



CHES
WATER
TRANSFORMING TRADITION

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WHERE THE TIMELESS GAME MEETS BOUNDLESS IMAGINATION

Step into a world where the chess board comes alive—not just with knights and kings, but with wild new rules, never-before-seen pieces, and boards that bend the boundaries of the game as we know it! **Chess Variants: Transforming Tradition** takes you on a vibrant journey through the centuries-long story of chess—from its mysterious beginnings to today's ever-expanding universe of creative spinoffs.

**REPLAYING
THE GAME
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TRAVEL THROUGH TIME

on our dynamic timeline showcasing the game's evolution—from ancient origins and cross-continental transformations to the rise of the modern Staunton set and today's standard rules. Discover how different cultures made the game their own and gave rise to the rich tapestry of chess we know (and love) today.

INTO THE VARIANT ZONE

At the heart of the gallery, explore a maze of possibilities where tradition meets twist! Each interactive section dives into different types of chess variants—like wild starting positions, quirky new pieces, unusual endgame rules, strange board shapes (Triangles?! Circles?!), multiplayer madness, and even games that leave your fate up to chance.

**A HISTORY
OF THE
DIFFERENT
VARIETIES
OF CHESS
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**DISCOVER THE
STORIES
BEHIND THESE
IMAGINATIVE
CREATIONS**

**THE
DIVERSITY
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WATCH & LEARN

Hear from passionate players, historians, and variant-lovers in short videos sprinkled throughout the space. They'll guide you through gameplay, offer tips, and share why they fell in love with these chess offshoots.

PLAY YOUR WAY

Take a seat, move a piece, and dive into the action. Whether you're a grandmaster or just curious, this exhibition is built for participation. The flexible, open layout means there's always something new going on—tournaments, pop-up lessons, or just casual games with friends and strangers alike.

MEET THE EXPERTS

Featuring insights from top minds like Rick Knowlton, John McCrary, Myron Samsin, Jon Crumiller, and László and Klara Polgar (yes, we're spotlighting their Starchess too!). See rare chess sets from across the ages and boards so unique they'll make your jaw drop.

**THE BOARD
IS YOURS.
MAKE YOUR MOVE.**

Think of the gallery as the ultimate mash-up of a museum, a game lounge, and a time-traveling tournament hall. Whether you're learning your first pawn move or designing your own house rules, this exhibition is all about discovery, creativity, and FUN. Pick your favorite variant—or invent your own.

-Shannon Bailey, Chief Curator, World Chess Hall of Fame & Galleries

**TRY YOUR HAND
LEARN
THE RULES**

OUT THE GAME

One of the wonderful things about chess is that it is like a time machine. Play through a game of Paul Morphy or François-André Danican Philidor, and you are transported to the year 1858 or 1783. The position on their board then is on yours to the last detail, and their presence along with it is almost real. The dial on the machine can be turned some more, to the year 1620 or 1475 or 946 or still earlier, and the effect is the same. But the further in time you travel, the more bewildering the world becomes. Go back far enough, and not a word anyone says will be intelligible, even though they insist they are speaking English. You may see two people playing what they call chess while doing things that are completely unrecognizable.

This is simply the way culture works: things change, either quickly or slowly, but also inevitably. Language is an important and instructive model for how this happens. Those long-ago English speakers make no sense to us, but English got from there to here somehow while being intelligible to everyone along the way. It may seem paradoxical, but is in fact not. Languages change by evolving in tiny bits, a new word here, an old one forgotten there, slowly transforming into something else. It is still happening now: the *Oxford English Dictionary's* Word of the Year for 2023 was *rizz*. A few hundred more years of words like *rizz*, and we will be unintelligible to whoever is around then.

Chess evolves in the same fashion. As with language, this stream of small changes is constantly in motion. In Garry Kasparov's day, time increments were almost unheard of, but are expected in every game now. The adjournment after forty moves of play, on the other hand, was commonplace then but incomprehensible to today's digital generation. Another rule change very much in the news is the randomized initial array known as Freestyle Chess or Chess960, which, according to some, will revolutionize the future of the game. Behind all the hoopla, though, is a long history of smaller experiments in shuffling pieces around. For instance, Victorian England saw a vogue for chess games with the positions of knights and bishops switched. The most important rule change in the history of chess is the adoption of long queen and bishop moves in the late 1400s. Even this did not happen in a vacuum. Instead, "Mad Queens Chess," as it was then known, was but one of many variants circulating in medieval Europe that toyed with the rules to a smaller or greater extent, and it cannot be understood without reference to them.

The starting point for these variants was the standard set of rules imported into Europe around the turn of the millennium from the Islamic caliphates to the south and east. This standard ruleset featured an 8x8 gridded board, with eight pawns and eight pieces

for each side. Rooks, knights, and kings moved as they do now, but here the similarities end. The game could be won by "bared king"—capturing all the opponent's pieces except for the king—or by stalemating the king, as well as by checkmating him. Also, today's queen was then a *firzan*, or counsellor, which moved and captured one square along any diagonal. The bishop was

instead an elephant, which hopped over one square along any diagonal and captured the same way. Pawns could move only one square ahead and always promoted to a *firzan*, though they at least captured as they do now. Castling and en passant did not exist at all. It made for a decidedly slower game than the modern one, though it also gave the medieval endgame an extraordinarily rich strategic depth owing to its protracted maneuvers.

But people have always liked to monkey around with things. Early European chess manuscripts show abundant evidence of this. By the 1270s, the king's leap was common enough to be mentioned in the Jacobus de Cessolis work *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium sive super ludum scaccorum* (*Book of the customs of men and the duties of nobles or the Book of Chess*). This was a special privilege of the king, which allowed it to jump one square in any direction and even hop over friendly pieces if needed. This privilege could be used only once, on the king's very first move. Here is the obvious germ of the modern rule allowing the king to castle—a surprisingly ancient beginning to something often considered recent. A few years later, in Spain, the *Libro de los Juegos*, commissioned by King Alfonso X of Castile in 1283, was already allowing pawns to move two

squares on their first move, but only until the first capture of the game had been made. In the next century or two, Spanish usage even came to include a version of *en passant*, though the pawn making a double move was the one doing the capturing rather than the other way around. The Cessolis manuscript also notes stalemate as a draw and bared king as no longer a win, corresponding precisely to modern win conditions.

