MORELLI

A game of skill for two players by **Richard Moxham**

' "Is it true that there is an Indian chess game with sixty pieces on each side?"
"It's possible," Oliveira said. "The infinite game."
"The one who conquers the centre wins." '

Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*, Chapter 154

1) EQUIPMENT

1.1 The 120 pieces posited by Cortázar's Morelli would require, at this game, a 31 x 31 matrix – which is rather closer to infinity than most of us would care to venture. 13 x 13 seems a much more reasonable proposition. The board [Fig 1] is coloured, in the concentric manner of a square archery target, with the successive shades of the rainbow: Red (outermost band, 48 cells) through to Violet (single cell – the Centre).


FIG 1
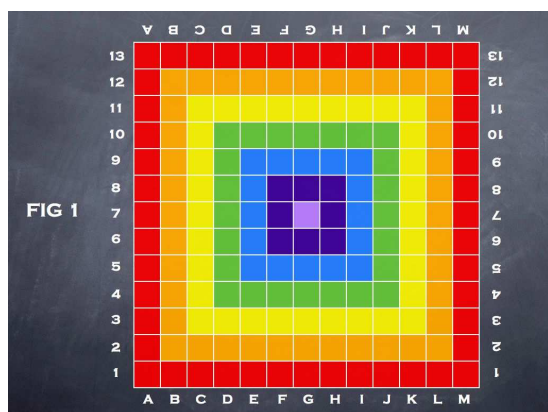
1.2 There are 48 reversible Black/White stones – plain, circular, and small enough to fit within a cell on the board.

1.3 Also 2 towers, identical to the stones in cross-section but perceptibly taller and each of a single colour – one Black, one White.

2) SETTING UP

2.1 At the beginning of the game, Black and White each have 24 stones on the board.

2.2 There are three possible start modes for the 48 stones: 'Facing' [Fig 2], 'Adjacent' [Fig 3] and 'Free' [Fig 4].

FIG 2

FIG 3

FIG 4
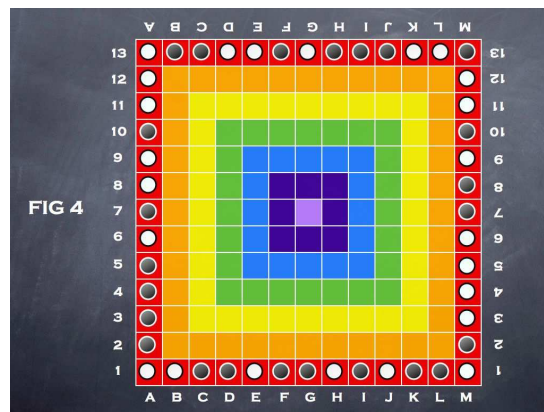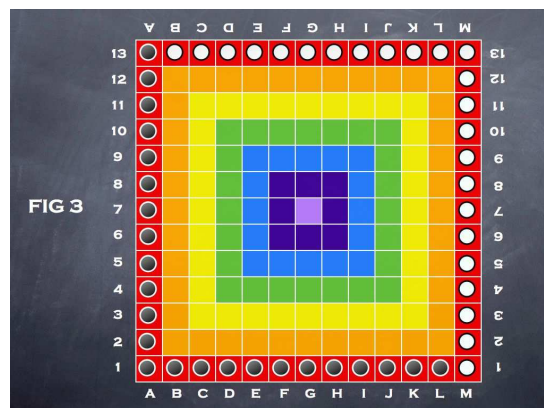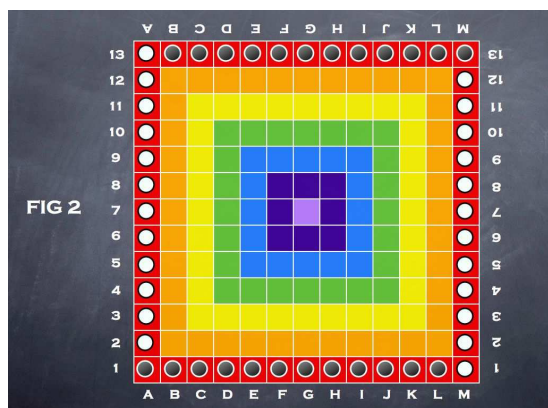
2.3 Diagrams of the board are presented, by convention, from Black's point of view, with the files reading 'A' to 'M' from left to right, and the ranks '1' to '13' from bottom to top. [NB: In both Facing and Adjacent modes, the stone in the bottom right (M1) corner should be White.]

