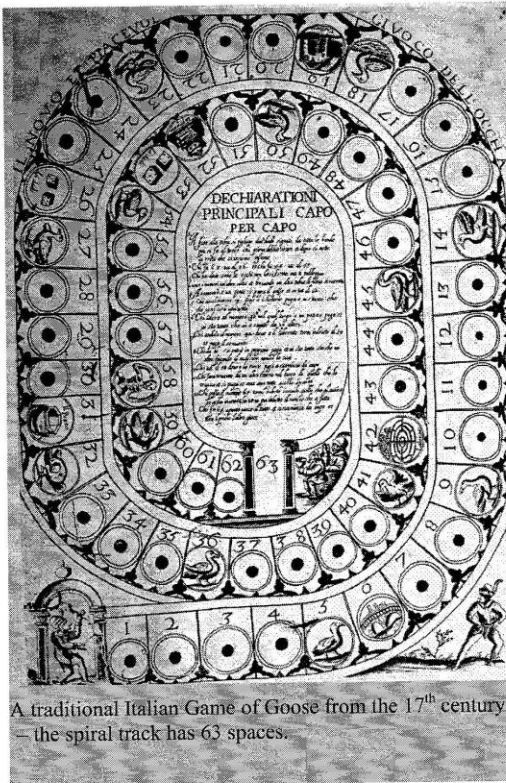


The Game of Goose – Images of America

by Adrian Seville © 2005

‘Goose? Who ya kidding?’ Nobody in America has heard of this game – and nobody much in Britain, though it was widely played there up to the end of the 18th century. You may have more luck in France, Belgium, Holland, Italy or Spain, where it is still known as a children’s game. But it once was – in its native 16th century Italy – a very serious game indeed, fit for royal attention.

It is a simple race game, played with markers and dice on a spiral track of 63 spaces. No skill required – it is all in the dice. The good spaces are marked with geese – two series of them: 5,14,23,32,41,50,59 and 9,18,27,36,45,54. When you land on a *goose*, you move forward from it by the amount of your throw. The bad spaces – where you pay to the pool – are marked *bridge*, *inn*, *well*, *labyrinth*, *prison*, *death*. The most important of these are the well and the prison, where you stay until someone arrives to get you out, and death, from where you go back to the start. It is a good game of its kind – use of double dice and the short track mean that progress is fast. The winner is the first to land on 63 – but there is an excellent end rule, that if you overthrow the 63, you count the extra points backwards. This means that instead of winning you can easily land on death, lurking at 58.



A traditional Italian Game of Goose from the 17th century – the spiral track has 63 spaces.

An exciting but mindless game – so why would Francesco dei Medici send it as a gift from Florence to Philip II of Spain, not a man for light-hearted things? The clue lies in the number ‘63’ – a cabalistic number, signifying the year of great crisis in a life: the ‘grand climacteric’. Both these powerful men were interested in numerology and in the last half of the 16th century the cabala was being joined to Christian thought – maybe to provide a numerology that would predict everything. So, this was a game of life. You could indeed play the game on your own, to see what fortune would bring – and you might even hope to influence the future.

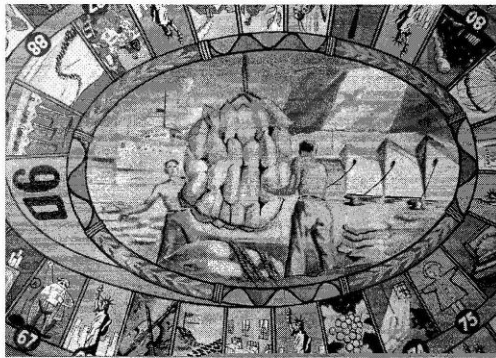
The ‘Christian cabala’ did not last – but the game did, coming to England in 1597 and spreading up from Spain into France and the Low Countries. Here, it was hugely popular and spawned innumerable variant games, some of which are still being invented. Four hundred years is too much history for a single short article – so this one concentrates on how a few of these variant games allow glimpses of America as perceived from Europe.

