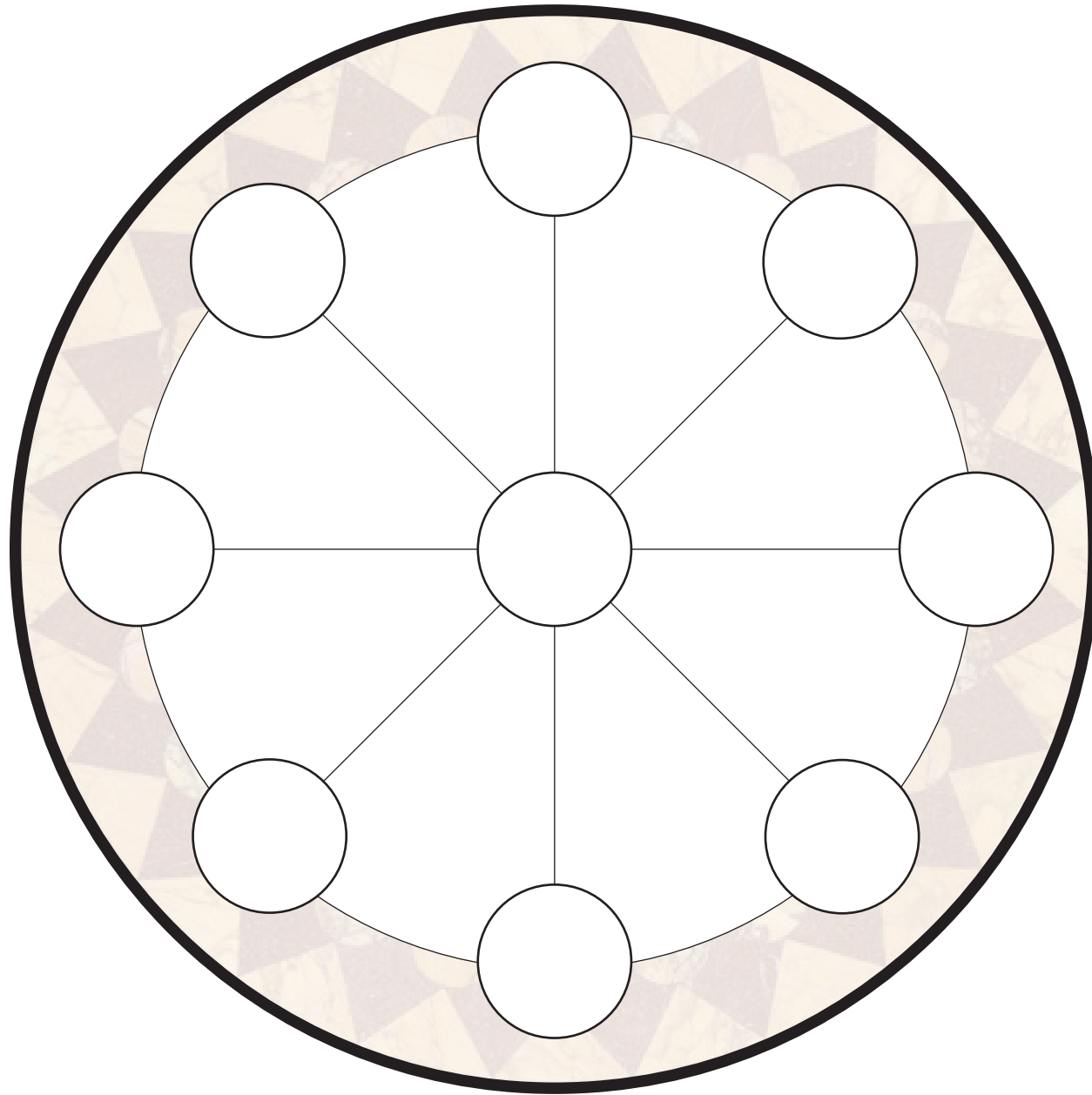


GAME BOARD

ROTA

Getty



This board is based on one found in Roman Libya.

INFORMATION AND RULES

ROTA

ABOUT

“Rota” is a common modern name for an easy strategy game played on a round board. The Latin name is probably *Terni Lapilli* (“Three pebbles”). Many boards survive, both round and rectangular, and there must have been variations in play.