Aside from the ways that pieces moved, their names and physical form were also subject to gradual change long before the current game developed. Queens and bishops had been present on European chess boards since at least the 1100s, as shown by the delightful Lewis chessmen, the somewhat misnamed Charlemagne chessmen, and many others. We also see the beginnings of the European divergence in piece-naming conventions. Spain and Russia preserved an older terminology, perhaps due to their geographic proximity to the caliphates from which they had learned the game. Spain continued to use the Arabic word *alfil*, while the Russians simply translated it directly into "elephant," as it still remains, and kept the Arabic word *ferz* for the queen. French texts, however, had already started using the word "fool" for the bishop by the early thirteenth century and have continued this usage without interruption. As with the regal queens and bishops, we see that some of the features of chess most identified with the shift to modernity in the late 1400s turn out to have a far earlier and more progressive evolution.

Some medieval innovations didn't pan out. The *Libro de los Juegos* notes a variant of chess using dice, where the results of the throw determine which piece must be moved. Another variant in the *Libro* makes captures compulsory. Still more strange is a rule where the king and queen, if neither has moved, may move together and have the result count as one single move. Occasionally, ideas were floated that almost amounted to a new game altogether. Under this heading belong variants such as Courier Chess, a German innovation of the 1100s that featured an 8x12 board and new pieces like the sage, the fool, and the courier. The *Libro* had its own take on expanded chess, with the *Grant Acedrex* having a 12x12 board and such exotic pieces as the unicorn, lion, and giraffe. In Central Asia, Complete Chess achieved a measure of popularity with its 10x11 board, camels, giraffes, and war engines. Some of the pieces introduced in these expanded games had moves very similar to what would become the bishop and queen. In particular, the courier of Courier Chess, crocodile of *Grant Acedrex*, and scout of Complete Chess are exact analogues of the modern bishop. These experiments indicate that chess players were exploring long-range powers of movement hundreds of years before those supposedly dropped from the sky in the 1470s.

The new, expanded games, while lively, unpredictable, and often moderately successful, don't seem to have survived into early modernity. But this is also the way culture works. Some novelties have staying power and some don't, and there is no way to find out which ones do until they are all tried out in the open arena of cultural contest. When this does happen, there is usually a period of time alive with diversity and excitement. Something like this almost certainly took place in the late Middle Ages when conventional chess, the new

About the Author

Myron Samsin is a writer, collector, and historian specializing in chess and board games. He has presented research at numerous academic gatherings, including the Chess Collectors International conference (2023), the Board Games Studies Association (2018), and the Initiativgruppe Königstein chess research colloquium (2003, 2005). His publications include *The Anatomy of Chess*, an anthology on the origins of the game (2003); a series of biographies of Canadian masters featured on Chess Café (2006–2008); and a forthcoming English translation of *Le Jeu d'échecs par correspondance dans le XIXe siècle*. Based in Winnipeg, Canada, he holds postgraduate degrees in philosophy.

expanded games, and what would eventually become Mad Queens Chess co-existed in a restless blend of gaming traditions.

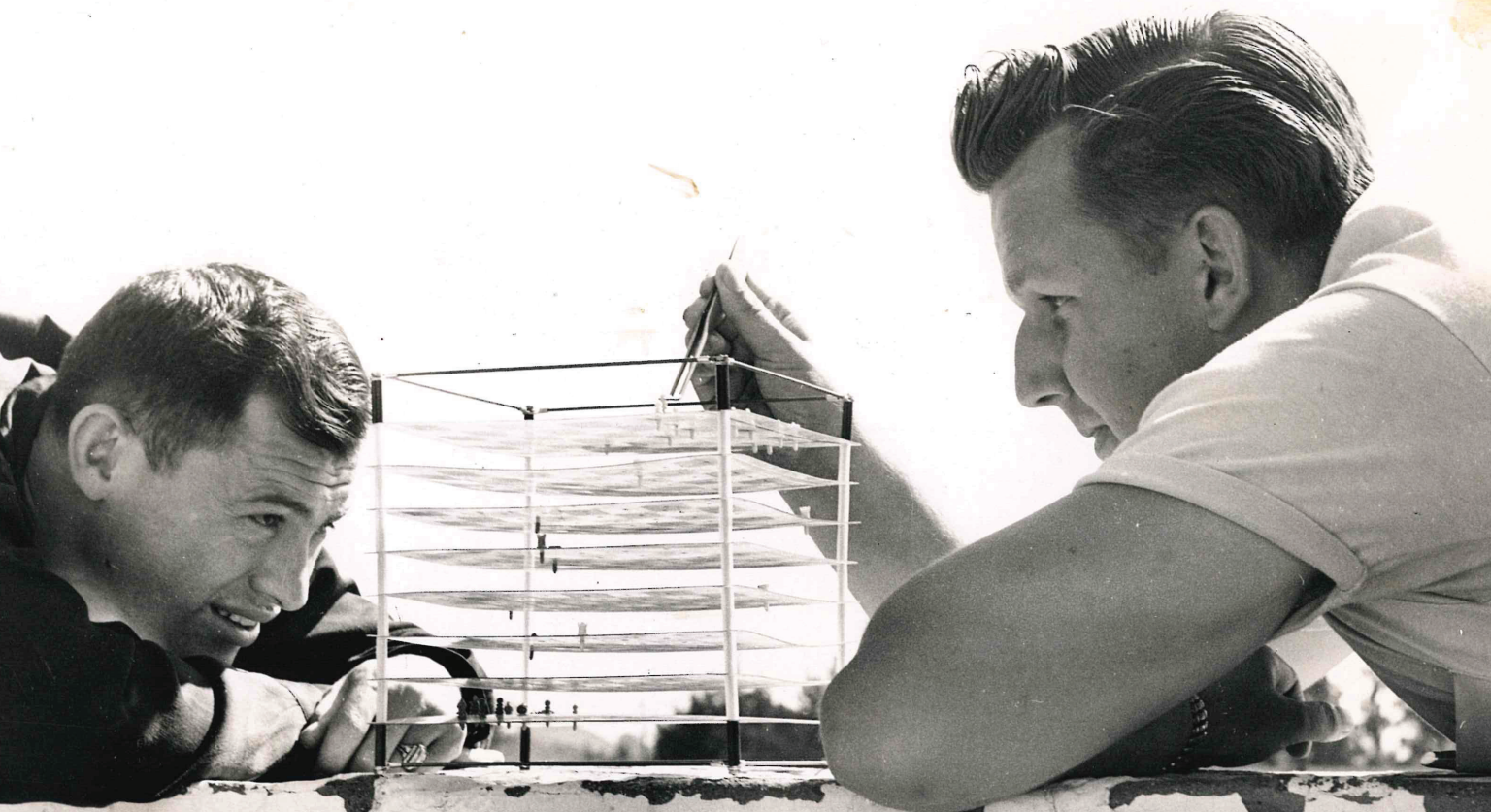
The evidence of medieval texts bears this out. They recognized that the rules of chess had diverged in various regions of Europe according to what local game players found more pleasing. The term *assize* was thus coined to refer to the different codes of play.

