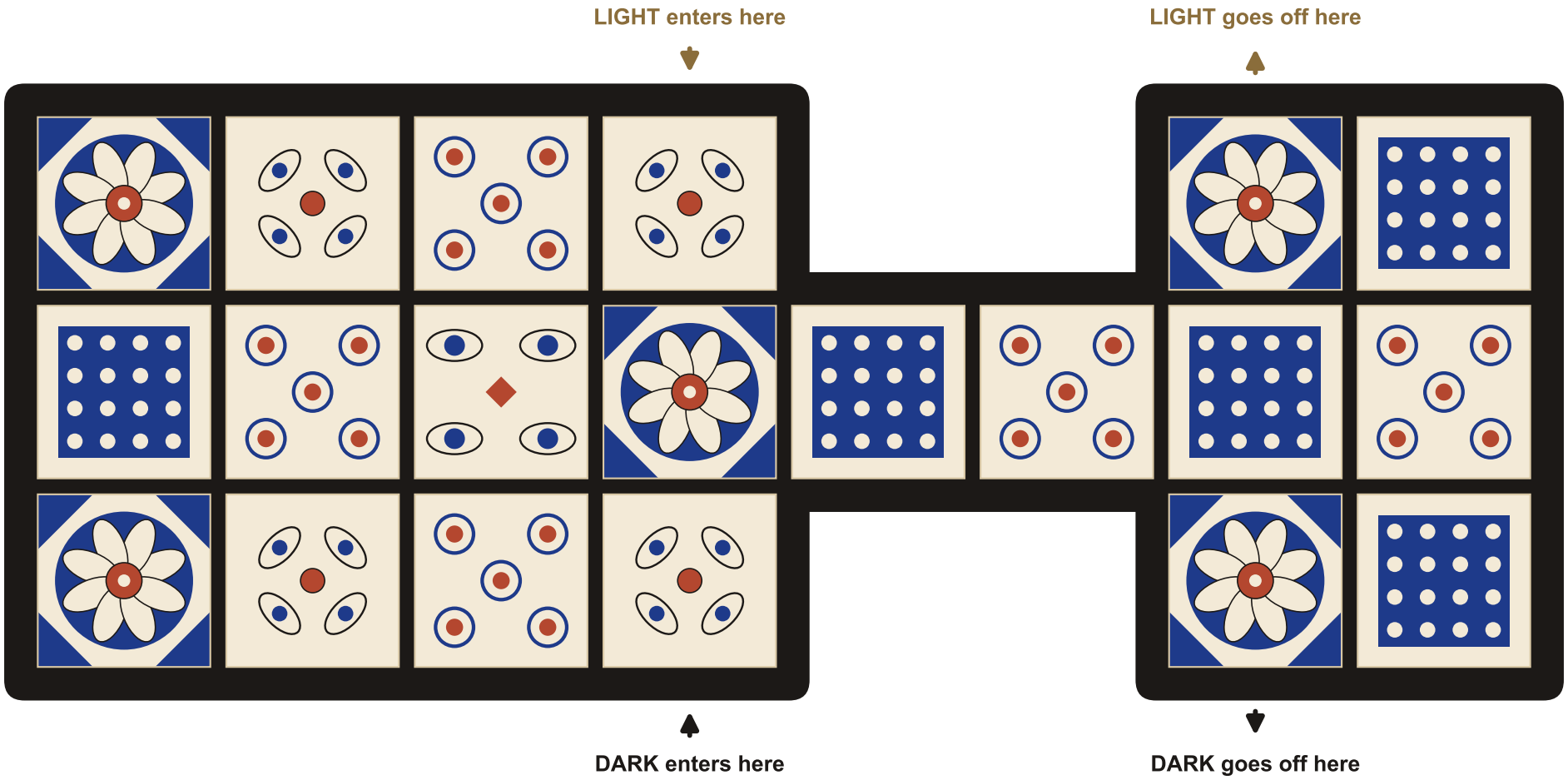
The Royal Game of Ur

Game board · Ancient Mesopotamia, about 2600 BC · 2 players



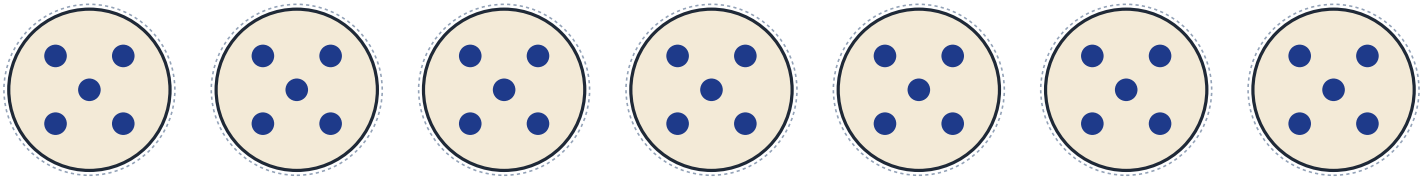
Rosette squares: land on one and throw again. The rosette in the middle row is safe.

The rules are on the "How to Play" page.

Royal Game of Ur: Pieces and Dice

Cut out 7 light and 7 dark pieces. Fold and glue 4 pyramid dice.

Light pieces

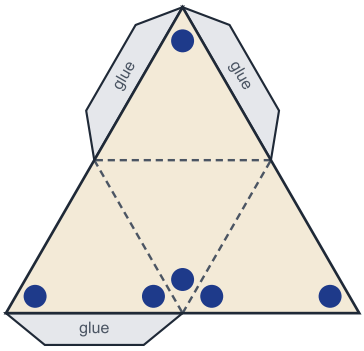


Dark pieces