This is a very simple game, and Rota is especially appropriate to play with young family members and friends! Unlike Tic Tac Toe, Rota avoids a tie.



Roman Rota game carved into the forum pavement, Leptis Magna, Libya.

Photo by Sebastia Giralt / CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

WHAT YOU NEED

- 2 players
- 1 round game board like a wheel with 8 spokes (download and print ours, or draw your own)
- 1 die for determining who starts first
- 3 playing pieces for each player, such as light and dark pebbles or coins (heads and tails). You can also cut out our gaming pieces and glue them to pennies or circles of cardboard

RULES

Goal: The first player to place three game pieces in a row across the center or in the circle of the board wins

- Roll a die or flip a coin to determine who starts. The higher number plays first
- Players take turns placing one piece on the board in any open spot
- After all the pieces are on the board, a player moves one piece each turn onto the next empty spot (along spokes or circle)

A player may not

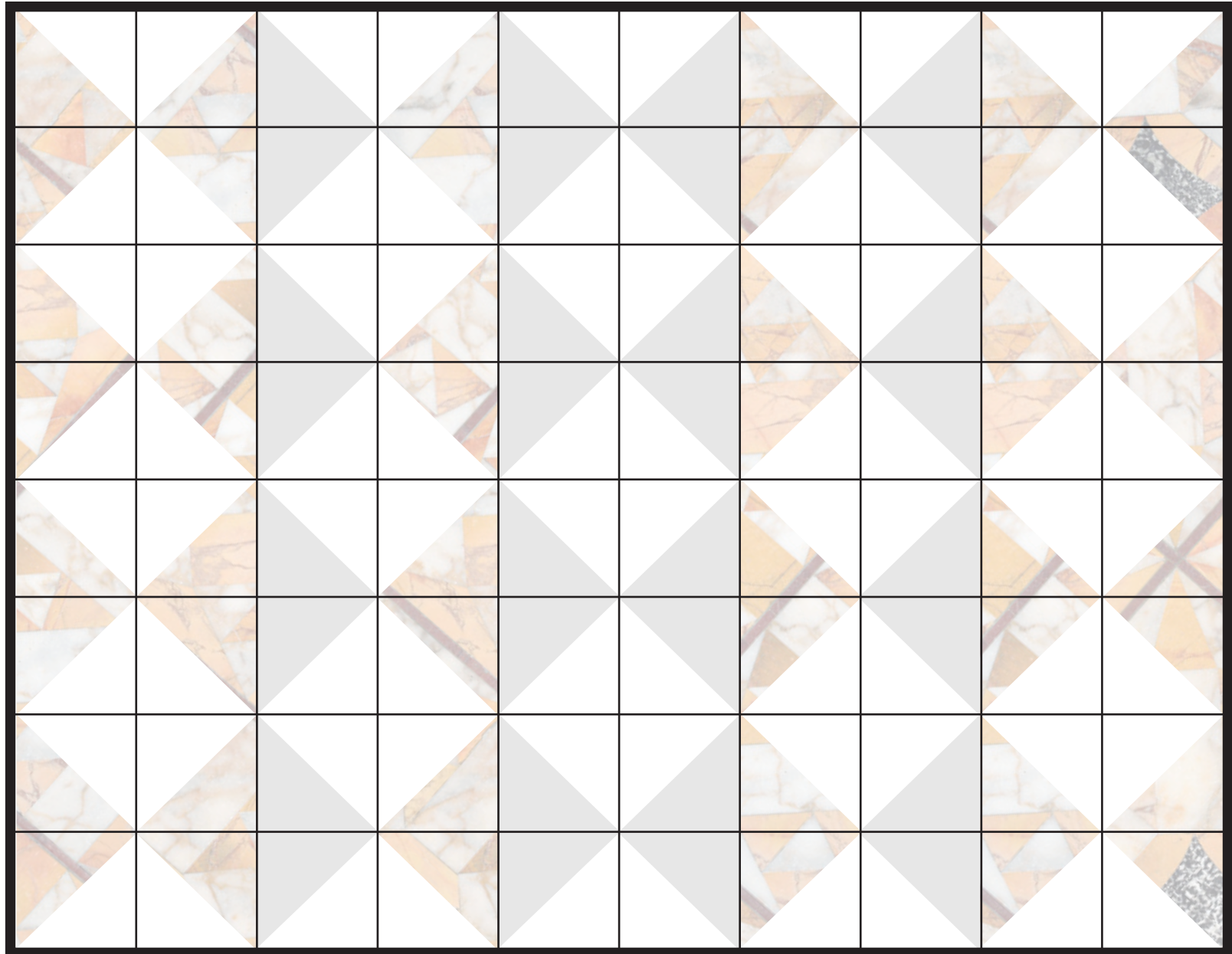
- Skip a turn, even if the move forces you to lose the game
- Jump over another piece
- Move more than one space
- Land on a space with a piece already on it
- Knock a piece off a space

