Adrian Seville

The Cultural Legacy of the Royal Game of the Goose

400 years of Printed Board Games

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Adrian Seville
with a check list of British games compiled by John Spear

Amsterdam University Press

This book is dedicated to the memory of the late
William H. Helfand – collector, mentor and friend.

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Preface

This book grew out of an exhibition based on my collection of board games that I curated at the Grolier Club of New York in 2016. Entitled *The Royal Game of the Goose – 400 years of Printed Board Games,* its aim was to show how one of the simplest of board games had produced variants in many countries of Europe that covered a very wide range of human activity and interest. Ed Rothstein, writing in the Wall Street Journal, was kind enough to call the exhibition 'a mind-opening cultural event'. The book seeks to record the cultural legacy of the game, first by tracing its history and development up to about the end of the 19th century, then by showing the persistence of its influence in more modern times, even to the present day. The emphasis on cultural aspects, rather than the technicalities of game design or production, is intended to widen the pool of readers to include historians who are interested in aspects of material culture. International links are fully explored.

My sincere thanks go to Thierry Depaulis, whose expertise on French games is unrivalled; to John Spear, who has most kindly contributed a check list of British Games; to my colleague in Italy, Luigi Ciompi, who is responsible for our Giochidelloca web site, and not least to my wife Mirjam Foot, who has read my drafts with her habitual thoroughness and keen understanding. Thanks are also due to the staff of those many museums and libraries whose collections have enriched my studies.

Adrian Seville

Part I
The History of the Game of the Goose and its Variants, from its earliest appearance to the end of the 19ᵗʰ century

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1.   Introduction and overview

1.1.   The Game of the Goose and its significance

The Game of the Goose is one of the simplest of games: it is one of a great family of race games, played with tokens to represent each player that move along a track according to the throw of dice, striving to reach the winning space. In the classic Game of the Goose, there is no choice of move or other mental input from the player. This might be thought to lead to a dull game, as indeed many race games are. However, the particular rules of the Game of the Goose (set out in an appendix to this chapter) cleverly combine to produce an exciting and lively game, which even adults can enjoy until the novelty wears off.

The game is played with double dice, adding the points on the two dice together, which leads to fast movement. In its classic form, the track has 63 spaces, most of which are undifferentiated and non-active in playing terms: a playing token landing on such a space remains there, unless it is already occupied by another, in which case the tokens change places. Some spaces however are hazards, each with its own characteristic penalty. Of these, the most feared is 'death', usually showing a skeleton, demanding that the player begin afresh. Other spaces bear the image of a goose, from which the game gets its name. These goose-spaces are generally favourable, since the player landing on one must move further on by the number of points thrown. However, an important part of the playing interest of the classic game is that, if the winning space 63 is overthrown, the player must count off the excess points by moving backwards from the winning space – only an exact throw wins the game. If, after counting backwards in this way, the player is unfortunate enough to land on a goose, the player must move further back by the amount of the original throw; and of course landing eventually on a hazard space will exact the prescribed penalty. There are also two 'dice' spaces, which come into play when a particular initial throw is made. The game is usually played for stakes, held in a pool which goes to the winner: the stakes may be money stakes of low or high value or, where children are concerned, something like nuts or sweets. Alternatively, the game may be played for counters of no monetary value.

In this classic form, the game has been current since the late middle ages: it is first recorded in Italy towards the end of the 15th century. The earliest surviving playing board is probably from the 16th century, while printed game sheets appear at the end of that century, at which time the game spread from Italy into many of the countries

of Western Europe. Remarkably, the game survives today in its classic form, with rules hardly altered over the centuries. In Italy the game is still just about current. In France, many people know it as a game they enjoyed with their grandmothers, while today in Spain toyshops offer versions reflecting a tradition that has endured for four hundred years. In England, where it was widely played for two centuries, it has been forgotten except by games specialists. But in the Low Countries – the Netherlands especially – the game is part of the national psyche. Dozens of new games based on the Game of the Goose appear every year: the format has even been used to attempt to influence public opinion in recent political elections.

