Adrian Seville and John Spear The Game of the Goose in England – a tradition lost

The Game of the Goose is the most significant race game ever invented, in that it has spawned literally thousands of variants across the countries of continental Europe. It is a simple 'roll-and-move' game, played with double dice and the usual tokens along a spiral track, traditionally of 63 spaces, usually printed on a fragile sheet of paper. It first appeared in the Italy of Francesco de' Medici (1541–87), who – it is recorded – sent it as a present to Philip II of Spain (1527–98). It soon spread to France and indeed reached England in 1597, where John Wolfe, Printer to the City of London, registered a printed sheet at Stationers' Hall as *The newe and most pleasant Game of the Goose*. The game was widely played in England for two centuries – Goldsmith mentions it in his poem, *The deserted village*,¹ as one of the prints hanging on the wall of a humble tavern, while in 1758, at the other end of the social spectrum, the Duchess of Norfolk planted a Game of Goose in hornbeam at Worksop.² However, by 1800 it was regarded as dull and old fashioned. By contrast, in France and the Low Countries especially, new variants of the game were constantly being developed in



 An early Italian Game of the Goose printed by Lucchino Gargano and dated 1598 on the plate.
Sheet size 507 × 378 mm, printed area 482 × 353 mm.
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fields as diverse as education, the arts, propaganda and advertising. This article traces something of the history of the game in England and explores why a rich tradition was lost.

THE STANDARD FORM OF THE GAME

First, though, the standard form of the game must be explained. In this, images of geese denote the favourable spaces: after landing on a goose, the player goes on by the amount of the throw. There are also unfavourable spaces, or hazards, which involve paying to the pool and other penalties. Most notable of these is death, on space 58: the unfortunate player who lands here must begin the game again. The other usual hazards are a *bridge* – go on to 12; 19, an *inn* – lose two turns; 31, a *well* – wait until another reaches the space then exchange places; 42, a maze - go back to 39 (usually); 52, a *prison* – wait as for the well. Being hit by another player's token involves changing places and paying to the pool. Winning requires the player to land exactly on space 63. If, as is usual, overthrows are counted backwards, this adds greatly to the excitement, since an overthrow may hit the *death* space. Indeed, the rules are ingeniously contrived to produce a highly playable game: waiting in the prison or the well for some other unfortunate to arrive and take one's place is a chastening experience! In this standard form, the game was evidently a game of human life, with the geese having a favourable symbolical significance. It was also imbued with numerological significance, deriving from the theories of the Cabala. This was a system of Jewish mystical theology developed in Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries but then adapted for Christian use in the Renaissance, by Italian scholars especially. In this system, the number 63 was highly significant, representing the crucial year of one's life, or grand climacteric. As a philosophical system, the Christian Cabala did not last - but the game itself did.

ENGLISH VERSIONS OF THE STANDARD GAME

Though the game actually registered by John Wolfe in 1597 is lost, the early English versions of the standard game were faithful to the Italian model. Indeed, in the earliest known surviving version, by John Overton of London $(1640-1713)^3$ and dated to a little before 1660, not only are the rules the same but also some of the incidental iconography is virtually identical, as a comparison of figures 1 and 2 will reveal: apart from the general similarity of the tracks, both the jester-like figure at the start of each and the two figures with goblets sitting against a barrel are strikingly alike in each case. The copy of this John Overton print is the one in The

Morgan Library of New York (the other is in the Opie collection): in this, his imprint is overlaid by a later label: 'Sold at the Black Lyon in Exeter Exchange in the Strand London, where you may have Musick Prick'd.' Laurence Worms notes that the musical instrument-maker, printer and publisher, Henry Waylett (fl.1743–65) was certainly 'At the Black Lyon in Exeter Change' in 1744.³ Given the reference to music, it appears likely that the later label is indeed that of Waylett; it is not known whether the Morgan copy is an original print by John Overton or a restrike by Waylett from Overton's plate.

