

# FROM CARDBOARD TO KEYBOARD

**Proceedings of  
Board Games Studies Colloquium XVII**

*Eddie Duggan & David W. J. Gill (Eds.)*

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# Board Games Studies Colloquium XVII

## Contents

Introduction.....	1
<i>Eddie Duggan</i>	
The use of a combination of X-ray computerised tomography, computer modelling and 3D printing in the study, repair and manufacture of gaming pieces.....	3
<i>Duncan Bell, Steven Laycock, David Mortimore, Daniel Emmens, Mark Greco, Nick Corps, Irving Finkel, Eddie Duggan and Danielle Taylor</i>	
Is there enough space for board games nowadays? .....	35
<i>Mauricio de Araujo Lima, Gisle Ramos, Raquel Salomão Utsch de Carvalho</i>	
Contamination, or borders to overcome: the new board games paradigm.....	49
<i>Cosimo Cardellicchio</i>	
Games and education: applying Roman ideas to the modern classroom .	61
<i>Christopher S. Dobbs</i>	
Strange Games: some Iron Age examples of a four-player board game...	77
<i>Eddie Duggan</i>	
From the Po to Essex: board games and the symposium.....	103
<i>David W. J. Gill</i>	
The Medieval Game of the Goose: philosophy, numerology and symbolism.....	115
<i>Adrian Seville</i>	
Dated, double-sided game boards for merels and 100 squares draughts in The Netherlands.....	137
<i>Wim van Mourik</i>	
List of participants and abstracts.....	203
Schedule of the Colloquium .....	229

# THE MEDIEVAL GAME OF THE GOOSE: PHILOSOPHY, NUMEROLOGY AND SYMBOLISM

*Adrian Seville\**

## Abstract

Simple race games, played with dice and without choice of move, are known from antiquity. In the late sixteenth century, specific examples of this class of game emerged from Italy and, assisted by the medium of printing, spread rapidly into other countries of Europe. Pre-eminent among these was the Game of the Goose, which was to spawn thousands of variants over the succeeding centuries to the present day, including educational, polemical and promotional versions mirroring many aspects of human life.

The presentation will deal with the early history of these games, concentrating on their philosophical background, numerology and symbolism. A significant strand is the Neoplatonist philosophy founded in the late fifteenth century by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola at the Court of the Medici. It was from that Court that Francesco was later to send the Goose game as a gift to Philip II of Spain. Both the numerology and the symbolism of the game would have been of interest to Francesco - and to Philip. The winning number of the track is sixty three, the "Grand Climacteric", representing the main crisis year of human life, beyond which there is peace and wisdom. The spacing of the geese by nine (the "trinity of trinities") suggests that the game, as these Princes would have perceived it, was concerned with spiritual advancement. In accordance with this interpretation, the hazards are easily identified as symbolising obstacles to such advancement; and their placement on the track is of cabalistic numerological significance. Indeed, there is evidence that the version of the Cabala that animates the game is in fact the "Christian Cabala" associated with Pico della Mirandola among others, where the hope was to make a new synthesis of knowledge.

The geese however are more problematic. They may simply represent good fortune, though a more spiritual interpretation is attractive. However, in some examples of the game, the incidental iconography

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shows that ‘winning the goose’ was just regarded as symbolising a good meal: evidence that the game was appreciated not just by royal princes but also at the level of popular culture. These games stand at an interesting juncture in the history of knowledge, looking backward to the ‘occult’ practices of the pre-Renaissance, while the careful construction of the track layout, providing a highly playable game, looks forward to the scientific understanding of chance.

## The Game of Goose—Deep meanings, or just drinking and gambling?

This paper is concerned with perhaps the most culturally influential of all printed board games: the Game of the Goose, a simple roll-and-move dice game with a spiral track of sixty three spaces, known from the late medieval era, but continuing to the present day and spawning literally thousands of variations in many countries of Europe.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite its long history<sup>2</sup> and its continuing relevance, many questions about this game remain unresolved. Did it have a deep philosophical meaning, or was it just a gambling game, often associated with drinking? Why are the favourable spaces, which double the throw, denoted by geese? Is there an underlying numerological scheme determining the placement of the geese and the positioning of the hazard spaces, notably “death” on space fifty eight?

In addressing these questions in the light of recent research, historical, iconographic and analytical techniques will be employed. However, in the end, not all questions can yet be answered fully.

## The Earliest Traces

The earliest known reference to the Game of the Goose appears in an obscure book of sermons for Advent by the Dominican Gabriele da Barletta in 1480.<sup>3</sup> He speaks (disapprovingly) of playing games at Christmas and, moreover, of the need for large and small dice, to overcome the imperfections of vision due to old age.

*Si vult venire, in domum meam in istis festis paravi plura. Si voluerit ludere ad triumphos, sunt in domo; si a tavole habeo plura tabuleria; si a locha habeo taxillos grossos et minutos.*

[If anyone comes to my house in this season, I have prepared several games. If he wishes to play at tarot, there are tarot cards in the house; if at backgammon [tavole], I have several boards; for goose I have both large

and small dice.]<sup>4</sup>

This text is paraphrased by Rabelais in the *Third Book of Pantagruel*, published in 1546, which satirically relates the use of dice by Judge Bridoye (literally “Bridlegoose” but meaning, colloquially, “nincompoop”) in reaching legal decisions: for difficult cases the judge uses dice too small to see the numbers! In fact much of the Third Book can be interpreted as an ironic Goose game.