Changing the rules

- Since the person who starts first has an advantage, give it to a young player, or alternate turns rather than leave it to chance
- Whoever wins six times first has to do something nice for the other person during a break in play...

GAME BOARD

LUDUS CALCULORUM



INFORMATION AND RULES

LUDUS CALCULORUM

ABOUT

This is a speed/strategy game. We are not completely sure of the rules, although the basics seem simple. The game is related in some ways to Gomoku and checkers. Many boards were scratched in the dirt and carved into pavements and doorways. Bored soldiers and entourages of the rich needed something to do in a pre-digital age! Archaeology produces few rules for games, since people took them for granted (and written reports often decay with time). We can't be sure of all the games played on all the different boards that survive, but we CAN be sure there were variations.



Left: Roman clay floor tile incised with a game board, with ivory playing pieces, Silchester.

Right: Rectangular game board carved on the steps of the Basilica Julia, Roman Forum, Rome.

Left to right: Reading Museum, England. Photo by BabelStone / CC VB-SA3.0; Photo by Eric Livak-Dahl, 2004, Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0, via Wikipedia

WHAT YOU NEED

- 2 players
- A gridded board; ours is 8×10 squares (download and print ours, or draw your own)
- 35+ playing pieces for each player, such as light and dark pebbles or coins (heads and tails). You can also cut out our gaming pieces and glue them to pennies or circles of cardboard

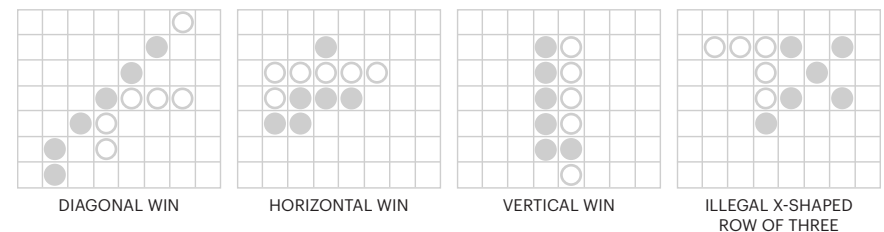
RULES

Goal: The first player to place five pieces in a row across, up, down, or diagonally wins

- Players take turns placing a game piece on any empty space
- Pieces are not moved or removed; they stay in place
- A double open-ended row of three is forbidden (3 game pieces that cross in a T or X if not blocked by an opponent beyond the third game piece)
- If there is no winner when the board is full or the pieces have run out, there is a draw

