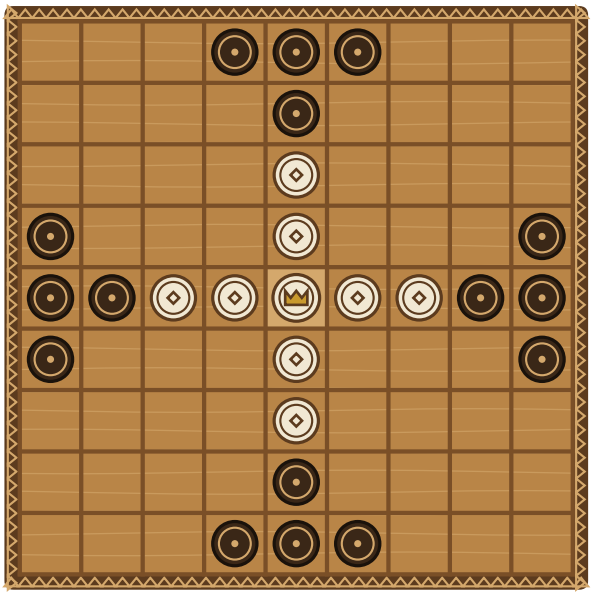
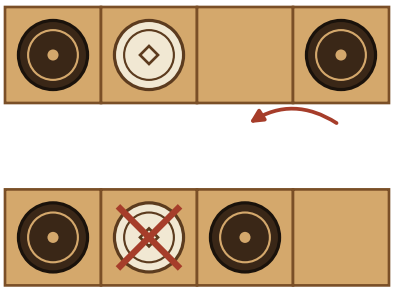
Hnefatafl: How to Play

2 players · about 20-30 minutes · ages 8 and up



Start: attackers dark, defenders light, king on the throne.

Capture



Dark moves next to the light piece...

...and it is trapped: take it off.

Moving INTO a gap between two enemies is safe.

1 Set up

One player is the attackers (16 dark pieces), the other is the defenders (8 light pieces and the king), from the pieces sheet or coins and buttons. Put the pieces on their start squares (the dots on the board). The king starts on the throne, the middle square. The attackers move first.

2 Move

Take turns moving one piece. Every piece, the king too, moves in a straight line, up, down, left or right, as many empty squares as you like. No jumping and no diagonal moves.

3 The throne

Only the king may stop on or pass through the throne. No other piece may, even when it is empty.

4 Capture

Trap an enemy piece between two of your pieces in a line (not diagonally) and it is captured: take it off the board. It only counts when YOU move to make the trap. You can safely move into a gap between two enemy pieces. The empty throne counts as an enemy piece for both sides (but not against the king). The king can help capture.

5 Capturing the king

On the throne, the king must be surrounded by attackers on all 4 sides. Next to the throne, he must be surrounded by attackers on his other 3 sides. Anywhere else, 2 attackers trap him like any other piece.

6 Win

The defenders win if the king reaches any square on the edge of the board. The attackers win if they capture the king. If it is your turn and you cannot move, you lose. If the same moves repeat 3 times, it is a draw. The defenders have the easier job, so play a match: swap sides, and whoever won a game in fewer moves wins.

About these rules: Nobody wrote down the rules of the Viking game. In 1732 the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus watched the Sami people of Lapland play Tablut, a 9 x 9 game of the same family, and wrote a short description. These rules are a modern version of his account.