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CMS.608 / CMS.864 Game Design
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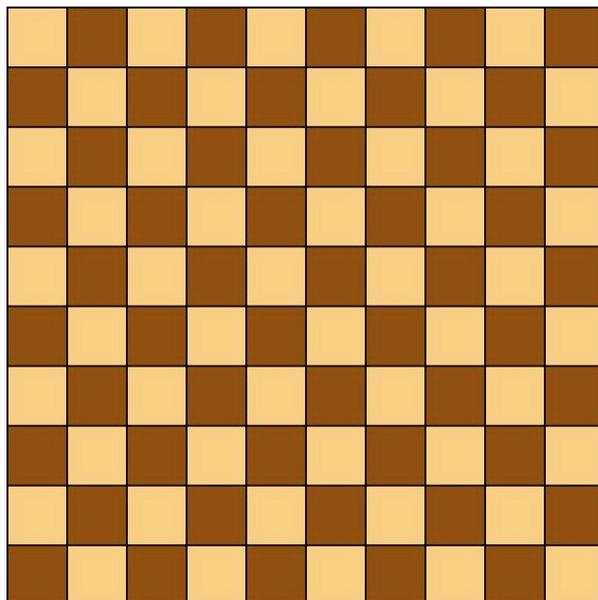
CMS.608 - Game Design

February 25, 2008

Continental checkers is a variant of the checkers family of games. This variety of checkers was popular in France sometime between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. In this paper I will review the rules of continental checkers, describe the results of playtesting this game, and discuss the effects of some rule modifications on the standard gameplay experience.

Original Rules

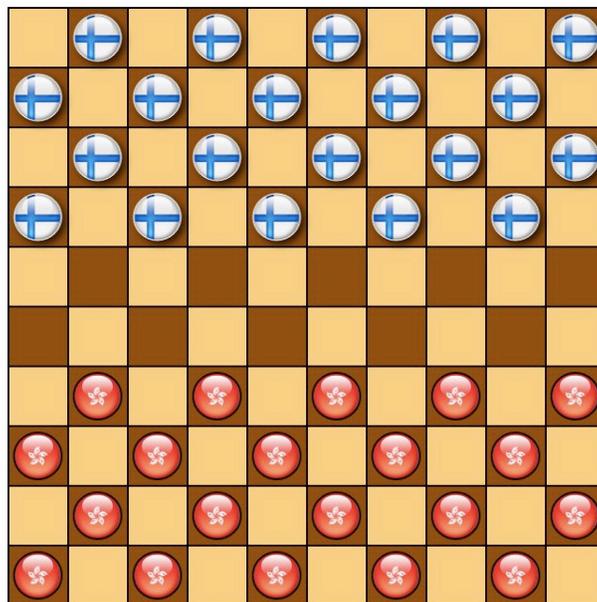
- The materials required are a playing board, and forty playing pieces. Twenty of the playing pieces should be of a single color, and the remaining twenty pieces of a single other color easily distinguishable from the first. Pieces can be represented by coins or any object serving as a placeholder in a single square of the playing board.
- The playing board is composed of one hundred spaces, fifty spaces each of two different colors. The spaces are of square shape and are arranged to form a



A ten space by ten space, one hundred square playing board.

square playing board of ten space by ten space dimensions. The squares of the board are arranged such that in any row or column adjacent squares alternate color, and any diagonal of squares within the board contains only squares of one color.

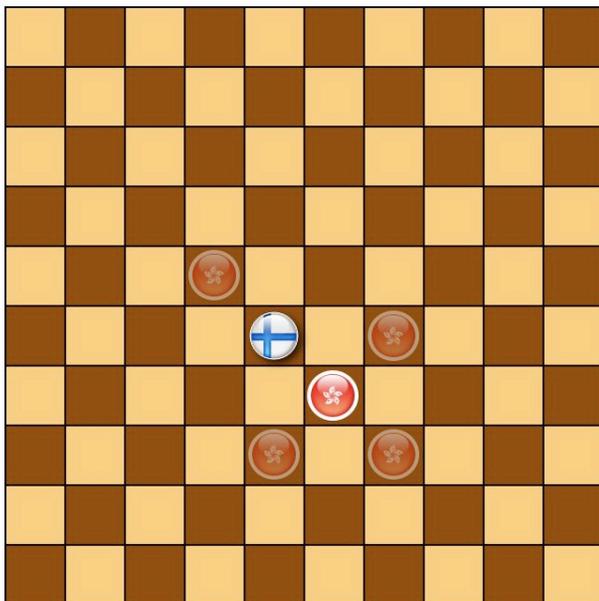
- There are two kinds of pieces, the standard (“soldier”) piece and the promoted (“king”) piece. At the start of the game all pieces for both players are standard pieces.
- Each player begins the game with twenty pieces. An individual player’s pieces should all be of the same color, and of a different color than the pieces of the opponent.
- To begin the game, each player’s pieces are placed on the black squares at his respective end of the board. The back four rows of each player’s respective side