Given this evidence of an early Italian connection, it is curious that there is no reference to the game of the Goose in the widest Italian list of games, that given by Alessandro Citolini in *La Tipocosmia*, Venice: 1561, which was slavishly reproduced by Tommaso Garzoni in *La piazza universale. . .*, Venice: 1585 and many later editions.

## The Oldest Surviving Goose Game

The oldest surviving Goose game board [Fig. 1] is that in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.<sup>5</sup> It is made of ebonised wood, elaborately inlaid with ivory, horn and gold wire in a style associated with sixteenth century Gujarat in North India. However, the numbers are in a western script consistent with Italian writing of the fifteenth century, suggesting that the board was made to an Italian design. A curious feature is that, though the board is in all other respects a classic Goose board, it lacks two of the hazards: the bridge, and the inn. The explanation for this is not clear. There are various other mysteries: the prison space is occupied by a boat in the form of a Venetian galley,<sup>6</sup> something not known in other Goose games,<sup>7</sup> though a different form of boat is sometimes found. Also, the execution of the drawings on the playing spaces is distinctly strange and crude, contrasting sharply with the meticulous workmanship of the decorative inlay, suggesting that the supposed Indian craftsman had difficulty in producing these unaccustomed shapes. On its reverse, the board is laid out for chess and (to a non-European design) for a form of backgammon.

Figure 1: The earliest known board for the Game of the Goose, in the Metropolitan Museum of New York. 430mm x 419mm x 29mm, Accession Number: 62.14 (Photograph © Adrian Seville).



## The internationalisation of Goose at the end of the sixteenth century

A welcome point of certainty is provided by a printed Goose game in the British Museum: the printer, Lucchino Gargano, has signed the plate and dated it 1598 [Fig. 2]. It is a “classic” Goose game in all respects, with characteristically Italianate decoration.<sup>8</sup>

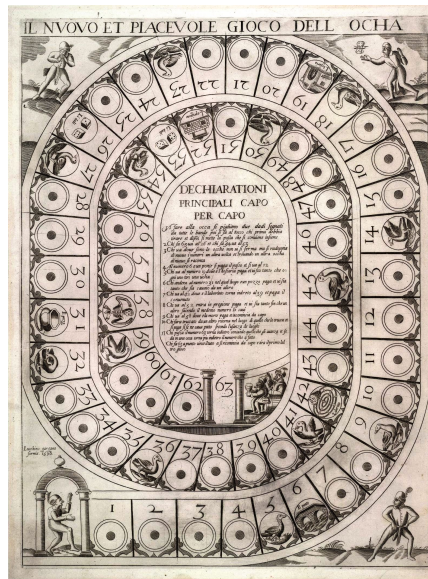


Figure 2: An early Italian Game of the Goose printed by Lucchino Gargano and dated 1598 on the plate (© Trustees of the British Museum).

Another classic Goose game [Fig. 3], this time from France, also dates to about 1598.<sup>9</sup> This has the imposing title: “*LE IEV DE L'OYE RENOUVELLE DES GRECS, IEV de grand plaisir, comme aujourdhuy Princes & grands Seigneur le practiquent.*” Publication details are given as: “*A Lyon par les heretiers de Benoist Rigaud*”. This unique surviving woodblock print, in the Herzog-August Library, Wolfenbuettel, is the prototype for the classic French *jeu de l'oie*. The title of the game claims that it is “renewed from the Greeks” and that it is “today practised by great Lords and Princes”. The first is a reference to the belief that, since the Greeks of the Iliad played games of chance, the Game of Goose could be traced to that lineage. There is no solid evidence to confirm this connection, though the claim is frequently found in French *jeux de l'oie* during the succeeding

centuries. The second claim, that the game is played by Princes and Great Lords, may be a reference to aristocratic origins (see below) or may simply be a statement of fact.

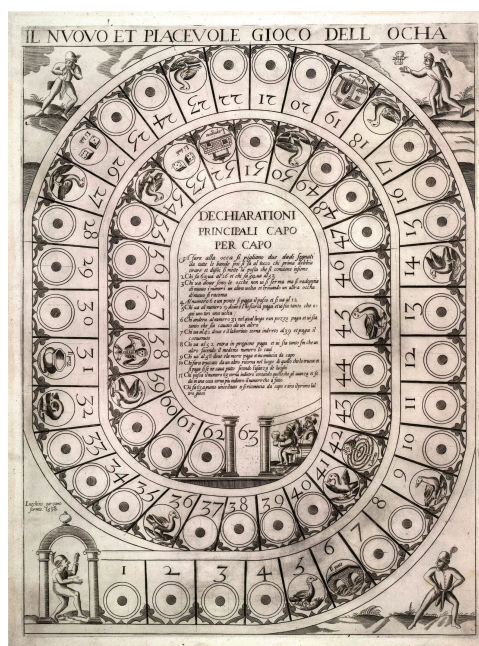


Figure 3: Detail of the oldest surviving French *jeu de loie*. Lyon: Rigaud, 1598.

Although it does not employ the goose as symbol of good luck, a game carved on stone by Michael Holzbecher for the Archduke Karl of Austria in 1598 is significant. This, *Das khurtzweilige Fortuna-Spill*,<sup>10</sup> is in fact a classic *Goose* game except for the replacement of the geese by the symbol of Fortune. An interesting point is that it is decorated with words and music of drinking songs, suggesting that this was not a game for children.<sup>11</sup>

The *Goose* game registered at Stationers Hall in London by John Wolfe in 1597 is now lost. However, elements of the Italianate iconography of the Lucchino Gargano game are found in later English *Goose* games, such as the version published by John Overton in about 1660.<sup>12</sup>

*Goose* was also sent to Spain in the 1580s, as discussed below (Section 5), adding further evidence of wide international diffusion of the game in Europe by the end of the sixteenth century.



