

Collecting the 'ephemera of ephemera' relating to printed board games

*Great fleas have lesser fleas upon their back to bite 'em
And little fleas have lesser fleas, and so ad infinitum.*

William de Morgan, after Jonathan Swift

AN ALTERNATIVE WAY TO COLLECT EPHEMERA

Anyone wishing to start a collection of ephemera representative of one of the established fields will speedily find that there are three big problems. First, there is nothing much available to collect. Second, anything old or interesting that does come on the market will be expensive. Third, even for good money, it may be impossible to buy from a dealer. Asking for advice, the aspiring collector will be told: 'Too late! I wouldn't start from here, if I were you.' Trade cards, printed board games, playing cards, commercial catalogues, theatre programmes ... the best stuff is already in museums, which have at last woken up to the appeal and usefulness of this material once it is digitised, or in the hands of private collectors who started long ago. In such a market, a dealer will often prefer to sell the rarest examples to a long-established customer, in order to preserve a beneficial relationship. However, in some of these collecting fields there may be an interesting alternative – collecting the 'ephemera of ephemera'. In other words, why not collect the elusive bits of paper that are connected with, but not part of, one of the main fields? As examples, this article explores the possibilities of collecting these peripheral things in the field of printed board games, and briefly discusses the extension to playing cards and other fields.

SIGNIFICANT COLLECTIONS

To make a significant collection of printed board games, such as the Game of the Goose [Adrian Seville and John Spear, 'The Game of the Goose in England – a tradition lost', *The Ephemerist* 151 (Winter 2010) pp. 8–14], is becoming difficult. A good example of a 'significant' collection is that assembled by the discerning Lady Charlotte Schreiber, now held in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. Lady Charlotte (19 May 1812 – 15 January 1895) was a splendid example of achievement in the Victorian era. Not only was she a prodigious collector but (as Lady Charlotte Guest) she was renowned for her literary achievements, notably in translating the Mabinogion from the Middle Welsh; and, when her first husband, John Guest, died in 1853, she successfully managed

his iron works in Wales until her marriage to Charles Schreiber MP in 1855. She is remembered for her fine porcelain collection, now in the V & A; also for her collections of playing cards and of fans, both now in the British Museum. As might be expected from such a collector, the collection of printed board games that she assembled late in her life contains some astonishing and unique examples of Italian material from the late 1500s and continues with some of the most beautiful French and German games. Or consider with awe the late Paul Dietsch [died 2000] whose collection of 2500 games now forms the basis of the *Musée du jeu de l'oie* in Rambouillet, near Paris. Compared with these monumental achievements, a collection of the ephemera associated with board games may seem small beer but, while being made at quite modest cost, could be intriguing, useful, and challenging to assemble.

IMAGES OF PLAY

The definition of 'ephemera of ephemera' in this case would mean that anything intended primarily to be played as a board game would be excluded – but this exclusion leaves open a wide variety of opportunities for the collector. An obvious starting point would be to seek out images of the games themselves being played. There are a number of genre paintings that show this, though the originals (or modern reproductions of them) would not ordinarily be classed as ephemera. But might not a vintage postcard showing Chardin's famous painting come into the right category? [fig. 1]



1. Postcard of an engraving of 1745 by Pierre Louis Surugue, after Chardin's *Le Jeu de L'Oye*, 90 x 140 mm.



2. Postcard of 1903 produced in phototype by A. Bergeret and company, Nancy, 85 x 140 mm.

Another postcard, clearly dated 1903, shows a very fashionable young lady using a dice shaker [fig. 2]. The amorous verse seems to suggest that playing the game can lead to an easy familiarity between lovers in France, such that they may even start to address each other in the second person singular! As usual at this period, the message from the sender – much more formal than the verse – is written on the front.

Then, there are some delightful advertising cards (*cartes réclames*) showing children playing the *jeu de l'oie*: in figure 3, the cry is, '*Dans le puits!*' – 'In the well' – where you stay until 'rescued' by your opponent, who must take your place. These were printed as advertising blanks, leaving space on the back for the advertiser's message. This particular example has a wonderful advertisement for Royal Windsor hair regenerator, which holds nothing back in its claims. These cards

were chromolithographed, probably by the Paris firm of Lessertiseux (at the address *pass. Du Caire C8 and 111*) and were used by a variety of upmarket retailers, not just in France. The *jeu de l'oie* is only one of (probably) twelve different games in the series of these cards, all of which show two young children playing an indoor game together, with a characteristic cry of despair or triumph.

Another, much longer, series of 78 children's games, including the *jeu de l'oie*, was produced by the Paris *chocolatiers* Guérin-Boutron. These have a brief description of each game on the back, together with a standard advertisement for the firm. They were printed by Hérald et Compagnie, in Paris.

