

King's Table

Introduction

King's Table is one of the oldest games in the world—simple in form, easy to learn, but structured so that it can be as complex and challenging as players want it to be.

The earliest version of the game, called *Hnefatafl* (neh'-fuh-tah'-ful) by the Vikings, dates back at least to the 4th century and was a common form of amusement for the Germanic peoples of Scandinavia for more than 1,300 years. Fragments of *Hnefatafl* boards and game pieces have been found in many modern archaeological excavations of Viking settlements.

The other versions of *King's Table* described here vary from *Hnefatafl* in the size of the board and the number of pieces, but all forms of the game use essentially the same rules.

Components

The game board is a 19×19 grid of squares. Except for the largest and most complex version of the game, only part of the playing surface is actually used. The game pieces are circular markers, black for the attacker and white for the side representing the King and his bodyguards. One of the counter sheets in this package includes 72 markers (48 black and 24 white) plus 3 Kings. Only one King is used in the play of the game; the other two can be set aside as spares.

Preparing for Play

The diagrams along the edges of the playing surface show the starting positions for each of the five versions of *King's Table* described in these rules. After deciding which version of the game they want to play and who will take which side, the players simply put their markers down on the appropriate squares.

How to Win

The attacker, who moves the black pieces, wins by capturing the King. This is accomplished in one of two ways; see the section below on "Capturing the King."

The defender, who moves the King and the white pieces, wins by moving the King so that it escapes from its attackers. The King escapes either by reaching a corner of the board or any square along an edge of the board. Players must agree on the definition of an escape before the game begins, keeping in mind that for the defender, escaping to a corner square is more challenging and more time-consuming than merely escaping to an edge square.

The defender also wins an automatic victory if all but two of the black pieces are captured, since it is impossible for the attacker to capture the King unless at least three black pieces remain on the board.

The Basic Rules

Movement

All game pieces move the same as a rook in chess does: horizontally or vertically—but not diagonally—across any number of unoccupied squares. A piece may not move through a square containing another piece and may not end its move in the same square with another piece.

The center square of the board, also known as the Throne, is a special location. Any piece can move through this square, but only the King can occupy the Throne (which is the square on which the King begins the game). The Throne is also special for another reason; see "Capturing the King," below.

If the defender is required to move the King to a corner square in order to claim victory (see "How to Win," above), then the four corner squares of the board are off limits to all pieces except the King. Thus, the attacker (black) cannot prolong the game or prevent the defender from winning by simply stationing a black piece on every corner square.

Players alternate turns, moving one piece at a time (just as in chess or checkers). The attacker makes the first move. A player must move a piece whenever it is his turn to do so; he cannot choose to pass and allow his opponent to make two moves in a row.

Pieces are not permitted to move beyond the boundaries of the game board being used. For instance, in *Hnefatafl*, which uses the 13×13 board, no piece can be moved to a location farther than 6 squares from the center of the board.

Capturing

The black pieces and all of the white pieces except the King are vulnerable to being captured. A captured piece is immediately removed from play. Capturing is never mandatory; in theory, an entire game could be played without a piece being captured. However, it would be virtually impossible for either side to win unless it first reduced the number of enemy pieces on the board.

A piece is captured when a move by the opponent causes that piece's line of movement to be blocked on two opposite sides. (All three pieces, the two doing the capturing plus the one being captured, must form a straight line in squares that are adjacent side to side.) The King may participate in the capture of a black piece, just as any of the King's bodyguards can do.

Figure A shows three examples of captures (left to right): a white move that captures a black piece, a black move that captures a white piece, and a black move that captures two white pieces.

