

# The Royal Game of the Goose

## Road to Ruin or Pathway to Paradise?

BY ADRIAN SEVILLE

As a desirable piece of ephemera, a humble printed game sheet in the British Museum in London takes some beating. This is the earliest dated *Game of the Goose* (figure 1), signed on the plate by Lucchino Gargano of Rome. The date is 1598, though the game is mentioned in Italy as far back as 1480 in an Advent sermon, advising against playing Goose and other games at Christmas. It is a simple roll-and-move game, with no choice of move and therefore with no exercise of skill. Although in the United States it is hardly known, its influence upon games – including games familiar to Americans – is profound.

Why *Goose*? The simplest answer is that geese were considered lucky in medieval Italy. The 63-space track has two series of them, in each the geese being spaced by nines. If you land on one, you play the points of your throw again. Using double dice, this makes for a fast and furious game. But there are hazards. Land on the *well* or on the *prison*, and you have to wait until some other unfortunate releases you by landing there – and has to take your place. The most feared hazard is *death* on space 58 – start again!

So, what was this game used for? The decoration in figure 1 at the end of the track shows two men sitting on a barrel about to enjoy a drink. There are many examples of Goose games where the decoration suggests that gambling, drinking and low-life generally are the likely associations – a “Road to Ruin” indeed, as in the Flemish game of Figure 2.

But there are other associations. What about the unusual track length of 63? From ancient times, but especially in the Middle Ages, this number has been associated with the “Grand Climacteric” of human life. The idea was that there was a seven-year cycle of crises (“climacterics”) in human life, and that the crisis at age 63 years was particularly dangerous, because then you

