



## Rules for TAK

*Created December 30, 2014*

*Last Update March 9 2016*

**Design:** James Ernest and Patrick Rothfuss

**Testers:** Boyan Radakovich, Paul Peterson, Rick Fish, Jeff Morrow, Jeff Wilcox, and Joe Kisenwether.

**Notes:** This is an open *beta version* of Tak, an abstract board game designed by James Ernest and Patrick Rothfuss. Tak was first described in Rothfuss' *The Wise Man's Fear* (2011).

We are circulating the unfinished rules to help players make improvements to the game. We will run a Kickstarter for the final game in April 2016. Your feedback is welcome, and it's important to treat this game as a work in progress. We like it very much, but nothing is final.

**Summary:** Tak is an abstract strategy game for two players. These rules describe the “modern” version, with some references to rules variants from antiquity.

**Board:** The game board is divided into squares, similar to chess or go. The board can be any size from 3x3 to 8x8 or larger, but the game is most commonly played 5x5 or 6x6. The 3x3 game is trivially simple, and the 4x4 game is typically reserved for children and new players. 7x7 is rarely played, but 8x8 is sometimes considered the “Master’s Game.”

**No Diagonals:** Spaces on the board are connected only by their edges. In Tak, things are not adjacent diagonally, and pieces do not move diagonally.

**Pieces:** Each player has several normal stones and one special stone, which is called the capital or “capstone.” The number of pieces on each side differs with the size of the board:

Size of Board:	3x3	4x4	5x5	6x6	7x7	8x8
Normal Pieces:	10	15	21	30	40	50
Capstones:	0	0	1	1	?	2

Stones can be laid flat or stood on end. When played flat, they are called “flat stones.” In this orientation, other stones can be stacked on them. If they are stood on end, they are called “standing stones” or “walls.” Nothing can be stacked atop a standing stone.

Capstones can come in many decorative shapes, and are always played upright. Nothing can be stacked atop a capstone. Capstones have other special properties, described below.

**Some History:** *Tak players of antiquity played with hand-carved pieces of various shapes and sizes. Some were just wooden squares or rounded stones; some were intricately decorated. Standard colors, shapes, and sizes for the pieces vary from time to time and place to place. Travelers typically played 5x5, using simple wooden pieces and an improvised board (or no board at all). Court players typically played the larger 6x6 game. Capstones could be highly specialized, and Tak players often carry their own personalized capstone, even if they don't carry a whole set.*



*A typical traveler's set of wooden Tak pieces*

## Playing the Game

**Setup:** The board starts empty.

**Goal:** The object is to create a line of your pieces, called a *road*, connecting two opposite sides of the board. The road does not have to be a straight line. Each stack along the road must be topped by either a flatstone or a capstone in your color. Below is an example of a winning position.



**A Winning Road:** In this example, Black has won, connecting two opposite sides of the board with a road. A road can include a capstone, but can't include standing stones.

**Double Win:** If a player makes a move that creates a winning road for **both players**, the active player is the winner. This situation arises rarely, but it's not impossible.

**Flat Win:** If either player runs out of pieces, or if the board is covered, then the player with the most flatstones wins.

**Who Goes First:** In your first game, determine randomly who will go first. If you play more games, alternate who goes first.

**The First Round:** On the first round of the game, each player will place one of their *opponent's* pieces. Each player places one *flat stone* of his opponent's color in any empty space on the board. After that, play proceeds normally, starting with the same player.

**Example:** *Black is going first. He plays a white stone. Then white plays a black stone. Then black takes the first normal turn.*

**Each Turn:** On your turn, you may take one action, which will be either *Place* or *Move*.

**Place:** You may place a flat stone, a standing stone, or a capstone into any empty space.

**Game End:** If you place your last stone, or if you fill the last empty space on the board, the game is over. See *End of Game* below.

