Inlay differences	Center inlay designs are updated from time to time, often when property is restyled or ownership changes.	Golden Gate designs: Cable car; Golden Gate bridge; name only/ no graphic, etc.
Denomination style	The denomination style in both hot-stamp and center inlay styles can change over time: \$1 ... \$1.00 ... \$1.00 ... \$1 ⁰⁰ (no period), etc. Also, 25c vs. 25 cents.	Circus Circus-Reno \$1 HS chips, available in both "\$1" and "\$1 ⁰⁰ " styles.

Type of Distinction (con't)	Explanation for Differences	Examples
Location (state or city) spelling/abbreviations	Look for important distinctions in Nevada, and other chips: "Nevada" ... "NV" ... "Nev" ... or no state; also "Las Vegas" vs. "LV"; also "Casino Center" distinctions at Las Vegas Club and "Boulder City" distinctions for Railroad Pass.	Las Vegas Hilton chips in "Las Vegas, NV" and also "Las Vegas" (only) styles>
Insert differences	Number or color or size/shape of inserts may change over time: none vs. 3 or 4 sets of inserts; side-by-side vs inset type inserts; colors or alternating pattern changes.	Bally's-Las Vegas \$1 blue chips, in 2 insert styles. 4-1/8 alt. yellow & green vs. 4-1/8 purple.
Color differences (distinct)	Occasional distinct changes in base color of chips, over time. More often with lower denom. chips: 25c or \$1, where more than one common color is used (vs. \$5-red; \$25-green; \$100-black customary colors). Not applicable in Atlantic City.	Imperial Palace-Las Vegas \$1 chips, in 3 distinct colors: light blue, dark gray and blue.
Chips in series or groups (issued at same time)	In cases where chips are issued in sets or groups, the distinction is limited to the graphic subject. The chip's appearance is close enough to classify as "distinct". Often look for common reverse side	Fremont Street Experience set of 10 chips (different casinos); Ariz. Charlie's and Four Queens sets of chips.
Special Events / Themes	Chip themes produced over time which have a similar look.	Bally's-Las Vegas \$5 celebrity "Entertainer Series"; MGM Grand \$25 Fight chips. Boardwalk Holiday Inn - LV: two \$5 Grand Opening chips: with date (1995) and no date. Lucky Strike at Pete's Place - Colo. Stacker sets of \$1 and \$5 "Royal Flush" chips.
Distinction in actual wording	Similar chips may differ in presence or absence of key wording, even if minor, especially Grand Opening type chips.	
Edge printing/ stackers	Chips manufactured for some Colorado and other casinos have been issued with edge printing which forms a picture when stacked. Difference in chips is in edge printing only. Not visible even when photocopying chips; must be specified.	

When reviewing a list or auction catalog of chips, or scanning a dealer's chip inventory, it is necessary to be more detail-oriented in hunting for a particular chip which is similar to other chips you may already have in your collection. The slight but distinct difference in two chips may account for a large difference in scarcity and price. In particular, an older obsolete chip which has been replaced by a similar chip -- except for a change in mold, or state abbreviation, or inserts -- may be much harder to find. Also, a newer or current chip which is mislabeled / mispriced as its obsolete "cousin" is frequently the reason why a chip may be returned after purchase by mail. Even if the mistake is inadvertent, the inconvenience of purchasing one chip, then receiving a different chip, can be a hassle to correct. [Tip: a Nevada chip with the obsolete "Nev." abbreviation for Nevada is almost always more valuable than a similar "NV" abbreviation chip.]

One of the reasons why chip conventions are so popular, besides being a great source for collectors, is that chip distinctions can be confirmed and the chip's condition also can be examined at the time of purchase. However, since it's impractical to bring your entire collection to a chip show (!), it is necessary to maintain a sufficiently detailed checklist to refer to, for purposes of comparison. Published checklists for certain geographic areas are available and very useful in this endeavor, even though such publications are only as timely and complete as the date of publication ... with all the changes and new issues across the country, an individually-maintained list is usually the preferred solution. Except for those collectors with a photographic memory, or with constant connection to chip inventories, it's easy to confuse two distinct chips without accurate and detailed records. [Speaking from experience, I have inadvertently purchased a duplicate chip when I trusted my memory!]