We hear of the Lombard, Spanish, and German assizes, as well as Long and Short assizes in England. Being aware of these differences beforehand could be useful in avoiding unpleasant and possibly violent disagreements over a move's legality, particularly in games with money at stake. It was also possible to be fluent in multiple variants. Several chess problem manuscripts of the late 1400s and early 1500s contain positions of both the traditional ruleset and the variant that would become modern chess. None of these texts bother to comment on that fact, indicating that this type of bilingualism was perfectly ordinary and unremarkable at the time. Most notably, the *Repeticion de Amores* of 1497, compiled by Lucena, lumps all its problems together into one large group arranged by the number of pieces in each position. Lucena is completely unconcerned about mixing different games together, beyond a small note by each diagram indicating which ruleset applies—nor does he prefer one to another, except to call the traditional style of play "of the old manner."

But as we know, one of these variants eventually came to displace all the rest. The term *displace* is probably more appropriate here in its connotations than other words such as *replace*. It calls to mind a process of slowly pushing aside, of crowding out; for the advent of modern chess was less a revolution than an act of forgetting, a letting go of the old

ways as they pass into obscurity. From this point of view, it is not medieval chess that is the variant, but rather the thing we all do now which is the offbeat deviation, the anomaly veering off course. We, too, will be displaced and forgotten one day, since we and the strange things we do now are no less contingent in time than the old ways. It is sometimes unsettling, but also a deeply human condition. Chess is indeed a time machine, although time turns out to be the most human thing of all.

THE LIVING HISTORY OF CHESS AND ITS RULES



Left:
Photographer unknown
Two Men
Playing
Three-Dimensional
Chess
1959
Collection
of the
World Chess Hall
of Fame
& Galleries

A HISTORY OF THE DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF CHESS

The earliest known existence of a game that can be unquestionably identified as a form of chess appeared in India around the 6th-7th centuries AD. Unlike older board games, which often used dice and typically had only one or two kinds of pieces, this earliest form of chess had six kinds of pieces, each with its own way to move. It was modeled on the *chaturanga* (“four-limbed”), a traditional form of the Indian army that had four components: chariots, cavalry, elephants, and infantry. This early form of chess and its six kinds of pieces represented the four parts of that army, plus a king and his minister. The moves for each piece in the game reflected the different functions of real-life military units. The chariot-pieces had the same move as our modern rook, moving rapidly along clear lines, like real chariots. The cavalry-pieces moved like our modern knight, able to move faster than infantry, leap over obstacles, and change directions quickly like actual cavalry. The infantry-pieces moved like the modern pawn, slowly forward, attacking only enemy units which were in direct contact with it, like real infantry. The king-piece moved like the modern king, one square in any direction it wanted.

However, the minister (modern queen) could move only one square diagonally at a time. Pawns promoted to minister upon reaching the last rank, but since the minister’s diagonal move limited it to only half the squares on the board, a pawn promoting on d8 was limited to a completely different set of squares than one which promoted on e8. The elephant (modern bishop) moved exactly two squares diagonally. Like the cavalry-piece (knight), the elephant could leap intervening pieces; but could reach only 8 squares of the 64, while a piece with the knight’s move can travel to all 64. Checkmate and stalemate brought victory, and victory could also be achieved by leaving the enemy king bereft of all his forces. *Chaturanga* adopted an 8x8 square board that already existed, having been used for centuries in other board games that were completely unlike this new game. Dice may have been used in some early versions of *chaturanga* to determine which piece could legally move in a turn. But chess, from its beginnings, has primarily been a game without dice, in which a player can move any of his pieces in a turn; thus making strategy the free calculation of possibilities rather than of probabilities.

Chaturanga spread through Persia, and through the newly-forming Islamic world, changing its name to *chatrang* and *shatranj* respectively. By the 10th century, *shatranj* had developed its own literature with composed problems, systems of opening play, and ways to rank players with regard to their strength. The Medieval Christian world learned of this new game, and in playing it retained the basic pieces, moves, and rules of *shatranj*. It became popular throughout that region, but significant changes in terminology were made. The minister-piece was renamed queen, likely because some queens were rulers with military responsibilities during the late Medieval period. The elephant-piece was given various new names, becoming a bishop in England. While it seems strange to modern minds to have a bishop fighting in an army, that did not seem strange to Medieval Englishmen; in those days, bishops not infrequently had military responsibilities and commanded armies. Since chariots were no longer used, medieval players adopted new names for that piece; the term “rook” may have been based on a Persian term for the piece, which may have come from an earlier term meaning “chariot”. The term “pawn” was ultimately derived from the Latin term for foot-soldiers. The cavalry piece became, quite naturally, a knight. Medieval Christians changed the name of the game to fit their languages; in England, it was being called “chesse” by the late 1400s. During these early centuries, boards became checkered, facilitating the visualization of moves.

East Asia developed chess variants that have the basic features of *chaturanga*, but with a number of different features. China, which had much contact with India during the Tang dynasty, (7th through 10th centuries AD) developed a variant of chess that is still played by millions today. It has not been determined whether the Chinese form of chess (called *xiangqi*) might have preceded the appearance of *chaturanga* in India and influenced its rules, although scholarly opinion has tended to favor India as the birthplace of chess. In *xiangqi*, pieces are placed on the points of intersection of squares rather than the centers of squares, and the board has a “river” separating the players’ sides of the board. Through these changes, the 8x8 board of *chaturanga* is replaced by a 90-point board. *Xiangqi* has the same six kinds of pieces as *chaturanga*, but with some differences in their basic moves, plus the addition of a new piece. The *xiangqi* pieces move as follows: The king can move only one point orthogonally (not diagonally), and is confined to a 9-point fortress. There are two ad-

visers or guards that have the same move as the minister in *chaturanga*, (one point diagonally); but they are confined to the same 9-point fortress as their king. Elephants have the same move as the *chaturanga* elephant, but cannot leap pieces and cannot cross the river. Pawns move and capture orthogonally forward (not diagonally) one point at a time, and cannot promote, though they can move sideways one point as well as forward in the opponent’s half of the board. The horse (knight) moves as the knight in western chess, but cannot leap pieces; the first part of its move must be orthogonal, and that point must be unoccupied, before it completes the diagonal part of the knight’s move. Checkmate is the object of the game. The Japanese developed a chess variant, called *shogi*, which keeps many features of the original *chaturanga*, but makes so many changes that it is a very different game from international chess, despite the obvious influence that the original form of chess had on many of its rules. *Shogi* uses a 9x9 square board, and many

shogi variants have been invented over the centuries.