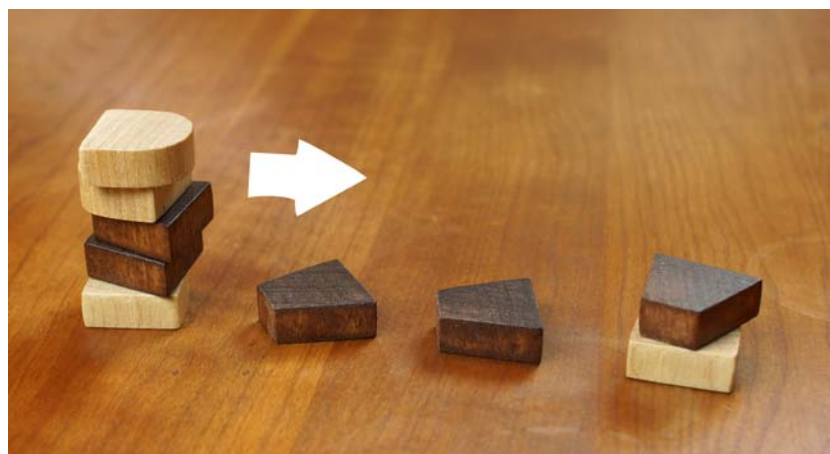
**Move:** Any single piece or stack of pieces that you control (that is, which has your stone on top) may be moved as follows:

Moving in a *straight line (but not diagonally)*, break the stack into smaller stacks, covering any existing flat stones along the way. You must leave *one or more pieces* in each space as you go, except for the starting space, where you are allowed to leave *zero or more pieces*. (See also *carry limit*, below.) The stack must proceed in a straight line.

*Note that you control the stack (and can move it) as long as the top piece is yours, whether that piece is a flatstone, a standing stone, or a capstone. A single piece can move by itself, which is how taller stacks form.*

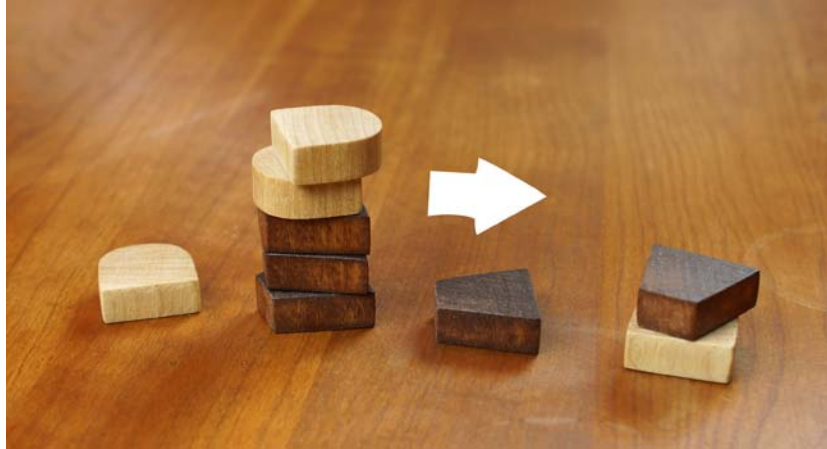
As you move the stack, the pieces will fall in the same order as they appeared in the original stack, from bottom to top. Here is an example move:

It is White's turn. She will move the stack on the far left, in the direction shown.



(Continued on the next page)

In the first step, she moves the top four pieces and leaves one white stone on the starting space.



In the next step, she moves three pieces and leaves one black stone.



Next, she leaves two stones (white on black) and moves just the top white stone.



This is the board after the move is finished.

## Additional Rules:

**Carry Limit:** There is no upper limit to the height of a stack. However, there is a limit to the number of pieces you can *move off that stack*, also called “carry limit” or “hand size,” which is a number equal to the width of the board. So, in a 5x5 game, the largest number pieces that you can carry is five. That means if you start with a stack of 7, you must leave at least 2 of those pieces in the starting position.

**Insurmountable Pieces:** Neither a capstone nor a standing stone may have any piece stacked on top of it. These pieces can be placed and moved normally, but can’t be stacked upon. Therefore, it’s not legal to make a move that would place a piece atop either of these stones.

**Flattening Stones:** The capstone can move onto any standing stone, *flattening it*. A standing stone can only be flattened by the capstone *by itself*, not by a taller stack with the capstone on top.

A Capstone can make a longer move (with a taller stack) before flattening a standing stone, but it must be the only piece that moves onto the standing stone. You can flatten a standing stone of either color. (This is the only way that standing stones are flattened, and there is no way to stand up a flat stone.)

*It helps to think of the capstone as having the best qualities of a flat stone and standing stone, plus its singular ability to crush walls. However, this isn’t completely correct. Although it counts as part of a road, your capstone doesn’t count for a point in a flat win.*

## End of Game:

**Primary Goal:** The primary goal is to create a road that connects any two opposite edges of the board. The capstone can count as part of this road, but standing stones cannot. As soon as you complete this road, you win. This is called a “road win.”