2.4 After deciding by any mutually acceptable means who is to be Black, the players determine in which start mode to set the board.

2.5 For this purpose, each conceals two stones in his closed fists, distributed as follows according to his preference: if he favours the Adjacent mode, both in the left hand (mnemonic: L-shaped = **L**eft); if Facing, both in the right hand (**R**homboid = **R**ight); if Free, one in each hand. The players then reveal their choices simultaneously. If the choices coincide, the start mode has been established by agreement; if they differ, the *third* mode becomes operative by default.

2.6 Where the Free mode is to apply, the board is set by the players' placing their stones alternately in cells anywhere on the Red band, Black first placing one, then White two (which need not be adjacent either to Black's stone or to each other), then Black two more, and so on, two by two, until Black makes the final placement of a single stone.

3) WINNING

3.1 The winner at **Morelli** is the player whose tower occupies the Centre at the moment when the game ends.

3.2 At the start of the game the Centre is vacant, but it may in the course of play be captured by either Black or White and occupied by the tower of the captor's colour.

3.3 Once such a capture has occurred, the Centre (which can never again be unoccupied) may subsequently change hands any number of times from Black to White or vice versa.

3.4 If it remains vacant to the end, the game is drawn.

4) MOVING

4.1 Players take turns to move one stone of their own colour, Black having the first move.

4.2 A stone may move any distance and in any direction along an orthogonal or diagonal line, subject only to the following restrictions:

> **4.2.1** It must come to rest upon a coloured band nearer the Centre than the band on which it stood before the move (though it may cross an axis of the board in so doing) [Figs 5-6].

