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

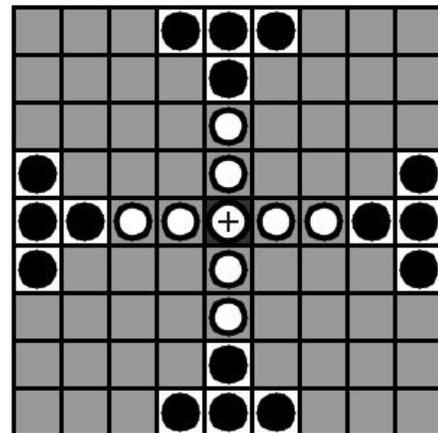
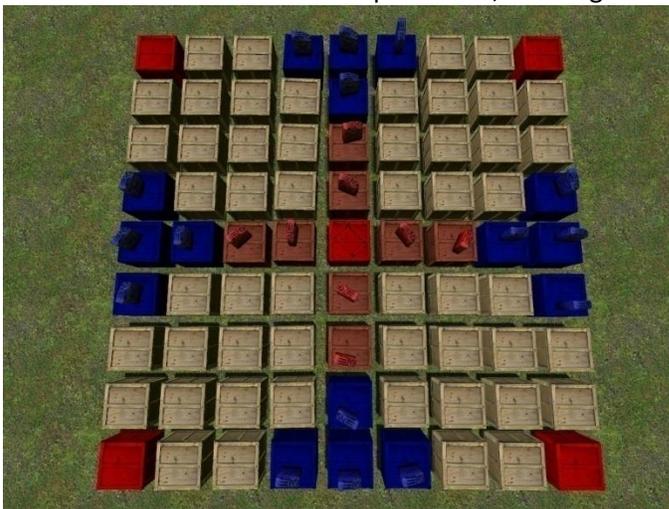
2/25/2008

Note: The following contents were excerpted from the journal of Dr. Wallace Breen, after recovery from the Citadel in City 17.

Tablut Reconstruction

Despite overseeing the perfection of humanity through its merger with the Combine, and creating the Overwatch, times come when an excursion into the treasure trove of the history of humanity becomes necessary for my own sanity. Today, with the help of Overwatch soldier #1, I experimented with recreating the game of Tablut. It's a quite old game, the documents describing it being from 1732 which is 279 years ago. The rules are somewhat ill defined, allowing some freedom in both interpretation and filling in gaps left in the rules. The basic rules, as interpreted from the 1732 description are as follows:

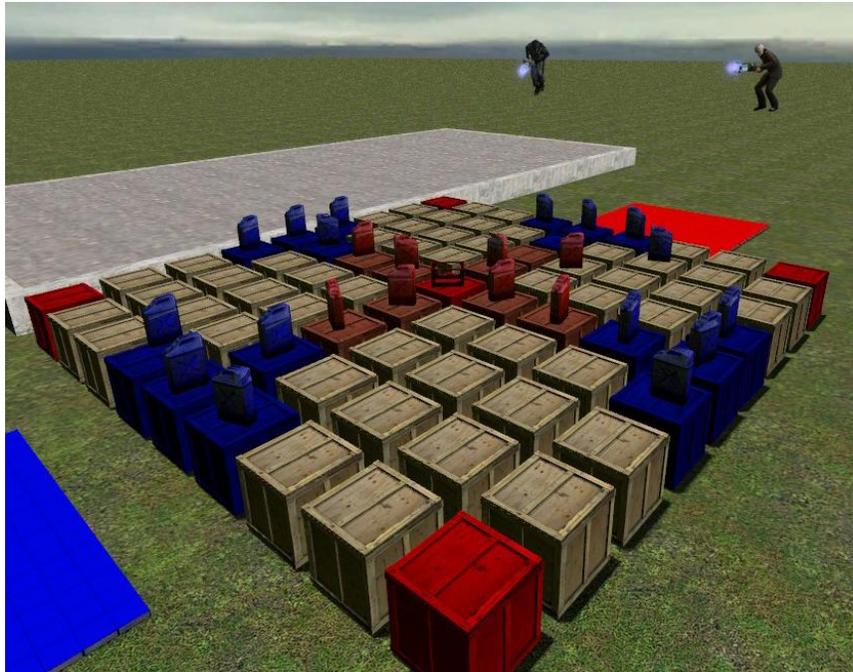
1. The game requires two players
2. The game is played on a 9x9 grid. It requires 16 pieces of one color, 8 of another, and a 9th king piece of the same color. The initial setup is below; the diagram is taken from (Helmfrid).



