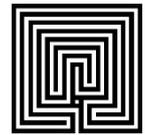


The Royal Game of Goose – A Labyrinthine Byway

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The *Royal and Most Pleasant Game of Goose* is little known and probably little played today, yet it forms a strange link between mediaeval symbolism, the labyrinth and today's race board games, including Monopoly. Invented in Florence at the time of Francisco de Medici (1574-87), the game won fame by being among gifts sent by the Florentine ruler to King Philip II of Spain - hence its 'royal' epithet. Known in Italian as Giucco dell'Oca, the game arrived in England in 1597, when John Wolfe entered it in the Stationers' Register - a sort of copyrighting - on June 16th that year. Various versions of it are known, including a rumoured example set out as a sort of hedge labyrinth at a stately home (details, anyone?), during the eighteenth century.

By the nineteenth century it had transmogrified into various other board race games, using dice and occasionally (like Goose) counters as well. These included the Dutch *Tramway Spel*; *The Royal Game of the Gathering of the Nations*, commemorating the Great Exhibition in London, 1851, and *Up to Klondyke*, celebrating the Alaskan gold rush of the turn of this century. All of these games used the format of Goose. Goose is a widdershins (anti-clockwise) spiral with 63 spaces or stations (7 x 9). Each player is provided with a marker and 20 counters (42 in all), and two dice are used. The rules are quite complicated, but the labyrinthine interest (apart from the spiral form of the game from the outside to the inside) comes on station 42, where there is a labyrinth. A player landing on the maze has to pay a counter into the pool and to return to station 29.

The number 42 is significant here as being the number of counters and markers used in the game, and in being two thirds of the way to the centre. It also has some other rather interesting "Fortean" connotations, including being the number of judges of the Dead in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the number of generations between Adam and Christ, and being "the most important rule in the book" in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, not to mention the meaning of life, the universe and everything in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*!

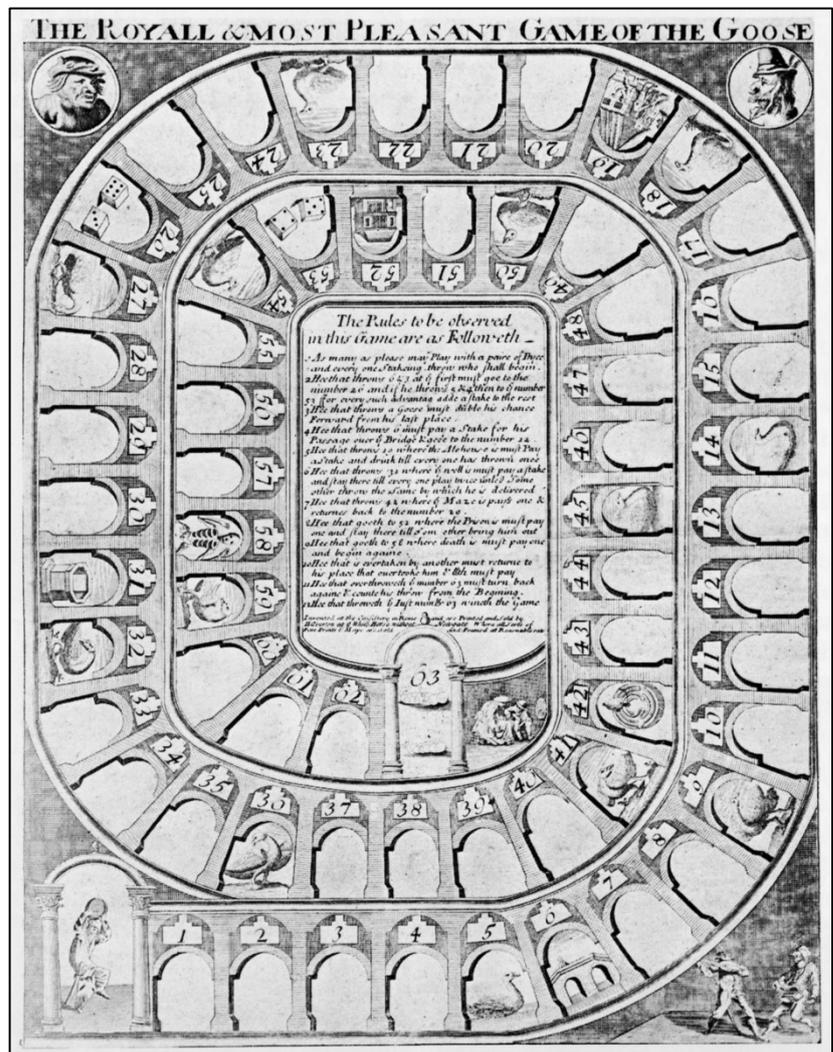
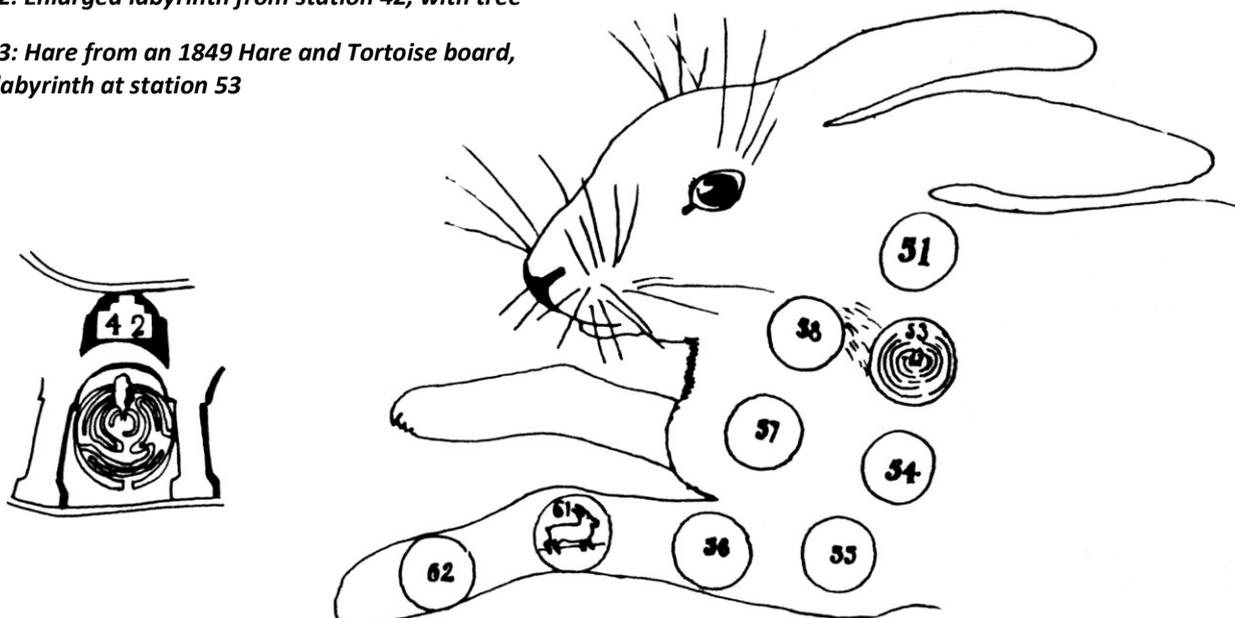