**Calling Tak:** It is common courtesy among the nobility to call “Tak” when you are one move away from a road win, in order to give your opponent a chance to play his best game. However, this is never required, and is considered by tavern players to be against the spirit of the game.

**Secondary Goal:** If no one accomplishes a road win, you can also win by controlling the most spaces with *flat stones* when the game ends. The game ends when all spaces are covered, or when one player places his last piece. This is called a “flat win” or “winning the flats.” Note that in antiquity, if the flatstone score was tied, the victory went to the player who went *second*. By modern rules it is just a tie.

Flat stones that are buried in stacks do not count for this win, only those on top. Capstones and standing stones do not count, even if they have flat stones below them.

**Scoring with Points:** A game can be **scored** based on the number of pieces left *unplayed*. A winner is awarded “the board” (one point for every space on the board, for example 25), and “the pieces,” which is the number of his own pieces that remained *out of play*. This score is usually settled in coins. This is considered a “commoner’s” rule and is not observed in more sophisticated circles. At court, a win is simply a win.

*Note: The common phrase “the board and pieces” simply means “everything.”*



## Game Variants:

**The Beginner's Game:** Even on a 4x4 board, Tak can be challenging. This is the game that everyone learns as children, and it's a still great way to sharpen your skills for the bigger game. On a 4x4 board, each player uses 15 pieces and no capstone.

**The Traveler's Game:** Tak can be played without a board, and this is usually done on the 4x4 or 5x5 grid.

Rather than using a bulky wooden board, players can choose any small object to mark the center board space. This can be a coin, a knot on the table, or just an ordinary stone. Players must imagine the rest of the board until it is defined by the placement of pieces.

A token can designate the center space of a 5x5 board, or the center point of a 4x4 board. Even a tiny dot on the table, or a few grains of salt can be used to mark the center point.

Travelers have also been known to scratch simple Tak boards on tavern tables, but you should be on good terms with the innkeeper before you try this. Be on the lookout for tables where this has been done for you.

**The Court Game:** The 6x6 game is typically played at court. Distinct from the Traveler's Game, the 6x6 Tak game is more sophisticated and difficult, and can take a little longer to play. Neither 5x5 nor 6x6 is considered the "standard" game; each has its advantages.

As mentioned above, players at court always call "Tak" when threatening their opponent with a win, and players typically let their opponents reverse moves, where possible, if those moves were clearly mistakes. (In contrast to the tavern game, where nothing is taken back!)

**The Master's Game:** Tak can be played on an 8x8 board. In this game each player gets 50 pieces and two capstones. This game can be extremely intricate and difficult, but expert players consider it the pinnacle of Tak play. (Note that we also listed the piece count for a 7x7 game above, but this size is rarely played, and experts disagree on whether the players should have one or two capstones.)

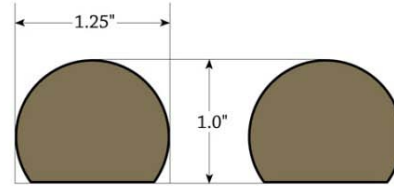
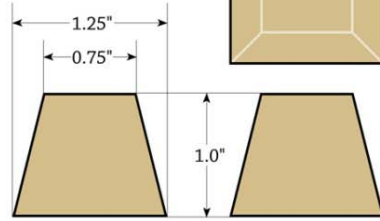
**Background:** *The Wise Man's Fear* was published in 2011. The mechanics for Tak were designed in 2014, and developed in 2015-16. This game is still in beta test, so we might make changes and additions before our final version. Please play, test, and enjoy it, and send your feedback to James Ernest, cheapassjames (at) gmail (dot) com.

## Making Your Own Pieces:

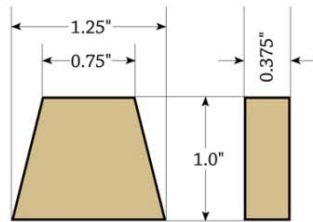
There is a great diversity of Tak piece shapes throughout the known world. Your pieces can be almost any shape as long as they can stack up, stand up, and fit in a board space.

You can make a set out of Lego bricks, cut them from a dowel, build them from clay, or carve a set from stone. The diagram below shows the preferred wooden set at Cheapass Games.