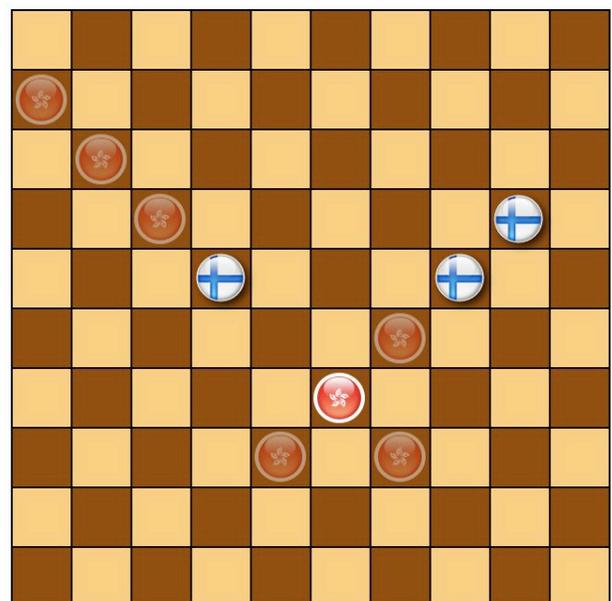
The playing board and pieces arranged in the starting configuration.

are filled by standard playing pieces in the starting position.

- Pieces may be moved along the black diagonals, in either the forward or backward direction. Pieces may move only one space per turn unless capturing.
- Capture is forced. If a player has an opportunity to capture (“jump”) one of the opponent’s pieces, the player must do so. If the player has more than one piece capable of capturing enemy pieces, the player must move the piece which captures the greatest number of the opponent’s pieces.
- A standard piece may capture an opposing piece located diagonally adjacent to it if there is an open space immediately beyond the opposing piece.
- A promoted piece may capture an opposing piece at any point along the diagonal if there are no other pieces between the promoted piece and the opposing piece to be captured, and there is an open square in at least the spot immediately be-



A standard piece and the possible moves it may make (shown with transparency). Recall that if a capturing move is possible it must be made. On this turn, red is required to capture the white piece by moving diagonally up and to the left.



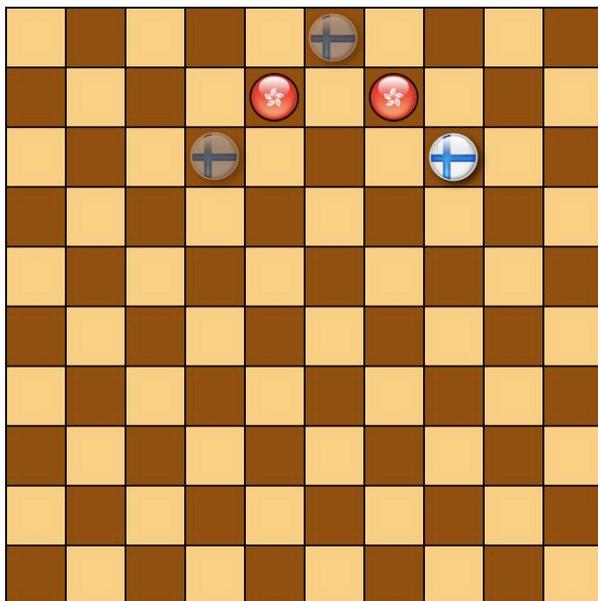
A red promoted piece (denoted by a white circular outline) and the possible moves it may make (shown with transparency). Recall that if a capturing move is possible it must be made. On this turn, red is required to capture the white piece by moving diagonally up and to the left, but may end its move on any of the three spaces beyond the white piece.

yond opposing piece. If there are multiple open spaces beyond the opposing piece the move of the promoted piece may end its move in any open space beyond the opposing piece.