## A Royal Gift from Italy to Spain

Pietro Carrera, writing in 1617,<sup>13</sup> gives a unique account of the origins of the game:

It is clear that intelligent men, after the first invention of something, will by adding to or modifying the basic idea, make other inventions. We know that this occurred for the Game of the Goose in the time of our fathers: this game was invented in Florence and, since it was much appreciated, Francesco de Medici, Grand-Duke of Tuscany, decided to send it to His Majesty Philip II of Spain. When it was published there, it gave occasion to certain intelligent spirits to invent other games, a little different from the original, among which was the game known under the name of the *Filosofia Cortesana* invented by Alonso de Barros of Spain.<sup>14</sup>

The credibility of this is much enhanced by the fact that de Barros' game does exist,<sup>15</sup> as does its rule book:<sup>16</sup> it is a 63-space spiral game obviously derived from Goose but having as its theme the progress of a Courtier in his career, as further discussed below. The game sheet is dated 1588 and was published in Naples: the engraved lettering is in Italian and Spanish.

Though Carrera does not give the date of invention of the Goose game itself, it has often been assumed that he is referring literally to the immediately previous generation, implying a late sixteenth century date; this interpretation is negated by the evidence cited above of the game being known in the fifteenth century. Also, a careful reading shows that his "time of our fathers" refers to the invention of the modified game.

An important contemporary reference to the game at the court of Philip II is contained in a letter by Gonzalo de Liano to Francesco I de' Medici dated 24 August 1585. The writer (known as "Gonzalillo") was Philip II's court jester. He writes: "Accursed be your servant Luis Dovara, who brought along a devilish game called *Gioco dell'Oca* [the Game of the Goose], played with two dice [...] It is a game played in Tuscany and God grant that he who made it may burn, for to the Prince and the Infanta and Luis Tristan I have lost 40 scudi".<sup>17</sup>

## Philosophical Background of the Medici Court

An obvious question is why should Francesco send such a game, evidently associated with gambling for money, to Philip II, a man of serious temper-

ament not known for being interested in gaming? The answer is that both were keenly interested in numerology and symbolism. The Medici Court was a hotbed of philosophical activity in these areas, as Frances Yates observes:

Pico della Mirandola [1463-1494] belonged to the brilliant circle around the Medici court in Florence which included another famous philosopher, Marsilio Ficino [1433 - 1499]. Ficino and Pico were founders and propagators of the movement loosely known as Renaissance Neo-Platonism. [...] It was Pico who introduced Cabala into the Renaissance synthesis. And, like Ramon Lull, it was as a Christian that Pico valued Cabala.<sup>18</sup>

Although there is no evidence that either philosopher was concerned directly with the Goose game, there is evidence (below) that Ficino was keenly aware of the significance of the number sixty three, which is the goal of the game.

## The Number Sixty Three as “Grand Climacteric”

The significance of the number sixty three as representing the “Grand Climacteric” of human life is an ancient belief, traceable to early Greek philosophers. Sir Thomas Browne summarises it thus:

[T]he numbers 7 and 9 which multiplied into themselves doe make up 63 commonly esteemed the great Climactericall of our lives; for the dayes of men are usually cast up by septenaries, and every seventh yeare conceived to carry some altering character with it, either in the temper of body, minde, or both. [...] The year of sixty three is conceived to carry with it the most considerable fatality.<sup>19</sup>

By 1650, when Browne was writing, the belief in the danger of the sixty third year of life was regarded as superstitious - but in Ficino’s time it was mainstream medicine. Ficino even contributed an explanation as to why “septenaries” [seven year periods] ruled each human life:

Just as Saturn rules the babe hidden in the womb for the first month and the Moon for the last, so, as soon as he is born, now in reverse order the Moon should rule in his first year; in his second, if you will, Mercury; in the third, Venus; in the fourth, the Sun; in the fifth, Mars; in the sixth, Jupiter;

and in the seventh, Saturn; and afterwards the order should be repeated throughout life. And so in any seventh year of life there occurs a very great and therefore very dangerous change in the body, both because Saturn is alien to man in general and because then the governance returns abruptly from him, the highest of the planets, to the Moon, the lowest of the planets.<sup>20</sup>

The track length of the Goose game is thus not accidental but is of high numerological significance and indicates that the game was conceived as representing the evolution of a human life: once the Grand Climacteric was passed, peace and wisdom were to be enjoyed.

## Nine as the Ruling Number of Goose

In Goose, however, there is no evidence of septenaries - hardly surprising, given that the geese are favourable, so that we would not expect them to mark climacteric points. Instead, they are in two series, each spaced by nine. In medieval Italian thought, nine is a holy number, being an extension of the Trinity as 3x3, the Trinity of Trinities. It represents spiritual advancement as the stages through which the aspirant ascends the spiritual path: see, for example, Dante's use of the number in the Divine Plan of the *Vita Nuova*.<sup>21</sup>

## The Hazard Spaces

If the geese represent spiritual advancement, it becomes easy to see that the hazard spaces represent obstacles to that advancement. There is no contemporary interpretation giving more detail but in general terms it is clear that the *bridge* is a rite of passage, perhaps marking adulthood, the *inn* represents earthly distractions, the *well* and the *prison* mean that help of another is needed, and the *labyrinth* symbolises error; *death* is not physical death but death of the soul, requiring a fresh start.

