

The Royal Game of Ur

Introduction and history

In 1926-7 Sir Leonard Woolley was excavating at the royal tombs in Ur, in modern Iraq, and found among other things the oldest full set of gaming equipment known to exist. This dates from about 2500 BC, comprised a board of twenty squares, two sets of seven pieces, and six dice in the shape of pyramids. The game was afterwards given the name the Royal Game of Ur. Other similar sets were found in the same archaeological dig, some in a less well-preserved state. The games differed in materials and quality of workmanship, but all shared the same layout of squares, some decorated with rosettes. Decoration on squares without rosettes varied from board to board, and some had delightful animal scenes engraved on them. No rules were found at the time of the excavation, so a number of different historians and archaeologists devised their own interpretations, and there are versions of this game for sale. In more recent years, an almost complete set of rules on cuneiform tablets has come to light, dating from the second century BC and telling us everything about the game apart from the direction the pieces travelled along the board.

Components used in The Royal Game of Ur

- 14 pcs of player discs (7 per player)
- 3 pcs of throw stick or 6 dice (3 per player)

Important note

The rules described here are just for one variant of the game. As it was played in several ways in the history, lot of variation exist. This rule will help you get the basics but feel free to do some research and try out different rules to discover how this game could be played in ancient times.

How to play

Complete sets of rules were published by R. C. Bell in his book Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations, and by Irving Finkel in his game for the British Museum shop. The set of rules in this leaflet takes elements from these but introduces some ideas by H. J. R. Murray and David Parlett that make the game more logical and elegant.

Beginning the Game

The Royal Game of Ur is played on a board of 20 squares, arranged in 3 rows of 8 with four squares cut away (as shown in Illustration 1). Five of the squares are marked.

The board can be thought of as in three distinctive sections: a large block, a small block and the bridge between them.

Each player starts the game with seven pieces in hand, the board being empty.

Each player has three dice marked with their disc symbols or you can use the throw sticks. When throwing the dice or sticks the score is the number of marked sides pointing upwards, with none signifying a score of four.

Players decide at random who begins.

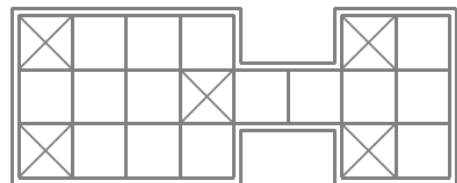


Illustration 1: the empty board. Squares marked with a cross here usually bear a rosette on the ornamented boards.

Moving the Pieces

The path of a player's pieces starts on his side of the board, in the large block, at the square nearest the bridge. The piece moves toward the corner with the rosette, before moving to the adjacent square on the middle row and continuing till it crosses the bridge. Once across the bridge, it moves to the rosette on the opponent's side, then curves around the small block till reaching the rosette at the player's own side, from which it is borne off. The path is simpler than it sounds: see Illustration 2.

In his turn a player first throws his dice or sticks.
 If none of his pieces are in play, then he must enter a piece on the first, second, third or fourth square on the board, according to the score of the dice.

If he has pieces already on the board, then instead he may move one of his pieces along its path by the number of squares indicated on the dice.

If the score of the dice was four, the player may after moving a piece, roll and move again.

A piece must bear off by an exact throw. For example, if a player's piece sits on the final rosette of its path, a 1 is required to bear off; if on the adjacent square, a 2, and so on.

Only one of a player's pieces may sit in a square at once; pieces cannot sit together in the same square.

If the roll of the dice gives no valid move, then the turn is lost and the opponent's turn begins. In this case no further roll is granted, even if the dice show four.

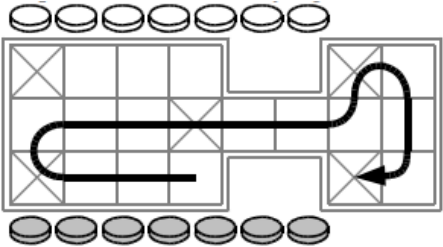


Illustration 2: the direction of travel for the black pieces, shown lined up here before any have entered the board. The path for the white pieces is a mirror image of this, starting and ending on the top row.

Catching Enemies

If landing on an opponent's piece, that piece is removed from the board and must begin its journey again.

A piece sitting on a special marked square is safe; the opponent cannot land on it. (see Illustration 1)

The first four squares in a piece's path are also safe, as the opponent's pieces never land there.

Ending the game

The first player whose pieces are all borne off the board has won the game.

Main source BoardGameGeek with some simplifications.