An interesting image of the game – not actually being played but certainly available for use – occurs in one of Laurie and Whittle's 'quarto drolls' (1804). It depicts an inn where a stereotypical Irishman is being offered a choice of meats, which he then steals. Hanging on the wall is a framed example of a Goose Game, recalling the reference to such a game in Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The deserted village*:

The pictures placed for ornament and use,
The twelve good rules,
The royal game of goose.

[The twelve good rules are those for the conduct of life, attributed to Charles II]. The artist has drawn the track of the game as a set of concentric circles, rather than the proper spiral: such inaccuracies are all too common in the depiction of board games.



3a. Chromolithographed advertising card, heightened in gold colour, showing children playing the *jeu de l'oie*, 75 x 115 mm.

3b. Back of the same card, showing forceful advertising for Royal Windsor hair regenerator.





4. *Knavish Pat*, one of Laurie and Whittle's 'quarto drolls', 1804. A Game of the Goose hangs on the wall, 197 x 250 mm. © Trustees of the British Museum.

These very various examples make the point that the Game of Goose was played in widely diverse social circles and by a wide range of ages – something not directly evident from the games themselves, and therefore illustrating the contribution that a study of such ephemera can make to knowledge in the field.

GAME OR GRAPHIC?

The spiral track of the traditional goose game is so well known that it is tempting to regard every similar graphic arrangement as representing a dice game. But consider the little card shown in figure 5, being the reverse side of a pocket calendar for 1987 produced for Cafés Rasset in Angoulême, France. Not big enough to be a playable game, and not intended as such, this card explains the road signs and also the so-called *numéros minéralogiques*: these were in fact department codes, used between 1950 and 2009 for the last two digits on



5: The reverse side of a pocket calendar for 1987. This is not a game but simply a spiral design showing the road signs and listing the then current licence plate codes in the centre (110 x 310 mm, folding to 110 x 76 mm).

French motor vehicle licence plates, which were originally issued by the Mining Service – hence the name.

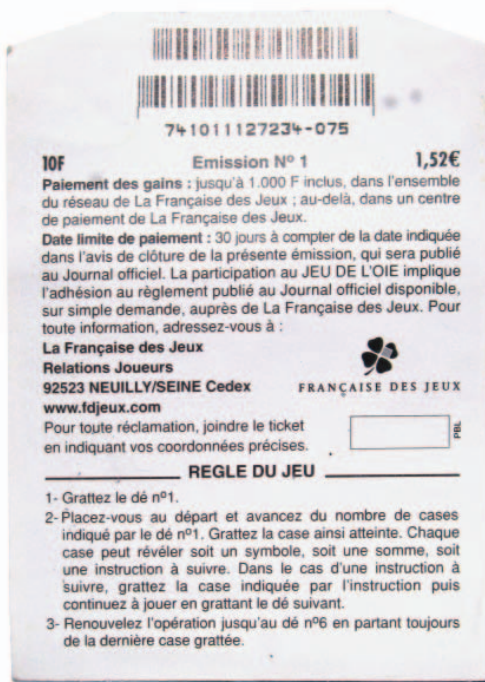
Another example of the spiral track motif being used, but not for playing a Goose Game, is shown in figure 6, this being a scratch-card lottery ticket, where the Game's modern association with harmless children's play makes a comforting symbol for a less-safe way of enjoyment. The idea of a race game has been cleverly adapted to the scratch-card environment.

Such productions fit easily in the 'ephemera of ephemera' definition. Their study can give an insight into how the parent game from which the symbol derives was viewed in various cultures at different times.

ADVERTISING SHEETS

A decision would be needed, though, on whether to include advertising sheets that *were* playable as a game – probably not, for though their primary purpose was (and is) advertisement and they are hardly ever played in reality, they are collected as games in their own right: there are literally thousands of them, mostly from the Netherlands, many hundreds being included in Fred Horn's collection in the Flemish Games Archive at KHBO, Bruges.

One would, though, wish to include sheets that, though they contained advertising, had a different primary use. The Game of the Goose has strong associations with good food. The early Italian popular prints of the game often show in the centre space a goose being hunted or eaten, though the goose in the game is properly meant to be a symbol of good fortune. This may explain why cheaply-printed games are featured to the present day as paper place mats in restaurants in continental Europe [fig. 7].



6: French scratch card lottery ticket, using the Game of Goose as a graphic symbol (105 x 77 mm).



7. A disposable paper place mat used in the 1990s in the Netherlands rail station restaurants, copied from an early twentieth century railway race game (270 x 415 mm).

Similarly, the Liberty Tree Tavern, a restaurant in Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom theme park, Florida, produced a children's menu card based on a (travesty of!) the 'Game of Goofe', the long esses apparently intended to give an authentic period flavor: 'Squire Goofe hath runneth out of flour for his bread. Ye must help him to get to the mill so that he may haveth more'. This was intended as a popular diversion while waiting for one's Yankee Doodle Noodles or Paul Revere Chicken Strips.