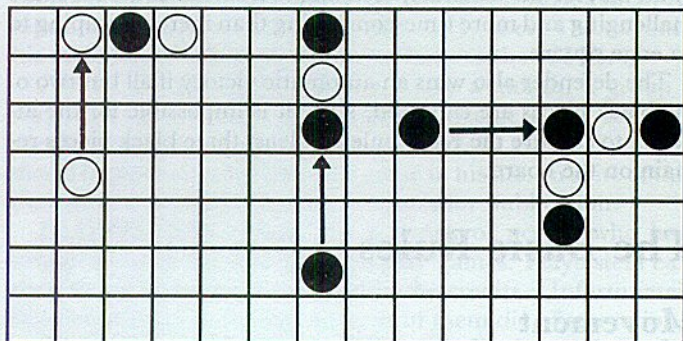


Figure A

Figure B shows two examples of positions where a capture cannot take place. The top diagram is not a capture because the white piece's line of movement is not blocked (the three pieces involved are on squares that are adjacent diagonally, not side to side). The bottom diagram is not a capture because neither of the white pieces is caught between two black pieces.

A piece that is located on a corner of the board cannot be captured, but it can be surrounded (and thus prevented from moving) if enemy pieces are blocking both of the lines of movement away from the corner.

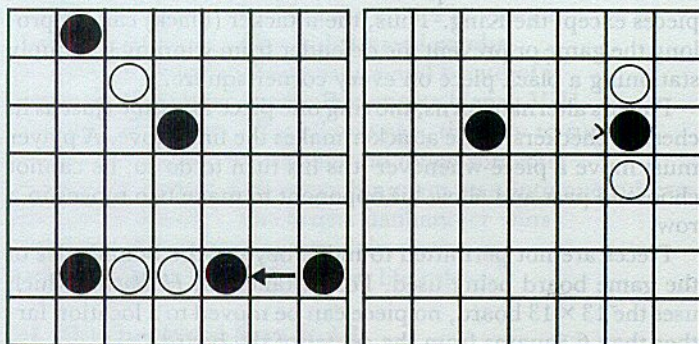


Figure B

Figure C

Resting

A capture can only occur as the result of a move by the capturing side. It is possible for a player to move a piece so that it is positioned between two enemy pieces. This is known as a resting move (see Figure C). The piece that moved is not in immediate danger, but it can be captured if the opposing player moves one of his pieces away and then (on a subsequent turn) moves that piece or another one back into the previous location.

Capturing the King

Unlike the other pieces, the King can only be captured if all four of its possible lines of movement are blocked. In most cases, this means that it must be surrounded by four black pieces (see Figure D).

The King can be captured by only three black pieces, instead of four, if it is caught against one of the sides of the Throne. In this case, the Throne acts as if it were occupied by an enemy piece. If the King is on one of the four squares adjacent to the Throne and its other three lines of movement are all blocked by black pieces (see Figure E), then the game ends in victory for the attacker.

If the object of the game is for the King to escape to a corner square, then the King is not captured if it is trapped against the edge of the board, but it cannot move in such a position until one of the black pieces around it is moved.

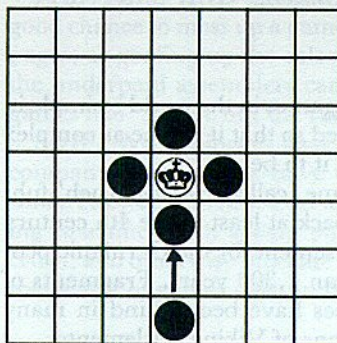


Figure D

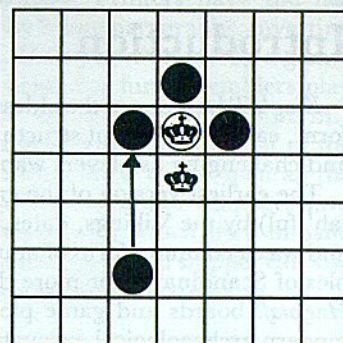


Figure E

Stalemate

A stalemate can only occur in a game in which the King is trying to reach a corner square, and only if the King is trapped along the edge of the board. If the last move by one side results in a position where every opposing piece is immobilized, the game ends in a stalemate and neither side wins. (The game could continue if players can agree on a way of breaking the deadlock; see "Variations and Options," below.)