Attempts have been made to particularise the numerology of the hazard spaces. Of these, the most promising is to use the numerical practices of the Cabala. As indicated above, the Neo-Platonist scheme of Pico did embrace the Cabala, within what was envisaged as a Christian synthesis. For example, the fifty eight of the death space can be transformed using small-values gematria as  $5 + 8$  to make 13, the "fatal" number.<sup>22</sup> However,

a complete and self-consistent treatment of all the hazard numbers has not been presented.<sup>23</sup>

Another approach to the numerology of the death space is to note that the reverse-overthrow rule means that if a throw of nine were made from space fifty eight, then the backward count beyond sixty three would arrive at space fifty nine, which is a goose space: the throw-doubling rule would then take the player back successively to spaces fifty, forty one, thirty two, twenty three, fourteen and five at which point a failure would occur since a continuation to minus four is not possible.<sup>24</sup> Apparently, the inventor of the game has cleverly removed this “bug” by making fifty eight a hazard space on which a player cannot stop but must return to the start. But a more fundamental insight is obtained by suggesting that the second series of geese are in fact placed explicitly to symbolise this “death of the soul” by providing a path for the return to the start. Iconographically, there is nothing to distinguish the two series of geese from each other. One might expect, for example, that the geese would face forward along the track in the first series but backwards in the second. Indeed, all the geese in the oldest board face backwards (and very strange birds they are!). In the other old games mentioned above, there is a mixture of forward, backward and front-on images of geese.<sup>25</sup>

The other hazards are placed as follows: bridge on space six; inn on space nineteen; well on space thirty one; *labyrinth* on space forty two; and *prison* on space fifty two. The numerical distances between these are successively 13, 12, 11 and 10 - an arrangement that is unlikely to be a matter of chance, though the progression is broken by the death space at fifty eight. In addition, there are two *dice* spaces, which mark the operation of a special rule governing an *initial* throw of nine on the double dice: a throw of 6 and 3 takes the player to space twenty six, whereas a throw of 5 and 4 takes the player to space fifty three. Absent this rule, such throws would produce an immediate win by hopping from goose to goose all the way to space sixty three. The numerology (if any) of the dice spaces is not evident.

## The Symbolism of the Geese

An obvious question, but one with no clear answer, is why geese? Certainly, geese are considered lucky in Italy and the presence of Fortune as a replacement for them in the early German game mentioned above would support their being interpreted as good-luck symbols. Against this, some commentators have argued that the iconography of the earliest popular prints of the

game suggests a material explanation: catch the goose to get a good meal. An intermediate position is that the goose symbolises “plenty” and indeed images of it as a cornucopia do exist.

However, the evidence for a symbolic interpretation is quite strong: would Francesco have sent the game to Philip if it had just been about material things? And the presence of the ruling number of nine allied to the climacteric aspect strongly indicates that the numerology is significant.

On this basis, the geese would need to symbolise spiritual advancement, presumably by divine help. If the geese were in fact pelicans (Christian symbols of divine love) this would be easy!<sup>26</sup> However, there is no evidence that pelicans are involved in the sixteenth century games, though in the eighteenth-century French game published by Letourmy shown in Fig. 4, the designer seems to have recalled the symbol of the “Pelican in her Piety” when ornamenting the final space with a bird feeding its young [Fig. 5]. Interestingly, the iconography of the spaces with playing significance is essentially the same as that found in the Rigaud game of 1598 [Fig. 3, above] which, however, has no decoration in its final space. The woodcut track in the Letourmy game is hard to date and could be much earlier than the game sheet, so it is not possible to date this occurrence of the pelican-like symbolism. It has to be remembered that the stylised iconography of the medieval pelican omitted the large bill that we associate now with its image, so confusion with the image for a goose was certainly possible.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 4: Detail of a French *jeu de l'oie* of the mid-eighteenth century, with the final image suggesting the ‘Pelican in her Piety’. Orléans: Letourmy (author’s collection).



Figure 5: Pelican feeding her young, from a twelfth century bestiary, Saint Petersburg Public Library LPL.Lat.Q.V. I N 131, f. 15.

The argument for Christian symbolism in the game receives a boost from the phrase found in the earliest surviving English versions: “Invented at the Consistory in Rome”, the Consistory being the administrative arm of the Roman Catholic Church. There is no independent evidence for this assertion, no doubt copied unthinkingly from printer to printer.<sup>28</sup> John Wolfe, the introducer of the game to England, had trained in Italy, and it may be that his game included the assertion. It does in any case conflict with the claim by Carrera mentioned above, that the game was invented in Florence.

### “Invention” of the Game of Goose

In considering such claims, one should reflect on what the term “invention” might mean for the *Game of Goose*. Single track dice games are known from antiquity: the Egyptian game of *Mehen* [Serpent] played on a spiral track of undifferentiated compartments ending in the centre (sometimes ornamented with a snake’s head), is known from about 3000 BC. Randle Holme, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, mentions an English *Game of the Snake* played on a pegged spiral track of sixty three undifferentiated holes.<sup>29</sup> So, “invention” of the *Game of Goose* must mean the production of a differentiated 63-space track with the characteristic spacing of favourable spaces and some (if not all) of the hazards. It seems unlikely that such a sophisticated game could have been invented starting with nothing more than an

undifferentiated track: intermediate stages of development therefore cannot be ruled out, though there is as yet no trace of them.

Although an Italian origin for the fully-developed Game of the Goose is indicated by all the few sources known, there is nothing to say that it could not have been developed from spiral race games from other countries. However, ingenious suggestions that the game is a representation of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, or that it derives from games of the Indian sub-continent, appear to lack foundation. The connection with spiral race games of the ancient world likewise lacks evidence of intermediate stages between a simple spiral and the full development of *Goose*.