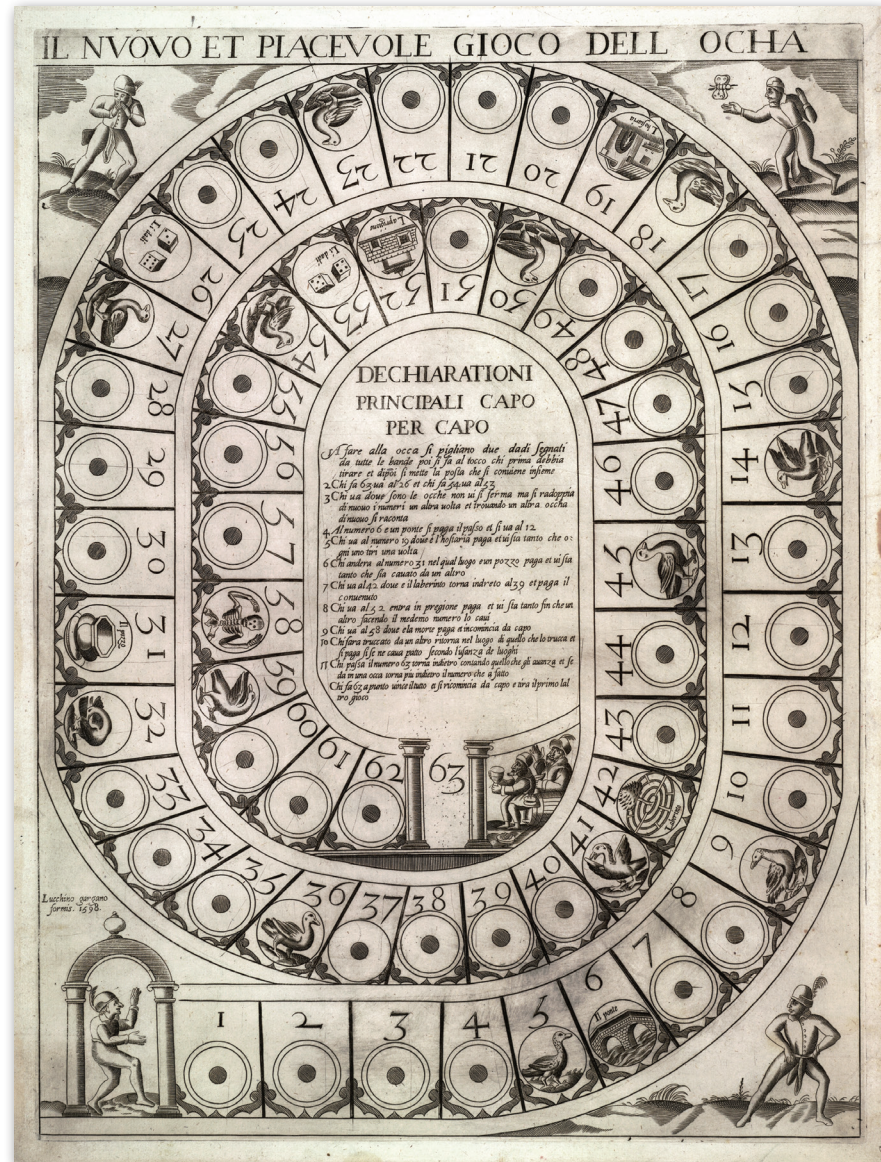


Figure 1. An early Italian *Game of the Goose* printed by Lucchino Gargano and dated 1598 on the plate (© Trustees of the British Museum).

were “old” – but, if you survived that, you could expect tranquility and wisdom in the rest of your life. In the fifteenth century, the Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino even put forward an astrological explanation, suggesting that your ruling planet changed each year, so that every seven years you fell under the malign influence of Saturn. The climacteric theory may sound far-fetched to us now but in medieval Europe it was standard medical thought.

Viewed in this way, the *Game of the Goose* starts





Figure 2: Detail of an 18th century Flemish Goose Game showing the game played on a barrel-head in a low-life tavern – the four poster bed suggests that other pleasures are available!

to take on a new significance – a game of human life, where the geese represent advancement through spiritual guidance and the various hazards represent the obstacles and errors we encounter. In harmony with that, the ruling number of the game is nine (the spacing of the geese) – three times three, or the Trinity of Trinities, this being the medieval number of spiritual advancement in Christian thought.

Maybe it was these considerations that led Federico de' Medici of Florence to send the game as a present to Philip II of Spain at the end of the sixteenth century – both of these royal princes were keenly interested in numerology.

The game spread through Europe at about that time. It came to England in 1597, when John Wolfe, Printer to the City of London, registered it at Stationers Hall. That game is lost but English games do survive from about 1660 – interestingly, the one in the Morgan Library, New York, has the same two men enjoying their drinks at the end of the track. There are other English versions that emphasize low-life aspects in their decoration. However, one French version, obviously derived from medieval images, uses a very different track-end decoration – a bird feeding its young, which could very well represent the Christian symbol of the “Pelican in her Piety” as Divine Love (figure 3). But probably by the end of the 17th century the original symbolic aspects of the game were being forgotten, as the Age of Reason displaced medieval thought.

The Game of the Goose, in its basic form, does come to America, but not until the middle of the nineteenth century, and then in versions traceable to English models. One such is the game registered in 1855 by Mary D. Carroll, of Providence, Rhode Island, in which the track-end decoration (figure 4) is a delightful representation of the American dream, a country paradise with bees

buzzing contentedly on a lazy summer's day. However, the basic Goose game, for all its popularity in Europe, never took hold in America.

The main contribution of Goose to American games comes by a different pathway. The story begins in France during the middle of the seventeenth century, when thematic variants were developed using the basic Goose game more or less closely as a template. These games were initially designed to help educate the “cadet” class, the male children of French aristocrats, in the basics of Geography, History, the Arts of War, Heraldry, and so on. Spiritual, moral and social education was not forgotten, and some games were designed for the education of young women. Later, such thematic games would spread more widely through French society and would come to model many kinds of human activity.

An eighteenth century example is shown in figure 5. This is a 63-space game about the Navy, conveying much interesting detail about ships and sailing practice, and probably intended to stimulate recruitment. But its fascination derives from its being a Goose game in all but name – instead of the favorable geese, we now have favorable winds, the prison becomes seizure by pirates, while death is now a shipwreck, with the same rule of “start again.”