The medallions in the English game are thought to be a local addition. They have no playing significance but appear to have been introduced for the sake of topicality, at a time when tension between Royalists and Parliamentarians was acute: the surmise is that they represent a Parliamentarian (on the left) slapping the face of a Royalist on the right! In later printings of the standard game in England, the content of the medallions was updated: for example, the notorious Jack Shepherd was paired with Jonathan Wilde, the 'Thieftaker-General', in about 1725 while around 1765 Carington Bowles produced a version pairing George III and his Queen.

Interestingly, something very like the John Overton game was adopted in the Netherlands as a standard form of the Goose game (see figure 3). It was copied and re-engraved by different publishers over several centuries with only minor variations, usually retaining the Parliamentarian/Royalist medallions despite these being of no significance in Holland.

DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL AND OTHER VARIANT GAMES IN FRANCE

Meanwhile in France the key development of the game was taking place. This was the invention of educational games for the amusement and instruction of the young sons of the French aristocracy – the *cadet* class, predominantly in their Paris colleges. The first such game was published in 1638 by Jean Mariette and is a chronological game designed to teach history from the birth of Adam. Then came geographical games, with Pierre Duval's *Le Jeu du Monde*, in which the countries of the world were represented by 63 small maps placed along a spiral track. Bearing in mind that Duval was Geographer to the King of France, it is perhaps unsurprising that the goal is to reach that country, at the end of the track.

Further variants followed until, by the end of the eighteenth century, there were games covering almost all aspects of a young gentleman's education: history,

THE ROYALL & MOST PLEASANT GAME OF Y GOOSE.



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2. The earliest known English Game of the Goose – John Overton c.1660, though with his imprint overlaid by a later label. Sheet size 594 × 467 mm, printed area 489 × 372 mm. (©The Morgan Library, New York)



3. A Netherlands version of the Game of the Goose, by Erven Wijsmuller of Amsterdam, mid nineteenth century – about 200 years later than the John Overton game shown in figure 2. Sheet size 488 × 378 mm, printed area 454 × 354 mm

geography, moral education and religion, Heraldry, science, and not least the arts of war. For young gentlewomen, there were games on the art of conversation, and on courtship and marriage. H.R. D'Allemagne's book attempts a thematic listing of all the versions of the game known in France at the time of writing.⁵ Apart from the educational games, he lists those of a satirical nature, games of propaganda and advertising (where he acknowledges that his list is very incomplete) as well as those designed for amusement around popular themes such as the theatre. Indeed, D'Allemagne's thematic subject headings, listing over 300 games up to the middle of the twentieth century, cover almost all of civilised life. It would be wrong to suggest that all these games borrowed the full apparatus of the traditional *Jeu de l'Oie* (Game of the Goose). Some, indeed, had little in common with it except the use of a unicursal along which the tokens moved, wholly governed by the throw of dice: in these games, the favourable spaces and penalties were specified according to the whim of the designer. However, a great many games derived additional interest from using the traditional Goose layout – but reinterpreting the traditional favourable spaces and hazards according to the new theme chosen for the game. If done with wit and humour, this device could add greatly to the appeal of the game and was probably the reason why these games retained their popularity.







The Immortal Man .



5. (above) The winning space in the New Game of Human Life, compared with that of its French original - Newton (left) and Voltaire

6. (right) Detail of an English Goose Game in the form of a goose c.1852 -the 'Railway Station' is an image of King's Cross Station, opened in that year



There is space for only one example, very typical of the games produced by the major print sellers along the Rue St Jacques in Paris during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. It is a copper engraving of large format (plate 445 × 610 mm) finely engraved and exquisitely coloured by hand. The title is Jeu Instructif des Peuples et Costumes des Quatre Parties du Monde et des Terres Australes and it was published by the house of Basset in about 1815. Each of the 63 spaces represents a different country of the world, with inhabitants in the appropriate costume. Recalling the Duval game mentioned earlier, the winning space is France. The favourable 'goose' spaces are the countries of Europe, placed in the traditional two sequences. The main interest, though, is in the hazard spaces, which are also in their traditional places: for example, the *death* space at 58 is represented by New Zealand (see figure 4), showing a 'traveller ready to be eaten by the cannibals', whereas the prison space at 52 is the Barbary Coast, and shows the taking of a slave. The resonance with the traditional game would undoubtedly have added to the interest and helped make the various countries memorable.