### Over-interpretation of the Game of the Goose?

Reviewing dispassionately the material presented above, one must admit that direct evidence for a “deep” interpretation of the Game of the Goose at the end of the sixteenth century is lacking, however compelling the presence of the number sixty three may be as circumstantial evidence. By contrast, there is Gonzalillo’s clear and direct evidence that the game was used for gambling at that time. Moreover, the iconography of the Gargano game [Fig. 2], dating from that time, is quite plainly associated with drinking, as shown by the decoration of the central space. Likewise, the *Fortuna Spil*, of similar date, has drinking songs as decoration and a “drink” space is frequently found on German Goose games of later date. The earliest French *jeu de l’oie* (by Rigaud, 1598, see Section 4, above) has no decorative iconography and thus provides no evidence one way or the other.

In these circumstances, it is natural to question whether looking for symbolic significance in the Goose game risks over-interpretation. However, support for a “deep” interpretation of such games is to be found in another 63-space spiral race game of similar date: the *Royal Game of Cupid*. The text printed on the face of this game makes it abundantly clear that numerology and symbolism are crucial to understanding games of this kind in the pre-modern age.

### The Royal Game of Cupid

The earliest known version of the Royal Game of Cupid survives only in a unique print [Figs 6a and 6b], made in the rue Montorgueil in Paris, famous for its woodblock images of popular religious subjects during the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>30</sup> No examples of printed games from this source



Figure 6: Details of the *Jeu Royal de Cupidon*, emphasizing the importance of 7 as ruling number of the game. Paris: Veuve Petit, rue Montorgueil, c. 1640 but from an earlier woodblock (author's collection).

had come to light until, in 2009, three games, all bearing the imprint of the widow of Charles Petit, appeared together at auction in Paris.<sup>31</sup> This Game of Cupid was one; the others were a *Game of the Owl* and a *Game of War*, with the latter two now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Their provenance was the library of the Chateau de Balthazar, near Caen.

In the *Game of Cupid*, the track arrangement is based upon the number seven, rather than on the number nine as in *Goose*.<sup>32</sup> Thus the favourable spaces—each bearing the image of Love as a winged Cupid—occur on spaces seven, fourteen, twenty one... up to the winning space at sixty three. That space depicts a formal walled "Garden of Love", in which wandering couples are targeted by the arrows of Cupid from on high. The Cupid spaces act like the doubling spaces of *Goose*.

The hazards are reminiscent of *Goose*:

- Space 5: the Bridge of Love - go on to space 12 and pay tribute to Cupid.
- Space 18: the Throne of Love - pay the feudal dues and render faith and homage to Cupid; and to learn his mysteries, stay there until each player has played twice.
- Space 30: the Fountain - pay, and stay until released by another player.
- Space 38: the Banquet - pay, and stay until each player has played once.
- Space 46: the Labyrinth - pay, and return to space 23.
- Space 54: the Forest - pay, and stay until freed by another.
- Space 59: the Tomb - pay and return to the start.



The winning space must be reached exactly, with reverse overthrows as in Goose. The rule for being hit by another is also as in Goose: pay and change places. However, the text on the game says: “because the number 7 is favourable to the game,” if a player is hit by another with a throw of seven, there is nothing to pay. Likewise, if any of the hazards are reached by a throw of seven, there is nothing to pay but the throw is redoubled.

The iconography of the game includes a remarkable decorative scheme for the non-essential spaces, a stylized open landscape with an undulating horizon that runs from space to space. The central space represents the *Hortus conclusus* [Enclosed Garden], where the cultivated landscape contrasts with the wilderness outside the walls. Apparently, medieval man preferred a contained or internalized world. The garden is also a symbol of virginity.<sup>33</sup>

The numerology of this game is equally significant. The text says that the number seven, “favourable and privileged in the game,” is chosen as being pleasant to Love “because it is very perfect”. The number represents the union three (signifying the masculine) and four (signifying the feminine) to produce a “holy” number, highly significant in Christian religious symbolism.<sup>34</sup> The game shares with *Goose* the track length of sixty three spaces and the significance of that number in symbolizing the ultimate crux in a human life.

A remaining puzzle is the interpretation of the serpent motif. The text explains:

*It is to be noted that this game is presented in the form of a Serpent, because Love in the guise of a Serpent slides into the hearts of those whom he possesses and poisons them with venom; and for several other good reasons which shortage of space on this sheet prevents explanation here.*<sup>35</sup>

The presence of Cupid makes clear that the subject is Love as Eros, not in any other form. It would be relatively easy to explain the representation of Love as a Serpent within the courtly love tradition, worming its way into the heart, thus creating a dramatic tension between the pleasures and the pains of love; but the description of Love as poisoning hearts with venom seems somewhat strong for this interpretation. It is more likely that the reference is to the Serpent in the Garden of Eden: a standard medieval identification is to regard the Serpent as representing temptation by a female - see for example Michelangelo's *Fall and Expulsion of Adam and Eve*, 1510 in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome, or the woodcut by Steffen Arndes in the *Hortus sanitatis* (Lübeck: 1492).

The Cupid game thus presents a wealth of symbolism and numerology, at the same level as, but distinct from, the “deep” interpretation suggested above for the Game of the Goose.