ADVERTISEMENTS FOR THE GAME

On the other hand, illustrated advertisements for printed games are certainly within the scope of the definition. The high quality games produced in Paris from the seventeenth century onwards were made by up-market map-makers, such as the de Fer family, who could do the fine engraving and printing of the large-format copper sheets used in the process. Illustrated trade cards from this era that promote games are known but are avidly collected and therefore expensive. Advertisement of printed games in England was largely via what we would now call 'small ads' in the newspapers and journals of the day. Whatever the fascination

of such text-based advertisements, they perhaps do not justify inclusion in an ephemera collection strictly defined. However, where the advertisements include images, the temptation to include them is strong. For example, figure 8 shows a visually interesting advertisement for the *Jeu de Lois* (Game of Laws). The game was originally issued by the French magazine *Le Charivari* as a *feuilleton* on 6 January 1872. A more permanent production could be ordered, with prices as stated. The game itself is a satire against the Second Republic, denouncing the deprivation of freedom, the increase of clericalism, the corruption of morals, and the aggrandisement of political power. [Alain R Girard and Claude Quétel: *L' Histoire de France racontée par le jeu de l'oie* (Paris: Balland Massin, 1982) p. 126; pl. 70]. The reduction in size of the game image from double folio to 105 x 137 mm for the purposes of the advertisement was done with remarkable fidelity by the firm of Ives and Barret.

P. Thibaud et Cie, a major French toilet-articles company affiliated with Gibbs, the English toiletries

and toothpaste company, used a similar approach when offering a goose game to promote Gibbs products: the game appeared on a full page of the *Paris Echo* on 17 December 1925, with a coloured version on card available by post for 2 francs.

Commercial advertising of children's games is another aspect. Figure 9 shows a detail from the Gamage's Christmas Bazaar catalogue of 1913, offering a very superior class of boxed game at 5s 11d, complete with geese. The initials J. W. S. & S. identify it as a production of J.W. Spear & Söhne of Bavaria, a Nuremberg firm of toy makers that had a strong English market and would later (1932) establish a subsidiary factory in Enfield [Helmut Schwarz and Marion Faber, *Games we play – history of J.W. Spear and Sons*, Nuremberg Toy Museum, 1997].

The advertisements so far mentioned are concerned with the primary sale of the games. But also of interest are early catalogues of book and print dealers in which printed games are advertised for sale as antiquarian



8. (above) Advertisement for the *Jeu des Lois*, Musée du Charivari, Paris, 1872 (120 x 265 mm).

9. Detail from Gamage's Christmas Bazaar catalogue of 1913, offering a Game of Goose by J W Spear & Söhne of Bavaria (facsimile reprint, David and Charles 1974)

items when the late nineteenth century vogue for collecting began.

A systematic study of advertisements for printed games in various contexts, including a keyword-linked image data base as well as searchable text, would indeed be a useful project.

USING PERIPHERAL MATERIAL TO ILLUMINATE THE HISTORY OF BOARD GAMES

The study of the history of printed board games is in one sense easy: a good many games survive, though we do not know how many have been lost. A (very) few of them are dated. More of them have rules included in the sheet. For some others, rules can be found in books such as De La Marinière's *Maison académique*, first published in 1654, and the various *Académies des jeux*. But what these sources lack is any indication of the social context – who played these games, under what circumstances, with what enjoyment? Contemporary accounts of the actual playing of games are sporadic and hard to find. For example, regarding the young Louis XIII (1601–43), we know from the obsessively-detailed *Journal* of his personal physician, Jean Héroard, that he played the *Jeu de l'Oye* in 1612 and again in 1628 during the siege of La Rochelle. We know that Napoleon as an adult played this childish game from choice and with lively spirit, from an account by the French dramatist and poet Antoine-Vincent Arnault (1766–1834) [Souvenirs, III, 295]. But these are mere flashes of illumination in the dark.

The printing history and commerce of these games is a little less obscure. Where the publisher is identified or identifiable, a link into general printing history is possible – few if any publishers produced *only* printed board games. Occasionally, the records of a particular printer/publisher survive, for example as an inventory of stock when the business changed hands, and this may list a quantity of games. But to extrapolate from these few sources is not without risk.

The ephemera collector whose inclination is towards research can help in many ways. Advertisements in journals and newspapers are of great use in the dating of games and can indicate the target audience or even the social aims of the publisher. Printers' lists are likewise valuable and sometimes are found as an extra page in an ephemeral rule book. Diaries that record the playing of a game may be an additional source. Invoices, catalogues and legal deposits may provide others. Edward Copisarow presented a ground-breaking paper to the 2010 Board Game Studies Colloquium in Paris, where he explained the usefulness of national archive material in determining chronologies for board game collectors:

Collectors of Victorian and Edwardian English games wishing to discover an inventor or a date have a number of resources available to them beyond the objects themselves and what can be gleaned from books of the period. The main such sources are copyright registers, design registry records, patent office applications, trademark journals and the catalogues of the copyright libraries.