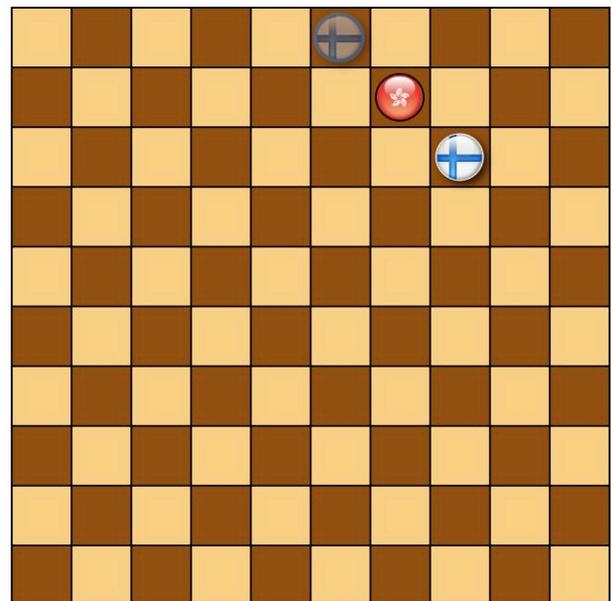
- A piece may be promoted if its move *ends* on a square located in the opponent's back row. A piece would not be promoted if during its move it travels through the back row but continues moving and finally settles on a space in a row other than the back row.

Pre-Play Analysis and Comparison

The most easily noticeable difference between Continental Checkers and the commonly played checkers (known as English draughts or American checkers) is



A move by white that captures two red pieces but does not result in the white piece being promoted.



A move by white that captures one red piece and results in the white piece being promoted (indicated by a blue circular border).

the size of the playing board. American checkers is played on an eight by eight grid, meaning there are thirty-six fewer squares on the board. The size of the board likely

would not change gameplay of American checkers other than spreading out the pieces and possibly incorporating a few more pieces for each player.

Gameplay in Continental checkers is affected by three key differences from American checkers: The ability of pieces to move both forward *and* backward, forced capture, and method of capture by promoted pieces. Before playing, the method of capture defined for promoted pieces seems similar to the method of movement defined for the queen piece in the game of Chess. This type of movement is very unique compared to my previous experience in playing American checkers and may prove to be an interesting difference in the gameplay experience.

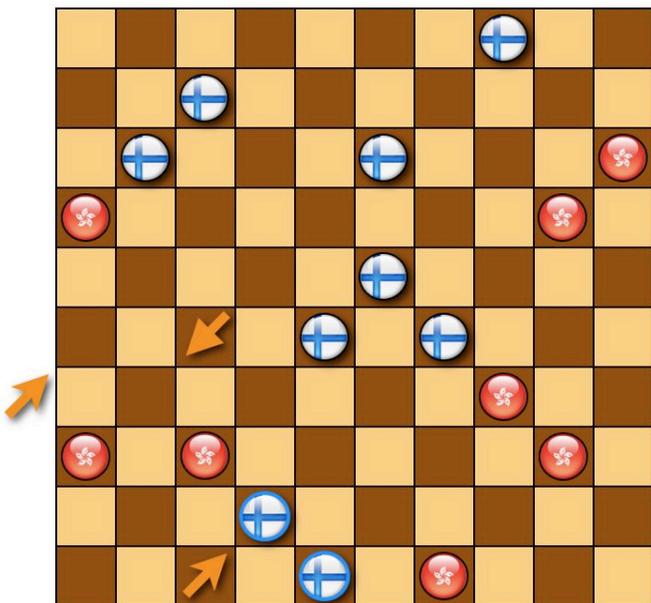
Playtesting

In playtesting I first played the game a small number of times under the original rules. Gameplay was especially slow in the beginning as both players attempted to be very mindful of the the rules, and spent an extra thirty seconds to a minute reviewing each move to ensure that no forced capture opportunities were missed. Play by both participants was very defensive, which may have been a result of the lack of familiarity with the rules. It is unlikely that the defensive style of play demonstrated by the participants was due to the ability of pieces to move backward as well as forward as both players continually forgot that they were allowed to move pieces in this manner.