3. The object of the red team is to move the king piece (located in the center) to any of the edges, where he "escapes".
4. The object of the blue team is to capture the king by surrounding him on all four sides.
5. Red moves first, with players taking alternating turns.

6. All pieces move an unlimited number of squares along a line (similar to the rook or castle in chess).
7. A piece is captured when it is surrounded on two opposite sides by enemy pieces, one of which moved there by the movement of an enemy. A piece is not captured when it moves between two enemy pieces, since capture requires an enemy action.

These rules were the basis of my reconstruction, but with several modifications, arrived at via testing with Overwatch Soldier #1.



Game Analysis

Tablut is a game in the Tafl line of games. One of the key distinguishing characteristics of Tafl games is the imbalance between the two players (Masters). In Tablut, this is obvious by the numerical superiority of the blue or attacking team, as compared to the red or defensive team. The balance of Tafl games then becomes a more complex task, since it requires balancing an asymmetrical game. The balance of something like chess is relatively straightforward, since both teams start with identical pieces in an identical arrangement on opposite sides of a square board. The balance of an asymmetric game is much more challenging.

In examining the rules of Tablut, it was obvious that there were certain ambiguities in the rules which would require clarification before play began. It was also clear that certain rules would require either simplification or further explanation. The rules, while being relatively short and simple, had a variety of complex consequences. One example of unnecessary complexity was the behavior of the kings starting location, and the starting location of the blue team. These were both potentially considered hostile, meaning players could not move through them or into them once they had moved out.

Another complexity was in the behavior of the escape rule for the king. In particular, when the king would be considered to have escaped was somewhat complex. In the rules formulation, it was stated that the king would escape via moving adjacent to any of the edges (Helmfrid). However, if the blue team could surround the king on three sides in the following turn, he would be captured instead. This was another instance of complexity, and could lead to situations where it was unclear which player was the winner, or one player not realizing they could win because the other player had apparently satisfied their victory condition.

Rules Modifications

The aim of the modification of the rules was two-fold. The first goal was a simplification of the rules, removing unnecessary complexity from the game mechanics. The second goal was maintaining, or improving the balance of the game as a system. Often, multiple modifications were required, some to reduce complexity, and others to offset the balance changes that the simplifications caused.

The first game modification was the victory condition for the red team. Their goal was simply to move the king to an edge of the board, where he could escape from on the next turn. There were certain limitations, including whether or not the blue start areas, sometimes referred to as base camps, were accessible to red. To simplify the game, the base camps were made traversable by red. This

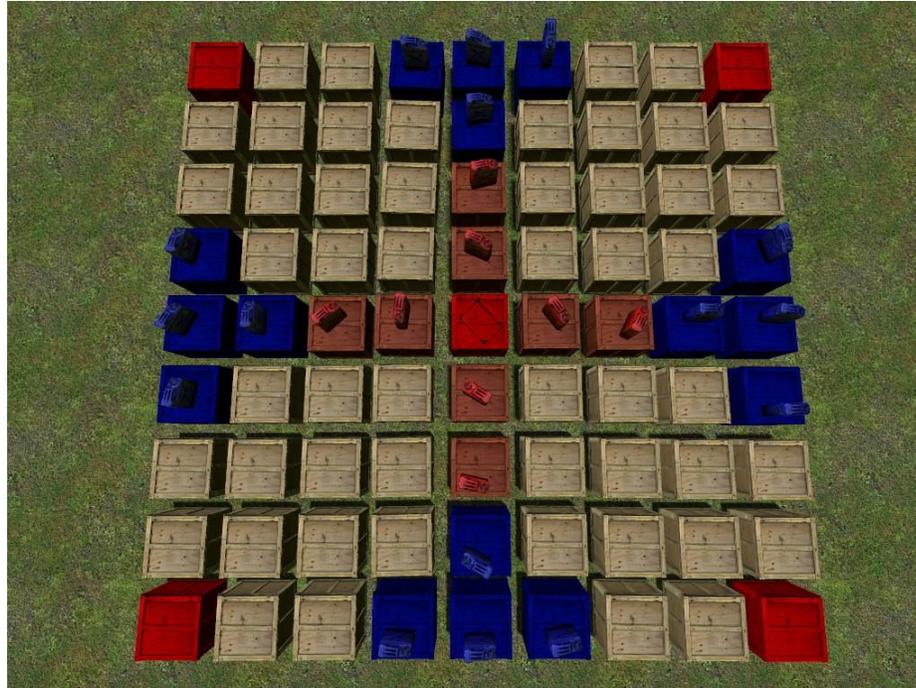
appeared to unbalance the game in favor of red, since the area for the king to escape was approximately doubled. To help restrict this, an idea was taken from *Alea Evangelii*, which was limiting the king's escape to only the four corners. This helped to balance the game, and also made it easier to discern when victory occurred for red, since the escape points could be easily marked on the board. To simplify the actual victory condition, red would be victorious as soon as the king was moved onto one of the red corners.