## The *Filosofia cortesana* of Alonso de Barros

The *Filosofia cortesana* of Alonso de Barros, mentioned by Carrera as resulting from Francesco’s gift of a Goose Game (see Section 5 above), is of interest in being a distinctly serious game, associated with the Court of Philip II.<sup>36</sup> A couple of (translated) extracts from the accompanying booklet will make clear its subject matter and moral attitude:

*I represent here a discourse about ambitious men, with the most common means, which are Liberality, Adulation, Diligence, Work.*

*[T]here are the risks of oblivion and ‘what will they say’, false friendship, changing ministers, death of the helper and misused fortune, what will others think, and poverty. Going through some of those, you sometimes get to the palm-tree of your desire, but not without a price.*

In this 63-space game [Fig. 7], the “goose” spaces are replaced by “work” spaces, each bearing a suitable moral, e.g.: “the fruit of hope comes through labour”, and indeed the “fruit” is shown hanging out of reach of two oxen toiling at the plough. The hazard spaces are not those of Goose, though there are similarities. These spaces, too, bear moral phrases, often with some acerbity, e.g. (space 26, Il Privato - the poor man): “Do not ask another to lend a hand unless your own is full.” The game sheet is full of symbolic iconography: e.g. a goose perches on a skull, blowing a trumpet from which the maxim, “Know thyself” issues in Latin. Interestingly, the decorative scheme for the non-essential spaces is a running wild landscape, recalling that of the Cupid game (Section 13, above).

This is quite evidently a serious game, intended to prompt self-analysis and reflection.

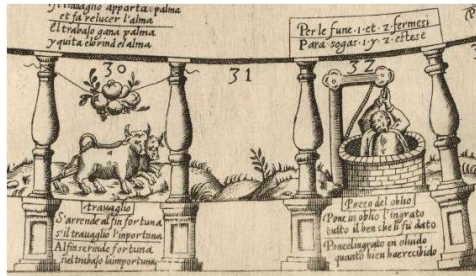


Figure 7: Detail of the *Filosofia Cortesana* of Alonso de Barros. Naples: Mario Cartaro, 1588 (© Trustees of the British Museum).

## Other Sixteenth Century Printed Games

Other than those mentioned above, very few printed games survive that can be dated confidently as being pre-1600. Of these, a number - notably *Il novo et piacevol gioco del giardin d'amore*,<sup>37</sup> by Giovanni Antonio de Paoli - are not race games at all, but are pay-or-take dice games, like the Game of the Owl.

Another game in the British Museum, *Il Piacevole Gioco dell'Oca* (the Agreeable Game of the Goose), bearing the unknown initials G.S., is indeed a Goose game, dated to the seventeenth century by its engraved decorative iconography, though the calligraphy of the numerals of the woodcut track itself looks older.<sup>38</sup> The Bertarelli Collection in Milan has an early engraved Goose game, *Il novo gioco de loca*, that from its decorative style must date from around 1600 or earlier. These two games serve to indicate that printed examples of some refinement were being produced at that time.

*Il novo bello et piacevole gioco della scimia* (the new beautiful and pleasant game of the monkey, signed by Altiero Gatti and dated 1588 on the plate) is in fact a Goose game, with the substitution of the geese by finely-etched satirical figures of monkeys in human attitudes.<sup>39</sup> Again, this is a game of refinement in both production and conception.

## Discussion

The surviving evidence is so scanty that attempting to complete a history of the medieval Game of the Goose is a matter of speculation. One can identify a daunting list of unresolved questions:

- What were the precursors of the fully-developed Game of the Goose

of the late sixteenth century?

- Is it a drinking/gambling game, or a game of spiritual life, or both?
- Does the numerology stem from Cabala or not?
- Are its philosophical roots in the fifteenth/sixteenth century Medici Court?
- Was the game indeed invented at the Consistory in Rome?
- What is the symbolism of the Geese?

Taking these questions in turn, it does appear likely that the game board in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a precursor to the fully-developed games of the late sixteenth century: the fact that two of the classic hazard spaces are blank is most easily explained in that way, bearing in mind that the scheme of hazards in early games was not as firmly fixed as that of the geese. However, it is a matter of speculation as to whether *Goose*, with its defining characteristic being the regular series of throw-doubling spaces, was derived from an undifferentiated track, or whether (more likely) there were intermediate forms of game with favourable and unfavourable spaces.

Regarding the second question, we have two contrasting pieces of evidence from Philip II's court: that the Game of the Goose was used for money gambling; and that a serious and moral game was derived from it. Probably the question of whether Goose was a "road to ruin" OR a "path to paradise" presents a false dichotomy. By the end of the sixteenth century, Goose was a mature game. It is highly likely that versions were produced for different markets, from richly decorated boards such as that in Fig. 1 to the simplest of woodcuts on flimsy paper. It is also likely that any deep moral significance would have been perceived only at the upper cultural levels, others regarding the game as just a (well-designed) vehicle for gambling. Of course, we do not know whether the Goose game stigmatised by Barletta in the late 1400s was identical to the printed versions a full century later. We do know, though, that it is very likely that the Game of the Goose was originally "invented" as a Game of Human Life, with a deep meaning - the numerology of sixty three and of the ruling number of nine is compelling evidence of that.

This interpretation is supported by Claude-François Ménéstrier, writing a century later:

*Il semble que l'on ait voulu par le jeu de l'oye, faire un système du progrès de notre vie sujette a beaucoup d'accidents et dont la 63ième année est l'année critique et climatérique, laquelle quand on peut passer il semble qu'on n'ait plus rien a craindre et que l'on peut attendre une douce vieillesse jusqu'a la décrépitude. Cette Climatérique est compose de sept fois neuf dont tous les novénaires sont marquez par la figure d'une oye. [It seems that the intention was, in the Game of the Goose, to create a system of progress through our life, subject to many hazards, where the 63rd year is the critical and climacteric year; once this has been passed, it seems that one has nothing more to fear and one can expect a pleasant old age until decrepitude. This Climacteric is made up of seven times nine, where all the groups of nine are marked with the figure of a goose.]<sup>40</sup>*

Though the interpretation of the numerology of the Grand Climacteric and of the ruling number of nine is hard to argue against, the Cabalistic interpretation of the death space, fifty eight, is less compelling. There is no contemporary example of gematria applied in that way to that number and the number is not associated with death in the general lists of symbols familiar to the Art Historian. Nor are the other hazard numbers interpretable in a similar way.