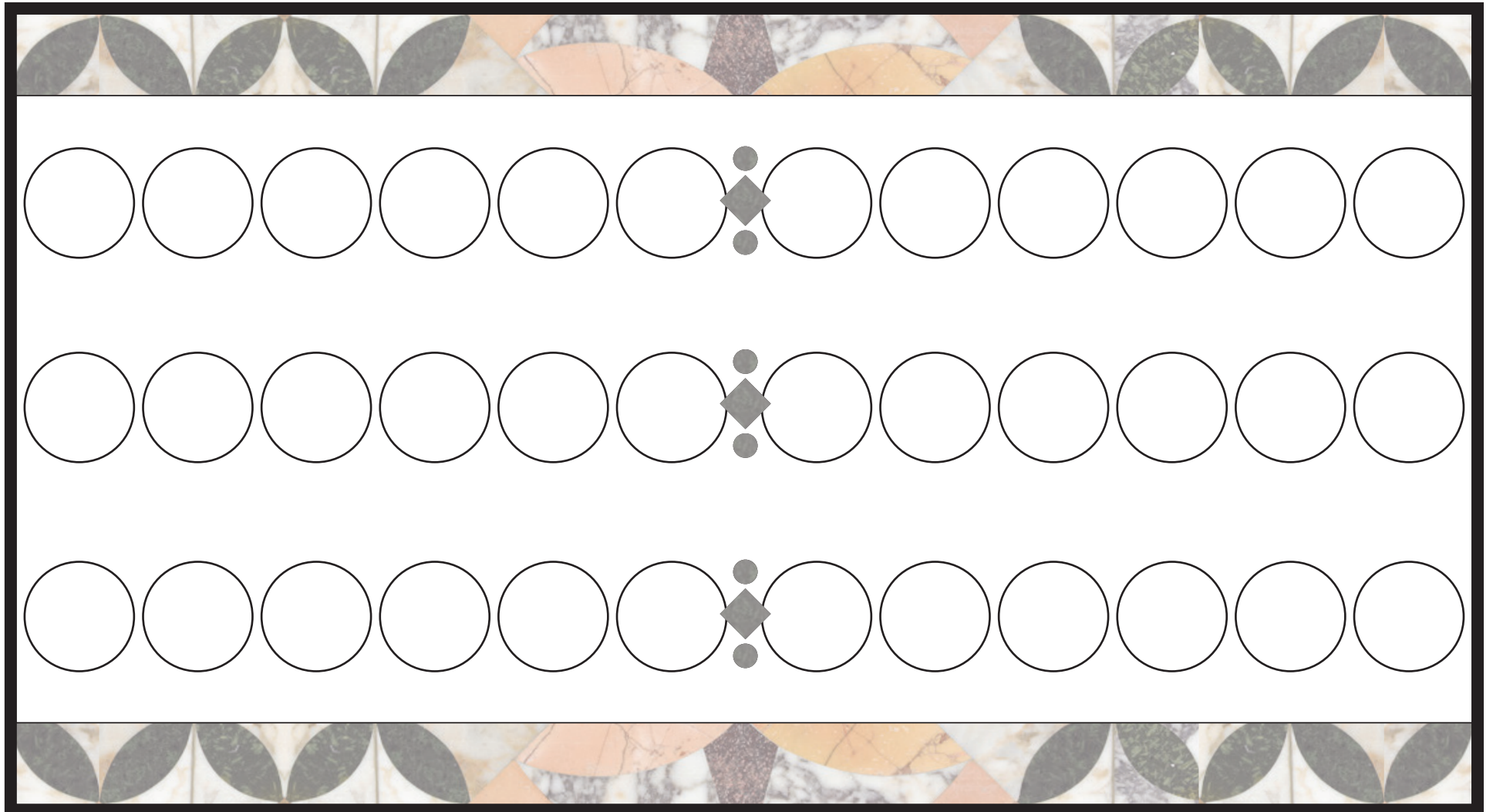
To make the game harder

Forbid a double row of four pieces in an X or T, as well as a double row of three