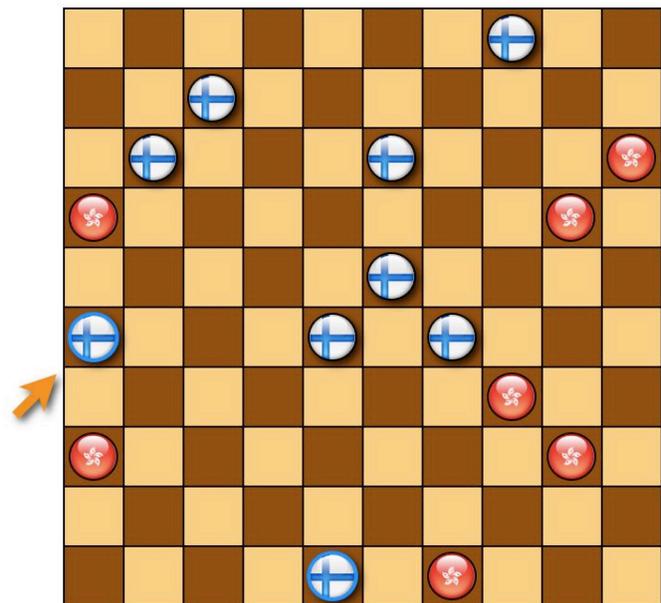
After a few games both players began to utilize the backward movement more frequently and in doing so were able to better prevent the loss of pieces in later turns. Players became better at avoiding losses, but remained very slow to develop an attack. Multiple piece captures almost never occurred excepting a few cases where a player mistakenly left themselves exposed.

As play continued, players eventually began to utilize strategy in which they would sacrifice a piece hoping to realize a larger gain (capturing one or more of the opponents pieces) in a future turn as follows:

1. First player moves a piece into a position where it will be captured.
2. Second player, by the rules, must capture it. Second player is now in an unfavorable position.
3. First player now uses this turn to capture more pieces than were originally sacrificed.



Arrows highlight the white promoted piece and its possible end locations when capturing a standard red piece.



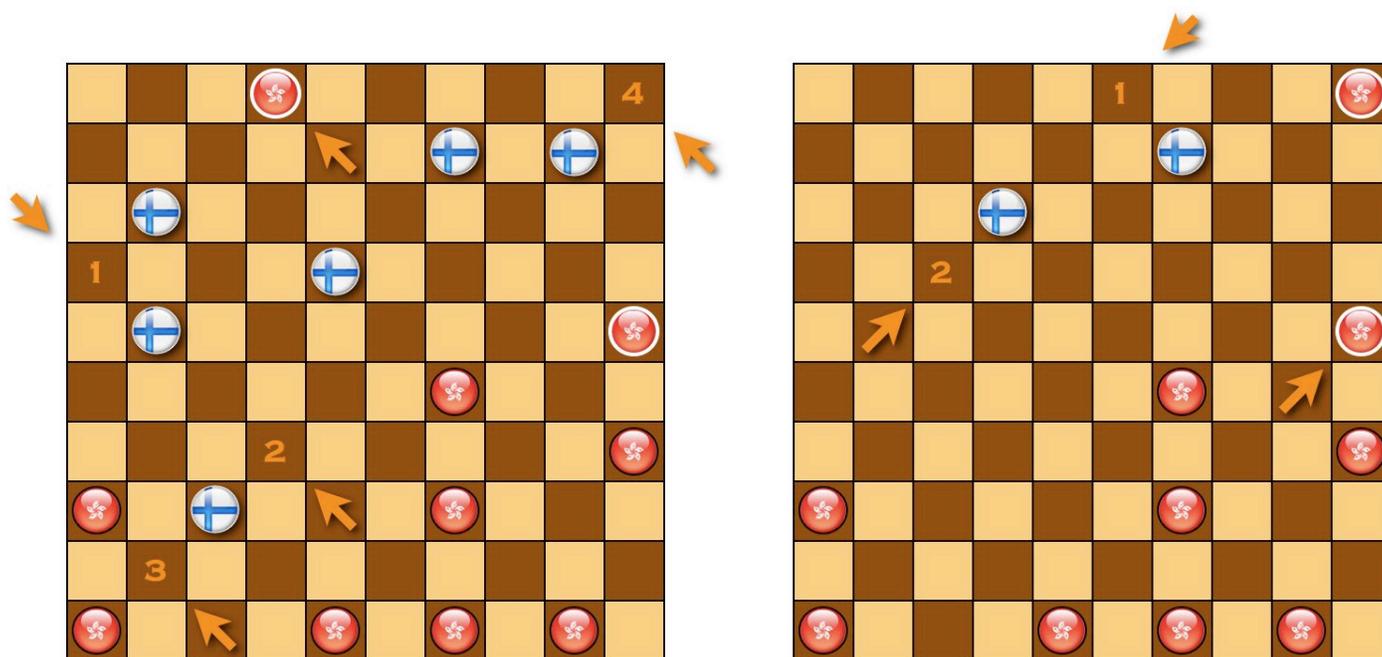
Here an arrow highlights the chosen end location of the promoted white piece. The red piece has been captured and the white piece has avoided capture by selecting the furthest open space beyond the now captured red piece.

