

Hnefatafl

Book of Strategy



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This book details various phenomena that can be observed when playing hnefatafl, some of which you may wish to consider on the way to achieving a mastery of the game.

The phenomena are divided into seven sections:

- I: Games
- II: Landmarks
- III: Moves
- IV: Pieces
- V: Formations
- VI: Statuses
- VII: Calculations

This book is subject to revisions.

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Section I:
Games

Open

A game in which the positions of the pieces on the board enabled the king to travel with relative ease across it.

Closed

A game in which the positions of the pieces on the board largely restricted the movement of the king across it.

Shuffle

A game in which no real fight or struggle took place: the defender essentially shuffled around their pieces whilst the attacker *encircled* them.

Tree of Life

A complex game in which the defending pieces were scattered across the board.

Immortal

An exceptional, inspired, creative, and original game to be remembered, and highlighted for posterity.

Azure

The perfect game.

Section II:

Landmarks

Throne

The central square of the board; 7·7; the king's starting square. The throne is the furthest point from the board's edge, and the king is confined to it until at least move 6. Generally speaking, the longer the king remains on the throne during a game, the less likely he is to escape. It is often in the attacker's best interests to push the king back towards the throne.

Corners

Pieces are seldom moved onto any of the board's four corner squares, due to the limited movement and opportunities that they afford.

Valleys

The 8 open lanes at the start of the game. These lanes can be used by the defender as part of *streams*, and *rivers*. It is in the attacker's best interests to block the valleys early on.

Hill

A side of the board which is relatively open for escape, typically due to a lack of *peaks* or *legions*.

Forest

A small opening near the edge of the board that the defender can work to escape through.

Front

The current direction in which the defender is expanding and heading. The front often faces the side with the least number of rival pieces. At the start of the game, the front often faces the side opposite that to which the attacker moved their first piece.

Cloud

A square onto which rival pieces cannot be placed without being captured. Clouds underlie the action of *scouts*, *fields of thorns*, and *paths of swords*.

Peak

When the attacker places a *blocker* on one of the four cardinal directions relative to the *throne*. Peaks are very effective at inhibiting the defender's expansion, and may work to prevent the formation of *streams*, and *mountains*.

Stream

When the king is able to move into an open lane, guaranteeing his escape.

└ Mountain

A type of stream which can be formed in the early game using *blockers*, if the attacker is not careful.

The following moves are an example of a mountain being formed:

1. →11·12 2. →10·9 3. ↑9·3 4. ↑5·9 5. →4·7 6. ↑7·12

The following moves show the formation of a different type of mountain, which employs a *scout*:

1. →3·7 2. →10·7 3. ←11·7 4. →9·7 5. ←12·6 6. k→8·7 7. ↑8·4 8. ↑8·12

River

When the king is able to move onto a square which leads to two *streams* on opposite sides, guaranteeing his escape.

└ Caster

When the defender, in the early game, casts away the 3 pieces on one side of the square of pieces which surrounds the king, in the hopes of forming a river.

Pier

When the defender, in the early game, opens their starting formation in such a way that gives them significant potential for escape. If the attacker fails to effectively employ *blockers*, the defender will be able to exploit *streams*, *rivers*, and *mountains*.

The following moves are an example of a pier being formed:

1. →3·6 2. ↑8·12 3. ↓6·11 4. ↑8·11

Section III:
Moves

Threat

When the movement of a piece results in the possibility of a rival piece being captured on a subsequent move, should the opponent not work to prevent it.

Ransom

When a piece is moved into a position where it *threatens* two or more pieces at once.

Exchange

When the capture of an attacker is followed by the capture of a defender, or vice versa.

Challenge

When a piece is moved into a position where it is sandwiched between two rival pieces. This can be utilised to *threaten* the two rival pieces at once. The square between two rival pieces can also act as a safe square.

Sacrifice

When a player moves a piece into a position where the opponent can immediately capture it, typically with the hope of deriving some benefit. Such benefits can include diverting a rival piece, and *challenging* the pieces the opponent used in the sandwiching.

Forsake

When a player does nothing to stop a threatened piece from being captured. The main reason for forsaking is to let your opponent waste time on the capture, giving yourself extra time to carry out a plan. Forsaking moves are usually played by the attacker in the early game, owing to their starting piece count.