GEOGRAPHICAL GAMES IN ENGLAND

By comparison with France, England was slow to develop variant games. The earliest known is John Jefferys' A journey through Europe, or the play of geography, dated 1759 on the plate but known only in a slightly later state bearing the imprint of Carington Bowles, and therefore not earlier than 1763. Here the track is marked on a map of Europe, beginning at York and going from city to city until London is reached as the winning space 77. This appears to be the first use of a track on an actual map, as opposed to the sequences of small maps favoured by Duval. The rules begin: 'The Journey through Europe is to be played in all respects the same as the Game of Goose. Whoever begins to spin the Totum⁶ first must place his man on the very number that turns up ...' and goes on to explain in detail how moves are made. Given that the Game of Goose was familiar throughout England, Jefferys' reference to it is not surprising. His game is not of 63 spaces, suggesting that the numerological importance was lost on him. Nevertheless, the game has considerable structural similarity to the standard game. In particular, the doubling forward of the throw when a goose space is encountered has its equivalent in Jefferys' game as 'any number where a King lives', i.e. capital cities. The hazard spaces are interesting and display the prejudices of the time: 'He who rests at No. 48 at Rome for kissing the Pope's Toe shall be banished for his folly to No. 4 in the cold island of Iceland and miss

three turns'. These various instructions succeed in making vivid the characteristics of the places visited but have no resonance with the original Game of Goose.

The next known English geographical game, also a tour of Europe but produced in 1768 by the Geographer to the King, Thomas Jefferys, retained many of the features of the earlier game, including the doubling on capital cities. However, in subsequent games – tours of the World, tours of England and other countries of Britain etc – this feature was lost.

OTHER THEMATIC RACE GAMES IN ENGLAND

From the time of its introduction into England, the Game of Goose remained primarily a gambling game. With few exceptions, geographical games were the only English race games with an educational value up until the last decade of the eighteenth century. Around that point in time English views on the approach to children's education began to change, including the increased use of games as an instructive tool - see Jill Shefrin's account of printed teaching aids in The Dartons - so the late Georgian and Victorian periods in England saw a great upsurge in printed spiral race games, as surveyed by F.R.B. Whitehouse in his classic work Table games of Georgian and Victorian Days.⁷ Many of these were designed for serious educational purposes and came complete with a lengthy book of instructions, often requiring instructive passages to be read out loud. This was contrary to the spirit of the Game of Goose, which is a fast moving game of simple rules. Perhaps this helps to explain why that game had so little influence over the English games of this period.

Sometimes an English game is encountered which appears contrary to this generalisation. An example is the famous New game of human life published by John Wallis and Elizabeth Newbery in 1790. Here, the track of 84 spaces represents the seven ages of man, as seven sequences of twelve years each. On each 'age' space the doubling forward 'goose' rule applies. However, this game is a structurally-exact copy of an earlier game, Le nouveau jeu de la Vie humaine, published in 1775 by the Paris firm of Crépy. The sequence of images is identical, though they have been re-drawn in the English version - with some interesting changes. Thus, the image of the immortal man on the winning space (number 84) is recognisable as Voltaire in the French version but for the English market the substitution of Sir Isaac Newton was made: both men died at the age of 84 years.8