Variations

An even trickier area of chip collecting is keeping up with "variations" or "variants". Variations are not as widely identified and reported, although many established geographic collecting regions (Nevada, Atlantic City, Colorado, and some "emerging market" areas) have enough collector-enthusiasts that variations are noticed and cataloged with an suggested designation for each variant. Variations are sometimes in the eye of the beholder, when the subtle color shading differences may only be color fading or natural manufacturing variances from the same production lot. Most often though, variations are the result of a new batch of chips with a slight, but real, difference in color. A change in hot-stamp mold or in a center inlay design, which results in a slightly updated chip may also create a new variant. Let's look at a few examples:

- Fitzgerald's-Las Vegas: series of 2 green 25c H&C hot-stamped chips, using same hot-stamp mold. Usually described as olive green and light/mint green, but the two colors are close. [Chips appear to have been ordered and manufactured at different times, then introduced on Fitzgerald's craps tables as replacement chips were needed.]
- Fitzgerald's-Reno: series of 2 lt. blue \$1 H&C center inlay chips (white-round) with 2-1/4 lt. orange inserts. One variant has \$1 centered in CI; other has \$1 lower than center in CI.
- Hotel Mapes Casino-Reno: series of 3 yellow \$1 small crown center inlay chips (black-round) with 4-1/4 inserts in 4 different colors: black, red green and blue. The three variants are due to a random assembly method in placing the 4 inserts in any order. The three variants can be described by noting opposite pairs of inserts: (a) black opposite red; (b) black opposite green; and (c) black opposite blue. [Even though this series of variants can be described concretely in writing, the difference is often overlooked, hence, classification of this group of chips as variants.]
- (As an aside, compare the random placement of the 4 inserts in the Hotel Mapes Casino chips above, with the new Mohegan Sun \$1 H&C chip manufactured by Paul-son. The Mohegan Sun chip also has 4 alternating-color inserts but all of the chips appear to alternate with purple opposite blue and brown opposite green. Current manufacturing techniques account for this regularity, I assume.)

Variations can be categorized into the following groups:

Type of Variations	Explanation for Differences	Examples
Slight color changes	Minor color variations, usually due to different manufacturing lots, although color update may be intentional. Color may be difficult/confusing for security camera, so chip is reissued in new shade.	Fitzgerald's-Las Vegas 25c chips in olive green vs. light green.
Slight hot-stamp variants	Placement of graphic elements in hot-stamp may change over time. Requires precision in verbally describing; photocopy preferred.	Union Plaza Hotel & Casino - 25c chips: look at different placements of word "Union".
Slight center inlay variants	Minor design or placement differences in center inlay graphic; sometimes relates to denomination style.	Palace Club-Reno \$1 C&J chips: two \$1 styles.
Insert placement variants	Minor differences in the color, placement or width of inserts.	Showboat \$1 gray w/ 3-red inserts: 5/8 inch vs. 1/2 inch.
Dovetail notch variants	Some H&C chips with two "pie" sections have dovetail joints in two different colors.	Fort Lucinda 50c red & green "pie" dovetails in both red and green.
Finish variants	Some Bud Jones metal inlay chips were issued in shiny finishes vs. buffed metal/concentric circle versions. Also some Chipcos have varieties of smooth vs. textured surfaces.	Desert Inn \$5 metal insert chips: shiny vs. buffed surfaces.
Invisibly marked variants	Chip suppliers stamp chips with invisible security codes, for collecting variety or for additional high-value chip security.	Luxor \$1 chips - 7 variants marked in ultraviolet ink.

When is a family of two or more chips considered "variations" rather than "distinct"? When a written description is somewhat subjective or ambiguous, or when the description uses terms such as "type 1 vs. type 2" to differentiate the chips. [Note: it is sometimes necessary and unavoidable to use such descriptions, unless a the actual chip(s) or a color photocopy is available. It's just that a collector could not conclusively look at two chip variations and immediately determine which is "type 1" and which is "type 2"] In the absence of a hobby-wide agreement on how to designate such variations, some confusion and misinterpretation is bound to occur. Use care when collecting variants through mail purchases or trades. Make sure the seller sends the chip you want!