The Game Boards

As stated above, this presentation of *King's Table* allows players to choose from five versions of the game, each one using a different-sized game board and having its own history. The versions, and some background about each of them, are as follows:

Saxon Board (19×19): The only known Saxon board game, this version of *King's Table* originated in England in the 10th century. The board represented the scene of a sea battle, from which the King's flagship sought to escape by reaching an edge of the board. (In this extra-large version of the game, it would be *very* difficult for the King to get to a corner square, but ambitious and skilled players are welcome to try the defending side with this variation.) The King and his 24 bodyguards are confronted by 48 attackers.

Hnefatafl (13 × 13): This version, partially described earlier in these rules, comes from a game board that was discovered in fragments on the *Gokstad*, a Viking-age chieftain's ship found in a burial mound. It is challenging, but by no means impossible, for the defender to get the King to a corner square, and thus it can be played using either of the two victory conditions for the defender. The King has 12 bodyguards against 24 attackers.

Tawlbwrdd (11 × 11): This Welsh variant of the game (rough pronunciation: *tall'-bird*) has its roots in a description dating from 1587. In this slightly smaller but no less challenging version of *Hnefatafl*, the King has 10 bodyguards against 20 attackers.

Tablut (9 × 9): The Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus observed the play of this game, and recorded his observations for posterity, while on a tour of Lapland in 1732. In other literature, this game board is described as representing the King of Sweden under siege by the Russians. In the original version, the King needed only to reach the edge of the board—but the defender was required to announce to his opponent when the King had a clear path to safety, thus giving the attacker one opportunity to block the escape. If the King had a route to two edges simultaneously, then the defender would announce the equivalent of “checkmate,” because the King's escape was inevitable. The King has 8 bodyguards against 16 attackers.

Irish Board (7 × 7): A close relative of *Hnefatafl* in geography and history, this version uses the smallest game board that would seem to be practical. It is based on a wooden board that was unearthed in the excavation of an ancient Viking village at Ballinderry, Ireland, in 1932. On the Viking board, the corner squares are clearly marked, indicating that the King had to reach a corner in this form of the game, which pits 12 attackers against the King and his 6 bodyguards.

Variations and Options

King's Table in its basic form is a fun and challenging game, but for even more variety the rules can be easily modified. Here are some suggestions for variations on the central theme:

1. Who moves first? Traditionally, the attacker makes the first move (as attackers are inclined to do), but the game can be given a slightly different flavor by allowing or requiring the defender to move first. Or, players can roll dice or flip a coin to determine which side starts the game. Unlike chess, moving first in *King's Table* is not necessarily an advantage; depending on the strategies that are used, a player might prefer to have his opponent go first so that he can react to what he thinks the enemy is trying to do.

2. Consecutive moves. In this variant, players do not necessarily alternate making moves. Instead, each player rolls a six-sided die to begin his turn; if the result is an even number, he loses that turn. Or, if a 50-50 chance of not being able to move seems too high, players can agree on a different system, such as no move on a roll of 1, or on a roll of 1 or 2.

If an experienced player is competing against someone who

is just learning the game, a system such as this can help to balance the odds: The inexperienced player always moves, but the experienced player only moves when the die roll allows him to. (Also see variant #3, below.)

Several other adaptations of this variant are possible, either to equalize the players' chances of winning or to introduce an element of chance and uncertainty. For instance, for a game that could end very quickly: Each player rolls a die to begin his turn, and then makes that number of moves in succession. Or, for an added twist, each of the moves in a single sequence must be made with a different piece. . . . It's easy to see that the number of variations on the movement rules is limited only by the players' inventiveness.

3. Weakening the King. In all of the historical versions of the game, the King moves in the same way as all the other pieces. However, this gives the King the ability to cover a lot of ground in a single move and makes it a very powerful piece—perhaps too powerful. This variation, which makes the King a weaker and more indecisive figure, requires the player of the white pieces to roll a die whenever he intends to move the King. On an even-numbered result, the King moves normally; on an odd-numbered result, the King moves the same way as a king in chess—one square in any direction, including on a diagonal. The King can still participate in the capture of a black piece as the result of a diagonal move. Once the die is rolled, the King must be moved; the player cannot change his mind and move another piece instead.

