

Childhood through the Eye of the Goose

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Printed board games have been significant in childhood for several centuries. Many of the games derive from the Game of the Goose, a simple dice-based race game of 63 spaces, first referred to in Italy in 1480. That game takes its name from the geese which appear on certain spaces: landing there allows the points thrown to be used again, so doubling the progress. Traditional hazards delay or set the player back, such as the 'death' space, requiring the player to start the game afresh. Examples in printed form survive from the late sixteenth century, at which time the game spread widely through Europe, including its appearance in England in 1597. However, the iconography of these examples suggests a game primarily associated with gambling or drinking, rather than for the amusement or education of children.

A key stage in the development of the game was the invention of thematic variants in France, more or less closely modelled on the prototype game. An early variant, possibly the first, was the *Jeu du monde* designed by Pierre Duval in 1645. This consisted of a 63-space track made up of vignette maps of different countries and states, the winning space being France. Variants on other educational themes soon followed, so that by the end of the century most of the subjects significant in the formation of young men of the aristocratic class were covered: Geography (1645), History (1645), Religion (1654), Astronomy (1661), Heraldry (1662), Arts of War (1697). The formation of young women of similar class was addressed by games with a social purpose: Love and Marriage (1725), and Conversation (1767) being examples of such themes.

The attribution of these games to an upper-class market is attested by the high quality of production, these being games of large format, printed from copper plates by the best Parisian houses: they were therefore costly. In some cases, the dedication supports this attribution, for example a game on the Art of Fortification is dedicated to: *L'illustre Jeunesse élevée dans le Collège de Louis le Grand*, the first and most prestigious of the French military colleges.

Similar games, though not as extensive in subject coverage as the French examples, appeared in other countries of continental Europe during the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, England was a notable exception to this emulation of French practice. Though the Game of the Goose continued to be popular as a diversion during this period, there was no comparable introduction of printed educational race games. Indeed, the earliest English educational race games appeared only in the second half of the eighteenth century, and these were explicitly based on the Grand Tour of Europe. The spiral track of the French games was not used: instead, a wandering track was laid out on the face of a map of Europe, following a trail of cities with numbers corresponding to a list of descriptions, with some numbers also having particular rules to advance, stay, or go back. Interestingly, the earliest of these games had rules similar to the Game of the Goose, in that landing on a capital city meant that the points thrown on the dice could be used again. However, it is questionable whether these games were aimed at the education of children, rather than at the young men about to enjoy the Tour as a rite of passage: for example, Robert Sayer's *Royal Geographical Amusement* (1787) states that, landing on Bordeaux, 'If the Traveller loves good claret, whether Pontac, Pagon or St. Emilion, he must stay here as many turns as he chuses'.

English educational race games aimed at older children date only from 1790, when John Wallis and Elizabeth Newbery published the *New Game of Human Life*, in which the spiral track of the parent Game of the Goose was extended to 84, corresponding to the seven ages of man – this being a close copy of the French version published by Crépy in 1775, but with some adaption of the iconography to the English market, and with dice replaced by a teetotum (a spinning top, here six-sided, numbered by the purchaser by hand, to avoid the punitive duty on dice). This game was intended to teach moral precepts and arguably was of key significance in stimulating a distinctive group of moral games published in London in the late Georgian period. Of these, the most influential was *The Mansion of Happiness*, published by Laurie in 1800, for this was to be published in nearly identical form in the USA by Ives some forty years later, this being the earliest printed board game published there, apart from some rare games of the geographical tour variety published by Lockwood in the 1820s.

John Wallis, initially together with Elizabeth Newbery, published several other educational games in the last decade of the eighteenth century. *The Royal Genealogical Pastime of the Sovereigns of England* (1791) is perhaps the earliest English educational game, as opposed to an imported adaptation. Its appearance is that of a genealogical tree, but it is in fact a unicursal game along whose track the successive sovereigns appear on shields, with their dates. Interestingly, knowing the dates entitled the player to an extra spin, thus distinguishing it from the classic Game of the Goose, in which no element of skill is possible since the move is wholly determined by chance. Another game by Wallis, published in 1798, is clearly aimed at younger children, for it bears the forbidding title: *An Arithmetical Pastime intended to infuse the rudiments of Arithmetic under the Idea of Amusement*. It is a spiral race game of 100 spaces, some of whose instructions have a distinctly minatory tone. Space 9, for example, shows an appetising plum-cake, but has the instruction:

Was all your business done today,
In time and well, not spoilt by play?
Then take your plum-cake and a spin,
If not, stay here a turn and grin.

The game is in fact adapted from an earlier German version, published by Georg Dein in Nuremberg in 1795. There is an un-English feel to the instructions, which have been poorly translated: 'grin' for example, should be 'pull a face' in discontent. This game, though, is interesting in that the conduct of the player in the real world is capable of influencing the course of the game. This breach of what Salen and Zimmerman call 'the magic circle' of play is of considerable theoretical interest and may be contrasted with Johan Huizinga's definition in *Homo Ludens* (1949):

Play is something outside ordinary life... with its own proper boundaries of time and space, according to fixed rules..

These examples from the 1790s appear to be the earliest printed board games for use by younger children in England, as distinct from the letter-bearing dice advocated by Locke in a previous century. As with games for older children, England lagged far behind educational games printed in Continental Europe.

The earliest such game known to the present author is German, dating from the second half of the seventeenth century (see figure 1).



Fig. 1: Detail of a German goose game of the 17th century, decorated with an animal alphabet for the teaching of reading (author's collection).