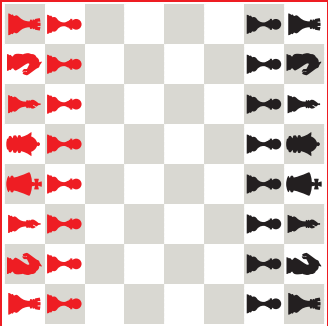
It is remarkable that the basic *chaturanga* pieces were retained throughout the geographic spread of chess; the moves of king, rook, knight, and pawn have survived with only minor modifications until today. However, significant challenges to communication across regions inhibited a full standardization of rules. Information traveled slowly and incompletely in the era of horse-drawn travel, which was often dangerous. Literature intended for public consumption (including chess treatises) was limited to copied manuscripts, which were rare and expensive, before the advent of printing. In some areas, common people of limited literacy played on crudely-made sets, using rules passed on by spoken language only. But in other areas, chess was mainly played by the wealthy and the literate classes.

Given those communication challenges, it is not surprising that many changes to the rules of chess were tried in different regions. Most of those variants were limited in time and place, and have not survived. But in a sort of survival of the fittest, some of those changes to chess rules

have survived over the centuries to become a part of modern chess. Since some of the innovations have occurred and recurred in different guises across the centuries, the following summary will focus on general categories of changes rather than strict chronological sequencing.

Below:
Set maker:
Unknown Cambodian artist
Board maker: AncientChess.com
Cambodian Chess
(Ouk Chaktrang)
2019
Collection of Rick Knowlton
Photo by Austin Fuller





a

Extra Pieces
(a) Hawk: combines the moves of a bishop and knight. Same as Archbishop. (b) Elephant: combines the moves of a rook and knight. Same as Chancellor. Pawns can be promoted to a Hawk or Elephant, not just queen/rook/etc.

Key Rules and Features
Played on a standard 8x8 board using all regular chess rules, with the addition of two extra pieces. Whenever you move a piece off its original square, you may deploy one of your extra pieces onto that vacated square

Objective: Tactical creativity

Established: 2007

SEIRAWAN CHIESS

b



Changes to the Moves of Existing Pieces

The original form of chess was a rather slow game, due to the limited movements of pieces other than knight and rook. As a result, the opening phase of a game developed slowly. Furthermore, the elephant's move was regarded as too limited, since moving exactly two squares diagonally (no more or less) allowed the piece to reach only 8 squares. To address the latter issue, an attempt to strengthen the elephant's move was made around 850, when it was allowed to move exactly two squares orthogonally (not diagonally), increasing its range. A more lasting change to the elephant's move was made circa 900: it allowed the elephant to move one square straight forward as well as to any diagonally adjacent square. This move for the elephant is, interestingly, the same as that of the modern "Silver General" piece in *shogi*.

To address the issue of the slowness of opening play, in the latter medieval period, pawns were allowed to move two squares forward on their first move. However, that change created controversy over the issue of whether it is fair for a pawn to use this two-square move to pass safely by an opposing pawn. The resulting "en passant capture" rule, which addressed that problem, was not fully standardized across nations until the end of the 19th century. Another innovation that gained wide acceptance was a rule that a king could leap two squares in any direction (orthogonally, diagonally, or as a knight), jumping over other pieces in the way, on its first move. In some areas, the queen (which was still a weak piece), was given the same privilege.

The most important change in the moves of pieces occurred in the last quarter of the 15th century, when the queen and bish-

Left & Lower Left:
Yasser Seirawan

S-Chess

2007

Courtesy of

Yasser Seirawan

Photos by Austin Fuller

op were given their modern moves. This sudden change, modeled on the rook's original move, was certainly the result of a single invention. The name of the inventor(s) was not preserved, but he, she, or they apparently lived in either Italy, Spain, or France. By replacing the old moves of the queen and bishop with the stronger moves, the new game could be played with existing chess sets, a factor which undoubtedly facilitated its rapid spread, as did the invention of the printing press in that same century. The older moves of the queen and bishop were extinct everywhere within a few decades, superseded by the new, much faster game.

The new moves of queen and bishop caused changes in some other rules of chess. Kings were no longer as safe while powerful queens and bishops were on the prowl. So the king's leap became a useful way to move the king to a safer haven on its first rank, leaping over the rook after it was moved from the corner. This became the modern castling move. Endgames became much more decisive, since pawns could still promote to queens, but now with a much greater increase in power that made checkmates easier to achieve.

Right:

3 Man Chess

3 Man Chess

in the Round Set

1999-2014

Collection of the

World Chess Hall of Fame & Galleries

Photo by Austin Fuller



Adding New Pieces and Enlarging the Board

From the earliest days of chess, various attempts were made to add new pieces with new kinds of moves to the chess set, to supplement the six basic pieces of *chaturanga*. Increasing the size of the forces on each side by adding newly-created pieces created a need to enlarge the board to accommodate them, and boards of 12x12 squares and even larger have been tried. Various new pieces, most with a limited range of movement, were tried. When the queen assumed its modern move in the

one of the top players of the 1700s, played some games of this Russian variant, but concluded that those added super-strong pieces so diminish the role of the other pieces that they spoil the game. The inventors of these new pieces may have thought they were increasing the possibilities of novel plays within the game. But adding new pieces tend to reduce the role of the weaker pieces, and may complicate the players’ calculations to the point of diminishing the enjoyment of the game. Furthermore, adding pieces requires enlarging the board to a size that players might find unwieldy.

