

'The Royal Game of the Goose: Four Hundred Years of Printed Board Games' Review

A winning survey of the many variations of a centuries-old game.



Edward Wallis's Royal Game of Goose, c. 1840. PHOTO: ADRIAN SEVILLE/THE GROLIER CLUB

By Edward Rothstein
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The Royal Game of the Goose: Four Hundred Years of Printed Board Games

The Grolier Club

Through May 14

Many dangers must be overcome on a long and winding road before you can claim any rewards. Along the way you might be distracted by the ribald pleasures of an inn or stumble into a deep well; you might fall prey to Poverty or be locked up in Newgate; if you travel far, you might be shipwrecked; if you are inattentive, your career might end. But if you manage to make it to the end . . . well, there might be a pot of money awaiting, or a hot-air balloon flight, a military medal, or religious salvation. Such, at any rate, are some rewards imagined over more than 400 years, as a player finally reaches space 63 of the Royal Game of the Goose.

Until I saw the mind-opening exhibition now at the Grolier Club (through May 14) I had no idea what the Royal Game of the Goose even was, let alone that it is one of the most venerable and varied board games in the world. (Next Tuesday afternoon, the Grolier will host an international colloquium about some of the game's classic competitors.) Goose may have originated in 15th-century Italy; by the 16th century it had earned so much respect that Francesco de Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, gave it as a gift to King Philip II of Spain. In both countries it is still widely played. For two centuries it was popular in England as well. And according to Adrian Seville, the exhibition's curator, who selected these examples from his own collection, it remains "part of the national psyche" in the Low Countries, where "dozens of new games" appear every year.

The original concept was so simple it became a framework for centuries of transformations. Roll two dice and move counters along a 63-space path. Land on the picture of a goose and you double your throw. Land on a hazard—such as a Bridge, an Inn, a Well or Death—and you are penalized. Each incarnation of the game altered goals and obstacles, turning the game's pre-modern sojourn into a map of grander ambitions and dangers—a portrait of a culture and its time. More than 70 examples on display from England, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain and the U.S. offer that scheme and elaborate variations. A traditional c. 1840 British version lays out the path within the outline of a goose's body but another British game from 1855 celebrates the growing empire with a tour of the nation's colonies and possessions. An early 20th-century French game champions musical pedagogy with each space offering another lesson. And in 1956, a version from the Washington, D.C. Democratic Women's Day Committee means to put a Democrat in the White House (that year, it worked only in the game). Jules Verne wrote a justly neglected novel about Goose, "The Will of an Eccentric" (1899), in which the entire U.S. became a game board.

But why a goose? Why 63 spaces? As Mr. Seville points out in the vivid catalog, in its original 15th-century form the game was numerologically suggestive. Goose images appear every nine spaces—a holy number, the Trinity of Trinities (in one instance here, the Goose image resembles the Christological symbol of the Pelican). The winning space, 63, also had a salvatory tinge. In Medieval thought, every seven years a transformation took place in human life; the age of 63, marking the ninth such milestone, possessed, as one writer said in 1650, "the most considerable fatality." It was known as the "Grand Climacteric"—a critical age in human life. Afterward, peace and wisdom might be expected—along with the right to claim the stakes in the Royal Game of the Goose.

Such associations help explain why the game might have been considered a suitable royal gift by the Medici Court. It was a representation of the religious life: an allegory. In fact, it seems to be rough ancestor to Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" (1678)—which probably should have itself been turned into a board game, as the Pilgrim proceeds through the Slough of Despond and the Valley of Humiliation, finally crossing the River of Death to reach the Celestial City.

These associations also help explain why so many of the games here are serious, even pious. Ideals are at stake. An 1855 game from Rhode Island envisions a pastoral American homestead with humming beehives. Moral education was another ambition. In an 1800 British game, "The Mansion of Happiness," the geese are virtues, the hazards vices; land on Idleness and you must proceed to Poverty. The game could even model national or "universal" history. In an 1814 English game, each space is accompanied by readings linking it to a historical event. More modest historical games have been shaped around ballooning (1784, France) or inventions (1894, Holland) with Edison at the winning space.

And there are a few instances of sheer playfulness. "The Gifts of Youth—The Little Game of Love" (1713, France) uses two circular paths; females take one, males the other. Land on Inconstancy,

illustrated with a butterfly, and the male must be tied to his chair by a female, using her garter. Land on Jealousy, and the player must hide behind a curtain and miss turns. And if both male and female land at a central space at which the paths “kiss,” they are triumphantly “joined together.” This is not quite what the Medici Court had in mind with the Royal Game of the Goose, but these players presumably have a long way to go before their Grand Climacteric.

Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.