

History of Hnefatafl

The board game called Hnefatafl is often mentioned in the Viking sagas. The game involves strategies like those found in the game of chess, and Norse noblemen often boasted about their skills in this game. In one Scandinavian poem, for example, one brother brags to another that he is a more handy man and can play Hnefatafl better than the other. Accomplishments in Hnefatafl were valued just as highly as skills in the martial arts. The word “hnefi” means king, and “tafl” means board. Hnefatafl was played in Scandinavia before 400 A.D. and was carried by the Vikings to Greenland, Iceland, Ireland, Britain, Wales and even the Ukraine. The Saxons had their own version of the game.

Hnefatafl was played on odd-sized boards that ranged in size from 7 x 7 to 19 x 19. The boards were made of wood, with holes drilled in the center of each playing square, and the playing pieces were pegged to make them easy to store. Some boards, instead of being made of wood, were just marked out in charcoal or scratched onto the surfaces of rock. Sometimes the game was played with dice that indicated how far a piece could move or whether it could move at all. Most versions of Hnefatafl do not use dice at all, however, which makes it a true game of skill.

The object of Hnefatafl is different for each of the two players in the game. One side plays the king and his 8 defenders, while the other side plays the 16 attackers. The object of the king and his defenders is for the king to get from the center of the board to one of the four corners of the board without being captured. The object of the attackers is to capture the king and his defenders before they get to the board's corners.

Rules of Hnefatafl

Materials needed

9 x 9 board

1 yellow stone or button (king)

8 red stones or buttons (defenders)

16 blue stones or buttons (attackers)

Setting up the game

1. Two players play the game. One player plays the king's side and his defenders. The other player plays the attackers. There are 8 defenders and 16 attackers.
2. To set up the game, place the king in the center of the board, and surround him with his defenders on the red spaces. Set up the attackers on the blue spaces.

Object of the game

1. The goal of the king and his defenders is for the king to get from the center of the board to one of the four corners of the board without being captured.
2. The goal of the attackers is to capture the king and his defenders before they get to the board's corners.

Playing the game

1. The center square is called the Throne, and the four corners are Hostile Spaces. Only the king may occupy these squares. The king can re-enter the Throne anytime he wishes. **Other pieces can go past the Throne only when it is empty.**
2. The goal for the king's side is to move the king to any of the 4 Hostile corner squares. This means the king has escaped, and his side wins. The attackers win if they capture the king before he escapes.
3. The attackers' side moves first. All pieces move one square at a time, either up or down, or sideways, but NOT diagonally.

4. A player is captured if he is sandwiched between enemy pieces (Situation 1) or between an enemy piece and a Hostile Corner Square (Situation 3).

A piece is captured ONLY IF THE TRAP IS COMPLETED BY THE ENEMY! A piece can move itself, therefore, between 2 enemies and not be captured. (Situation 2.)

A captured piece is removed from the board. The king can also capture attackers.

●	●	●
---	---	---

Situation 1: The last piece to move in place is the left (blue) Attacker. The (red) Defender is sandwiched and removed from the board.

Situation 2: The last piece to move in place is the red (Defender). Since the Defender sandwiched himself, he is safe from the Attackers.

HOSTILE CORNER SQUARE	●	●
-----------------------------	---	---

Situation 3: The last piece to move in place is the (blue) Defender. Since the (red) Attacker is between a Hostile Square (corner square) and an enemy, he is sandwiched and removed from the board.

5. The king can be captured using the same strategies discussed in Rule #4 above, EXCEPT when he is on the Throne or on one of the 4 red squares surrounding the Throne.

	Attacker	
Attacker	KING	Attacker
	Attacker	

Situation 4: The King is on the throne. In order to be captured, he must be surrounded north, south, east and west on the red squares immediately around the throne.

To capture the king while he is on the Throne, the attackers must surround him on all 4 “compass” sides by occupying the 4 red squares surrounding the Throne (Situation 4).

When the king stands on one of the 4 red squares surrounding the Throne, the attackers can capture the king only if they occupy the “compass” squares surrounding the king on 3 sides, but obviously not the Throne square, since only the king can occupy that spot (Situation 5).

	Attacker	
	KING	
Attacker		Attacker

Situation 5: The King is on one of the red squares around the throne. In order to be captured, he must be surrounded on 3 sides (3 red squares).

6. The edges of the board count as Hostile squares for the purpose of sandwiching the king. This means the Attackers need only 3 pieces to capture the king on the edge of the board (Situation 6).

Attacker (Edge)	KING (Edge)	Attacker (Edge)
	Attacker	

Situation 6: If the King is on the edge of the board and becomes surrounded on 3 sides by Attackers, he can be captured because there is no place for him to move!

7. The corner squares count as Hostile squares for the purpose of sandwiching the king, even though the king is allowed to enter the Hostile Square **under other circumstances**. Only 2 pieces are needed to sandwich the king if he is next to a corner square (Situation 7).

HOSTILE CORNER SQUARE	KING (Edge)	Attacker (Edge)
(Edge)	Attacker	
(Edge)		
(Edge)		

Situation 7: If the King is next to a Hostile Corner Square, he can be prevented from entering it when the Attackers form a right-angle sandwich.

8. The king's side loses if the king can no longer move safely.
9. If the king sees that the path is clear to one of the 4 corners spaces on his next move, he has to warn the Attackers by saying "Escape" or "Check."
10. If the Attacker sees that the king can be captured on the next move, he has to warn the king by saying, "Watch your king" or "Check."