Nevertheless, one chess variant with added pieces and an enlarged board did achieve sufficient popularity to survive several centuries. Called Courier Chess, it used a 12x8 board and added three new kinds of pieces. Two of the new pieces had limited range, but one was given the move of the modern bishop. Courier chess was popular only in certain areas within Europe, primarily Germany. It did not develop a significant literature or formal organization, and ultimately failed to compete with the international chess of the 8x8 board and powerful queen.



15th century, combining the moves of rook and bishop, suggestions were made as early as the 17th century to add other very strong pieces, such as one that combines the moves of rook and knight; and of bishop and knight respectively. World Champion José-Capablanca suggested adding those pieces in the 20th century. But the idea of adding these new powerful pieces never caught on, except in Russia, where some players employed a chess variant that added a rook-knight, bishop-knight, and queen-knight piece to the regular array. François-André Danican Philidor, a Frenchman who was

Changing the Opening Position

Throughout the early spread of chess some variants used a “crosswise” arrangement of the opening position, with each king on the same file as the opposing queen. There were also variants that exchanged the initial places of bishops and rooks, perhaps in an attempt to facilitate the early development of those pieces. With the proliferation of chess literature in the 19th century, concerns arose that too much memorization of opening lines was interfering with true tests of skill of players facing each other. So suggestions were made to randomize the opening position of pieces on the back ranks, leaving the bishops on opposite colors. Former World Champion Bobby Fischer advocated a form of randomized chess that has 960 randomly-determined possible opening positions.

Four-Handed Chess

From the earliest centuries of chess, a number of four-handed forms of chess have been invented and played. One four-handed variant of early chess used the regular set of 32 men and the standard 8x8 board, but divided the forces into four armies arrayed from each of the four corners of the board. This variant eliminated the ministers and gave each king one piece of each of the other kinds found in *Chaturanga*, plus four pawns, whose forward movement was relative to their army’s position. A number of four-handed chess variants require full-sized armies and significantly enlarged boards. Four-handed variants were being played in the 19th-century and are still played today. The players may be paired as partners, with each partnership cooperating to mate both the opposing partnership’s kings without verbally communicating with each other (as in Bridge, but without a dummy). Three-handed varieties of chess have also been invented and played.

Above: Photographer unknown
Honey Sauberman, Inventor of Quadra Chess, Demonstrates Her Game
1977
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame & Galleries

The Move Toward a Universal Code of Rules

The 19th century brought technological advances that revolutionized communication (the telegraph and telephone) and transportation (railroads and steamships). As a result, chess players could communicate and meet with each other far more readily over great distances than ever before possible. By the mid-century, regional gatherings of players began to occur, which soon led to the first national and international tournaments. A proliferation of chess journalism and books led to a drive to produce a truly international code of rules that was observed in all countries.

But there remained significant differences in the rules across different nations and regions that had to be resolved before a universal code could be established. Howard Staunton, an inductee into the World Chess Hall of Fame, was an influential and active leader in trying to achieve a universal code of rules during the mid-1800’s. The following is a summary of the major rules that had to be standardized.

a) **Stalemate** was a win for the stalemated side in England and the U.S. at the start of the 19th century, a paradoxical rule that allowed a player to win by forcing the opponent to stalemate him! This rule is found in English chess literature of the 17th century, where it was argued that some kinds of mates are more praiseworthy than others, and stalemate was a disgraceful kind of mate. But stalemate was a draw everywhere else. English and American players early in the 19th century stopped defending the paradoxical stalemate rule, and accepted the rule that stalemate is a draw.

b) **Castling**: As noted above, the modern castling rule was a product of the Medieval rule that allowed a king to move

two squares in any direction on its first move, leaping over anything in its way. When the queen and bishop assumed their more powerful moves in the latter 15th century, the “king’s leap” was used to put the king in a safer spot, leaping over a rook that had already moved away from the corner. Some of the restrictions in this old “king’s leap” rule, such as that the king could not leap out of or across check, have been retained in modern castling. But some areas took this castling move to an extreme, allowing the castling king a free choice of any square between its original square up to and including the corner; and the rook in that corner to move to the king’s original square or to any square crossed by the king. This “free castling” allows sixteen

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ways to castle by each player, as opposed to two ways in modern castling. Free castling was played in Italy until the proliferation of opening literature and international competition, which used the modern castling rule, caused its abandonment by the end of the 19th century.

c) **Pawn promotion** was governed by several significantly different rules at the beginning of the 19th century. In India, pawns could promote only to the piece that originally stood on the file in the opening position (e.g., a pawn promoting on h8 could pro-

mote only to rook.) The modern rule, which allows promotion to any piece except the king regardless of the number of pieces of that kind on the board, was observed many places. By this rule, a pawn can promote to a second queen even if the original queen is still on the board. But some played by a rule that a pawn could promote only to a piece that had been captured. Thus, there could never be more than one queen, or two rooks, bishops, or knights for a side. If no piece had been captured, the pawn was “suspended” on its promotion square until a piece of its color had been captured, when the pawn immediately assumed the rank of that piece. The rule of “promote only to lost piece” can lead to a number of absurd positions, including ones in which tactics turn on which

History

Popular particularly in the region of Ströbeck, known historically as “the village of chess,” Courier Chess bridges medieval chess (Shatranj) and modern European chess, introducing larger boards, precursors to the modern bishop, and experiments in piece design that influenced later chess variants.

Pieces

Queen: moves one square diagonally. Sage: moves one square diagonally in any direction. Courier: moves diagonally any distance. Bishop: moves two squares diagonally, jumping the intermediate square. Kings, rooks, knights, and pawns move as they do in modern chess.



AncientChess.com, Courier Chess (after van Leyden, 1508), 2015. Collection of Rick Knowlton, Photo by Austin Fuller

COURIER CHESS

Objective: Powerful diagonal movers
Established: 12th century Germany

KRIEG SPIEL

Objective: Rely on deduction and luck
Established: Late 19th Century

THREE-PLAYER CHESS

Objective: Create a balanced playing field
Established: 20th century

The Board

The board is usually triangular containing an arrangement of squares or triangular cells to allow three players. Each player sets up along one side of the triangle. Their pieces often mirror standard chess but adapted to fit the geometry. Players move in a fixed order (clockwise or counterclockwise around the board).

