

Hnefatafl

A MODERN GAME WITH AN OLDER TRAIL

TWENTY-FOUR ATTACKERS / ONE KING / FOUR CORNERS

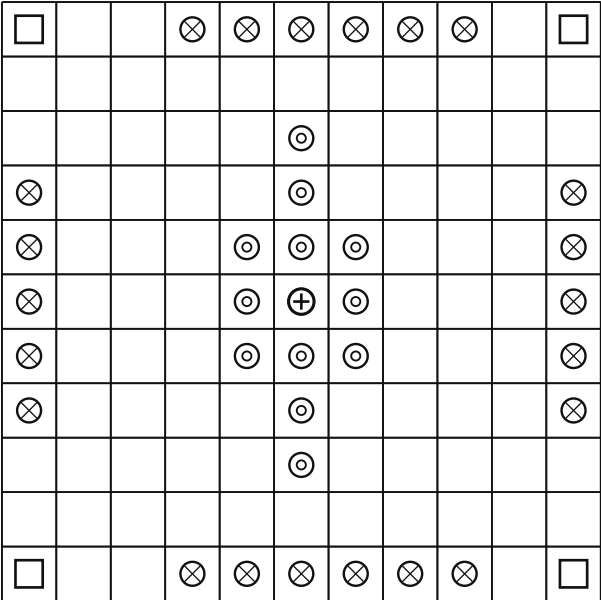
A game of unequal forces

Hnefatafl is a tafl-family strategy game built around a hunted king. In the modern Fetlar 11x11 edition used here, attackers have the numbers and defenders have one urgent job: get the king to any corner.

The same empty lane looks like freedom from the centre and a breach to close from the edge. That is the game's hook: the sides share one board but never the same fear.

What you need

An 11x11 board, 24 attacker counters, 12 defender counters and one king counter. Use coins, buttons or paper tokens in three distinguishable designs.



The central throne and four corner escape squares are marked.
The board is a modern Fetlar presentation, not a historical artefact.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE CAN TELL US

c. AD 400

Vimose, Denmark: Roman-era board-game context. Its 18-square lattice is unresolved, not a Hnefatafl attestation.

c. AD 900

Gokstad, Norway: a 13x13 face described by a Museum of Cultural History account as probably Hnefatafl, with Nine Men's Morris on the reverse.

Later records

A marked Ballinderry board, Welsh tawlbwrdd in 1587, a 1732 Tablut record published in 1811, and a translation that changed one phrase about the king.

From 2007

On Fetlar, players developed and playtested a practical modern 11x11 ruleset. This is a deliberate playable revival, not a surviving medieval rulebook.

How to play

THE CURRENT FETLAR 11X11 RULES

- 1

Set up
Use an 11x11 board. Put the king on the central throne, twelve defenders around it in the cross formation, and twenty-four attackers in six-piece groups at the midpoint of each edge. Attackers move first.
- 2

Move
Players alternate. Every piece slides orthogonally through empty squares any distance, without jumping. Only the king may stop on the throne or a corner. Ordinary pieces may pass through the empty throne but may not stop there; they cannot enter or pass through a corner.
- 3

Capture ordinary pieces
After your move, an adjacent enemy soldier is captured when it lies between the moved piece and a friendly piece, or between the moved piece and a hostile throne or corner. Captures are active, and one move can capture in more than one direction.
- 4

Capture the king
The king is armed and can help flank ordinary pieces. Attackers normally need four hostile orthogonal sides to capture him. The empty throne can replace one attacker, so three attackers can capture a king beside the throne. An empty corner does not replace an attacker.
- 5

Win
Defenders win immediately when the king reaches any corner. Attackers win by capturing the king or by closing an unbroken ring around the king and all defenders. In this rules version, a side with no legal move also loses.
- 6

Draw
The third occurrence of the same position with the same side to move is a draw. If too few pieces remain to complete the game, human modes use an offered draw that the opponent must accept; this is a product choice, not a historical rule claim.

STARTING POSITION

□			⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗		□
					⊙					
⊗					⊙					⊗
⊗				⊙	⊙	⊙				⊗
⊗				⊙	+	⊙				⊗
⊗				⊙	⊙	⊙				⊗
⊗					⊙					⊗
					⊙					
□			⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗		□

Attackers use crossed circles. Defenders use double circles. The king uses a cross. The centre ring is the throne; the four square marks are escape corners.

- Fast legality check**
1. Is the path orthogonal and clear?

2. Did the piece stop on a legal square?

3. After the move, is an enemy between two hostile sides?

4. Did the king reach a corner, or did the ring close?

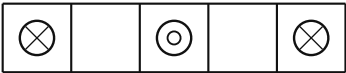
Play guide

THREE POSITIONS TO REMEMBER

ONE MOVE, TWO VIEWPOINTS

Hnefatafl is easier to feel than to summarise. Keep the two goals visible while you play: the king is looking for one open road, while the attackers are looking for the last gap.

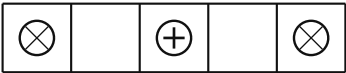
1 Ordinary capture



Your piece

An enemy soldier is trapped between your moved piece and another friendly piece, or a hostile throne/corner.

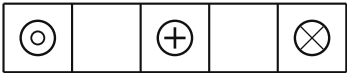
2 The throne helps



Throne

An empty throne can stand in for one attacker when the king is captured beside it. A corner cannot.

3 Close or escape



The two endings

The king wins at a corner. Attackers win when the king is captured or no defender can reach the board edge through non-attacker squares.

A PRACTICAL TURN

1

Look

Find the king's nearest open route and the attackers' most fragile gap.

2

Slide

Move one piece any distance along a clear orthogonal line. Do not jump.

3

Check

Resolve every capture created by the move, then test the two win conditions.

4

Repeat

Attackers move first; alternate until a corner, capture, ring, no-move loss or draw appears.

Keep the evidence boundary in view
The Ballinderry board, Welsh tawlbwrdd and Tablut records preserve different pieces of a history; they are not one surviving medieval rulebook. The board you play here is the modern Fetlar 11x11 implementation developed and playtested from 2007.

SOURCES

Research dossier and rules revision: Forgotten Games Hnefatafl dossier, updated 20 August 2026. Historical anchors: Museum of Cultural History Gokstad account; National Museum of Denmark Vimose record; Duggan's tafl analysis; Fetlar Panel rules and 2026 published account. Full links and claim IDs are retained in the campaign research files.

Print the board

A4 AT 100 PERCENT

Cut out or use any counters you have. Keep one design for attackers, one for defenders and one for the king.

Starting position is shown as outline symbols. Replace them with your own counters to begin.

KEY







Print at 100% / A4 / black and white