FIG 5

FIG 6
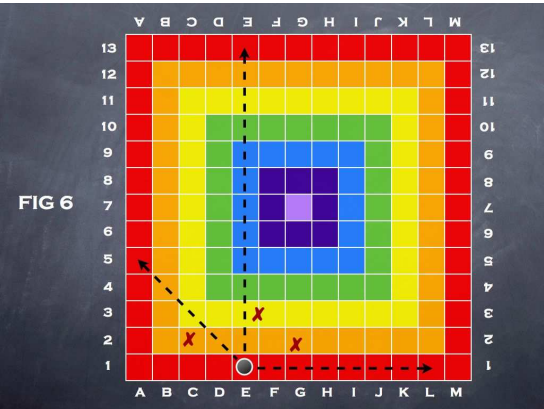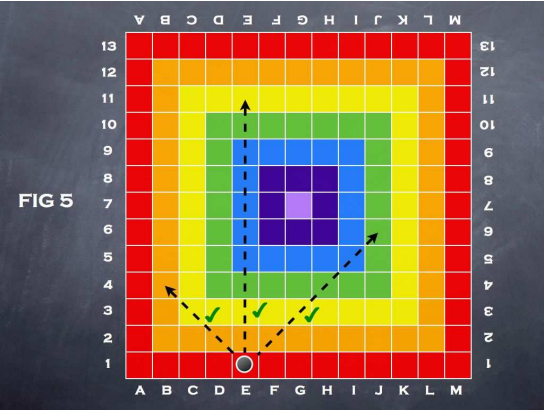
> **4.2.2** It cannot pass through, leap, or land upon any cell occupied by a friendly or hostile stone.
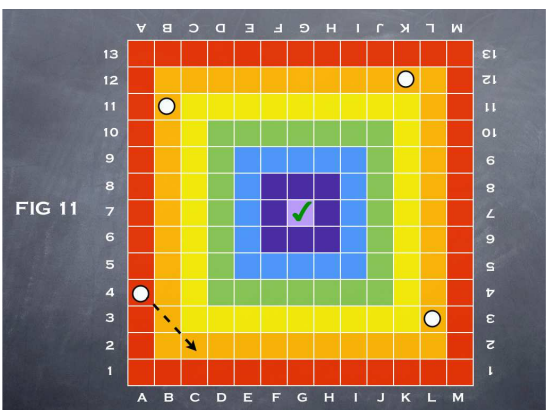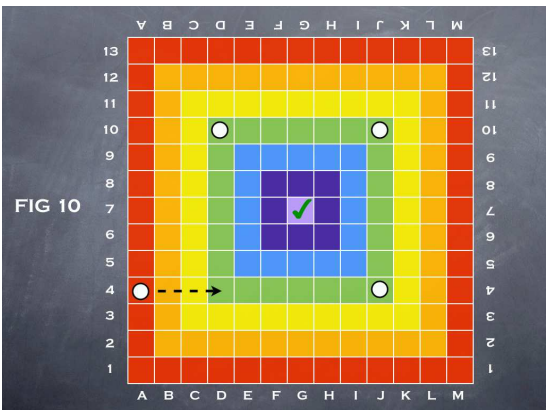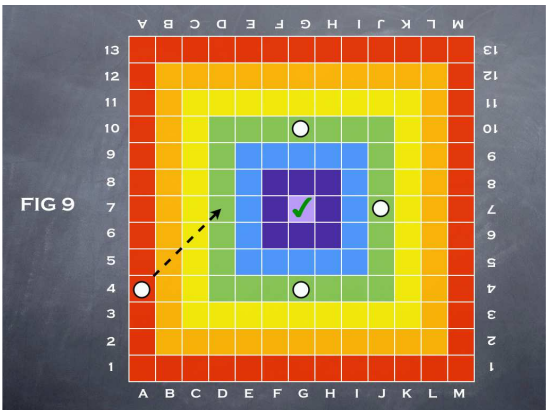
> **4.2.3** It can pass through the Centre while the latter is still vacant, but not once it is occupied [Figs 7-8].

FIG 7

FIG 8
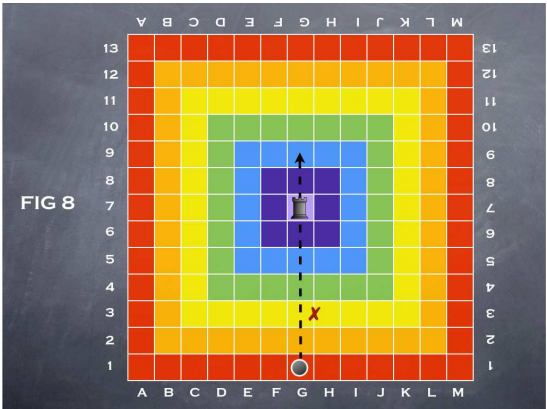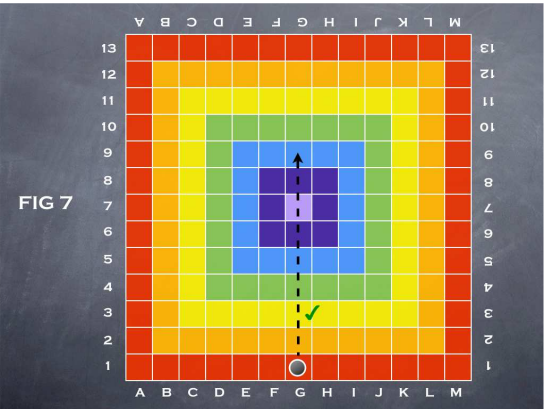
> **4.2.4** It cannot in any circumstances land upon the Centre.