Key Rules and Features

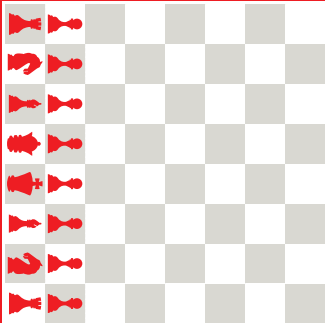
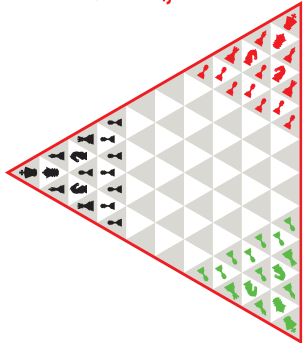
Players do not see their opponent's pieces and must rely on an umpire (referee) who keeps track of the full game state. The umpire announces any illegal moves, possible pawn captures, and captured pieces. For checks, the umpire announces "Check by..." (piece type) but not the exact location.

History

It was named after German military "Kriegspiel" exercises, which used similar hidden-information mechanics for officer training. It inspires variants like Fog of War chess on online platforms, where similar hidden-information rules are implemented digitally without an umpire.

Piece Movement

Rooks: move along ranks and files adapted to the triangular layout. Bishops: move diagonally along lines of triangular cells. Queens: combine movement types of rooks and bishops. Knights: maintain their L-shaped jump adapted to the coordinate system.



Composition

From as early as the Medieval period, players were using composed chess positions that did not arise in actual games, but demonstrated unusual features. Many of these composed positions were used by gamblers, who used their prior familiarity with the composed positions to entice passers-by to play them at gambling stakes. Chess literature for centuries has contained many composed positions, intended either to train tactical thinking or simply to demonstrate the many unique stratagems that the fascinating game of chess can produce.

A special type of composed position is called heterodox ("fairy") chess. In composed problems of this type, new kinds of pieces may be invented specifically to create positions with unique properties. A popular piece that was invented for heterodox problems is called the "grasshopper", which moves like a queen, but only to a square that is immediately beyond an occupied square. Composed positions with grasshoppers can contain fascinating complexities, but the piece would have little value in competitive games. Unlike chess variants that are actually played competitively, heterodox pieces invented for composed positions would typically be useless outside the composed problems for which they were invented.

Above:
Bert Verhoeff/Anefo
Robert Hübner Playing Circular Chess at the Blast Furnace Chess Tournament, Wijk aan Zee, The Netherlands
January 11, 1971
Collection of the Dutch National Archive/Public domain

Left:
Photographer unknown
John Williams and GM Walter Browne with Mega Chess
1994
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame & Galleries, gift of Raquel Browne



Other Variants that Do Not Easily Fit into the Above Categories

The game of *Kriegspiel* is a variant that is intended to mimic real warfare, in which the location and strength of opposing forces is often unknown. *Kriegspiel* is played by standard chess rules, but each player has his own board, on which he makes his moves. But he cannot see the moves made by the opponent on his own board, which is in another room. A referee has a third board, hidden from the players, on which the full position is kept. The referee tells a player when it's his turn to move, and whether his attempted move is illegal without telling him why. By this information, each player gets clues on where the opposing forces are located.

Another variant that was played in Medieval times used a board that has 64 squares with standard piece moves, but the squares are arranged in an oblong, 4x16 array. Some other variants have employed cylindrical boards or boards with hexagons instead of squares. In recent times, a three-dimensional board has been marketed, modeled on *Star Trek* episodes, on which regular boards are stacked on top on each other, and pieces can move on their own board, or jump to other boards.

In modern times, there are many variants that are played only informally, usually in chess clubs. For example, checkless chess prohibits the giving of checks other than checkmate. Another variant requires that the players change sides (without changing the position) every 10 moves. Variants exist in which players make more than one move at a time. One variant has the rule that captured pieces are not removed from the board, but are placed by the capturing side on any vacant square. Such variants are typically played only for fun and do not develop any real literature or organization.

Dr. John McCrary has been closely involved with the World Chess Hall of Fame & Galleries since its inception in the 1980s, serving as Chair of the Hall of Fame Committee beginning in 1986. In this role, he was instrumental in preserving the Hall of Fame concept during its formative years, especially when securing a suitable museum space proved challenging and threatened the project's continuation. In 1998, while serving as President of the U.S. Chess Trust, Dr. McCrary proposed the creation of a World Chess Hall of Fame to complement the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame. Following a conversation with the FIDE Executive Director—who confirmed the absence of a comparable museum—he obtained FIDE's endorsement and signed the Trust document officially establishing the World Chess Hall of Fame.

From 2001 to 2003, Dr. McCrary served as president of the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF), following two years as vice president. During his tenure, he worked to bridge gaps between scholastic chess leaders and top USCF officials. Among his key contributions was co-sponsoring the creation of the Scholastic Council, which continues to serve as a vital part of US Chess. He also represented the USCF at the landmark first U.S.-China team match.

Dr. McCrary credits much of his success to the unwavering support and partnership of his wife of 55 years, Dr. Kay McCrary.

THE DIVERSITY

MODERN CHESS

In 1476, when the printing press was new, the second book ever printed in English was **The Game and Playe of the Chesse**. The text, inspired by **Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium super ludo scacchorum** by a Dominican friar named Jacobus de Cessolis, was already popular throughout Europe. It was not the “chess” we play today—the pieces would look odd to us, and their moves were relatively limited. This book had more to do with medieval moral anecdotes than anything we would consider chess study. Around 1475, printing was also beginning in Valencia, Spain—and the group of printers there not only played that older form of chess but also had a mind to try something new, giving some of the key pieces significantly more power—able to strike out across the board suddenly, sometimes with devastating effect!

Europe was no stranger to chess variants. An expanded 8x12 square game, courier chess, was played in Germanic regions for about 600 years. Also, the 13th-century Castilian king, Alfonso X, had commissioned a magnificently illustrated manuscript detailing all sorts of chess board sizes and novel chessmen. But this new chess from Valencia had some special advantages. It could be played with the existing pieces on the 8x8 chessboard and play was more dynamic. Europe was in a time of great cultural change, and this new game’s proponents printed their own literature with their own printing press. Those same proponents were dispatched all across Europe, rapidly escaping the Spanish Inquisition—new chess booklets in hand! That new variant, with a few adjustments over the past five centuries, is the chess we play today.