As to where the Game of the Goose was “invented”, Carrera’s clear statement of its Florentine origin, though unsupported by other evidence, is certainly consistent with the philosophical temper of the Medici Court, with its interest in symbols and numerology, including active development of the Climacteric theory. It is suspicious that the attribution to the Consistory in Rome, found only in English games, appears throughout a resolutely Protestant period of English history. Possibly it was intended to throw scorn on the Roman Catholic Church, by associating that institution with a gambling game and the pursuit of money? The winning space of these English games shows an image of a number of coins.

The symbolism of the geese continues to intrigue. The interpretation based on the pelican is entirely a speculative confection made by the present author and awaits contemporary supporting evidence before it can be taken seriously, though the fact that an eighteenth century *jeu de l'oie* shows something very like the Pelican in her Piety as the winning space means that it should not be dismissed out of hand. But could confusion really have arisen between the pelican and the goose? Their medieval images

were certainly capable of being confused, the heraldic image of the pelican lacking the characteristic pouch below the bill that we now recognise. It is also worth noting that the word *oca* in early Italian, besides its specific meaning of “(farmyard) goose”, can also apply to large web-footed birds in general, so as to include the pelican.<sup>41</sup> Against that is the fact that the pelican is such a clear Christian symbol that confusion is unlikely. The less-specific interpretation of the geese as symbolising “good luck” is of course not inconsistent with the deeper interpretation, that the good luck is a form of divine intervention.

Mysteries are heaped upon mysteries!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Adrian Seville. “Tradition and Variation in the Game of Goose”. *Board Games in Academia III*, 1999 (Proceedings of a Colloquium in Florence, edited by Niek Neuwahl). Bagno a Ripoli: privately published by the Editor, 1999. An updated version is available at [http://www.giochidelloca.it/dettaglio\\_storia.php?id=35](http://www.giochidelloca.it/dettaglio_storia.php?id=35)

<sup>2</sup>Manfred Zollinger. “Zwei Unbekannte Regeln des Gansespiels” [Two unknown sets of rules for Goose games]. *Board Game Studies*, 6. Leiden: Leiden University, 2003, pp. 61–84 (in German).

<sup>3</sup>Gabriele Bruni, da Barletta or Bareletta, called “Barletta”, probably died c. 1500.

<sup>4</sup>Thanks go to Thierry Depaulis for this transcription and translation, from the first edition, Brescia: 1497–98.

<sup>5</sup>Adrian Seville. Les mystères du Jeu de l’Oie au Metropolitan Museum de New York. Presentation (in French) for a study day at the Cluny Museum, Paris, February 2013. A summary is available online at <http://www.giochidelloca.it/storia/cluny.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>A possible explanation of the association of the Venetian galley with the prison space is given by Kathryn Hinds in *Venice and its Merchant Empire* London: Cavendish Square Publishing, 1999, p. 56. She writes: “[T]he 1500s saw the appearance of slave rowers in the republic’s galleys. Earlier, the rowers had been free men who often doubled as soldiers. When it became difficult to find free men who were willing to take the job, the rowing benches were filled with debtors and criminals.”

<sup>7</sup>A set of Goose rules in Latin appears in a manuscript by Ulisse Aldrovandis (1550/1605) in which the prison space is occupied by the “*mantica seu valisia*” (backpack, or suitcase) apparently in reference to a saying “*tu sei in valisa*” (“you are in the suitcase”, meaning: “you are in prison”) [Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, Ms. Aldrovandi 21, Miscellanea vol. II, S. 25–30 in “*De Ludis tum publicis, tum privatis methodus*”]. These rules are analysed by Manfred Zollinger [op. cit.] who points out that there is considerable flexibility in the hazard spaces of early Goose games.

<sup>8</sup>A “classic” Goose game is one that corresponds to (e.g.) the game by Gargano in having a 63-space spiral, the same hazards on corresponding spaces, geese in the same two interleaved series spaced by 9, and rules as stated in the centre, except that French games have a slightly different rule for the Labyrinth.

<sup>9</sup>Thierry Depaulis. “Sur la piste du jeu de l’oie”. Paris: *Le Vieux-Papier*, fasc. 346, October 1997.

<sup>10</sup>The Entertaining Game of Fortune, now in the Landesmuseum Johanneum in Graz, Austria.

<sup>11</sup>Manfred Zollinger op. cit.

<sup>12</sup>Adrian Seville and John Spear. "The Game of the Goose in England—a tradition lost". In: *The Ephemera*, Winter 2010. London: the Ephemera Society of London, pp. 8–14.

<sup>13</sup>Pietro Carrera, *Il gioco de gli scacchi*. Militello: per Giovanni de' Rossi da Trento, 1617, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup>Translation by the present author.

<sup>15</sup>British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1869,0410.2463.\*

<sup>16</sup>Filosofia Cortesana moralizada. - Napoles [sic], Joseph Cacchij (1588).

<sup>17</sup>Susanne Kubersky-Piredda and Salvador Salort Pons. "Travels of a Court Jester: Gonzalo de Liagno, Art Agent at the Court of King Philip II of Spain". In: *Double Agents. Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Marika Keblusek and Badeloch Vera Noldus. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011, pp. 213–232.