The medieval origins of the game give clues to an explanation of its structure. The number of spaces in the track corresponds to the 'grand climacteric' number, 63, of high numerological significance since Roman and Greek times. Arguably, the track itself is a symbolic representation of spiritual progress of the human soul, a representation in which the geese denote favourable spiritual guidance while the hazards represent earthly temptations and pitfalls along the way. The origin of the goose as favourable symbol is a matter of debate, the simplest interpretation being that geese are regarded as lucky in Italy. These controversial matters are explored in Chapter 2.

Though the symbolism of the classic game is interesting, the real fascination is in the thousands of variant games built upon this basic template. The earliest variants date from the end of the 16th century but begin in earnest with the educational games of mid-17th-century France. They go on to reflect almost every facet of human life, such is their diversity. When one of these themed games has the classic track length of 63, the classic hazard spaces are often present, but interpreted thematically. For example, in a variant related to sailing ships, the death space might be represented by the image of a shipwreck, with the same rule: 'start again'. Similarly, the favourable spaces classically denoted by geese might be represented by a favourable wind. It is fun, when looking at such a thematic game for the first time, to pick out the death space and see what malevolent image it shows.

This book is devoted to showing why the Game of the Goose can lay claim to being the most influential of any printed game in the cultural history of Europe. For the historian, one fascination is how the game was tailored to appeal to different ages and social groups across the years. Francesco de' Medici and Philip the Second of Spain are prominent in its early history, while the young Louis XIII of France and even Napoleon I appear later as players, fully justifying the game's 'Royal' appellation. But the game is for all classes, ages and conditions: even in its early days the game was spread throughout Europe by colporteurs to supply much meaner households than those of princes.

A recurring question in the history of these games is the tension between the high principles of 'moral' or 'instructive' games and the 'low-life' connotations of a game normally played with dice and well adapted to gambling. Over the centuries, the focus of the main target audience has shifted, first from adults to young adolescents,

then to children in the family group, and finally to children playing for fun on their own, as in the present day. This 'taming of the Goose' is a story in its own right and is addressed in the final chapter.

A further area of interest is how far the games popular in different countries mirror national traditions and preoccupations. For example, the games of 19th-century Germany differ markedly from those of other nations, games representing journeys (whether real or imagined) being particularly popular. In England, the focus of the thematic games of that century is largely on education and moral improvement for a juvenile audience. By contrast, many of the thematic games of 19th-century France represent a wide range of social activities enjoyed by adults, while others focus on spiritual development. And why did the classic game never take hold in the USA? Isolated examples are found there from the middle of the 19th century but the game most typical of the USA is a moral variant, *The Mansion of Happiness,* adapted from a game of that name first published in England half a century earlier.

For those interested in printing history, the huge variety in printing styles of these games provides a tempting hunting ground. Some of them, especially the finely-engraved games of France before and immediately after the Revolution, are aesthetically beautiful prints in their own right. They were expensively produced in their large formats for the aristocratic market and for the newly-emerging wealthy *bourgeoisie.* Yet even during this early period there were mass-market versions, cheaply printed from woodblocks. In the mid-19th century, the transition to lithography as a medium for illustration naturally was reflected in the production of the games, at first using hand colour but later using chromolithography. At the end of the 19th century, as colour printing became relatively cheap, the first give-away game sheets for advertising begin to appear, while the 20th century shows every kind, from the cheapest mass production to the *livre d'artiste.*

Many of the thematic games provide a rich resource for cultural historians in that they act as snapshots of their often very specific world and time. Through the medium of printing, detailed images were reproduced, giving iconographic material not found elsewhere. Again, several of the games were provided with booklets of rules and instructions, something especially common in Georgian and Victorian games published in England. These booklets often give extensive descriptions of their subject matter, which can lead to new insights. Also, printed games were essentially ephemeral productions, frequently updated. For example, several games produced in France in the early decades after the Revolution were adapted to ensure political correctness under successive regime changes. The games can therefore be important primary sources for the historian, though this aspect of them has been neglected.

