

The Christmas Goose

by Adrian Seville

*What's a goose doing in here?
It's the Game of Goose, of course.*



Figure 1. A goose feast awaits the winner of this 17th century Venetian Goose game.

Back in September 2005, in the AGPC Quarterly, we saw how this royal and historic game gave some interesting images of America. This time though, the images from the game are all about feasting and jollity—just right for Christmas.

All the games shown here are based on the simple race game of Goose, played with double dice and the usual tokens. Traditionally, the winning space, which you must reach exactly to win, is number 63. And on the way are hazard spaces, to send you back or hold you up, and the beneficent geese, which characterize the game. When you land on a

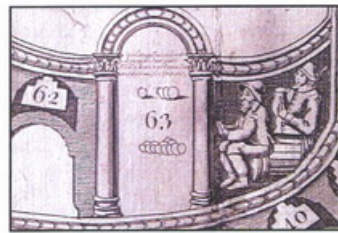


Figure 2. A 19th century Goose game using earlier woodcuts.

In British games, the winning space tends to be associated with drinking before a warm fire, rather than eating the goose as such.

goose space, you immediately move forward again to the extent of your throw.

Nobody knows for certain where the geese came from, when they first appeared back in mid-16th century Italy. There is a respectable body of opinion that thinks they are not just general symbols of good fortune, but also represent having a good feast at the end of the game. This opinion is strengthened by the fact that many of these early games picture a goose-feast in the winning space. This is especially true of those games produced in woodcut, and so probably intended for a non-aristocratic market, unlike the more expensive copper engravings, where the geese may have a higher symbolic purpose.

Figure 1 (on previous page) shows the center of a famous early Venetian printed Goose Game, by Carlo Coriolani, dating from about 1640. A prosperous family is enjoying a good meal of goose. Behind, through the window, is another scene that often adorns the center of early Italian games—the hunter with his gun, doing some wildfowling. Images of this kind continued to be popular in Italian goose games well into the 19th century.

Figure 2 shows a 19th century print with a central feast that seems much more lively than that in the earlier Venetian game. The actual picture of the feast is difficult to date, but is earlier than the 19th century and may or may not be original. Quite often, the central picture in these later printings is not from the original wood block, but is a replacement made necessary because the screw press wears out the center of the block more quickly than it does the surrounding spiral



Figure 3. The winning space of an early 18th century English Goose game

track area, which may itself be very old. The letterpress typography on the sheet round the game itself is often the most recent aspect of the game.

In British games, the winning space tends to be associated with drinking before a warm fire, rather than eating the goose as such. Figure 3 is taken from a game published by Robert Sayer in London around 1726, datable by the medallions showing the infamous thief Jack Shepherd and the almost equally infamous Jonathan Wild, the 'thief taker general': both came to a bad end.

In none of these games is there a particular hint of Christmas. However, in some German games of goose, the feeling of a winter feast is strong. Figure 4 shows the



Figure 4. An early 20th century German Goose game promises a rich winter feast

center of a game dating from about 1900, with plum puddings and wine. As is typical of German games, the tradition of winning on space 63 is not followed.

So far, all the games illustrated have been genuine Goose games, with geese on the favorable squares. However, in Figure 5—a late 19th century print from Alsace—we see another genre. Here, though the basic structure of the game is that of Goose, the theme is now that of the Christmas tree. Whoever lands on a space showing a tree goes forward just as when landing on a goose in the traditional game. The central space shows the giving of presents under the tree.

Our final example comes from the Netherlands, and is a later edition of a game first published in about 1858. Strictly speaking, it is not a Christmas game, but is one celebrating the Feast of Saint Nicholas (Sint Nicolaas, popularly changed into 'Sinterklaas'). The Saint's feast day is on December 6th, but only in the Low Countries and especially in the Netherlands, the eve of this day is celebrated by young and old. There is some fascinating information about this tradition on the website of the Netherlands embassy in the UK:

http://www.netherlands-embassy.org.uk/about/the/holidays_and/the_feast_of_saint

All Dutch children know that Sinterklaas lives in Spain, where he spends most of the year recording the behavior of all children in a big red book, while his helper, Black Peter, stocks up on presents for next December 5th. In the first weeks of November, Sinterklaas gets on his white horse, Peter ("Piet") swings a huge sack full of gifts over his shoulder, and the three of them board a steamship headed for the Netherlands. Around mid-November they arrive in a harbor town—a different one every year—where they are formally greeted by the Mayor and a delegation of citizens. Their parade through town is watched live on television by the whole country and marks the beginning of the Sinterklaas season.

The game itself picks up many of the old traditions associated with Sinterklaas. The favorable spaces are occupied by boots and shoes, instead of geese, and these contain little presents. Another tradition is that of the lovers—large ginger



Figure 5. The Christmas Tree is the theme of this late 19th century game from Alsace

bread figures that take their places at the table with everyone else. They can be seen in the central picture, where the Saint (a real

you on to 18, where there is another goose, then to 27 and so on to 63. To stop this easy win, the special rule says that instead you move on to space 26 (if your throw was 6 and 3) or to space 53 (if it was 5 and 4). In the Saint Nicholas game, this special rule is varied. On the initial throw of 6 and 3, if you are a man, you move to 25, where there is a smart young woman for you to marry. But if you are a woman, you move to 26, where there is a nice young man. However, if you throw 5 and 4, you are instead directed to squares 51 and 53, showing an old man and an old woman.

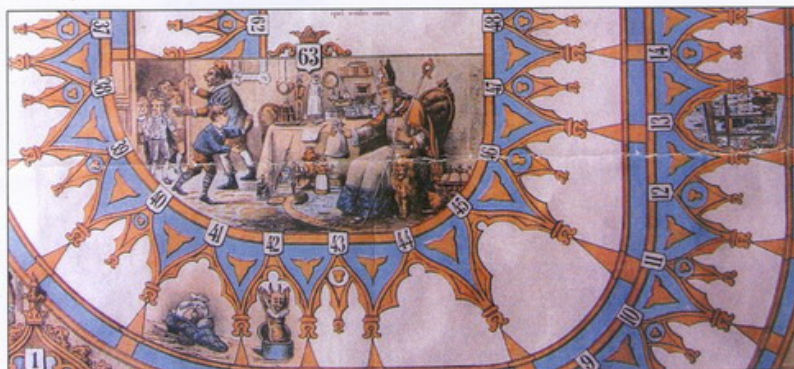


Figure 6. The Dutch game of St Nicholas first appeared in the mid-19th century.

On the initial throw of 6 and 3, if you are a man, you move to 25, where there is a smart young woman for you to marry.

historical personage) is handing out gifts and the party is just beginning as the children come excitedly through the door.

The Saint Nicholas game has a charming rule of its own. In traditional Goose, there is a special rule when you make an initial throw of 9, so you land at once on a goose. The normal moving-forward rule would take

The Game of Goose and its variants richly reflect many aspects of human life. The original game was indeed a 'game of life,' with cabalistic overtones, though it probably grew out of simpler race games intended for gambling. Many variants have been developed for serious purposes—education, advertising, and political propaganda. But the seasonal games shown here are for pure pleasure. Have a good Christmas! AGPC