In addition, the four escape points are also hostile to all pieces. This is done mainly to prevent blue from simply placing pieces in the four corners, and making it essentially impossible for the king to escape. This also opens up certain new strategies, since they can be used by either red or blue for a piece in a capture, and requires additional care in the corners. While it is an added complexity, the imbalance of allowing the camping of the escape points was a large enough problem to merit the added rule.

The second modification, or more correctly clarification, is the abilities of the king. For balance, the king is allowed to participate as one of two units in a capture. This behavior is required to ensure that the red team has a reasonable ability to capture pieces when the king is moving, and also for the sake of simplicity in the rules, since it allows the king to behave almost entirely like any regular piece in the game. The rule is only for clarification in the case of debate over the function of the king, and would otherwise be an unstated consequence of the capture rule.

The final rules for my reconstruction of *Tablut* are as follows:

1. The game requires two players
2. The game is played on a 9x9 grid. It requires 16 pieces of one color, 8 of another, and a 9th king piece of the same color. The initial setup is below:

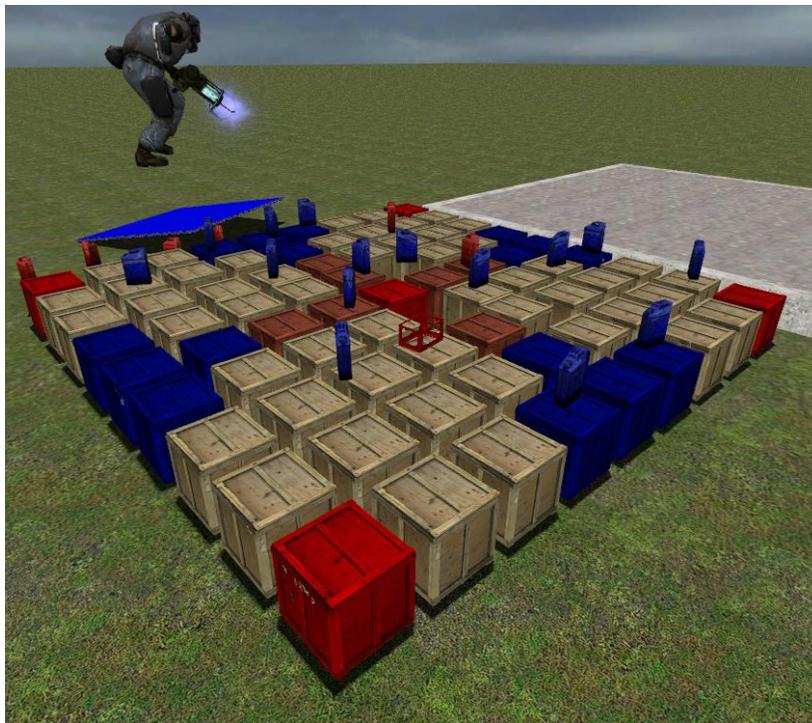


3. The object of the red team is to move the king piece (located in the center) to any of the four marked corners where he immediately escapes.
4. The object of the blue team is to capture the king by surrounding him on all four sides (in the case of the king adjoining an edge, only 3 sides are required).
5. Red moves first, with players taking alternating turns.
6. All pieces move an unlimited number of squares along a line (similar to the rook or castle in chess).
7. A piece is captured when it is surrounded on two opposite sides by enemy pieces, one of which moved there by the movement of an enemy. A piece is not captured when it moves between two enemy pieces, since capture requires an enemy action.
8. The four marked corners are hostile to all pieces, and can be used as one of two men for a capture by either team.
9. The king is allowed to participate in captures.

