

History of “The Royal Game of Ur”

In the 1920s, a man named Sir Leonard Wooley was excavating (digging) in the ancient city of Ur, located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Ur is in the land that we once called Babylon, but now call Iraq. Sir Wooley discovered some ancient board games in the tombs of the city of Ur. These board games, which date back some 4,500 years, are believed to be the oldest board games found anywhere in the world!

The playing boards were made of wood and were decorated with shells carved with lapis lazuli (blue semi-precious stones) and limestone. These boards were probably played by kings. The same game was played by commoners, but they scratched the designs into paving stones, since they couldn't afford these materials. The original playing pieces were seven stones with five black dots on them, and seven stones with five white dots on them.

When we play the modern version of the game, we flip ordinary coins as dice, but in ancient times, the dice were shaped like pyramids. One corner was shaved flat, and the other four corners were decorated in some way to make them stand out. When the pyramid dice were thrown, they came up as either “marked” or “unmarked.” It is interesting to note that one of the kings of Ur was Ur-Nammu, who rebuilt the city and a spectacular building called the Ziggurat. The Ziggurat is a pyramid-shaped temple.

Rules for “The Royal Game of Ur”

Materials needed

Hopscotch-like board

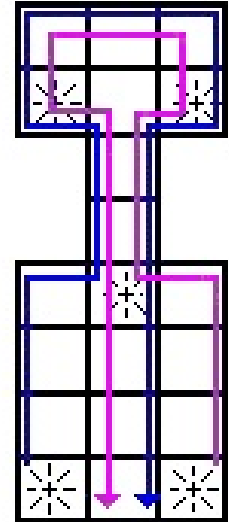
7 light-colored stones or buttons

7 dark-colored stones or buttons

3 coins of the same value

Objective of the game

The object of the game is to be the first player to move all 7 of your stones around the board on your side of the board. (See illustration to right.) The start square is the bottom **rosette** for each player. Your stones exit between these two rosettes.



Playing the game

1. Each player takes 7 playing pieces. One player takes 7 light stones, and the other player takes 7 dark stones.
2. Use 3 pennies to determine who goes first. Shake and toss the pennies, then count the “heads up.” The most “heads up” determines who goes first.
3. The board is empty when you first start playing. You must throw 4 points or 5 points to begin any stone on its path. Here’s how you count points:
 - 3 “heads up” = 5 points and the right to take another turn
 - 3 “heads down” = 4 points and the right take another turn
 - 2 “heads down” = 0 points and play passes to your opponent
 - 1 “heads down” = 1 point and play passes to your opponent
4. If you have stones on the board, you can move them one square along your path for each point you earn when you toss the coins.
5. Unless your stone is on one of the **5 rosettes, the exit square, or the center line of the board**, you may be attacked by your opponent *if that opponent is going in the same direction as your stone* and lands on your square. In this case, your stone is removed from the board, and you have to restart that stone.

6. You may have as many stones on the board as you wish. Each square, EXCEPT for the **rosette squares** and the **exit square** (between the 2 starting rosettes), may have ONLY one stone at a time on it.
7. The rosette squares and the exit square are **refuges** (safe spots): several stones of different colors may sit there without any danger.
8. To make it completely around the board, there are 2 requirements. First, each stone must reach the exit square. Secondly, a throw of 4 or 5 points must be thrown.
9. The winner is the first player who moves all of his or her stones around the board and leaves the board through the exit square.