Errors

Errors occur when a chip is not manufactured to specifications. When a chip has different designs on its obverse and reverse, the potential exists for a chip with two obverse or two reverse sides. Due to manufacturing controls, these errors are rare, at least in the stacks of chips that are in play. More common errors occur when a misspelling or misdating occurs on a chip. [Note: some collectors would classify commonly available and mass-produced errors, such as spelling errors as "variants" and reserve the "errors" designation for rare chips.] Some examples:

- Goldberg Gaming-Colorado Chipcos- two sides "Big Jake's" and "Soda Fountain" -two obverses or two reverses.
- Little Caesars - two 25c white hot-stamped chips with spellings: "Little Caesars" and (misspelled) "Little Ceasars".
- Imperial Palace - 20th Anniversary chip issued with (misspelled) "Editon" then reissued with "Edition" spelling.
- Flamingo Hilton New Years Eve - \$5 Chipco issued as "New Years Eve 1991" to celebrate New Years Eve 1990/New Years Day 1991.

Classifications for error-type chips:

Type of Errors	Explanation for Origin of Error	Examples
2 Obverses or 2 Reverses	Manufacturing error in placing 2 "heads" or 2 "tails" on chip.	Goldberg Gaming Chipcos (described above)
Conflicts between Obverse & Reverse	Two different denominations may appear on chip; rare occurrence.	Showboat-Atlantic City chip: \$5 obv/ \$25 rev error.
Error / omission in edge inserts	Insert omitted or wrong color (rare). Also, same chip color and inserts issued to two different casinos/clubs (error in security feature of non-duplicate chips).	Jim Kelly's Nugget-Tahoe \$5 red 3-1/2 sxs white/blue/white inserts -- previously issued to California club.
Errors in spelling	Proofreading error, resulting in misspelled word(s). Note that intentional changes in spelling sometimes occur-- ex: Harvey's to Harveys (no apostrophe).	Little Caesars and Imperial Palace chips described above.
Errors in dating	Date for an event is in error (although, in some cases, the customer, not chip mfg. may be the source of error).	Aladdin \$5 H&C chip for 1995 CC>CC show-- wrong dates.
Errors in denominations	Occasionally, 25c chips or other less-than-\$1 chips may show redundant decimal <u>and</u> "c" sign: ".25c".	Horseshoe-LV brown HS chip stamped ".25c"

When is an error not an error? When the chip was manufactured to intended specifications, even if an apparent conflict exists. Example: Caesars Tahoe \$5 and \$20 baccarat chips (Oversize-44mm). Look closely and you will note that they used the "Caesars Palace" house mold for these chips, rather than create a specialized oversize "Caesars Tahoe" mold. Clearly, this mold could not have been used without Caesars Palace blessing; the incorrect mold was probably used simply because the cost of a new mold for a limited production run would have been rather expensive.

Eagle Eyes

I openly acknowledge and credit those "eagle eyed" collectors who notice and communicate the existence of chip distinctions, variations and errors. Chip collectors who have migrated to the hobby from coin or stamp collecting intuitively recognize the importance of cataloging distinctions in chips. Token collectors also are attuned to the slight differences in die variations and cracks and different methods of manufacturing tokens. In some respects, the detail with which token distinctions can be described exceeds current conventions in chip listings. As stated previously, distinctions aren't so important if the chip is "unique", or if a photocopy is available. However, accurate reporting is essential when two or more chip "cousins" can be confused with each other. A picture can be worth a thousand words -- if it illustrates a casino chip offered for sale or auction. In most cases, a photocopy of the actual chip (both sides if different, where possible) is preferable to a written list without illustrations. There's less confusion about the details, and it's sometimes easier and faster to review pictures of chips rather than written specifications only. The chip's condition, strength of hot-stamp, cancellation if any, etc. can be observed in a good-quality photocopy. Color photocopies are even better, but are usually reserved for more expensive chips in lists or auction catalogs, due to cost considerations.

Enjoy your collection and stay aware of the distinctions, variations and errors. Who knows ... you may find a new chip that hasn't been discovered before!