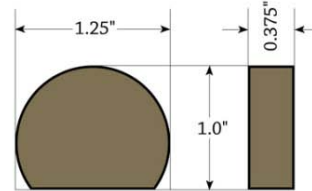
**White Capstone:  
1 Per Game**



**Black Capstone:  
1 Per Game**



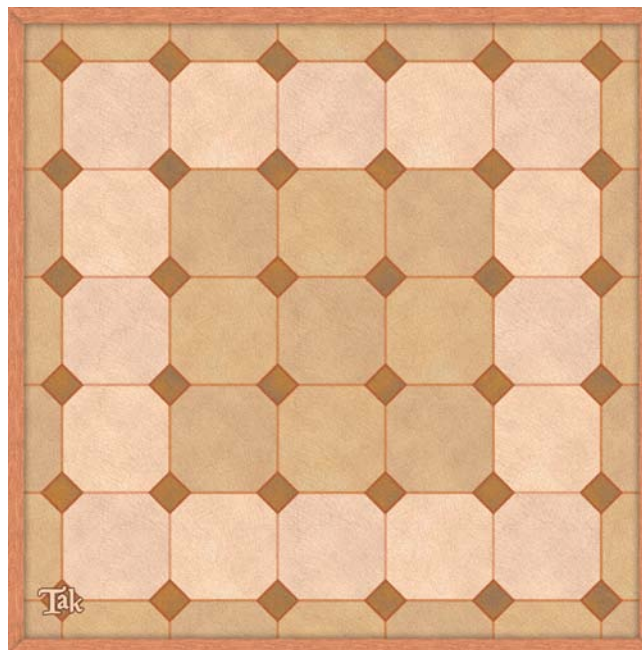
**White Flatstone:  
30 Per Game**



**Black Flatstone:  
30 Per Game**

### A Hybrid Board:

A fairly modern invention, the “hybrid” board shown below allows a single surface to represent a 6x6, 5x5, 4x4, and 3x3 game. For the odd-sized boards, you can play on the large squares, and for an even-sized board, you can play on the small diamonds. It may seem a bit complicated at first, but after a few pieces are played, the board works quite well.



## Tak Terminology:

Over the ages, we assume that Tak would have developed many terms describing specific situations and gambits. The real game hasn't been around as long as the fictional one, so we're just starting to collect terms. Hopefully we can flesh this out before the game goes to print. But these are terms we really use.

**Flat Stones:** These are also called Flats, Bits, or just "Stones," though technically all of the pieces are stones. (This term is used even if they are made of another material, such as wood).

**Standing Stones:** These are also called Walls, though this term can fool new players into thinking that they can't move. Some call them "Uprights."

**Capstones:** Technically these are "Capital" stones, though nobody calls them this. They are also just called "caps" or "The Big Piece." (Note: Some players place a higher dollar value on winning without using your cap.)

**Captives and Reserves:** Stones that are part of taller stacks, but not on top, are classified as "Captives" (if they are the opponent's color) and "Reserves" (if they match the top color). Captives are also sometimes called Prisoners.

**Note:** A Tak player who encountered chess for the first time might take issue with the term "capture," since in chess the piece is clearly removed from the board. Tak captures enemy pieces in a more realistic way: if they escape, they can fight again!

**Hard and Soft Caps:** There is a strategic advantage to stacking a capstone on another piece of your color, though often they are sitting on an enemy piece instead. When a cap is sitting on an allied piece, it's called a "Hard Cap," or "Hunter," and if on an enemy piece, it's a "Soft Cap," or "Soldier." The difference is whether the stack can run out, crush a standing stone, and still leave a connected path.

The term is also sometimes used as a description for the entire stack below the capstone, so if a stack is "hard" then it contains many reserves, and if it is "soft" it contains many captives. Similarly, stacks that are covered by Standing Stones can also run hard and soft. Some people prefer to use "hot" and "cold," again referring to the proportion of reserves (hot) and captives (cold) in the stack.

**Playing Sheriff:** This is something we refer to as "Hoovering," though that's a modern reference. It basically means using a single piece (usually a capstone) to suck up every flatstone that the opponent lays down. But it only works up to a point, because of the carry limit.

**Reach:** How far the top piece of a stack can move, or the area that stack effectively controls.

**Guards:** Walls placed to prevent a tall stack, usually a capstone stack, from having reach.

**Brooker's Fall:** We have no idea what this is. This is described in the book, and the description amounts to "getting clever in the corner," though the corner might have nothing to do with it. Kvothe tries it in his fifth game, and Bredon describes it as "clever" and requiring uncommon cleverness to escape from, which he dubs "Bredon's Defense."

Come to think of it, Bredon might just have been humoring Kvothe...