4. Handicapping. Another way to balance a game between players with different degrees of experience is to reduce the number of pieces that the more experienced player has at the start of the game. Especially when playing one of the smaller versions, a difference of even a single piece can have a great effect on the outcome of the game.

As with the variations on movement discussed in section 2 above, handicapping by changing the number of pieces can be accomplished in many ways. Either the underdog or the other player can decide which pieces are to be removed; the underdog could be allowed to “resurrect” the first one, or two, or more, of his pieces that are captured; the other player could be required to make his first capture(s) by surrounding an enemy piece on three sides instead of two. Even a game between the world's best player and an outright novice can be structured so that both players are challenged and each has an equal chance of winning.

Playing Hints and Other Advice

While *King's Table* might seem easy to master at first glance, it is truly a rigorous test of each player's concentration. The game is often won by waiting for the other player to miss something or otherwise make an error; hence the observation, as noted in the preceding section, that moving first (and thus having the initiative) is not always an advantage.

In games between players of equal experience, the defender (white) will win approximately 60 percent of the time. This

percentage increases when the King is only required to reach the edge of the board, and it decreases somewhat when the King must escape to a corner square (which is obviously a more challenging task for the defender).

Why are the odds against the attacker, when the black pieces outnumber the white pieces by two to one? Because (as quickly becomes obvious), it's very difficult for the attacker to surround the King until most or all of the other white pieces are captured. Whenever the King is adjacent to at least one of its bodyguards, it's impossible for the attacker to win.

A good general strategy for the attacker, then, is to chip away at the perimeter of the King's defenses instead of making a quick thrust into the core of the array of white pieces. If some of the black pieces are kept along or near the edges of the board, the attacker is able to strike across a long distance in one of two or three different directions; in general, the closer a piece is to the center of the board, the more its mobility is limited.

The defender's best strategy is similar to the attacker's—up to a point. Move the outermost bodyguards aggressively, but without creating any large holes in the King's defensive shell, and try to capture enough black pieces so that the attacker is no longer able to blanket the board with pieces and block all of the King's escape routes at the same time. Then, when the time is right, begin moving the King toward safety—but be sure to keep some bodyguards nearby so that the King can't be cut off and surrounded.

Because the starting positions in each version of the game are symmetrical, neither side begins with a weak spot that the enemy can exploit. But often, that situation quickly changes. If the attacker moves a lot of his pieces into a small area of the board, the defender has two choices: meet the thrust head-on by moving a lot of bodyguards into the same area, or try to make a break for it through the part of the board that the attacker has left relatively unguarded. In either case, the symmetry of the opening position soon becomes a thing of the past.

Notation

Players who wish to replay game situations or keep a record of moves (as would be necessary in a play-by-mail contest) can use a simple notation system. Each square of the game board is identified by a cross-indexed letter-number system, so that the upper left corner is A1 and the lower right corner is either G7, I9, K11, M13, or S19, depending on the version being played. (Of course, players will have to agree on the basis for the lettering and numbering, since opponents facing each other across a board will differ in their views of which square is in the upper left corner.)

When recording a move, use a dash to separate a piece's starting square from its destination. For example, on the 13 × 13 *Hnefatafl* board, a possible opening move for black is H1—H3; then white might respond with G5—G6.

If a move results in a capture, identify the piece(s) captured with an "x" followed by the square(s) from which captured pieces are removed. For instance, in the right-hand diagram of Figure A, assume that the black piece's double-capture move is C1—C4; the full notation for this move would be C1—C4 x C5D4.

For convenience and ease of identification, use an asterisk to signify a move by the King, such as *G7—G8, which would be a possible first move for the King on the 13 × 13 board.

Credits

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