This book does not aim to be a complete cultural history of the Game of the Goose. That would require a full account of how the game was used in different cultures, including the purposes for which it and its variants were used, who played it and in what circumstances, the economic and practical aspects of its production and

distribution, the interaction between different cultures – and how all these things changed over time. It is true that these subjects form the inspiration for the book. However, the reality is that contemporary written sources hardly touch on these aspects and, where they do, the information given is scant – mere flashes of illumination. The gaps have to be filled in by careful study of the games themselves, though this can succeed only to a limited extent, especially since not all of these fragile games on paper have survived. This book is therefore concerned with the cultural legacy of the Game of the Goose: in particular, how the corpus of surviving games reflects their historical provenance and – reversing the process – how study of them can give insights into the cultures which produced them.

1.2.   Tracing the lines of descent

These games, for all their apparent simplicity, are sophisticated objects. They are not, generally speaking, designed *de novo*. Instead, the game producer will typically use elements of the rules which are familiar in his or her culture, will often choose the iconography from familiar sources, and may even use the physical means of production of an earlier game, such as blocks or plates, with suitable adaptation. This means that, though there is no DNA in a printed board game, it is often possible to trace a meaningful line of descent. These lines of descent inform the core structure of this book. They are indicated at the level of an overview in the chronology appended to this chapter but will be explained in more detail in the main sections. First, though, it is appropriate to look at the methodology.

The most powerful method of tracing the lines of descent of Goose games is to study the variations in rules. The reason this is powerful is because the rules of the game are so often used in their classic form, essentially invariant over centuries and known throughout Europe. This means that what may appear to be trivial variations in rules are (like DNA markers) often highly significant in tracing descent. Once introduced into a culture, whether by careless accident or by deliberate design, they are likely to be copied in that culture across generations. Also, when the same variation then appears in another culture, it is compelling evidence of cross-cultural interaction.

The second method useful in tracing lines of descent is to study the iconography. This can be done using standard methods familiar from Art History. However, the nature of Goose games is such that some special techniques are useful. The invariant nature of the classic game means that the iconography of the playing spaces is essentially fixed – for example, a skull or a skeleton will almost always appear on the 'death' space. By contrast, the other iconographic elements are not fixed by such playing considerations. Thus, the iconographic scheme for a classic game may include decoration (for example) of the track end, of the entry space,

of the otherwise empty corners of the sheet, the central space, and of the spaces of the track that have no special playing significance. These decorative elements can of course take any form without interfering with the playing characteristics of the game. Despite this, many of the early producers of these games were content to copy these decorative elements, perhaps mistakenly regarding them as essential features, or simply for the sake of expediency. For example, an entry arch is often found at the start of the track, though it is not required by the playing structure. Analysis of features such as this can provide useful additional clues to the line of descent

The third method of tracing lines of decent is to examine the printing and publishing history. Frequently, the materials from which these games were printed were handed down by inheritance or purchase of an existing business. A complication is that the materials concerned are not immutable – a copper plate can be partially re-engraved, for example. Furthermore, a game is not necessarily printed from a single plate or woodblock. Frequently, the printing surface for the playing track is separate from that of the text, and the decorations may likewise have a separate plate or block. In woodblock printing, blocks may be repaired or partially replaced after suffering wear. A further complication dates from the introduction of rule books, which became common in late 18th century England when games began to be presented as sheets, dissected and mounted on linen, that folded into slipcases, like folding maps. Here the complication is that bibliographic information may appear not on the game sheet but on the rule book or indeed the slipcase, and marrying up these diverse sources can present difficulties.

1.3.   Sources

The main sources for this book, then, are the games themselves. They are scattered across the world in private collections and in museums. Until digital access came along, these games were difficult to study. Even now, the quality of images provided by museums is often inadequate for the detailed examination of the larger-format sheets; and complete digitisation of rule booklets is unusual. These problems provided the impetus for the formation of the author's own international collection, begun forty years ago and now numbering about 700 games. More recently, the establishment of the *giochidelloca* web site, by the author with his Italian colleague, Dr. Luigi Ciompi, has opened the study of these games to researchers worldwide. The site offers legible images of well over 2500 games, freely downloadable, with examples from all the countries where the Game of the Goose has significance.[1]

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1   www.giochidelloca.it.