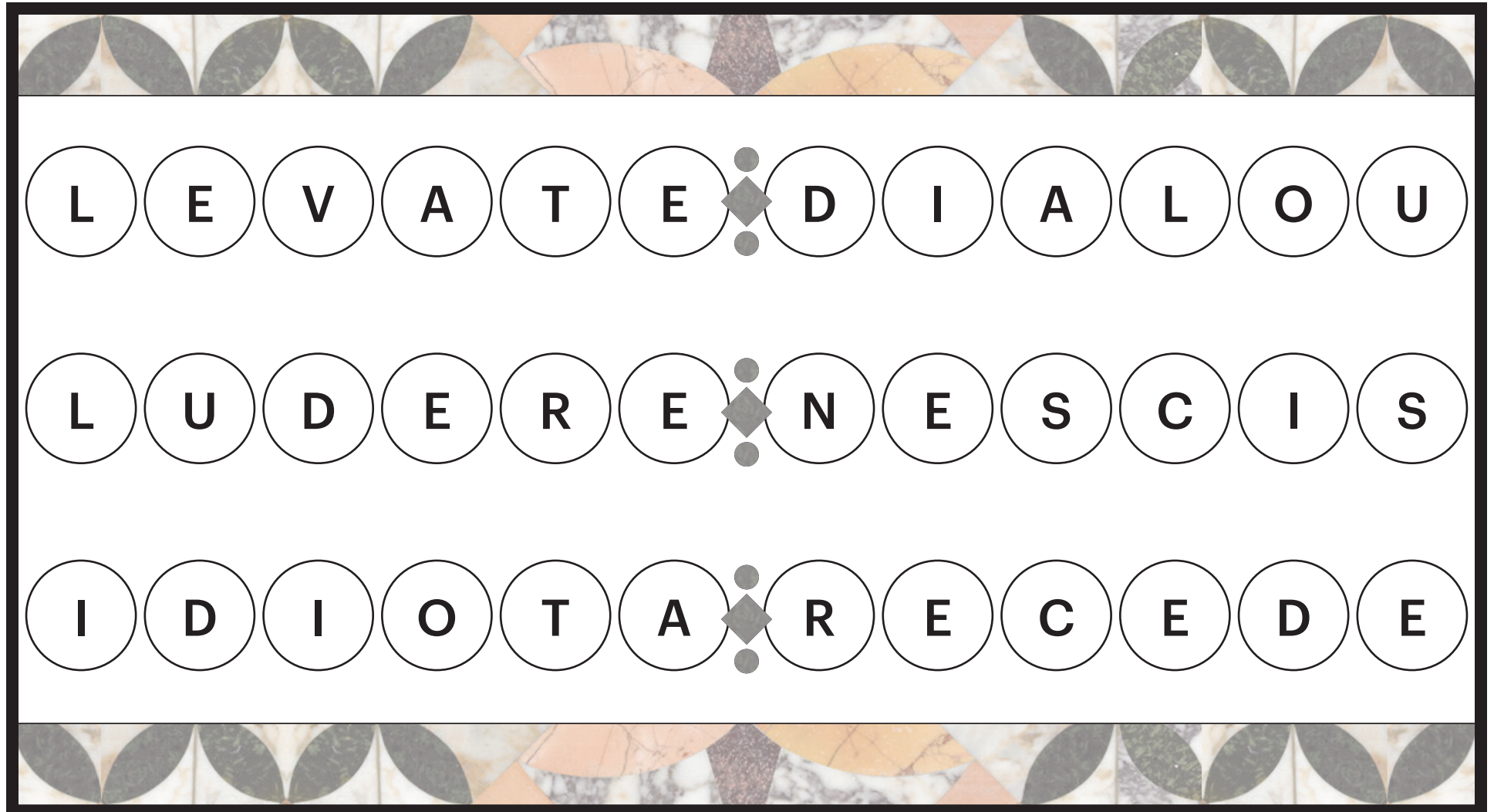
GAME BOARD

LUDUS DUODECIM SCRIPTORUM



GAME BOARD

LUDUS DUODECIM SCRIPTORUM



This inscribed board says: "Get up, get lost. You don't know how to play! Idiot, give up!"

Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL) xiv.4125

INFORMATION AND RULES

LUDUS DUODECIM SCRIPTORUM

ABOUT

This game of chance and strategy is a bit like Backgammon, and it takes practice. The game may last a long time—over an hour. Start to play a first round to learn the rules before getting more serious—or before deciding to tinker with the rules to make them easier!

We provide two boards to choose from, one very plain, and another with six-letter words substituted for groups of six landing spaces. Romans loved to gamble, and some scholars conjecture that Duodecim boards with writing on them were intended to disguise their function at times when authorities were cracking down on betting.

Some boards extolled self-care, Roman style; one says: “To hunt, to bathe, to play, to laugh, this is to live!” Another is a tavern’s menu: “We have for dinner: chicken, fish, ham, peacock.” But some boards are too obvious to fool anyone. Our example is an “insult board”: “Get up, get lost. You don’t know how to play! Idiot, give up!” Both players could assume negative comments were about the opponent.



