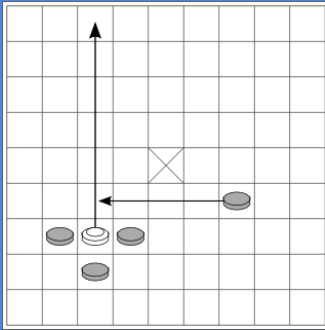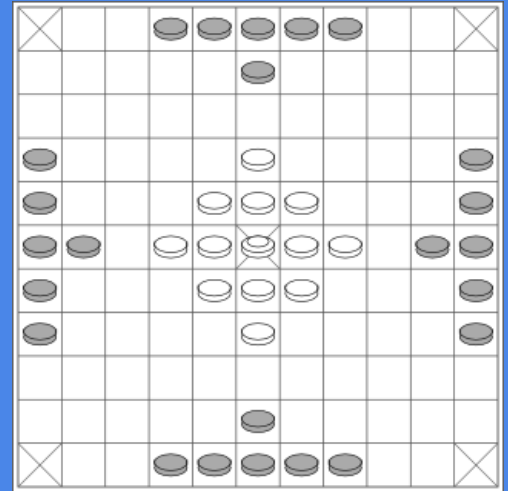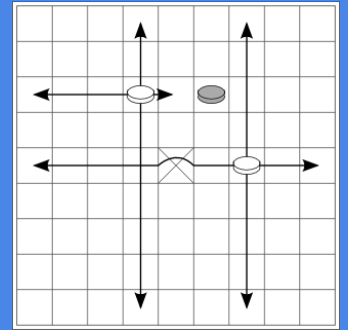# Hnefatafl

by Arian Djahed

Hnefatafl, or "king's table" in Old Norse, is a variation of chess that originated in mediæval northern Europe and had many variations of its own throughout the region, such as Tawlbwrdd in Wales or Ard Rí in Scotland. My game is based on the reconstructed 11x11 version of the Hnefatafl game, pictured on the right. →


The game is unique in that each side has its own objective, with the black's being to capture the white side's king piece and the white's being to get said king piece to one of the corner squares (as pictured on the left). Each piece—including the king—moves like a rook in chess. However, regular pieces cannot go on so-called "king squares" (i.e. corner squares and the middle square), but they can "pass over" them on their way to another square (as pictured on the right).