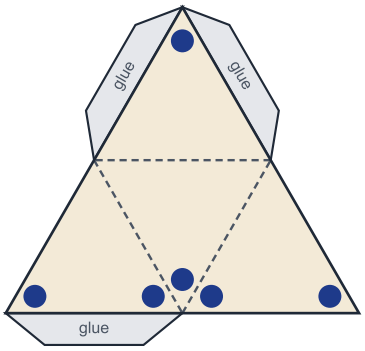


Pyramid dice (make 4)

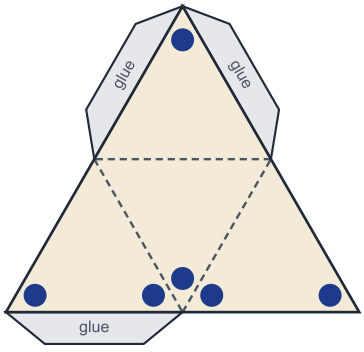
Print on card stock if you can. Cut on the solid lines, fold on the dashed lines, glue the tabs inside (tape the last one). Each die has 2 tips with blue dots.



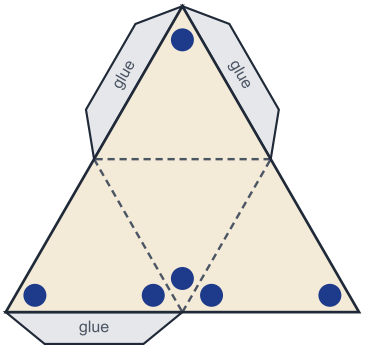
Die 1



Die 2



Die 3

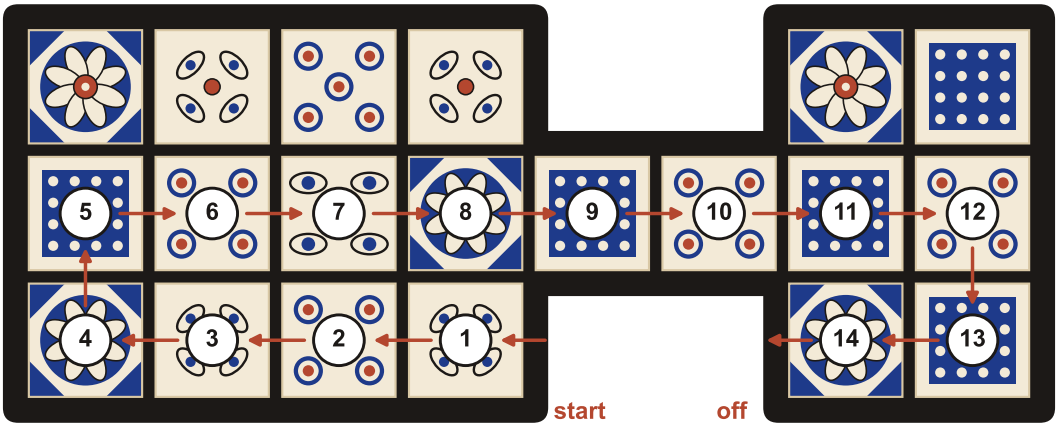


Die 4

No dice? Flip 4 coins and count the heads: 0 to 4, the same odds as the pyramid dice.