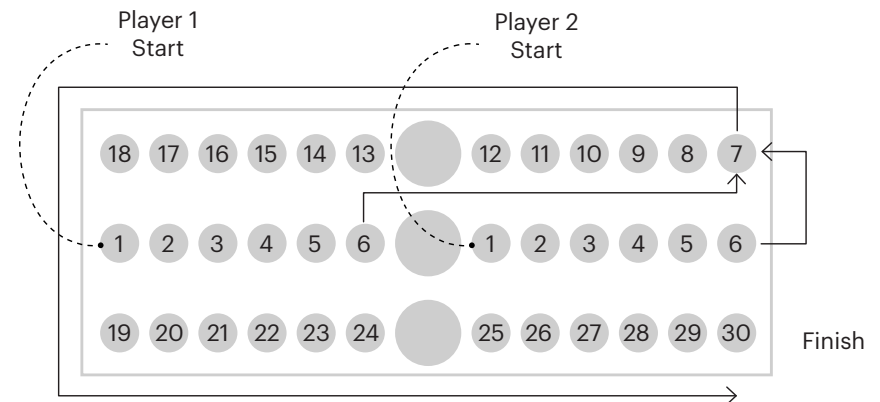
Ludus Duodecim Scriptorum board from Aphrodisias in Turkey.

Photo: William Neuheiser. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic, via Wikimedia Commons

Scholars have reconstructed the direction of play based on a beginner’s board with a sequence of letters. Roland Austin and Harold Murray figured out the likely game basics in the early twentieth century. Rules are adapted from Tabula, a similar game

WHAT YOU NEED

- 2 players
- A game board with 3 rows of 12 game spaces (download and print ours, or draw your own)
- 5 flat identifiably different game pieces for each player. They will be stacked. Pennies work: heads for one player, tails for the other
- You can also print and cut out our gaming pieces and glue them to pennies or cardboard
- 3 six-sided dice



INFORMATION AND RULES, CONTINUED

LUDUS DUODECIM SCRIPTORUM**RULES**

Goal: The first player to move all playing pieces off the board wins

To enter

- The first player is selected by the roll of a die (the higher number plays first)
- Play begins in the middle row, in players' 6 home spaces (see diagram)
- No piece may advance from home until all 15 are on the board
- Pieces may be stacked
- No player may enter the other's home row
- Each player throws three dice per turn and moves based on the throw

To play

- Each player can move 1, 2, or 3 game pieces based on the throw
- The numbers on the dice can be used separately to place 3 game pieces, or can be added together to move one piece or two stacked pieces
- Example: 3 dice throws of 1, 3, and 6 offer five possibilities:
 - 1 piece moves 10 spaces (1+3+6)
 - 3 individual game pieces moves 1, 3, and 6 spaces (1, 3, 6)
 - 1 piece moves 1 space and 1 piece moves 9 spaces (1, 3+6)
 - 1 piece move 3 spaces and 1 piece moves 7 spaces (3, 1+6)
 - 1 piece moves 6 spaces and 1 piece moves 4 spaces (6, 1+3)
- No die may be ignored
- A number may not be split, only added
- A players' stacked pieces are always safe from an opponent
- Players may not land on the opponent's stacked pieces, but can count the space and move to an empty spot beyond

- An opponent may land on a single piece, forcing it to start over at the beginning of the next turn
- To return a captured piece home and then back onto the main board, players switch to one die
- If a player's pieces are blocked by stacked pieces of the opponent, the player's turn is lost until the board opens up

To exit

- A player's game pieces must gather in the final six spots before any may exit
- Exiting requires an exact throw (a piece on the last spot still needs a throw of 1)
- At this stage in the game, players switch to one die

No, it's not you—this game is hard to grasp at first. If you are patient and play one game while learning the rules, you'll have fun.

To make the game faster/easier

- Allow entire stacks to move as one if the total of the 3 numbers rolled allows the stack to reach a free spot
- Decrease the number of game pieces and/or dice