5) OCCUPYING THE CENTRE

5.1 When a player's move completes an arrangement of four of his own stones possessing fourth-order rotational symmetry about the Centre (rule of thumb: all on the same colour-band and evenly spaced) [Figs 9-11], he may install his tower, evicting that of his opponent if applicable.


FIG 9

FIG 10

FIG 11

Rules © Richard Moxham 2013. Rulebook © Richard Moxham and Néstor Romeral Andrés 2013. Art by Richard Moxham.

5.2 This opportunity expires at the end of the turn which gave rise to it, and cannot be exploited retrospectively even if the relevant position has survived.

5.3 The Centre cannot change hands as a result of a configuration generated in the course of setting up the Free start mode.

5.4 There is no penalty for overlooking or refusing an available occupation of the Centre.

6) CAPTURING

6.1 Capture in **Morelli** is custodian capture. That is, it takes place when a moving stone comes to rest next to an adverse stone whose immediate neighbour on the opposite side, either orthogonally or diagonally, is a stone (*not* a tower) also belonging to the mover [Fig 12].

FIG 12
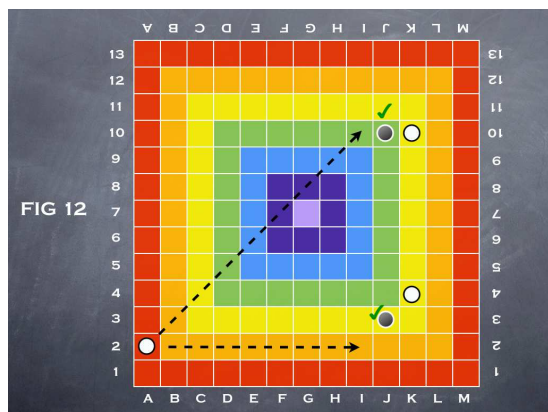
6.2 When this occurs, the adverse stone is not removed from the board but defects to the captor and changes colour accordingly.

6.3 Like an occupation of the Centre, a capture must be the immediate result of an active move by the captor during open play. Hence:

**6.3.1** Captures cannot be implemented retrospectively.

6.3.2 Capture can never occur as a result of a configuration generated in the course of setting up the Free start mode.

6.3.3 Stones on the Red band are at all times immune from capture (consequence of **6.3.2** and **4.2.1**).

**6.3.4** A stone may be inserted with impunity between adverse stones already in place [Fig 13].

FIG 13
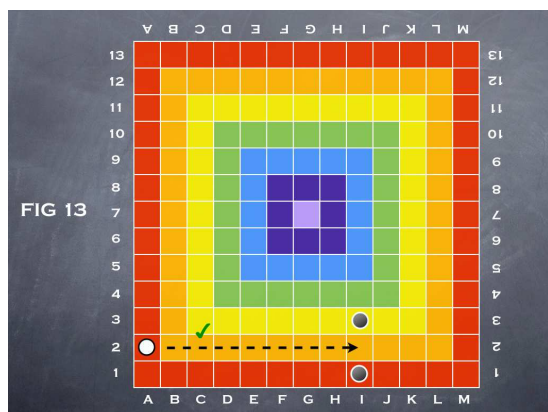
6.4 Where a single move directly completes the conditions for two or more captures, all of these may be implemented [Fig 14].


