OWLMAN THE GAME

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IS DOC UP TO THE TASK?

Below this post you will find the current rules of Owlman. At the end of 2010 a change in the rules was made. This was because we discovered a winning strategy for Doc under the original rules. Although my hunch had been that the new ruling might tip the balance in favour of Owlman, this has not yet been demonstrated on Super Duper Games. Of the last ten games played there, five were won by Doc; five by Owlman.

The basic issue relevant to this rule change is that of repetition of position. This issue, of course, has an impact on many games, Chess and Go, included. Many games (such as Chess) have no problem surviving the rulings necessary. Other games (such as Go) may even be enhanced by these rulings. Nevertheless many modern games, if they are to be played at a high standard of proficiency, are designed so that repetition is avoided altogether.

It has been said many times that if Chess were a newly invented games, no-one would put up with such a demanding set of rules. However, I am not so sure the repetition rule itself is really such a bugbear. After all, if you are playing at a high level, this is the least of your worries. And if you're playing casually, and are in a loop, you would either vary yourself, or offer your opponent a draw. (If he was perverse enough to refuse the draw- but still not vary- then you might do better finding another opponent.)

In Owlman itself, positions often occur where Owlman's best move is to attack a particular helper, whereupon Doc's best option is to move it, whereupon Owlman's best move is to attack it again- and then Doc does best to move it back where it started! The result of this equilibrium, without any ruling, would- if neither player wanted to risk a sub optimal move- be a never ending (drawn) game. This is a problem in Owlman because it happens quite frequently. Formerly it was effectively Owlman who was forced to play sub optimal moves when this occurred- as Doc could demand that he DIDN'T repeat a position. As explained below, however, it became clear that this enabled Doc to achieve a long drawn out, and rather boring, win.

The new rules favour Owlman instead. Now there is no rule which prevents

repetition, merely a requirement that Doc win before 'nightfall (ie on his 49th move or earlier). The effect is to force Doc to avoid repetition, which means that HE will have to play sub standard moves sometimes (sub standard that is compared to the proscribed repetition). While this does not seem to allow Owlman to win by use of a clear cut strategy, such as can be boiled down to a few principles, nevertheless, it does make the game very challenging for Doc. If Owlman plays with any verve, Doc's helpers will have run screaming from the woods in next to no time!! Doc, I think, needs to figure out a puzzle- like strategy to inch forward while keeping a sufficient number of advancing helpers on board.
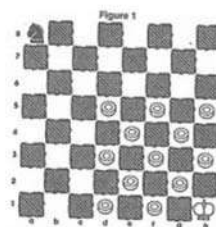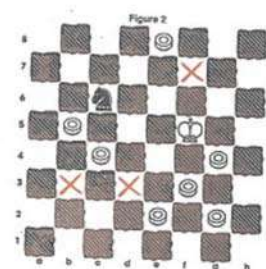
Tricky, but difficult! On the other hand, Doc is still winning games. Either I'm wrong or Owlman isn't swooping as freely (and frighteningly) as he should!

Posted by Andrew Perkis at 2:42 PM   5 comments:

Current Rules for play on SDG

(See Previous Posts for Details re Sightings of the Owlman etc)

RULES, EQUIPMENT, AND SETUP
The game can be played using pieces from a chess and checkers set. The dark squares on the board represent the trees of Mawnan wood; pieces move between the trees on the light squares. The setup for play is shown in Fig.1. Doc is represented by the white chess king, and his helpers are the 12 white checkers. A black knight represents Owlman (although this can be replaced by a suitably sized ornamental owl with a felt base if one is available).
At the start of play, Doc surveys the woods from h1 (the church tower). Owlman is about to advance through the woods from a8 (his secret lair). Owlman's main objectiveis to frighten all of Doc's helpers out of the woods. Doc aims to reach the Owlman's lair, along with one of his helpers, who will help him set up his "cryptozoological" camera. (See "End of Game" for details of other winning objectives.)
PLAYWhite moves first. Thereafter moves alternate with no passing. All pieces (both White and Black) may make a 'step' move to any adjoining

white square- the move of a King in Checkers. Owlman (unlike Doc or his helpers) may instead make a 'swoop' move from corner to opposite corner of a 4x2 rectangle- a kind of elongated knight move. (The 'Fairy Chess' piece with this move is usually called a Camel.) Owlman may jump over other pieces while making a swoop.

The squares marked with an 'X' in Figure 2 are those to which Owlman can move by swoop. Owlman can also make a 'super swoop'. This is dealt with under 'captures' below.

There is no white square to which a piece may not move- with the exception of h1. Owlman may play onto this square, but, after the square has been vacated by Doc, it may not be played onto by White again.