Royal Game of Ur: How to Play

2 players · about 30 minutes · ages 8 and up



Dark's path, squares 1 to 14. Light's path is the same, using the top row.

1 **Set up**

Each player takes 7 pieces, light or dark. All pieces start off the board. Your row is the outer row on your side. The middle row is shared. Both players throw the dice: the higher throw goes first (tie: throw again).

2 **Throw**

On your turn, throw the 4 pyramid dice from the pieces sheet (or flip 4 coins: heads count). Count the dice with a blue-dot tip pointing up. That number, 0 to 4, is how many squares you move ONE piece. A throw of 0 means your turn is over.

3 **Move**

Bring a new piece onto the board (a throw of 1 puts it on square 1, a 4 on square 4), or move a piece already on it. Follow the path in the picture. You may jump over any pieces. If you can move, you must.

4 **Bump**

You may not land on your own piece. If you land on your opponent's piece in the middle row, it goes back off the board and must start again.

5 **Rosettes**

Land on a rosette and you throw again. A piece on the middle rosette is safe: the other player cannot land there.

6 **Go off**

Going off is one step past square 14 and needs the exact number: a 1 from square 14, a 2 from 13, a 3 from 12, a 4 from 11. If no piece can move, your turn is over.

7 **Win**

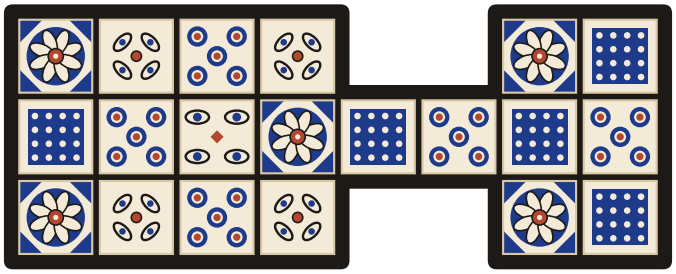
The first player to take all 7 pieces off the board wins.

About these rules: nobody wrote the rules down when the first boards were made. These are the rules most people play today, worked out by experts from clues on a clay tablet written by a Babylonian scribe in 177 BC, more than 2,000 years after the board in the British Museum was made.

The Royal Game of Ur

Name _____

Read about one of the oldest board games in the world.



The board is drawn from the one found at Ur, now in the British Museum.

About 4,600 years ago, in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (today's Iraq), people played a race game on a board of 20 squares. In the 1920s the archaeologist Leonard Woolley dug up the city's royal tombs and found several of these boards buried with the dead. The best one is now in the British Museum in London.

The board is a wooden box covered with tiny pieces of shell, red limestone and blue lapis lazuli, set in black bitumen, a kind of natural tar. Lapis lazuli does not come from Mesopotamia. Traders carried it more than 1,200 miles from the mountains of Afghanistan, so a board like this was a treasure.

It was not only a game for kings. People across the ancient world played it for about 3,000 years, from Egypt to India. Guards at an Assyrian palace scratched a board into the stone of a giant statue at the gate, so they could play while they waited. In one city in southern India, families still played a version of it in the 1900s.

For a long time nobody knew the rules. Then Irving Finkel, an expert at the British Museum, read a clay tablet written in cuneiform by a Babylonian scribe in 177 BC. It gives clues about how the game was played, and Finkel used them to work out the rules most people use today.

Questions

1. Where is Ur? What is that land called today?

2. Name the three materials set into the black bitumen to make the pattern.

3. Why was lapis lazuli special for the people of Ur?

4. How do we know the game was played by ordinary people, not only kings? Give one clue from the reading.