Rule Changes

In an attempt to increase attacking movements a rule was introduced that allowed the player occupying a specific predetermined space on the board to move two pieces

each turn rather than just one. This rule change was immediately strange to play with because there is no “center space” on the game board that each player from the starting position is equally likely to occupy. Introducing a second symmetrically placed spot that would allow a second move tended to just negate the advantageous effect of being able to move twice, because the opponent was also able to move twice. This simply led to the game being played in turns of two moves per player, which did not alter the game significantly enough for the players to continue with this “king of the hill” rule.

An interesting aspect of the game was the strategy involved in moving and capturing with promoted pieces. In the first games we played few pieces were ever promoted.



Strategic maneuvers with promoted pieces. On the left: By chaining captures and selecting appropriate landing spaces for each capture the promoted red piece is able to traverse a significant portion of the board, and capture four white pieces. On the right: A few turns later the other promoted piece on the red side is also able to chain captures, resulting in a red victory.

The promoted pieces introduced a very interested new strategic element that we attempted to enhance. In order to bring about more promoted pieces we changed the promotion rule so that any piece that ended a turn on a space in the opponent’s back

two rows would be promoted, rather than just the back row. This rule change did in fact increase forward and attacking activity, as both players attempted to gain an advantage by increasing their number of promoted pieces as quickly as possible.

In general the frequency with which pieces were promoted did increase, but this was not always the case as the players would at times would simply avoid moving the pieces from their back two rows in order to prevent the opponent from promoting pieces. This defensive strategy created an interesting method in which players would seem to attack in waves, first with their forward pieces, and eventually when necessary with a second wave of the pieces from their back rows.

If one player was able to gain a number of promoted pieces early, it did provide a noticeable attacking advantage for that player and would create an inequality in strength that could be very challenging for the second player to recover from. This inequality did arise occasionally, but was enjoyed by the players.

Rule Ambiguities

The rule sources utilized lacked information regarding a few scenarios we encountered during play testing. We decided to resolve them as follows:

- A promoted piece can move one space when not capturing.
- A promoted piece can make multiple captures in a single turn.
- A captured piece is considered removed from the board as soon as the piece capturing it passes over it. This allows promoted pieces to move back and forth along a diagonal to make multiple captures if possible.

Impressions

Continental checkers seems to be a more challenging strategic game than American checkers. Over more time and more intense play very high level strategies could develop to take advantage of forced capture and promoted piece movement. These strategies stem largely from design decisions implemented in the rules of the game, and allow movement capabilities to the players that allow for this to be an entertaining and stimulating game in its own right.

Contributions

I have provided an explanation of the rules for this variant of checkers, and included graphics I have created to help clarify rules that may be misinterpreted. I highlighted a few differences between this version of checkers and American checkers, as well as describing interesting events in playtesting. Interesting movements or strategy from playtesting have been included in the form of diagrams to help share the gameplay experience with the reader. Some of the game's rules were modified in attempts to enhance certain aspects of the game. Though not all of the modifications were successful it appears that a good middle ground could be reached between the original rules and modified rules to increase the attacking aspect of the game, and it would be very interested in playing either the original or modified version of this game again in the future.

Work Cited

"Games of Kings and Soldiers." <http://www.di.fc.ul.pt/~jpn/gv/checkers.htm>

"18th and 19th Century Games." <http://www.mackinacparks.com/uploads/Games.pdf>

"English Draughts." Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Checkers>

*** Many thanks to Dominik Kmita for his help in playtesting this game. ***