<sup>18</sup>Frances Yates. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. London: Routledge, 1979, reprinted 2001, pp. 17–18.

<sup>19</sup>Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia epidemica, or, Enquiries into very many received tenets, and commonly presumed truths* (London: Printed by A. Miller for Edw. Dod and Nath. Ekins, 1650), Book IV, Ch. XII. Reprinted in Charles Sayle, ed., *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, Vol. II (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1927) pp. 160–61.

<sup>20</sup>Marsilio Ficino, "De Vita", Book 2 Chap. XX, in *Three Books on Life. A critical edition and translation with introduction and notes* by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies in conjunction with the Renaissance Society of America, 1989), p. 231.

<sup>21</sup>An explanation for there being two distinct series of geese is given in the next section.

<sup>22</sup>Gematria is the Cabalistic process of giving meaning to a word by assigning numerical values to their letters, then summing to obtain a number to which significance is then attached. Summing the digits of that number to obtain further significance is called "small-values gematria."

<sup>23</sup>Jacques Duchaussoy. *Le Bestiare Divin*. Paris: Le Courier du Livre, 1972, pp. 119–123.

<sup>24</sup>This was revealed to the present author when he was building a computer simulation of Goose and found that a throw of nine from space 58, if allowed, caused the program to fail!

<sup>25</sup>From about the middle of the seventeenth century, German Goose games have a special rule whereby only forward-facing geese are favourable: backward-facing geese act as baulks.

<sup>26</sup>The symbolism of the pelican apparently dates from the second century AD and is given in the Physiologus, an anonymous collection of legends and stories about animals, plants and natural objects, written in Greek in Alexandria by an unknown author. Descriptions are followed by morals related to the Christian religion. The pelican that sheds its own blood in order to sprinkle its dead young, so that they may live again, is a "type" of the salvation of mankind by the death of Christ on the Cross.

<sup>27</sup>The pelican also was regarded as being physically very like a goose, apart from the sac below its bill. For example, the *Compendio della storia generale de' viaggi...* by de La Harpe (Rinaldo Benvenuti, 1781) says: Ha la forma, la grossezza, ed il portamento d' una grossa oca colle gambe egualmente corte. [It has the form, size and walk of a large goose, with legs just as short.]

<sup>28</sup>It may instead be that the assertion was a Protestant dig against the Roman Catholic Church, by associating that institution with a gambling game!

<sup>29</sup>Randle Holme. *The Academy of Armory*, Book III. London: The Roxburghe Club, 1905, p. 68.

<sup>30</sup>Le Ieu Royal de Cupidon, autrement appellé le passe-temps d'Amour. Paris: chez La Veufue [veuve] de Charles Petit, Rue Montorgueil, chez vn E[sp]icier deuant les trois Mores, [n.d., printed c. 1640, probably from the woodblock of Charles Petit, active 1607-36]. Woodblock with original hand color au pinceau, 40 x 52 cm.

<sup>31</sup>Thierry Depaulis, "Trois jeux imprimés du début du XVIIe siècle par la veuve Petit à Paris." *Arbeitskreis Bild Druck Papier*, Vol. 16 (Muenster: Waxmann Verlag, 2012).

<sup>32</sup>A separate question arises as to the origins of this game. Claes Jansz. Visscher produced *Het nieuw slange spel anders genaemt koninclyce tytkorting van Cupido* [the new game of the snake otherwise called the royal pastime of Cupid] in the Netherlands c. 1625, a date comparable with that of the example under discussion, but this Dutch version lacks the explanation linking Love with the ruling number of the game, suggesting strongly that it is derived from the French model, rather than the converse.

<sup>33</sup>Thanks are extended to Anne Hunt, an art historian based in Ely, England, for sharing her iconographical analysis here. With respect to the Enclosed Garden, see Song of Songs 4:12, "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, / a garden locked, a fountain sealed."

<sup>34</sup>See Udo Becker, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000).

<sup>35</sup>Translation by the present author.

<sup>36</sup>Manfred Zollinger. "Un jeu retrouvé: la fiolosofia cortesana d' Alonso de Barros." *Le Vieux Papier*, fasc. n°395. Paris: January 2010.

<sup>37</sup>British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1869,0410.2467.\*

<sup>38</sup>British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1893,0331.44

<sup>39</sup>British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1869,0410.2461.\*

<sup>40</sup>Claude-François Ménéstrier. *Bibliothèque Curieuse et Instructive*, Vol. VI. Trévoux: Imprimerie S.A.S., 1704, p. 196.

<sup>41</sup>As late as the nineteenth century, the formal taxonomic scheme used in Italy for birds included the "order" of the geese, which named the pelican as one of its genera. See, for example, the *Dizionario universale della lingua italiana, ed insieme di geografia... mitologia [Ec.]* by Carlo Antonio Vanzon [Palermo: 1842. Tipografia Demetrio Barcellona Vol. 8 (N-O) p. 701]. "Le oche formano un ordine di uccelli che tutti si trattengono sull'acqua, e possono destramente notare co'loro piedi palmate... Quest' ordine d' uccelli ha per generi il rincope, la sterna, il laro, il pellicano, il piloto, l'anitra, Io smergo, il colombo, il fetonte, la projellaria, l'alica e la diomedea." [The geese form an order of birds which all swim on water and are further distinguished by their webbed feet. This order has for its genera... the pelican... the domestic goose...]. So in common parlance the pelican might well have been regarded as "a sort of goose".