It is a classic 63-space Game of the Goose, with geese depicted on the usual spaces and the various hazards likewise. However, the non-active spaces are decorated with an animal alphabet and – uniquely- the instructions in the central panel give a clear idea of the target audience. They say (present author's translation):

This game has three uses: firstly, children can be taught to read: others, to count up properly: third, old and young can spend time with the goose game.

The game is not dated, so its relationship to the work of Comenius (the *Orbis Pictus* of 1658) is a matter of speculation, but it clearly is in a similar vein and of comparable age.

A French alphabet game invented by Alexandre Fleuriau was published in 1705 but this was a game involving dice with letters, rather than one based on the Game of the Goose. However, a game invented by Mlle. Duteil, published in 1773, is indeed a spiral race game with the major vowels acting as Goose-like favourable spaces. The earliest alphabet game from the Netherlands involves drawing letter cards from a bag and placing them on a printed layout, much as in the Game of The Owl, which is a dice-based pay-or-take game of comparable antiquity to the Game of the Goose, but not a game of movement.

The development of printed educational games for both younger and older children up to the end of the 18th century was thus very significantly different in England from that which occurred on the Continent. There seems no explanation for this and it remains a cause of some surprise, particularly since the cross-fertilisation of children's tales from France to England was not inhibited.

The final part of this paper introduces a distinct sub-genre: games representing childhood itself. The *Jeu des Ecoliers* is a fine example: published by Jean in Paris in about 1812, it traces the path of the student from entry to college to the final distribution of prizes. Although not of the classic 63 spaces – the track has only 44 – it is very clearly a Goose-game derivative. The favourable spaces, doubling the points, are on the classic numbers 5, 9, 14 etc. with each such space depicting an allegory of some subject of the curriculum as follows: Reading and Writing; Latin and Greek; History and Poetry; Geography and Mathematics; Drawing and Geometry; Astronomy; Logic; Rhetoric; and Philosophy.



Fig. 2: Punishments in the *Jeu des Ecoliers*. Paris: Jean, ca. 1812.

Although the game appears to suggest a happy environment, where the scholars are at play on gymnastic apparatus, the hazard spaces suggest a harsh regime such as the military colleges provided. They show an increasingly

severe set of punishments, beginning with the rod, moving on to the cap with asses' ears, before showing the scholar on his knees in disgrace before the class. A gloomy prison cell comes next, where the scholar on his diet of bread and water kicks at the door in frustration. Worse is to come: the scholar, his hands tied painfully behind his back, is lashed to a stout upright post, the notice of his misdemeanours displayed shamefully above his head. A punishment of this kind was standard in military establishments and indeed was still in use as a field punishment during the First World War. The ultimate disgrace, however, is on space 42, just before the end: it is marked '*discipline militaire*', and shows the scholar doing the menial task of carrying heavy cans of water: from the fountain. This corresponds to the death space in the Game of the Goose, though – rather than restarting – the player is required to exit the game.

The second of the games representing childhood to be discussed is *The Game of Getting Up*, an Edwardian game by Jaques of London. This is an altogether more elaborate production than the simple printed sheets of the games more directly derived from the Game of the Goose. It is indeed a race game but here there are printed cards, representing objects familiar in the household, which are to be collected when the player lands on a space depicting one of them. These cards have important significance for the player's progress.

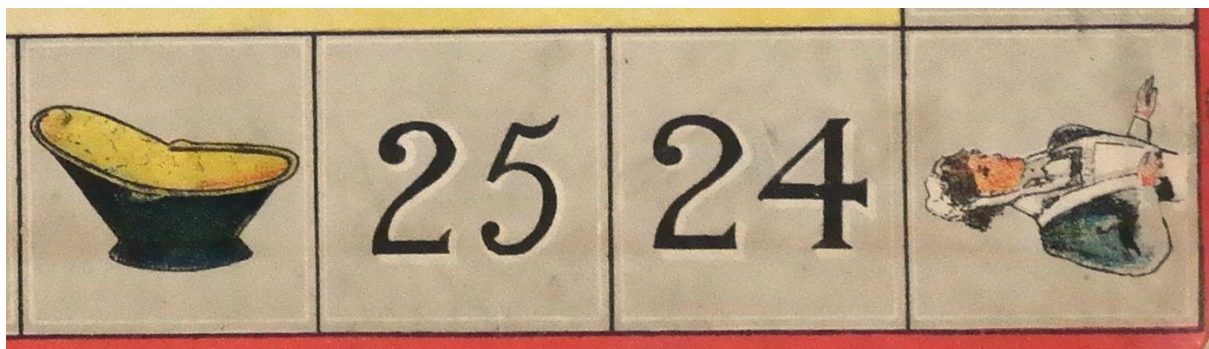


Fig. 3: Detail of the *Game of Getting Up*. London: Jaques, ca. 1900 (author's collection).

For example, at space 23: 'Meet Nurse. If the player has not any two of the tickets, sponge, flannel, soap or bath towel, he must go back to 5, and trust to luck again to get through with or without them.' Or, at space 26: 'Miss one turn to have a bath. If no towel, go back to 18 to get it.'

These two games characterise most vividly the experience of childhood, a characterisation much helped by the pictorial nature of the printed board game but also aided by the interesting adaptation of traditional rules to suit the theme. A century apart in time, these two games are yet a world apart in the attitudes to children that they reflect. Both, though, are characterised by the mores of an affluent upper class, implicit rather than explicit in both cases. In the *Jeu des Ecoliers*, the assumption is that the player will identify with the aristocratic officer class, while in the later game the household is assumed to contain a full-time nurse to look after the needs of the children, while standards of hygiene are taken for granted.

So, the Game of the Goose, with its derivatives, is not only an educational tool going back more than three centuries. It is also a significant marker for the cultures of childhood in their variety across different ages and across national boundaries.

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