France was the first country to develop interesting variants of the game, beginning with a geographical game of the world, invented by cartographer Pierre Duval in 1645. This had 63 small maps arranged in the characteristic spiral, including Virginia and Florida. Later publishers developed the theme, a fine example being Basset’s Game of the Peoples and Costumes of the Four Quarters of the World, published in Paris in 1815. Here, the good (goose-number) spaces are those of the counties of Europe, with France – of course – as the winning point. California is now shown, very much in native dress. The countries for the hazard spaces are chosen with considerable wit – *death*, at 58, shows a traveller in New Zealand on the point of being eaten by cannibals, while *prison* shows slaves being taken on the Barbary coast.



The French Game of Peoples of the World shows how California seemed in 1815. The ‘death’ space shows a traveller about to be eaten in New Zealand!

These were intended as educational games – but the scope of goose variants runs much wider than this. Political and satirical games were also invented, as well as a whole genre of advertising games more or less firmly based on the original rules. Moving on to the twentieth century, from Italy we have two contrasting views of America. The first is a political game from 1950, given away free by the Christian Democrat Party, which – unlike the Communist Party – was strongly pro-USA and wanted to highlight the benefits of the Marshall Plan, or European Reconstruction Project as it was known officially. The game shows grain arriving in US liberty ships as the winning scene. The good (goose) spaces have the Statue of Liberty as their icons while the hazard spaces show such anti-social aspects as strikes, civil disobedience, and terrorist bombs. The game is decorated in one corner with an image of Christopher Columbus, paired by the traditional goose on the opposite side. Games like this had a clear propaganda message, trading on happy memories of paying the safe and familiar game of goose.



An Italian game of 1950 shows as the winning space Liberty ships unloading grain under the Marshall Plan – this was a propaganda game issued by a political party favouring links with America.

The satirical magazine *Linus* presented images and thoughts of a very different kind to Italians in 1970. This was the year of the great Lockheed scandal, where the company proved to have resorted to bribery of local officials in order to sell its planes, both in Italy and in Japan. The rising influence of America was now feared, especially on the political left. The game was caustically labelled ‘L’Ockheed’, being a clever pun on the Italian name for the goose, L’Oca. Now, the ‘good’ spaces show a CIA agent, in typical hat. The Lockheed company is shown as the source of hundreds of ‘little brown envelopes’, signifying the bribes offered.



In 1970, the Italian satirical magazine *Linus* seized on the Lockheed bribery scandal to issue a game in which the ‘goose’ spaces showed the CIA and the Company was pilloried for giving out little brown envelopes!

All these games, though they show glimpses of America, are not about America itself. For this, we have to turn to an unlikely source: a novel by Jules Verne, entitled ‘The Testament of an Eccentric’. Published in 1899, this tells the truly incredible story of an eccentric millionaire, William J Hypperbone, whose will – the ‘testament’ – provides that his considerable fortune should go to the winner of a fantastic game of goose. In this, the contestants are themselves to travel through the States and Territories of America according to the throw of dice at the office of Hypperbone’s attorney. Their adventures – incorporating much travel-book detail – are the theme of the novel. The reader has the benefit of a fold-out goose game of the United States, in which the various States and Territories are shown by their coats of arms. The correspondences with the traditional goose game are cleverly done. For example, all the goose spaces show Illinois, whose coat of arms is the American Eagle – a new meaning to being sound upon the goose! New York is chosen for the bridge, at 6, for obvious reasons. The death space at 58, shows California: a trip to Death Valley is in prospect. Finally, the winning space at 63 again shows Illinois – the attorney’s office, where the game ends, is in Chicago.



The Noble Game of the United States of America was the theme of a novel by Jules Verne where the players were sent to the various States and Territories by the throw of dice. The ‘goose’ spaces show the American Eagle of Illinois while Death Valley inspires the choice of California for space 58.

Perhaps it is time for America to invent its own variant of the Royal and Pleasant Game of the Goose – and, in so doing, to ignore the Walt Disney version to be found on the back of the children’s menu in the Liberty Tree restaurant!

This article is based on the presentation given by Adrian to the AGPC Convention in London in April 2005. Anyone wanting to learn more about the history of the game is welcome to contact him by e-mail at Adrian.Seville@btopenworld.com