Capturing is also unique in Hnefatafl, and there are a lot of potential subtle nuances that come about as a result. For a regular piece, you must capture it by surrounding it on two opposing sides (as pictured on the right). In addition, one of the two pieces must move into the capture position in order to capture the piece; the enemy piece cannot be captured by moving into a square surrounded on opposite sides by your pieces. As the picture demonstrates, you can also use a corner square as one of the "sides" when capturing an enemy piece, provided that you're still the one "moving into position" to capture the piece and not the enemy player. A specific kind of "chain capture" is also permitted, e.g. if there are pieces arranged like BW_WB and you move a black piece into the empty square, you will capture both of the white pieces. However, if the arrangement is _WBWB and you move a black piece into the empty square, you will only capture the leftmost white piece as the other is not adjacent to the black piece that you moved. Capturing the king piece seems more complex at first, but is actually simpler since there are no strange nuances: you simply have to surround it on four sides.
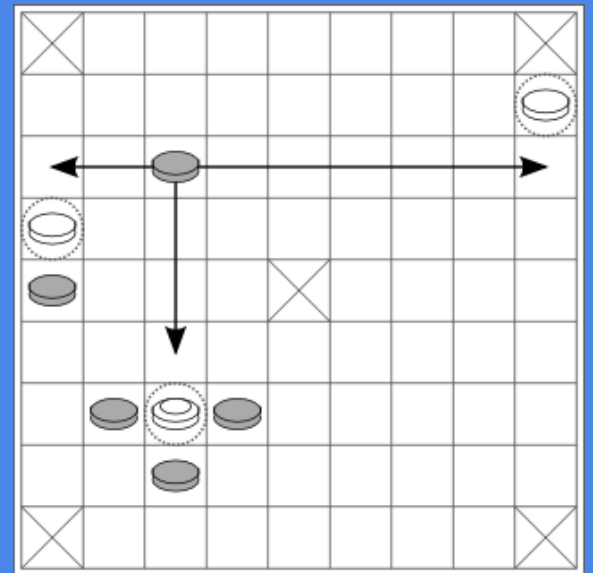
Upon starting the game, it will look like the picture below. Given the game's similarity to chess and the fact that most video game versions of chess employ a point-and-click gameplay system, I decided to employ the same thing here to optimize intuitiveness. So, to move a piece, you simply need to click on the desired piece and then click on its destination. If you click on a piece from the opposing team or you click on a square that is out of the piece's reach (e.g. a square diagonal to the piece's position), nothing will happen. Your turn will not end until you click a legal position, upon which it will move there and the opponent's turn will initiate. The two sides take turns making their moves on the same computer; there is no network functionality and no computer player to play against in lieu of a human opponent.
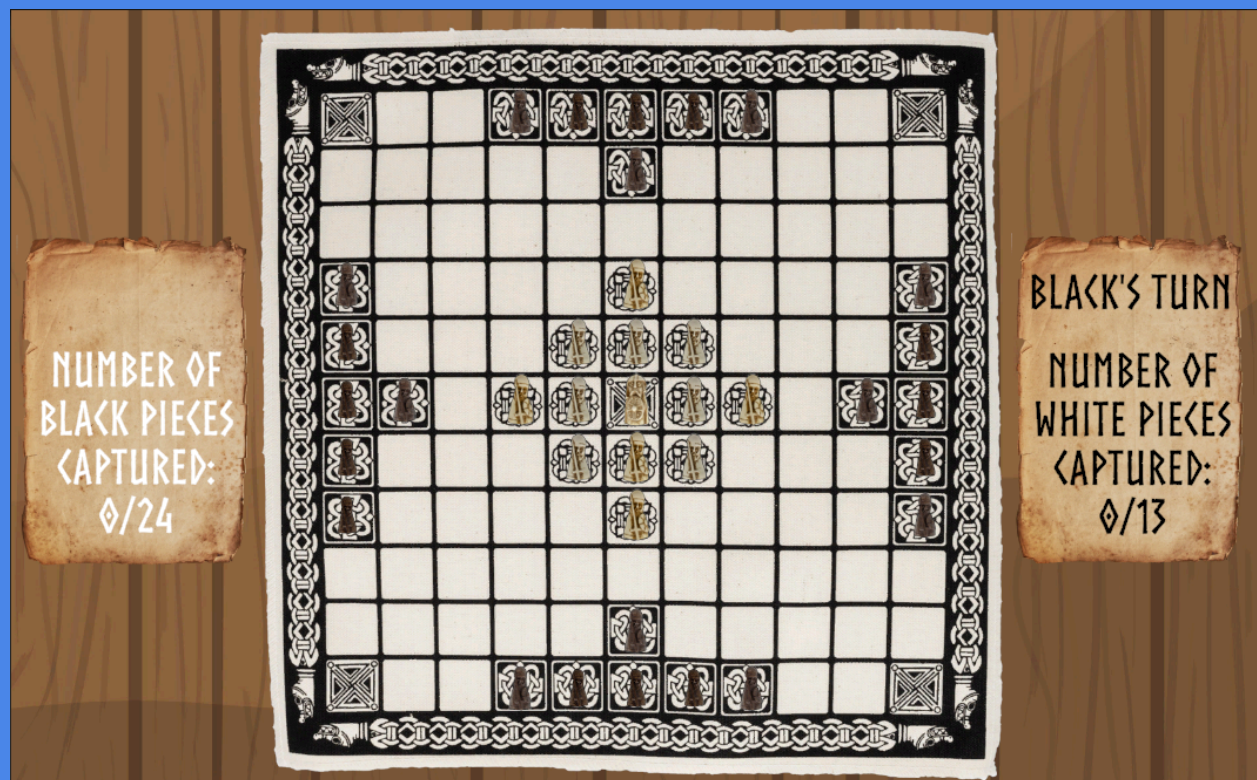
As a final note, please keep in mind that since this is a historical game that faded into obscurity for several centuries only to be brought back via copious archæological digging and by rediscovering its play in remote regions of northern Europe, some elements of its ruleset are often hotly debated and there is no guarantee that these rules are exactly the same as the original game's. The rules that I chose are the ones I played by when I originally discovered the game, but there are bound to be slight variations out there. However, the core of the game will remain the same. And now that you've read all the rules, have fun and make Oðinn proud!