**Royal Game of Ur**

**The Rules of The Royal Game of Ur**

The Royal game of Ur is an ancient game and not everything about the game is known including its name. Since it is not played today and because no definitive account of the rules is known, the following is no more than conjecture. From the various sets of rules that have been hypothesised for this game, this author has struggled to find one that plays well, is elegant and which also seems likely to be an accurate rendition of the original. In the end, it was decided to list several sets of rules, give a recommendation and let players decide for themselves.

**Equipment**

The game of Royal game of Ur is played on an unusually shaped special board. To understand the shape of the board, first draw grid of 3 x 8 squares. Then, counting from the left, eliminate from the top and the bottom row, the 5th and 6th squares. You should be left with a block of 4 x 3 squares connected to a block of 2 x 3 squares by a bridge of 2 squares in the middle. Although boards with various patterns have been found, the only consistent factor has been that five of the squares on the board have rosettes inscribed in them and the consensus has been that these squares have a special significance. On the top and bottom rows, a rosette should appear in the second square from the right and the first square from the left. A fifth rosette should appear in the fourth square from the left in the middle row.

The boards found at Ur have been accompanied by small round counters, each with five white dots on them, seven light and seven dark. Also found have been six pyramidal dice each with two dots on two of the four corners. These are simply binary lots - throw three dice and count the number that land with a spotted corner upwards giving a number from 0 to 3.

**Path around the board**

There have been 2 suggestions by renowned games historians as to what path the counters take around the board. Masters Games has added a third possibility. All three say that entry to the board is made into the outer row on the fourth square from the left going left. One player enters on the top row, the other on the lower. When the counter reaches the corner (with the rosette), it moves to the middle row and travels along in the reverse direction.

**HJR Murray**

When a counter reaches the penultimate square in that row it turns again going to the opposite row to that which it started and then travels around the outside of the 2 x 3 rectangle before returning back down the middle row and off the board where it came entered. This makes a path of 27 squares, the 28th move being to bear off the board.

**RC Bell**

This is probably the most commonly used path and matches the description of a game played on the same board found on a tablet dated 2 1/2 millennia later. When a counter reaches the final square of the middle row it returns to its starting row, goes one square back and then bears off. This makes a track of 14 squares, the 15th move being to bear off the board and players counters keep can only meet on the middle row.

**J Masters**

This follows the HJR Murray route but shortens it so that pieces are borne from the same square as RC Bell. When a counter reaches the penultimate square in that row it turns again going to the opposite row to that which it started and then travels around the outside of the 2 x 3 rectangle before bearing off into the gap from which it started but from the opposite side. This a path of 16 squares, the 17th being to bear off. Both this and Murray's version have the elegant result that a rosette is encountered every 4 squares.

**General rules and Objective**

It is generally agreed that the Royal game of Ur is a race game - the aim is to get all 7 pieces around the board to the finish point first.

1. Throw the dice to decide who plays first - highest score goes first, if it's a draw, throw again.
2. Players take turns to throw three binary lots and move one of their pieces.
3. Only one piece may be moved per throw of the dice and pieces must always move forward around the track.
4. If a counter lands upon a square occupied by an opposing counter, the counter landed upon is sent off the board and must start again from the beginning.

**Masters Games**

Masters Games has produced the following conjectured game based on all the information gathered so far. It uses the J Masters board, of course, and the following binary lot throws:

0 - move 4 squares

1 - move 1 square

2 - move 2 squares

3 - move 3 squares

* If a counter lands on a rosette, throw the dice again (and again if another rosette is landed upon). The same piece need not be moved on the additional throw.
* Pieces can be moved onto the board at any stage of the game as long as the square that is moved to upon the first turn is vacant.
* A player must always move a counter if it is possible to do so but if it is not possible, the turn is lost.
* Exact throws are needed to bear pieces off the board.

**R.C. Bell**

RC Bell used his path stated above and dice throws, which give a different flavour of game entirely, were as follows:

0 - move 4 and have another throw.

1 - move 0 and the turn finishes.

2 - move 1 and have another throw

3 - move 5 and have another throw

* Each player places an agreed amount into a pool.
* A piece can only be entered onto the board by a throw of 5 and moves as indicated above for further throws.
* If a counter lands on a rosette, that player must pay an agreed fine into the pool.
* If a counter lands on an opposing counter, the latter piece is captured and sent off the board from where it can only return to the board by the throw of a five in the usual way.
* The first player to bear all pieces off the board wins the pool.

**British Museum / Irving Finkel**

This version of the game was published with a replica of the royal gaming board by the British Museum during the late 1990s. It uses the RC Bell path around the board. It also inaccurately used only five pieces instead of seven and four binary pyramid lots instead of 3 viz.:

0 - move 0 squares - i.e. miss a go.

1 - move 1 square

2 - move 2 squares

3 - move 3 squares

4 - move 4 squares

* If a counter lands on a rosette, throw the dice again (and again if another rosette is landed upon). The same piece need not be moved on the additional throw.
* Pieces may be started onto the board at any time as long as the square to be moved to by the dice throw is vacant.
* A player must always move a counter if it is possible to do so but if it is not possible, the turn is lost.

**Irving Finkel v. Tom Scott 2017 Rules**

Same as the 1990 British Museum rules (RC Bell path, 4 pyramid dice etc.) with the following changes:

* 7 pieces each instead of 5
* The middle rosette square is a safe square and cannot be taken by an opposing piece