FIG 14
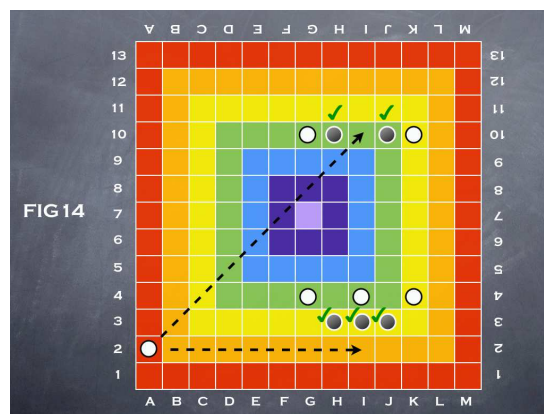
6.5 Where a single move directly completes the conditions for any number of captures, and also for an occupation of the Centre, all of these may be implemented [Fig 15].

FIG 15
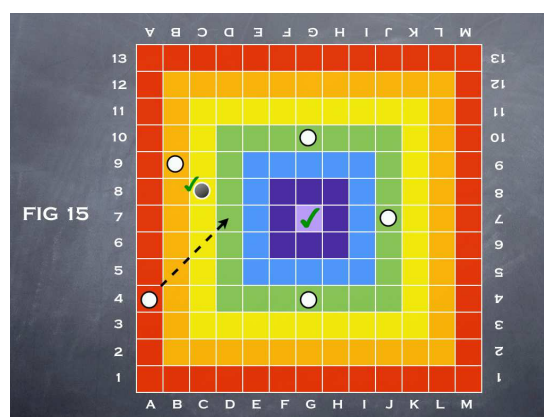
6.6 Where a captured stone completes, by virtue of changing colour, the conditions for an occupation of the Centre, the occupation may be implemented along with the capture [Fig 16].

FIG 16
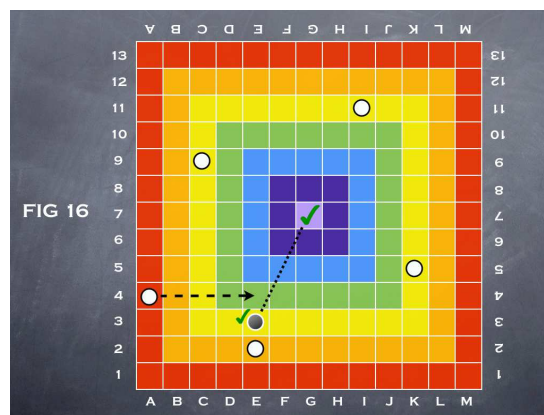
6.7 ['Ripple Rule'] However, where a captured stone completes, by virtue of changing colour, what would otherwise be the conditions for the capture of a further stone, that secondary capture is *not* permissible [Fig 17].

FIG 17
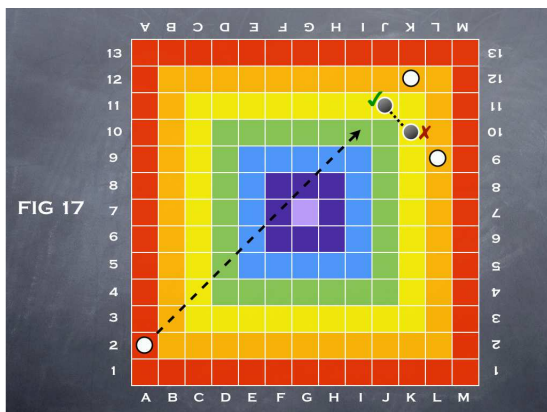
6.8 There is no penalty for overlooking or refusing an available capture.

7) ENDING

7.1 The game ends when a player, *on his turn*, has no legal move – or at any earlier moment by agreement between the players.

Figs 18 and 19 illustrate two variations of a fairly typical endgame.

In Fig 18 Black (to play) can either stretch his game out for two more moves [e.g. G10 & F9] or end it graciously in one [J9]. Either way, he has no means of dislodging the White tower, so White holds on for the win.