Clash

When rival pieces are placed on adjacent squares. This may be done for several reasons: •To *threaten* a rival piece. •To *push* a rival piece. •To *pin* a rival piece. •To encourage the diversion of rival pieces to *fortify* or defend the clashing piece.

Push

When a piece is made to move away after a *clash*. A push can help to pen the defenders in, and to move the attackers away.

Pin

When a *clash* results in a rival piece's path being blocked. This is often employed to form *streams*, and *mountains*.

Fortify

When a friendly piece is placed on an adjacent square to another, making it resistant to simple captures. This can be used to build *fortifications*.

Restrain

A move which forces, or encourages, the opponent to respond to it. This can put the restrained player at a disadvantage, as they find themselves passively reacting rather than acting with initiative.

Threatening a piece can be an example of a restraining move. Restraining moves should be chained together for maximum effect.

Drag

When the king moves one square at a time, typically whilst trying to reach a diagonal square. This can cost the king valuable time.

└ Serpent

When the king attempts to escape from the board with a series of dragging moves.

Voyage

When the king moves from one side of the board to another, typically to enter a less crowded area, find a new point of escape, or shift the opponent's focus.

Mistake

A move which results in a disadvantage, or a reduction in advantage, for the player who played it.

Golden

An inspired, creative, and original move which works to win the game. A move may well only be recognised as golden once the game is complete, as its effects may not necessarily be immediate.

Section IV:
Pieces

Blocker

A piece which acts to block the path of rival pieces. In the early game, the attacker tends to place blockers in the *valleys* and on the *peaks*. A blocker's blocking power increases with its proximity to its target. Blockers are vulnerable to being *threatened*, and *overloaded*.

Scout

A defender which acts to defend a friendly group, by preventing attackers from *clashing* with it. Scouts are vulnerable to being blocked, *threatened*, and *overloaded*.

Infiltrator

A defender which travels behind enemy lines and enables other defenders to *clash* with, *threaten*, and *push* attackers that would have otherwise been closing in. Infiltrators are essentially offensive *scouts*. Infiltrators are vulnerable to being blocked, and *threatened*.

Tiger

A piece which is moved into a position where it can be *threatened* on the next move. The most common tiger is when the attacker moves to 4·7, 10·7, 7·4, or 7·10 on the first move. Tigers can *restrain* either the player who played them, or the opponent, depending on the amount of strategic calculation involved.

Dragon

A piece which the attacker cannot capture, as its absence would open a path to the edge of the board for the king. This invulnerability allows dragons to *threaten* rival pieces more easily than other pieces. Dragons can also be unleashed:

└ Unleash

When a dragon is moved from in front of the king, into a position where it *threatens* a rival piece, to reveal an empty path to the edge of the board. Due to the threat of escape, the attacker is forced to block the lane, guaranteeing the capture of their *threatened* piece on the next move.

Reserve

A piece which is not actively doing a job, such as blocking or *scouting*, but is behind a piece that is. Reserves can act as backups that enable the active piece to remaneuver itself when threatened, when it is needed elsewhere, or when an opportunity presents itself. In other situations, it is advisable to relocate reserves and give them a job. The defender starts the game with many reserves, whilst the attacker starts with just 4.

Section V:
Formations

Barricade

A line or group of pieces which works to block the path of many pieces. The defender typically utilises a barricade to stop the attackers on one half of the board from reaching the other, which can work to nullify the effects of the attacker starting with more pieces.

Fortification

A small or large defensive structure which contains *fortified* pieces. These pieces can be singly, doubly, triply, or quadruply *fortified*.

Castle

When the defender expands the interior of their starting formation to form a spacious, secure, defensive structure.

House

When the defender, typically in the endgame, hides the king within a structure that is completely impenetrable. Whilst little benefit can be derived from this, a house may be used to temporarily secure the king's safety before attempting a last-ditch escape attempt.

Box

When the defender has moved most of their pieces off their starting squares, but has kept the king inside a partial box. Opening and leaving the box can cost the king valuable time.

Tunnel

A diagonal structure which directs the king from the throne towards a corner of the board.

Field of thorns

When the defender expands their starting formation to create an open 2-lane-wide area onto which rivals cannot move without being captured.

Path of swords

A stretch of squares in front of the king onto which attackers cannot move without being captured. This is often created in the endgame when preparing a final escape path for the king. The defending pieces which make up a path of swords are often vulnerable to being *challenged*.