CAPTURES

Only Owlman can make captures. The one case where Owlman may capture Doc is if Doc still occupies h1 when Owlman moves onto that square, either by normal move or by swoop move. Otherwise, Owlman can only capture helpers, and can only do so with a step move, not a swoop move. Whenever Owlman advances by making a step move towards a helper, he instills such terror that the poor helper immediately runs out of the woods and plays no further part in the game. Figure 2 clarifies these captures. Here Owlman can advance to d5 and capture f3, or to d7 and capture e8. The helper on b5, however, cannot be captured.

One other method of capture is possible for Owlman, and that is by super swoop. A super swoop may only be made when Owlman is placed on h1 (the church tower). From here he may super swoop to any square occupied by a helper. The helper is then captured and removed from the board. From h1 Owlman must make a super swoop move; other move types from the church tower are not permitted.

END OF GAME

The game ends as a win for White if Doc reaches a8 and has also moved a helper to b7. Doc also wins (though this happens but rarely) if a trapped Owlman is unable to move on his turn of play. Owlman wins if he either captures Doc or all of Doc's helpers. IF DOC HAS NOT ACHIEVED HIS OBJECTIVE BY NIGHTFALL (IE AFTER HIS 49TH MOVE) THEN OWLMAN IS THE WINNER.

49 Move Rule

This will come into effect on SDG on 20th Dec. 2010. Under this rule Doc loses if he has not achieved his objective by his 49th move. There are now no rules concerning repetition.

Under the the old rules Doc, it seems had a very long forced win as follows.

*to never push from c4 to b5 or e6 to d7 (or to b3/f7) unless this is the only way to avoid material loss-& to move back to c4/e6 asap

*to avoid tactical errors, especially those involving threats to g2

*to keep the minimal fortress position in mind, and guide the game towards it (or a better position if possible) while avoiding any losing zugzwangs

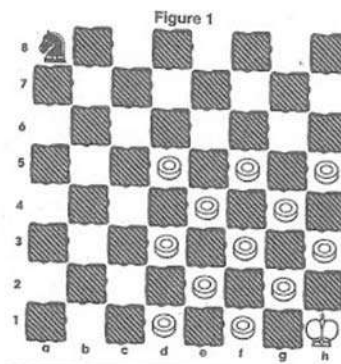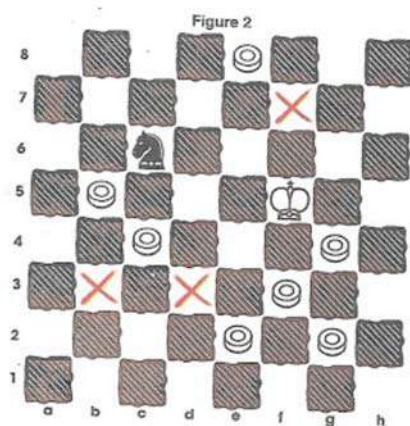*exploit the repetition rule (if necessary) to win the ending that ensues

The minimal fortress position is as follows: Helpers at c4, e2,e6,f1,g4 & h3. With Doc at g2 you can play through to see how Doc can win (unless Owlman is at d3, f3 or f5 and it is Doc to play).

Comments welcome.

Monday, November 1, 2010

OWLMAN - THE GAME

OWLMAN
This game has already received reasonably thorough testing. However, despite being a relatively simple two player game of unequal forces, it is, as yet, not at all clear who should win with best play. Among players who have already played a few games, Owlman will usually have the better chances. This is because the demands of good play for his opponent- Doc- are much greater. Mastery of short term tactics is all that is required to play the Owlman side well. To play the Doc side well, on the other hand, requires both avoidance of tactical errors and long term planning also.

Comments are welcome, especially with regard to opening systems and any advances in solving the game. My own hunch is that Doc should win with best play but I do not think this is going to be proved or disproved anytime soon. However, if the game is ever solved, then a more comlex version on a 10 x 10 board is waiting in the wings ...

THE SIGHTINGS

Mawnan village, in Cornwall, southwest England, attained worldwide fame in the 1970s following several reported sightings of a mysterious 'Owlman'- a creature rather similar to the 'Mothman' that was sighted a few years earlier in the Point Pleasant area of West Virginia. The first reported apearance of the Owlman- a mysterious half-man, half-bird creature- occurred when two young girls on holiday in Cornwall hard "funny noises" coming from somewhere above them. Looking up to see what could be making the sound, they were startled by the grotesque spectacle of a winged figure hovering over the church tower. Through the years up to 1995, a number of sightings were reported, mostly on the edge of the woods, close to St Masnan's Church.

One observer described Owlman as "a monstrous man-bird thing. It was the size of a man, with a ghastly face, a wide mouth, glowing eyes and pointed ears... it saw me and arose, floating towards me. I just screamed and then turned and ran for my life. Now I have to rethink my world view entirely."