Most private collections and most museum collections (themselves usually resulting from the acquisition of an historic private collection) tend to be limited to the games of their own nations, as noted in the chapters that follow. Yet the international dimension is crucial to understanding the development of these games. Important in this regard is the impressive collection of printed board games assembled by that remarkable example of Victorian achievement, Lady Charlotte Schreiber (1812–95) and now held in the British Museum[2]. The collection of about 130 printed board games that she assembled late in her life contains some astonishing and unique material, beginning with Italian examples from the late 1500s and continuing with some of the most beautiful French and German games.

As with collections, the few existing books on the Game of the Goose and its variants tend to have a national focus. A recent exception brings together in large format 63 race games from several nations, representing real or imaginary journeys, complete with rules and excellent descriptions.[3] However, the present book breaks new ground in giving special attention to the cultural significance of the game in an international context.

1.4.   Bibliographic information for printed board games

Unlike most books and many fine art prints, 'bibliographic' information for printed board games can be difficult to identify. Sometimes, they do not even have a title, but just begin with something like: 'Here are the rules' implying that the name of the game will be known without explicit labelling. In this book, where no title appears on the game, the name given has been supplied to indicate briefly what kind of game is involved.

Often, these games give no clue as to who provided the creative input in their making, as opposed, for example, to publishing it. Where no such name appears, 'anon' is implied for the authorship. Even when a designer is named, the term is elastic: it may, for example, refer to the individual who invented the rules of the game, chose its iconography, or executed the layout as a set of drawings for the printer. Only occasionally is sufficient information available to give greater precision to the term

In many games, the only name that appears on the game sheet is that of a producer – and a question arises as to whether that means the printer (who prints the game sheet) or the publisher (who owns and controls the original concept and who finances its production in printed format). In the hand-press era, these functions overlapped. For example, one of the the earliest (17th-century) English Games of

2   Not only was she a prodigious collector, but (as Lady Charlotte Guest) she was also renowned for translating the *Mabinogion* from Middle Welsh. She made a fine porcelain collection, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum; she also made collections of playing cards and of fans, both now in the British Museum.

3   Ernst Strouhal, *Die Welt im Spiel*. Vienna: Brandstätter, 2016.

the Goose bears the imprint: 'printed and sould by John Overton over at St. Sepul-chre's Church: in London', indicating that Overton was both printer and publisher. In France, in the time of the *Ancien Regime*, terminology was similarly equivocal: the term *éditeur* [publisher] is modern. However, the term *marchand des estampes*, though of frequent use during the period to describe the great Parisian printing houses such as de Fer, Crépy and Basset, ignores their input as primary producers of prints, rather than simply selling the products of others. In this book, following the lead of Maxime Préaud, the term 'publisher' will be used to signify this wider role during the Early Modern period.[4] In the later era of the machine press the functions of publisher and printer became more distinct, though in the case of large-format games from copper engravings, the printing may have remained in house for longer.

As with many published prints, a printed game may appear in several different states or editions. Often these differences are not significant for the cultural impact of the game. Detailed identification of these differences has therefore not been undertaken in this book except where they are indeed significant.

1.5. Structure of the book

The book is divided into two main parts. The first part begins by surveying the history of the classic game and its early diffusion from Italy to other countries of Europe about the end of the 16th century. It then moves on to the variant games, country by country, up to about the end of the 19th century. The structure reflects the fact that, during this long period of almost three centuries, most of the innovation occurs within countries rather than by adoption of new ideas across national boundaries, though there are important exceptions to be noted.

The second part deals mainly with the 20th century, where the proliferation of games and their international spread is such that a thematic approach cutting across nations is more appropriate; given the thousands of games available for study, this is necessarily highly selective. This part encapsulates the cultural legacy of the game under three headings: amusement and education; propaganda, polemic and satire; and, finally, advertising and promotion. It will be demonstrated that, in many of the countries of Western Europe, the continuing influence of the Game of the Goose on game design and the culture of play is clearly evident in all these fields. In some examples, the influence of the classic game is obvious and direct, especially when the 63-space spiral track is retained. In others, the influence is at a greater distance and needs to be uncovered by careful examination. A final chapter sets the printed

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4   Maxime Préaud, Pierre Casselle, Marianne Grivel and Corinne Le Bitouzé, *Dictionnaire des éditeurs d'estampes à Paris sous l' ancien régime.* Paris: Promodis – Editions du Cercle de la Librairie, 1987, p.7.

board game in the context of material culture and indicates what is to be learned from studying the genre.