Odin's gate

When the king is one square away from being on the edge of the board, with a friendly piece in front of him and another to his front left or right. If the attacker is unable to *threaten* the king, or prevent the piece in front of him from moving, then the king's escape will be guaranteed.

Wings

When there is a *blocker* behind the king to his left, and another behind him to his right. The square which the king occupies is often a safe square, as the attacker's options for sandwiching a piece on it are limited. The formation is typically used to allow the king to enter an open lane safely, as well as to safely *clash* with an attacker and mount an offensive.

Legion

A line of attackers which acts to block the king from escaping on one side of the board. Legions can be extended, and linked:

└ Extend

When a piece is added to the end of a legion, slightly increasing its length, security, and blocking power.

└ Link

When two legions are joined together, greatly increasing their security and blocking power. Linking legions is a key step in forming an *encirclement*.

Encirclement

When the attacker surrounds the vast majority of the defender's pieces with an unbroken ring. The formation of an encirclement is often an unsurmountable challenge for the defender, and should be resisted. This makes their construction a key priority for the attacker. Encirclements are vulnerable to being pierced, and broken:

└ Pierce

When defensive pieces on the inside of an encirclement work to disrupt it. This usually involves targeting a concave part of the encirclement, by *challenging* and *threatening* the pieces that make it up.

└ Break

When defensive pieces on the outside of an encirclement work to disrupt it. This usually involves *threatening* encircling pieces, preventing them from *clashing* with encircled defenders (acting as a *scout*), or supporting the expansion of the encircled defenders (acting as an *infiltrator*).

Section VI:
Statuses

Capture

└ Equal

When both players have captured the same number of pieces

└ Unequal

When one player has captured more pieces than their opponent.

└ Scourge

When one player has captured significantly more pieces than their opponent.

Position

└ Equal

When neither player appears to be in a superior position to win.

└ Unequal

When one player, on balance of several factors, appears to be in a superior position to win.

└ Advantage

The player who, on balance of several factors, appears to be in a superior position to win.

└ Disadvantage

The player who, on balance of several factors, appears to be in an inferior position to win.

Connected

When two attackers can see each other across the board. Connected attackers can work together to threaten defenders that come between them.

Overloaded

When a piece, such as a *scout* or *blocker*, is burdened with multiple duties at once, often restricting its potential movement. This makes the overloaded piece a target for the opponent. When an overloaded piece falls or withdraws from its outpost, it often results in a weakening of the position and some sort of disadvantage.

Trapped

When the king is on a safe square, but cannot move to any other squares without being captured. This leaves the king particularly vulnerable to being *threatened*. In such a position, the defender should work to prevent the king from being *threatened*, or to break the trap.

Counting

When the king and a small group of pieces, typically in the endgame, is immobilised and waiting to be rescued from enclosure, or supported to escape, by another group.

Guillotine

When the attacker is about to lose and can do nothing but delay: by repeatedly sending *blockers* who will be captured.

Spin

When both players are involved in a repetition of moves, typically when the king is trying to escape.

Web

A complex position in which many calculations have to be made. An example of a web is a position where *threatened* pieces have accumulated and it must be decided whether this should be addressed, or ignored.

Free

When a player can make any move without risk. This likely applies to the attacker's first move, owing to their starting piece count.

Frozen

A rare situation in which every possible move that a player can make is disadvantageous in some way.

Lock

A situation in which one player is guaranteed to win if they make the correct moves. The attacker often has a lock once they have built an *encirclement*. It will likely never be known whether any theoretical locks exist starting at move one or two.

Section VII: Calculations

Deviate

When the defender decides to pause or abandon their current plan and pursue another, typically when a new opportunity presents itself.

Calm

The extent to which the defender will benefit from protecting all of their pieces, for the sake of not escalating the effects of the attacker starting with more pieces.

Berserk

The extent to which the defender will benefit from *sacrificing* all of their pieces, for the sake of preventing them from getting in the king's way.

Timing

The extent to which the defender should create *streams* and *rivers* early on, or forgo these transient threats and head straight for the long game. The benefits of the former include catching your opponent off guard early on, keeping your opponent on their toes, and exploiting the inexperience of beginners. The benefits of the latter include working towards a greater potential payoff, lulling your opponent into a false sense of security, and not giving your opponent the satisfaction of overcoming your minor threats.

Move Ratio

The ratio of the number of moves that the king makes to the number of moves that the other defenders make.

Set

A sequence of moves which gives neither side an advantage, and results in a balanced and equal position for both sides.