Tony 'Doc' Shiels is the author of How to be a Psychic Superstar. He has been described by The Western Morning News as "the noted surrealist artist, writer, conjurer and monster hunte, who lived for many years at Ponsanooth, near Falmouth." Throughout the years of Owlman's appearances, Shiels was frequently consulted about the apparition. He carried out some of his own investigations in an attempt to uncover the secret of the Owlman. Although Doc never did solve the mystery, in the game- which is inspired by his quest- he gets a second chance.

RULES
EQUIPMENT AND SETUP

The game can be played using pieces from a chess and checkers set. The dark squares on the board represent the trees of Mawnan wood; pieces move between the trees on the light squares. The setup for play is shown in Fig.1. Doc is represented by the white chess king, and his helpers are the 12 white checkers. A black knight represents Owlman (although this can be replaced by a suitably sized ornamental owl with a felt base if one is available).

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PLAY

White moves first. Thereafter moves alternate with no passing.

All pieces (both White and Black) may make a 'step' move to any adjoining white square- the move of a King in Checkers. Owlman (unlike Doc or his helpers) may instead make a 'swoop' move from corner to opposite corner of a 4x2 rectangle- a kind of elongated knight move. (The 'Fairy Chess' piece with this move is usually called a Camel.) Owlman may jump over other pieces while making a swoop.

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REPETITION OF POSITION

Whenever a position occurs that has occurred at least once before (mostly as a

simple back-and-forth repetition), White has the option to demand that Owlman vary his play from that when the position occurred previously.

END OF GAME
The game ends as a win for White if Doc reaches a8 and can also move a helper to b7. Doc also wins (though this happens but rarely) if a trapped Owlman is unable to move on his turn of play. Owlman wins if he either captures Doc or all of Doc's helpers.
  Quotes all courtesy of The Western Morning News

EXAMPLES OF PLAY
Sample Opening
1.d3-c4   a8-b7(xd5)
2.f5-e6   b7-c6(xd5)
3.d1-c2   c6-d5(xf3)
4.h5-g6 (Fig.3)
At this point ....d5-e4 (xg2) would, by clearing
a path for Doc, favor White.
4 ...   d5-c8
5.e6-d7   c8-f7
6.c4-b5   f7-e4 (Fig. 4)
Forking c2 and g6, just as 4....d5-e4 would
have done, but without capturing the g2
helper- which blocks Doc in.
7.g2-f3   e4-d3 (Fig.3)
Now White must play Dg2, or Owlman moves
to g2 himself and captures Doc on the next turn.
Then Owlman can decide whether to capture the
b5 or the g6 helper. Chances seem
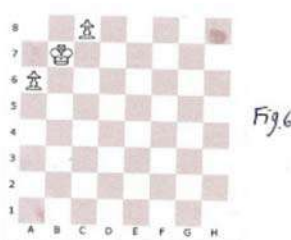about even.

ENDINGS
Endings are often very close. Here are three examples of endgame situations.

(i) The formation in Fig.6 wins for White, no matter where Owlman is placed, unless he is already on h1 and has the next turn. Then a super swoop, capturing one of he two helpers, will win: 1 ...   h1 x a6/ 2.c8-d7 (forced)   a6-b5! (the only way to win) 3.d7-c6 b5-e4/ 4.c6-d7   e4-f5/ 5.d7-c6   f5-g2/ 6.c6-d7 g2-h1 (and captures the helper next turn).

(ii) Without the h3 helper, Owlman, to play, can win in the Fig.7 position. After 1 ... h1 x b5/ 2.c4-d5 b5-e4/ 3.d5-c4 e4-f1/ 4.c4-d5 f1-g2/ 5.d5-c4 g2-h1 Owlman can capture the remaining helper. However (also without the h3 helper) Owlman would lose in the position after 1 ... h1 x b5 if it were his turn to play. No matter

where owlman moves, SWhite's helper will b able to reach a6 or c6 after two more moves- and then continue to b7. Therefore, with the helper at h3, after 1 ... h1 x b5, White wins by simply making a waiting move with 2.h3-g4.

(iii) In this fairly rare ending (Fig.8), White wins if it is his turn, but but could not do so without the rule that allows him to ask Owlman to play a different move in a position that has occurred before. Without this rule the game would not end! As it is, the game might continue: 1.c8-d7 b7-a4/ 2.d7-c8 a4-b7/ 3.c8-d7 b7-c6/ 4.d7-c8 c6-b7. Eventually Owman must move from b7 to a square he has been to before, when White can require him to vary and not return to b7. White will then be able to play c8-b7, winning.

Fig.3

Fig.4

Fig.5

Fig.6

Fig.7

Fig.8

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