To make exiting faster/easier

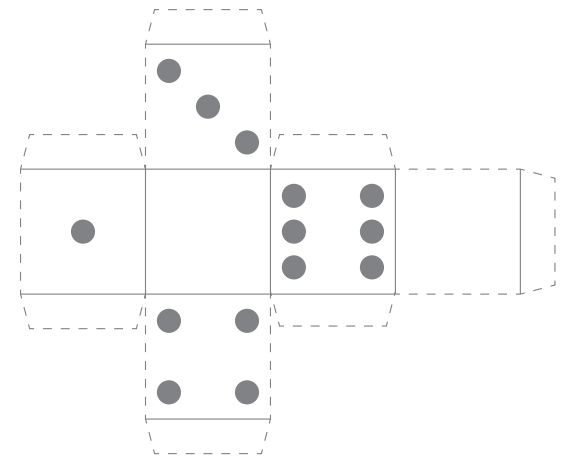
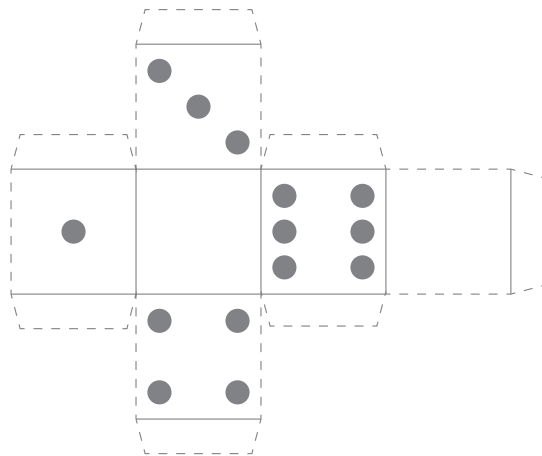
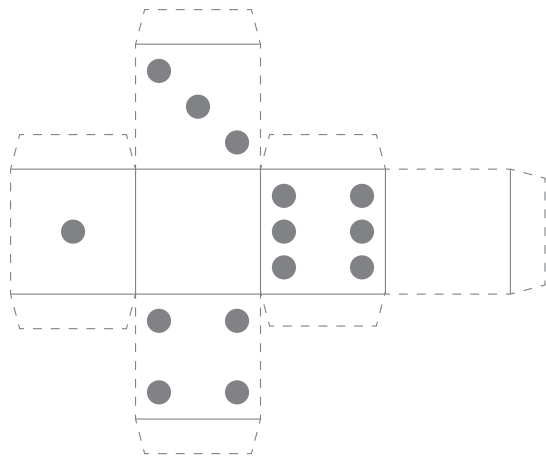
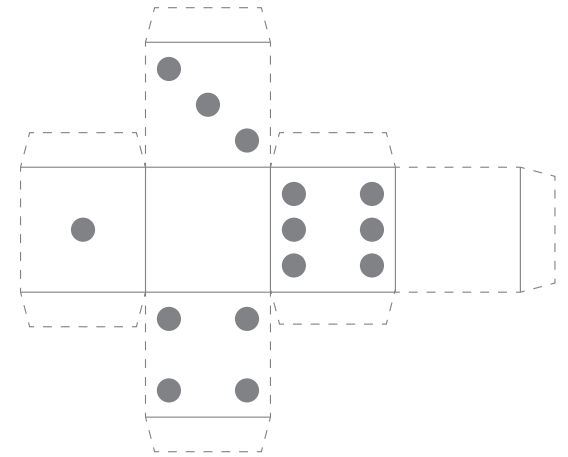
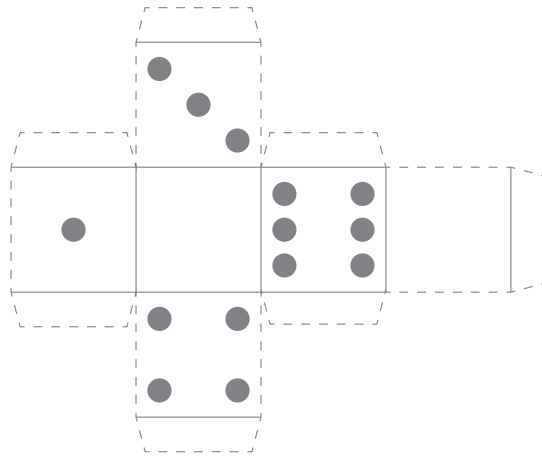
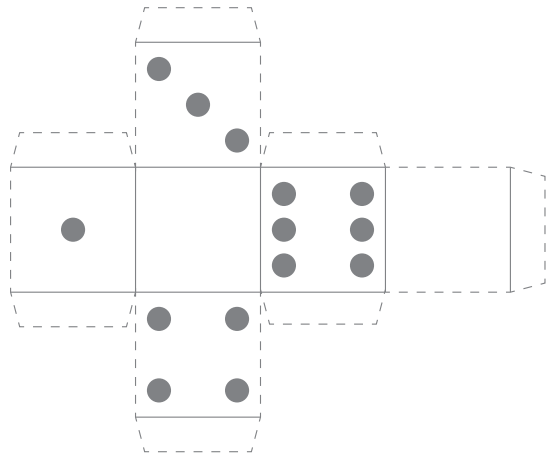
- Allow an exit once all pieces have reached the final 12 spaces.
- Allow pieces to exit whenever they can without waiting for others to catch up