Play Test

The play testing of the game was conducted using a prototype constructed from surplus material available around City 17. Crates were used to denote locations on the board, while gas cans were used to mark pieces, along with a red basket for the king. There were some minor flaws in the initial prototype of the game, which were exposed through testing. These however had to do with both the description of the rules, and the construction of the prototype.

One key problem in the construction of the prototype is that the crates used in the construction were breakable. This caused issues when pieces were placed incorrectly, and crushed the crates. The second prototype of the game used crates constructed of a more solid material, which caused breakage to no longer be a problem. In addition, the gas cans used to construct the red pieces initially were of a flammable type, which caused a spontaneous explosion of most all of the red pieces. The second prototype used gas cans which had been emptied and cleaned, reducing their flammability to essentially zero.

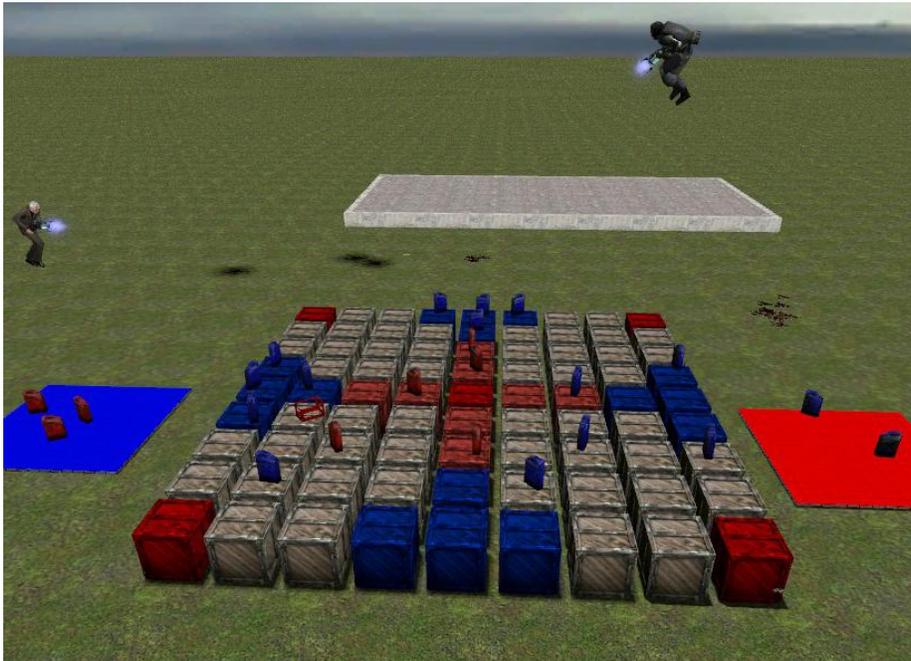


One rules flaw exposed in the first play test was the possibility that the description of red as the attacking team and blue as the defending team may have made the capture rule unclear. In particular, the red team did not capture any blue pieces, which may have been due to a misunderstanding of the rules. For clarification, the final rules make no reference to teams as attacking or defending, simply using the color of the pieces in the prototype to denote their affiliation.

Overall, the results of the play test seemed positive. The simplified, updated game rules were accessible, and created an interesting strategy game. The imbalance of the game based on initial piece allocation made it a more interesting experience, since each player was forced to employ different types of strategies. Using the final rules formulation, the results seemed to indicate a relatively even balance, with the results being an even split between players.

Conclusions

The reconstruction of Tablut was an interesting exercise. It required an examination of the known rules, and exploring ways to simplify and clarify them. The game which resulted borrowed from several games in the Tafl family, mainly Alea Evangelii, to create a hybrid game which is simple to understand, easy to play, and involves strategic thought. Play testing highlighted areas where the rules might be confusing, and also helped to explore the balancing issues of an asymmetric game. An important point is that simplifying the rules may have consequences on the balance of the system which require further changes to rebalance the system.



Works Cited

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