Appendix 1a   Chronological overview to the end of the 19th century

This section is intended to give a brief guide to the key events in the geographical spread of the game and the development of its variants, rather than to provide a detailed chronology. Dates followed by a dash represent approximate start dates of general trends. There are also some specific dates, mostly indicating the first appearance of particularly significant games. Dates marked with a question mark are uncertain. Where the description 'earliest' appears, 'earliest known' is implied.

1400

1463	Italy	Earliest reference to the Game of the Goose (in a sermon)

1500

1500?	Italy?	Earliest surviving Goose board (but made in North India?)
1580–	Italy	Earliest printed Goose and allied games of the Monkey and the Baron
1585?	Spain	Goose game sent by Francesco de'Medici to Philip II
1585–	Europe	Internationalisation of the classic Goose game
1588	Italy	Spanish *Filosofia cortesana* variant printed in Naples.
1597	England	Goose game registered by John Wolfe, Stationers' Hall
1598	Germany	*Fortuna* game based on classic Goose game, engraved on stone
1598	France	Classic Goose game printed in Lyons.

1600

1620?	France	Earliest Game of Cupid (Snake), a variant of the Goose game.
1624?	Netherlands	Earliest Dutch games of the Goose and of the Snake (Cupid)
1640–	France	Earliest educational variants

1650?	Germany	Alphabet version of classical Game of the Goose for teaching children
1685–	France	Thematic variants for adults
1700		
1747	England	Goose variant *Courtship and Matrimony*
1750–	England	Cartographic Goose variants based on the Grand Tour
1790	England	*Game of Human Life* based on French original of 1775
1790–	England	Educational and moral games, with some influence from Goose games
1800		
1800–	England	Educational and moral games, with little influence from Goose games
1800	England	*Mansion of Happiness* published
1800?	Netherlands	Classic Game of the Goose 'for the youth of The Netherlands'
1826–	Europe	Lithography begins to replace engraving
1840–	USA	Goose game and *Mansion of Happiness,* adapted from English sources
1880–	Europe	Chromolithography becomes important for mass-production of games
1880–	Netherlands	Advertising games based on the Game of the Goose

Appendix 1b   Rules for the classic Game of the Goose

1. The players must agree the stakes.
2. Each player must have a distinctive token and place it at the start.
3. Each player places one stake in the centre of the board, making the 'pool.'
4. The players each throw the two dice once: the player with the highest total starts.
5. Each player in turn moves their token forward by the sum of the two dice thrown.
6. If your first throw is six and three, move to space 26.[5]

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[5]   This rule and the next prevent an immediate win on an *initial* throw totalling nine, which would other-wise mean hopping from goose to goose until space 63 was reached.

7. If your first throw is five and four, move to space 53.

8. If a player's token lands on a space occupied by someone else's token, it is a 'hit' – their owners each pay one stake to the pool and the token that was hit moves back to the space just vacated by the thrower's token. The tokens thus change places.

9. If a token lands on:
    – the Bridge at space 6, pay one stake to the pool and go to space 12.
    – the Hotel at space 19, pay one stake to the pool and lose one turn.
    – the Well at space 31, pay one stake to the pool and wait until someone comes to pull you out; their token then takes the place of yours and you move yours back to the space just vacated by their token, as for a hit.
    – the Maze at space 42, pay one stake to the pool and go back to space 39.[6]
    – the Prison at space 52, pay one stake to the pool and wait until someone comes to let you out; their token then takes the place of yours, and you move yours back to the space just vacated by their token, as for a hit.
    – Death at space 58, pay one stake to the pool and start the game again.

10. If a token in going forward[7] lands on a space with a picture of a goose, move forward by the amount of your throw. If you land on another goose, move forward in the same way.

11. To win the game, and take all the stakes in the pool, you must land exactly on space 63.

12. If you are near the winning space, and throw too many, you must count the extra points backwards from the winning space.

13. If you then land on a goose picture, you must continue moving backwards by the amount of your throw until you land on a space with no goose picture. If you land on the Death space, you must start again.

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6   In French games, the rule is 'go back to space 30'.
7   But see rule 13 for tokens going backwards.