His paper [*Chronologies using British 19th-century Intellectual Property records: Agon, Ludo and Reversi*. A CD of the Proceedings is in preparation] gave an overview of the main places to look for such registrations, with examples of what can be discovered and what pitfalls can be encountered, and indicated how this archive material can be supplemented from ephemera sources such as advertisements and magazine articles.

In other welcome developments, Julie Anne Lambert, Librarian of the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, is constantly alerting us to new ephemera resources in her blog (<http://ephemeraresources.blogspot.co.uk>) while Dr Richard Stevens at the University of York publishes a large and diverse group of sources online at 'The art world in Britain 1660 to 1735' (<http://artworld.york.ac.uk/home.jsp>) comprising inventories, wills, sale catalogues, letters, invoices and receipts, legal papers, travel diaries and lives of painters.

So, with all these resources at hand, what need is there nowadays to make a collection of ephemera?

COLLECTION OR RESEARCH RESOURCE?

There is an obvious overlap between collections and research resources and indeed many private collectors now have sophisticated web sites to allow others access to images and information. But for most collectors, the driving force remains the satisfaction of bringing together an attractive and significant assembly of material, which together exceeds in importance the sum of its parts. A collection of the ephemera relating to printed games meets this test in a number of ways: the images build up an overview of how games were used in different cultures and different times; the use of the images in non-games contexts can provide an indication of how the games were perceived more generally; and their use in advertising can provide a useful parallel strand to text-based studies of printing history. And, yes, such a collection would be attractive!

ANOTHER FIELD OF EPHEMERA: PLAYING CARDS

As a second example of the ideas set out in this article, consider playing cards. Images of people playing at cards have a long history, with cheating and gambling having a special fascination. As with printed board games, such images are of great interest in cultural history. And cards were not just for playing with: Gejus van Diggele has made a special study of the secondary uses of playing cards. Here he gives just a few of his many examples:

They were used as simple labels, but also for announcements of weddings or funerals, emergency money, i.o.u.'s; for music notation, but also as an aid for p.o.w.'s to escape from German prison camps during WWII; for household use as a spool or a box, but also to leave a mother's cry of despair with the baby that was left at the orphanage or convent. [<http://www.dxpo-playingcards.com/xpo/2nduse.htm>]

There are of course many advertising playing cards, which are certainly collected as main-field ephemera. But, as with the spiral of the Goose Game, the universality of the images of the standard pack is so strong that they are frequently used for advertising in other formats. Collecting every advertisement with (say) a heart or a diamond in it would be overwhelmingly dull, but there are many examples where an image of the playing card itself is used as a symbol and these can be fun. For example, the makers of sewing thread, VF (Verstraete Frères), used a splendid image of the Queen of Spades (figure 10) on their labels back in the 1880s. More exotically, did you know that *Queen of Spades* is 'one of the fastest-growing bubble tea franchises in Taiwan'? Or that the same lady, in her German guise as *Pik Dame*, identifies a very *louche* nightclub in Frankfurt? The opportunities for ephemerists are indeed endless!

As with the peripheral material surrounding board games, similar material associated with playing cards can be used to help fix their cultural context through time.



10. The Queen of Spades used as an advertising symbol by Verstraete Frères for their sewing threads, c. 1880 (Bibliothèque municipale de Lille bibliothèque numérique 43662-621)

DISCUSSION

The wide range of collectable ephemera means that the idea of 'ephemera of ephemera' may take various forms, or may perhaps not be applicable in some fields. But it may also be that collectors in established ephemera fields have already acquired peripheral material that deserves to be re-evaluated and considered as a collection in its own right. Indeed, this may be a good way of changing the thrust of a collection, for example when collecting the main material is found to be too daunting, whether in terms of budget, availability, range or storage requirements.

The focus in this article has been on graphic material rather than on text-based material. As indicated above, text-based material is increasingly becoming available through searchable data bases, and techniques such as optical character recognition, though imperfect, help in recovery of information from scanned originals. This may mean that the incentive to collect such material is reduced. For graphic material, on the other hand, the case for collecting is still strong, though some might argue that a 'collection' of such material made up entirely of digital images would be perfectly valid.

The possibilities for rapid growth of ephemera studies as digital techniques and resources become available are favorable: in time, the ephemeral penumbra may significantly illuminate the shadows in more established lines of research.

It would be interesting to have views from collectors and researchers, especially in areas other than those briefly explored here – please send comments to Adrian.Seville@btopenworld.com.

Images not credited elsewhere are from the author's collection: none of these items cost him more than ten pounds.

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