In some English games based on Goose, the borrowing from the French is explicit. Thus, the goose-variant game published in France by Demonville as *Le Prix*

de Sagesse ou La Fontaine en Jeu was printed from the same plate by Darton with an extra title, La Fontaine in the Game of the Goose, and instructions in English in the central area within the track. That area also contains a reference to another game being available from the seller, concerning mythology. The reference is in the form of a newspaper review of the game which appeared in the Mercury of 20 January 1810. In it the reviewer comments favourably on the game but also remarks: 'We cannot avoid agreeing that the Mythological play, traced on the same plan and on the rules of the old play of the Goose does not gain upon the latter in amusement and above all in utility. It does not require great effort of genius to replace the figures of the ancient Game of the Goose by the figures of the divinities of Fable, but the author has given a proof of intelligence by substituting to an idle and insignificant thing, some slight knowledge in an agreeable science.' It is evident from this that the Game of the Goose was held in little esteem and that the detailed thematic substitution was not appreciated. Although a Darton game of mythology is not known, there is a version Heathen Mythology by Wallis, evidently on the same plan, in which for example the Prison space is substituted by Morpheus, the God of Sleep, while the Inn space of course becomes Bacchus and the goose doubling of the throw occurs on the 'superior deities' - perhaps not an 'effort of genius' but quite acceptably done!9

One of the present authors (J.S.) has made a special study of English games of this period. He records 351 games known at least by title; for 220 of these, he has a count of spaces and only five (apart from Game of the Goose itself or the closely related Game of the Snake and Game of the Monkey) have the canonical 63 spaces. Of these five, two (Heathen Mythology and the La Fontaine game mentioned above) are definitely borrowings from France. Another, Edward Wallis's Polite tourist – curiosity in the city of Paris (1818) has an obvious connection with France, leaving only Verner and Hood's Bulwark of Britannia (1797) and Spooner's Hare and tortoise (1849) as English 63-space games without a clear French link. Likewise, the goose doubling rule is uncommon. Apart from Goose and the allied games of Snake or Monkey, out of 131 games where the rules were examined in detail, only 10 had the doubling rule, though 35 had an extra-spin rule instead.

ENGLISH GOOSE - THE FINAL THROW

Mention should be made of the nineteenth-century attempts to recover the popularity of the Game of Goose itself. These date to around 1850 and are characterised by the track appearing in the outline of the figure of a goose. Some of these adhere closely to the standard rules while others have bizarre rules of their own: the example shown includes spaces with sailing boats, at which one is required to whisper, 'sail ahoy' to one's neighbour!

CONCLUSION

Joseph Strutt, writing in 1801, had a poor opinion of the game, calling it 'a childish diversion usually introduced at Christmas time We have also the Game of the Snake and the more modern Game of Matrimony, with others of the like kind: formed upon the same plan as that of the goose, but none of them, according to my opinion, are the least improved by the variations.'10 Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising that the Game of Goose did not continue to develop in the way that it did in other countries, especially France and the Low Countries. Whatever the explanation, the game is now esteemed only by a few specialists in England but is widely studied and collected in the rest of Europe, where indeed the game is still popular with the public and is still being produced today - a long period of success.

For further information on the Game of Goose and allied games, see the website set up by Luigi Ciompi and Adrian Seville at www.giochidelloca.it.

^{1.} See John Holcomb's website, www.textetc.com, for a discussion of the revisions of this verse

^{2.} Horace Walpole, Letters (1840) vol.3, p.395

^{3.} For details of Overton, see *A dictionary of the British map engravers* by Laurence Worms and Ashley Baynton-Williams, in preparation.

^{4.} Private communication, 2010

^{5.} Le Noble Jeu de l'Oie, Paris, Librairie Gründ, 1950

^{6.} A top-like spinner often used in England to avoid the use of dice, later called a teetotum

^{7.} Jill Shefrin, *The Dartons* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Occasional Press, 2009) and F.R.B. Whitehouse, *Table games of Georgian and Victorian days* (London: Peter Garnett, 1951)

^{8.} See Linda Hannas, *The English jigsaw puzzle* (London: Wayland, 1972) p.115 for further discussion, including a note of other substitutions

^{9.} See *The Dartons* by Jill Shefrin, op.cit., for a full account of Darton publications

^{10.} Joseph Strutt, Sports and pastimes of the people of England (1801)