CHESS VARIANTS

Chess today is truly a model of perfection—a perfectly square board, pieces moving in geometric harmony—an endless venture into thousands of variations—attacks, defenses, counterattacks, surprise twists in every moment. But if one can look up from the chessboard, for a few moments—it isn’t easy!—and look around, one may see that all through history chess has existed in countless forms, and some of those forms are still played today. They too, in their own ways, have reached pinnacles of perfection. Looking at chess as it has existed over centuries and around the world, we find not only a game, but a window into past and present cultures. In fact, alternative forms of chess, known as chess variants, have inspired creative minds for eons, and continue to capture the imagination of modern-day players.

ORIGINS

The older form of chess was already a very sophisticated game. It existed for about a thousand years in that form, spreading through much of India, Persia, the Middle East, northern Africa, and most of Europe. It had a preferred style of pieces, also in vogue for about a millennium. Compare that for a moment to “our” chess, having existed about half that long so far, with a style of pieces less than two centuries old. The older game had extensive literature, mostly in Arabic manuscripts, telling of legendary masters, famous games, and brilliant chess puzzles. And those old texts were also rich with variants. Chess could be played on round boards, long rectangular boards, hugely expanded boards, some with special squares and a menagerie of unusual pieces with their own moves.

OF CHESSES

Rick Knowlton is the coauthor of **A World of Chess: Its Development and Variations through Centuries and Civilizations**. In 2003, he founded AncientChess.com, a platform dedicated to chess variants, offering playing sets, educational resources, and instructional videos.

MONGOLIA

Mongolian chess (shatar) is derived from the early Central Asian game, (add name here, shatranj,) and augmented with unique rules of piece movements and checkmating patterns. The chessmen are visually striking, carved by specific clans to represent their own strengths and customs, in endless variety. Mongolia has variants as well, played on boards of 10 x 10 squares, or larger, with very creative new powers and pieces.

THAILAND & CAMBODIA

These two countries share a chess tradition, with small variations in opening rules and piece carving style. Makruk (Thai) or Ouk Chaktrang (Cambodian). Still played avidly in Southeast Asia, this game is the closest thing to the earliest known ancient chess.

BURMA (MYANMAR)

Myanmar is now rekindling its ancient chess tradition, with tournaments and national organizations. The pieces are magnificently carved figures, and the game proceeds with pawns already advanced, the two players setting up their pieces in an array of their own choosing before play begins—a brilliant innovation, centuries old.

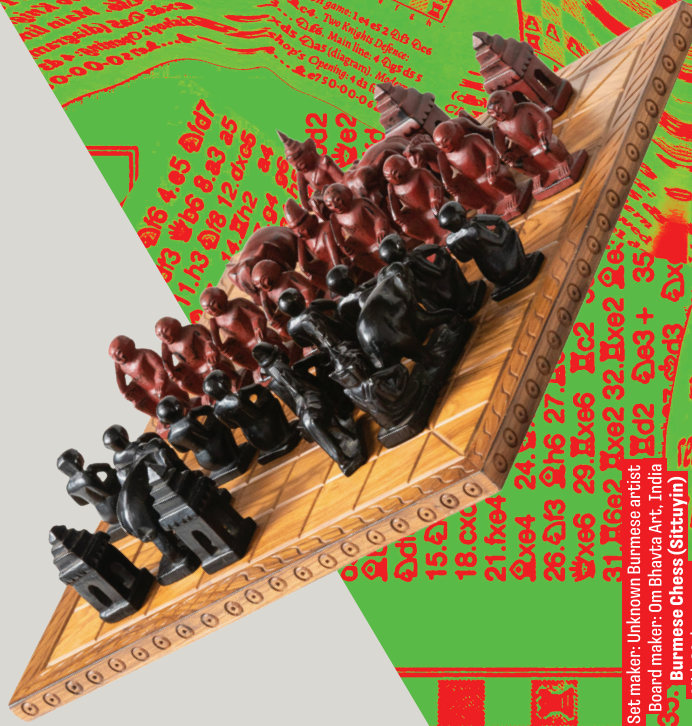
ALWAYS MORE VARIANTS

Most of us learned of chess as a single game, with absolutely established rules, universal and never changing. But in the long historic view, chess is an idea of a game, always changing, adapting, and being reinvented by the imagination of its players. There are thousands of chess variants now available, enjoyed by everyone from curious beginners to the most ambitious champions. Everyone is welcome to enter the wide world of chess, where the joy of playing offers endless possibilities.



Unknown Mongolian carver
Mongolian “Hia Shatar”
2015

Collection of Rick Knowlton
Photo by Austin Fuller



Set maker: Unknown Burmese artist
Board maker: Om Bhavita Art, India
Burmese Chess (Sittuyin)
Mid-20th century

Collection of Rick Knowlton
Photo by Austin Fuller

CHINA

The Chinese game, xiangqi, is strikingly different. It is as if you took that ancient game, turned the pieces into checkers painted with their chess-piece names, placed them on the lines of the board, marked the board with “palaces” and “a river,” and added a cannon that shoots over the heads of its fellow chessmen. Beyond that, the game begins in such an open position that complex attacks, defenses and counterattacks begin in the very first move! Xiangqi also has its variants. Ancient texts show related games played on huge boards with multiple armies, while modern players often enjoy playing with the pieces facedown and randomized—flipping them over to reveal their identities during the game. Don’t hesitate to try playing! Considering for a moment that an eight-year-old Chinese child knows about 3,000 Chinese characters, how much easier it will be to learn the nine characters needed to play xiangqi! With that, and a few new rules, you can join a whole new world of chess—one of the largest game communities that ever existed!

KOREA

The Korean chessboard looks similar to its Chinese counterpart, but beware—there are many incremental differences in rules, creating an entirely new set of possibilities and challenges. With its own history of Korean variants, this game attests to how differently games can evolve over centuries, all starting from the original chess idea.

JAPAN

The long-isolated land of Japan has a chess history all its own. When the idea of chess hit Japan, perhaps around the year 1000, the game exploded into extreme variants, some on enormous boards with countless varieties of pieces. Eventually, sho shogi, the “small chess,” on a 9x9 square board became the standard shogi—but only after a new 16th-century rule was established, making the “small” game much more complex: captured pieces do not quit the game, but continually come back into play. Shogi is played all over Japan today, and has unmatched traditional customs at every level, not to mention popular variants of all sizes still being invented.

