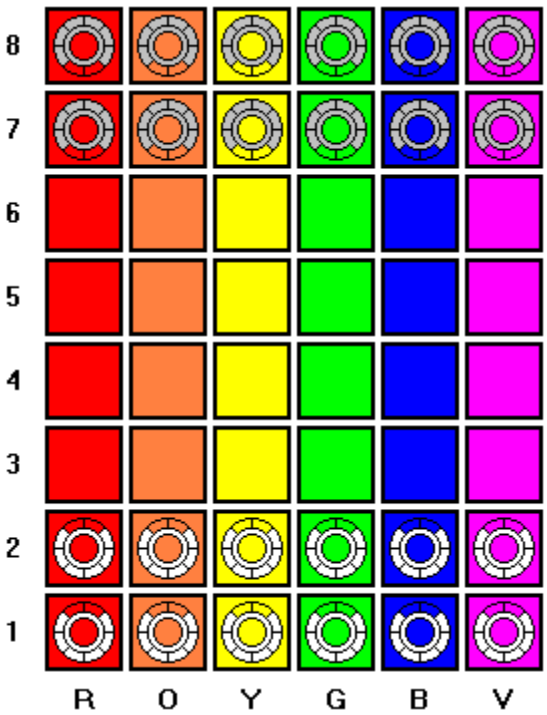
Capriccio

1982, Larry Wheeler

[from http://home.flash.net/~markthom/html/capriccio.html]



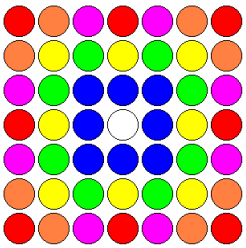
Larry has been experimenting for almost twenty years with a class of games he calls “indirection chess,” of which Capriccio is the latest and most refined incarnation. Actually Larry now has a version which is slightly different from the one described here, and when I last heard was at last thinking of looking for a publisher. The name of the game suggests the capricious way the powers of the pieces fluctuate in the course of a game.

There are two armies, Black and White. Color is used to distinguish types of pieces as well as their affiliation. Because of this the pieces need to have some fixed part, such as a dot in the center, which shows red - orange - yellow - green - blue - or violet, and still leaves room for the black and white army designations.

The pieces are a little hard to make because they *also* should have some removable elements, again rainbow-hued, designed in such a way that (for instance) the White Red piece can carry two blue and one yellow element. These removable elements will come and go as the game progresses; a White Red, for instance, starts the game with two removable red markers but later it might have a yellow, a green, and two purple markers. It always keeps its permanent red mark, of course, which therefore should be in a distinct area of the piece: as I suggest above, like a dot in the center. Larry has made a beautiful set in which the pieces look something like Trivial Pursuit pieces with knobs coming up from

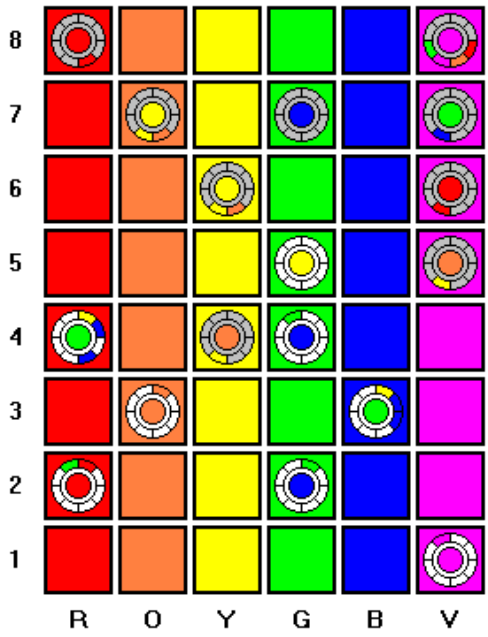
the center. The knobs, colored, are permanently attached, and the pieces accomodate wedge-shaped finials in the different colors which can be taken out and exchanged for others as needed. In the diagram above I try to suggest such an arrangement, in pieces that all start the game with two finials in their own color.

Here's the idea: each color has a movement power associated with it, following the diagram at right. Thus Blue confers a king move, Green a knight move, Yellow a move to the second square orthogonally or diagonally, Red to the third square orthogonally or diagonally, Violet a move to the opposite corner of a 3x1 rectangle (a "camel" move), and Orange to the opposite corner of a 3x2 rectangle (a "zebra" move).



BUT! A piece's powers of movement do *not* come from the color of its permanent mark. They come from the colors of whatever finials it carries at that moment! Hence the powers of the pieces are not the same throughout the game, and part of the strategy is to plan for your pieces to have the powers they will need when you need them.

Time to describe how the pieces gain and lose finials. Any White piece -- say, a White Green -- gets one finial for each White piece that stands on a square of its color -- that is, every White piece on a Green square confers a finial of its color onto every White Green. (Ditto for Black pieces.) For example, consider the following position:



Note that the White Greens have two blue and one yellow finial. This is because on the Green squares, White has two blue pieces and one yellow piece. Black has only one Violet left, and it has one violet, one orange, one red, and one green finial. This is because on the violet squares, Black has one Violet, one Orange, one Red, and one Green piece. The White Greens can make either Blue or Yellow moves, and the Black Violets can make either Violet, Orange, Red, or Green moves. Note that the White Greens cannot make Green moves: a piece's permanent color has nothing to do with its powers of movement, only the permanent colors of the other allied pieces that stand on squares of its color. The White Yellow cannot move at all, until and unless White moves something onto a yellow square. The Black Blue is in the same fix. But these pieces still confer powers on their allies.

If White should move his Green at r4 to y6 (making use of its Yellow powers), he would then remove one green finial from his Red piece(s) and add one green finial to his Yellow piece(s). (In this position he has only one Red and one Yellow left.) If White had moved his Green at r4 to y4, capturing the Black Orange on that square, then besides transferring his own finials from his Red to his Yellow pieces, the player would also remove one orange finial from each Black Yellow piece.

Once you have absorbed the concept of how pieces can move the rest is simple. White moves first. Capture, as indicated, is by occupation. The object of the game is to move any piece to the farthest rank of the board in such a way that your opponent cannot capture the piece on his next move.

The large number of options available gives the game some of its particular spice. In Go or Twixt or Hex you have lots of options but to a newbie like me most

of them look alike; here it makes a huge difference whether you move your orange piece two squares to the left onto a green square, or three squares to the left onto a blue square. When there's a fight over a particular square, you have tricky calculations not only about how many of your pieces guard it, but in what order they can go to battle -- since if your green moves off its blue square, your blue may no longer be able to make the required move. On the other hand you often have plenty of opportunities for an exchange, and finding the right one to take advantage of in the middle of your opponent's attack can sorely inconvenience the piece he extended by cutting off some power it needs. All your moves have the potential for multiple effect -- posing threats themselves, and empowering other pieces suddenly to make threats in completely different parts of the board, and in the case of captures, disempowering enemy pieces. Forking two chesspieces with a knight seems tame by comparison.

Constructing pieces like Larry's seemed too difficult, but I followed another of Larry's suggestions to make the board shown here. The pieces are made out of poker chips, which Larry got from someplace called "rolco" (they don't seem to be on the web). He had them in all colors, and they nest well; so each piece is a black or white cap with a colored sticker in the center, surmounting a stack of poker chips in the colors to indicate its current powers. This seems to work well enough and is pretty easy to make. Of course if you're willing to be really austere you could dispense with removable elements altogether, since the information they convey is present on the board anyway.