Fig. 1: English engraved broadsheet Game of Goose, published c.1750 by H. Overton. The labyrinth on number 42 is visible, lower middle right, represented as a turf maze, of a kind which a person who did not understand the principles of unicursal labyrinths might draw. At the centre is a tree.

Fig. 2: Enlarged labyrinth from station 42, with tree

Fig. 3: Hare from an 1849 Hare and Tortoise board, the labyrinth at station 53



Some continental examples of the game have the labyrinth as a sort of mountain path which is reminiscent of the Christian tradition of Calvary Mountains, such as exist even today in some Catholic countries. And here we may have a connection if we may allow some speculation for a while. Northern Italy was the origin-place of these devotional geomantic layouts, and one of the first, at Varallo, was made in 1491, about a century before the origin of Goose. When Goose was invented, the construction of these Calvaries was well underway, such as that at Orta (1583), and Varese (1604), both in Italy, so it is not unreasonable to see in Goose a secularization of a popular theme of a trail visiting various stations at which certain events would take place. In Goose, some of these are hazards, such as the well, and others more pleasant delays, such as a tavern. To make such a sacred rite as the Ascent of Calvary into a boardgame would have been unthinkable blasphemy, yet the similarity between the Calvary Mountain and both the actual progression of Goose and the station 42 on some boards must show some link.

The maze also appeared in a nineteenth century board game known as *The Hare and The Tortoise*, which was based on the Aesop fable of the same name. This was published on November 5th, 1849 by William Spooner of London, and featured a lithograph by L'Enfant on which the reptile and mammal were figured. On the hare, station 53 is a labyrinth, as on Goose circular and this time with what appears to be a small building at the centre, doubtless a prophecy of Caerdroia H.Q.! To land on this station was worse than in Goose, for it involved the payment of three counters into the pool, and losing 3 turns in the game. In both of the English examples, the Goose of 1725 and the Hare of 1849, the mazes are hazards which cause delay and loss, but what is more interesting is that they appear to be based upon turf rather than hedge mazes (very few of which were round). It is a pity that the artists were not more accurate in their labyrinth portrayal, for then we might be able to determine their location.

There are several other board games, of earlier provenance, which involve maze-like contortions: the Ancient Egyptian game of *Coiled Snake*, its derivative, the 19th century European game of *Snail* (which has 49 stations and a sunwise spiral); and the traditional Sudanese game of *Hyena*, where travellers go towards the well at the centre and back out again. However, these games' connection with labyrinths are by similarity only, and it is left to *The Royal and Most Pleasant Game of Goose* and its derivative *Hare and Tortoise* to give us examples of uncontested labyrinths in board games.

Nigel Pennick, Cambridge, England; December 1985

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