AncientChess.com

Oblong Chess (9th century, Persia)

2007

Collection of Rick Knowlton

Photo by Austin Fuller



THREE-DIMENSIONAL CHESSES

Objective: Explore spatial strategy
Established: 1960s

ATOMIC CHESSES

Objective: Explode the opponent's king
Established: Early 2000s

FISCHER 960

Objective: Encourage improvisation
Established: 1996 by Bobby Fischer

ANTI CHESSES

Objective: Lose all of your pieces Established: Unknown

HORDE CHESSES

Objective: Battle of quality vs. quantity
Established: 2002

BUG HOUSE

Objective: Work with teammate to win
Established: 1960s

DUCK CHESSES

Objective: Additional tactics
Established: 2016

OMEGA CHESSES

Objective: Enhance tactical possibilities
Established: 1992

Origins

Conceptualized earlier but popularized by Star Trek as Tri-Dimensional Chess, it symbolizes the futuristic vision of the show and remains a popular collectible and intellectual curiosity. 3D Chess bridges science fiction with real-world gameplay, embodying humanity's continual pursuit of higher strategic and conceptual challenges.

Key Rules and Features

Explosive Captures (The "Atomic" Rule): When a piece captures another, an "explosion" occurs on that square. The capturing piece, the captured piece, and all non-pawn pieces on adjacent squares are destroyed. Pawns on adjacent squares are immune to the blast, but the capturing pawn itself is destroyed.

Key Rules and Features

Randomized Starting Positions: the back-rank pieces (for both White and Black) are randomized. There are 960 possible legal starting positions (hence the name). Pawns start in their usual positions. The bishops must be on opposite-colored squares. The king must be placed between the two rooks to allow for casting.

Gameplay

Three main 8×8 boards are stacked vertically, while four 2×2 attack boards (or movable platforms), are placed at varying heights and positions relative to the main boards. Pieces move as in standard chess but can also move between boards using attack boards as transitional spaces.

King Safety

Players cannot capture pieces that would result in their own king's explosion. Therefore, kings can stand adjacent to each other, but cannot capture each other. You can win without traditional checkmate by simply causing an explosion that destroys the opponent's king.

Castling Rules

After castling, the king and rook end up in the same positions as in standard chess: the king on c1/g1 (c8/g8 for Black) and the rook on d1/f1 (d8/f8 for Black).The movement may look odd (sometimes the rook and king even cross paths), but the final positions mirror classical chess.

Key Rules and Features

Capturing is compulsory: If a piece can be captured it must be done. When more than one capture is available, the capturing player may choose. Stalemate is a win for the stalemated player. This includes having no remaining pieces on the board.

The King

The king has no royal power: it may be captured like any other piece. Since there is no check or checkmate, the king may expose itself to capture. There is no castling. A pawn may be promoted to a king.

Key Rules and Features

White: Has a "horde" consisting entirely of pawns arranged across ranks 1 to 4 and on b5, c5, f5, and g5. **Black:** Has a standard full chess army (king, queen, rooks, bishops, knights, and pawns in the normal setup). White wins by checkmating Black's king. Black wins by capturing all of White's pawns (there is no king for White to checkmate).

Strategic Themes

For white (the horde): push pawns to restrict Black's piece movement; Remember that promotion is key to achieving checkmate. **For black:** avoid getting blocked by pawn walls; Trade pieces effectively to simplify the game; coordinate piece attacks to systematically eliminate pawns.

Key Rules and Features

Four total players on two teams. Each team consists of two players who sit side by side with their opponents directly in front of them. Teammates play opposite colors. The game ends when either player on a team is checkmated, flagged (runs out of time), or resigns. Thus, both boards are critical for team strategy.

Capturing Pieces

When you capture a piece on your board, you pass it to your teammate, who can then "drop" that piece onto their board instead of making a normal move. Pieces can be dropped on any empty square as long as it does not place a pawn on the first or last rank.

Key Rules and Features

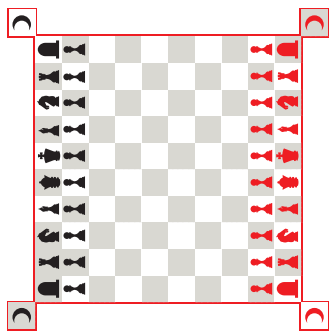
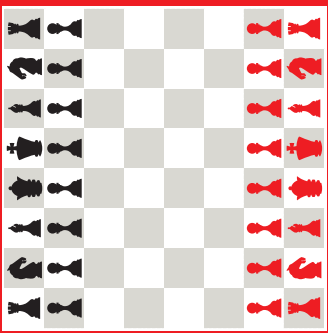
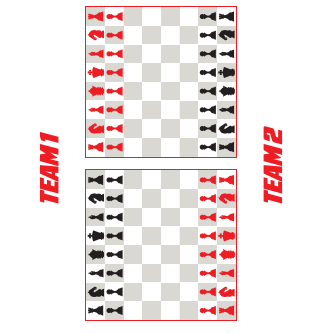
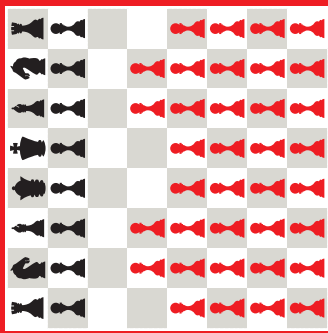
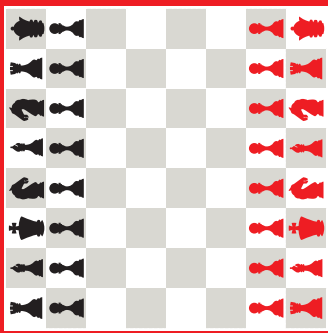
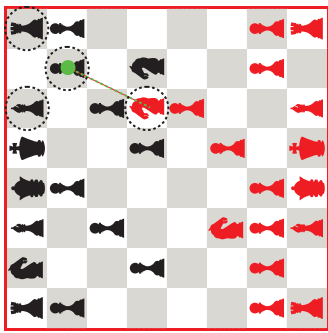
The Duck Move: after making a regular move (or even when in check), the player must move the duck to any empty square on the board. This happens instead of passing a turn. **The Duck as a Blocker:** Pieces cannot move to or through its square, nor can they capture it.

Check and Checkmate

The goal is to capture the opponent's king, but the game does not have the concept of check or checkmate, and castling rules are modified.

New Pieces

Champion: moves like a knight, but also can move two squares orthogonally or diagonally, without jumping over intervening pieces for these two-square moves. **Wizard:** moves one square diagonally, or can jump two squares orthogonally or diagonally. Placed on the four corner squares, starting off-board.



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