FIG 18
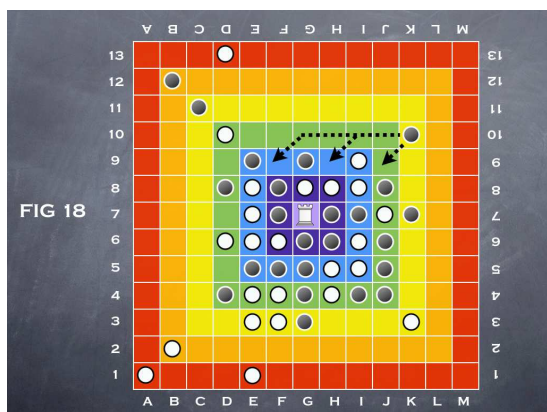
In Fig 19, the position (Black again to play) is identical – except that now *his* tower occupies the Centre. White has a win in two [F11 & F9], but if play proceeds as shown [Black J9] the decisive second move will never be made.
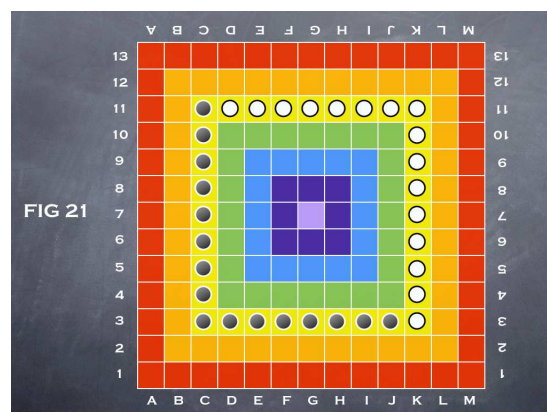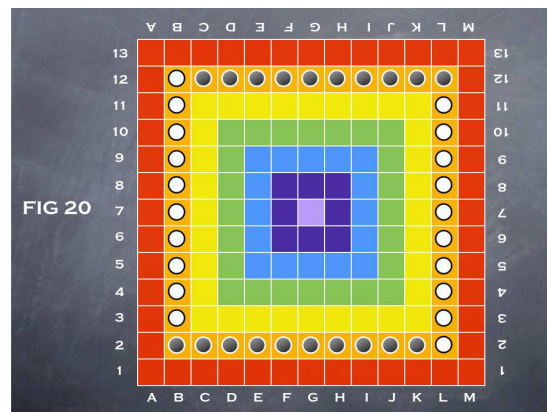

FIG 19
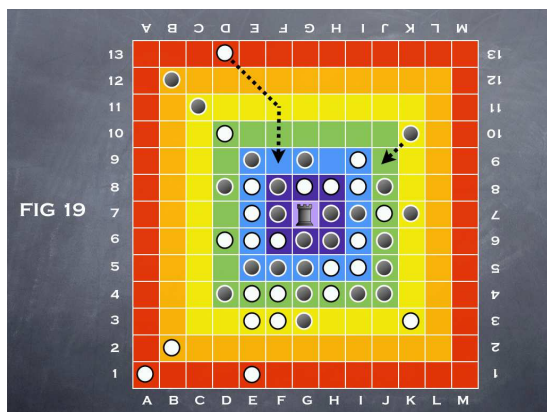
It should be noted, however, that Black must manage things in precisely this manner, closing out his game by the fastest route. If instead he opts for the flamboyant two-move finish [e.g. G10 & F9], stealing White's target cell, then a slight variation from the

shown line [e.g. F11 & E10] gives White a diagonal capture on that second move which Black has now failed to deny him – and a win with the very last play of the game.

8) MORELLI ON SMALLER BOARDS

8.1 Newcomers to **Morelli** may find it helpful in the first instance to acquaint themselves with the game on a playing area of less than regulation size. A set-up on the orange band, with 20 instead of 24 stones per player [Fig 20], gives a game which, while still far from trivial, is somewhat easier to manage strategically – and even a start on yellow with 16 stones each [Fig 21] is useful as a means to mastering the mechanisms of play. Neither variant necessitates any modification of the rules.

FIG 20

FIG 21