Another way of varying the Goose game is to change the track length. This was done in the game of human life published by the Paris firm of Crépy in 1775, when the



Figure 3: The unusual track end decoration of an 18th century French Goose game is possibly derived from a medieval Christian image of the Pelican feeding her young, resembling that from a French Bestiary of 1450.





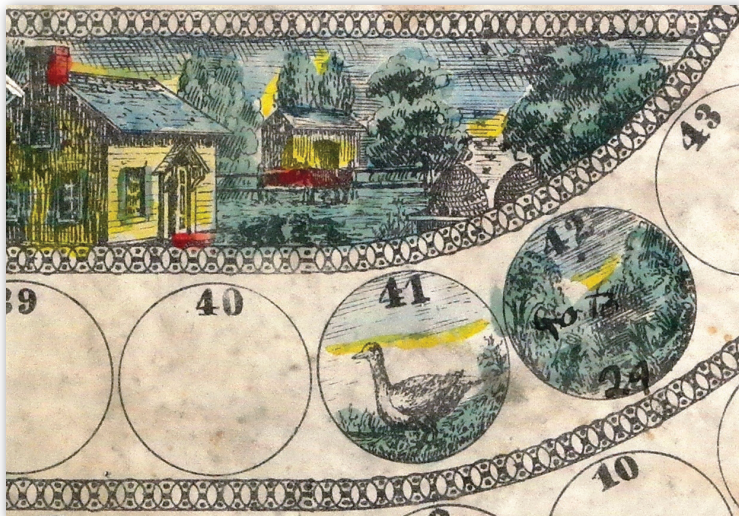


Figure 4: An American dream – track end decoration of a Goose Game registered by Mary D. Carroll in Providence, Rhode Island in 1855.

track length was extended to 84, to represent the Seven Ages of Man. Now, the throw-doubling geese become the “age” spaces, on 12, 24, 36 etc. This game has particular significance in our story, because it was copied by John Wallis and Elizabeth Newbery in their *New Game of Human Life*, published in London in 1790 (figure 6). To make it more suitable for an English audience, some changes were made in the human figures represented – for example, on the winning space, the “Immortal Man,” Voltaire was replaced by Sir Isaac Newton. However, the

design and structure of the game were unaltered. This was a popular and influential game, setting the moral tone for a whole range of the English games that followed in the nineteenth century.

One such was the *Mansion of Happiness*, first published by the London firm of Laurie and Whittle in 1800. The inventor is given as George Fox W. M. (presumably worshipful master of a Masonic lodge). The importance of this game is that it was picked up almost half a century later when in 1843 the Ives brothers, of Salem, Massachusetts, introduced it to America, with only minor variations to improve its playing qualities. This was long thought to be the first American roll-and-move race game and (though a couple of obscure map-based games are now known to pre-date it) it is of unquestionable significance in the history of games in the United States.

Although it does not have the throw-doubling spaces of *Goose*, it uses a similar idea. If you land on any of the virtues of Piety, Honesty, Temperance, Gratitude, etc. you may advance 6 numbers towards the Mansion of Happiness, which is shown as a garden paradise at the central winning space. However, if you land on Audacity, Cruelty, Immodesty or Ingratitude, you “must not even think of Happiness and must return to [your] former situation” – i.e. miss your turn. There are two “prison” spaces, one being called the “house of correction.” Here you are sent for various “crimes,” being sentenced to a



Figure 5: Detail of a game of the French Navy, originally published in the 18th century. It re-interprets the Game of Goose using the naval theme – for example, space 36 (a following wind) acts like a throw-doubling Goose space.





Figure 6: Detail of *The New Game of Human Life*, published in London in 1790. This reinterprets the Goose Game as the Seven Ages of Man.

certain number of months (i.e., losing that number of turns). However, reminiscent of *Goose*, if another is sent there for the same crime, you are released early and that player takes your place. It is a highly moral game – indeed, if you land on the Summit of Dissipation you *must* (the italics are in the rules!) go to Ruin (figure 7).

Once the medieval symbolism is forgotten, the Game of the Goose becomes just a trivial game, albeit a cleverly constructed one, in which excitement is never allowed to flag. All players of dice-based race games suffer from frustration near the end of the track, when an exact throw is needed to win. But *Goose* turns this to good effect, by a rule which says that overthrows are to be counted backwards – which brings the death space in range. The mechanics of *Goose* are about as good as it gets in a roll-and-move game.

It is perhaps not surprising then that *Goose* has spawned so many variants over the centuries. Education, politics, satire, advertising – you name the subject,

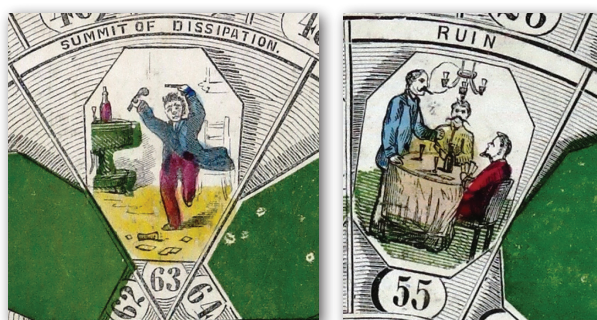


Figure 7: Details from *The Mansion of Happiness*, a moral game originally published by W. & S. B. Ives, Salem, Massachusetts, in 1843 - this edition S. B. Ives, 1864.

there is a game to suit. A favorite is the German game shown in figure 8, dating from around 1900 and advertising *Steckenpferde* (Hobbyhorse) brand of complexion soap. Pictures of washing with this soap carry you forward and the winning space at 100 shows the bar of soap in question. But just near the end, at space 98, a woman of – shall we say – mature years recoils from her image in the mirror. She has been using the wrong soap and must start again. In these games, *death* comes in many guises!

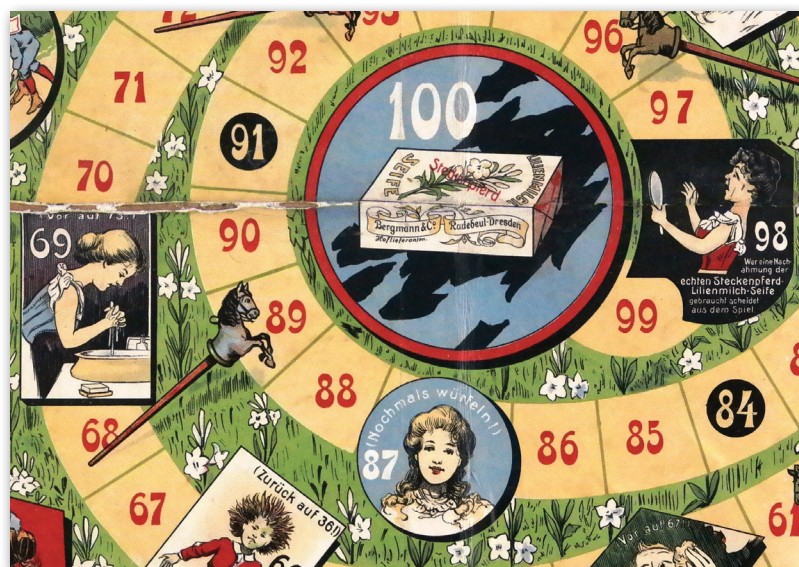


Figure 8: Detail from a German game from around 1900 advertising a complexion soap – the lady at space 98 has been using the wrong brand and must start again!

## Adrian Seville

studied Physics at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, moving on to a Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh before joining the academic staff of City University, London. In mid-career, he moved into management of the university as Academic Registrar. Following early retirement, he has concentrated on the study of printed board games, giving presentations in Europe and in America. He has lectured at the School of Advanced Study of the University of London and has advised the Bodleian Library (John Johnson Collection), the Rothschild (National Trust) Collection at Waddesdon Manor, and contributed to a study day at the Cluny Museum (Paris). A public exhibition of games from Dr. Seville's collection will be held at the Grolier Club of New York, 47 E 60th St, New York, NY 10065, from February 23 to April 30, 2016.