To make the game harder

- If a piece is sent back to the beginning, the player may not move any other pieces until that piece is off the home space again and on the main board

ANCIENT GAMES

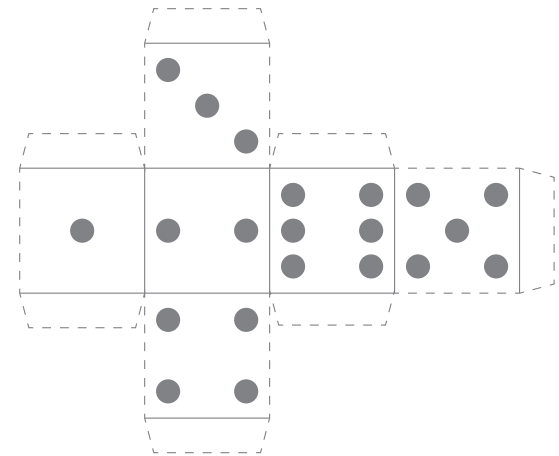
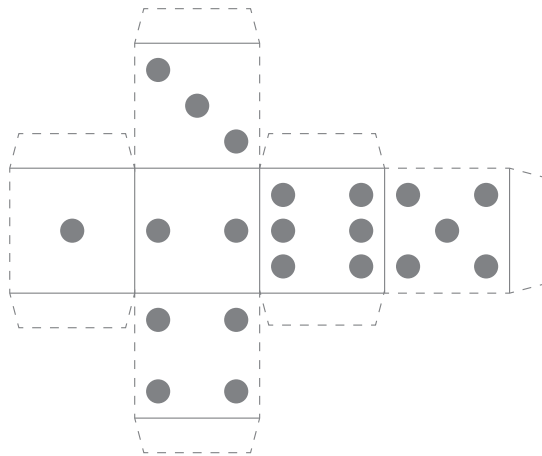
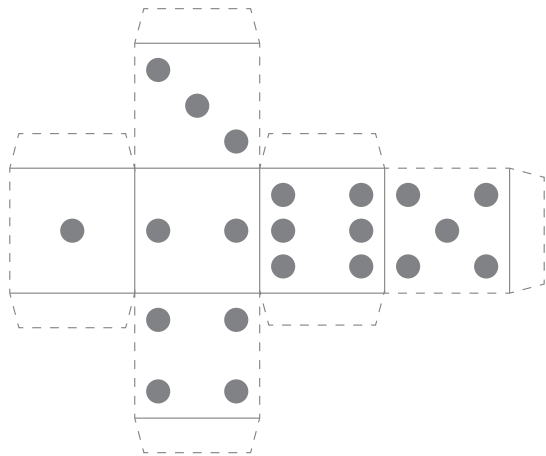
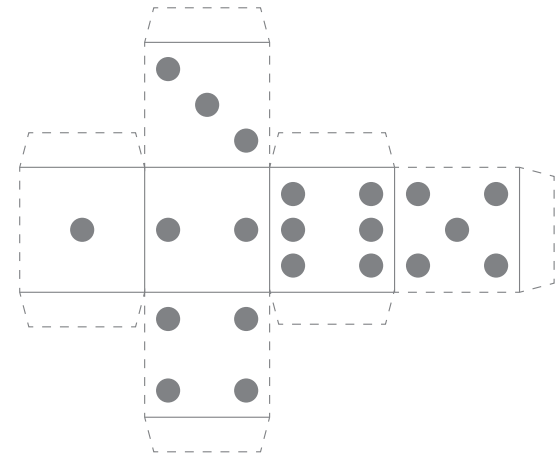
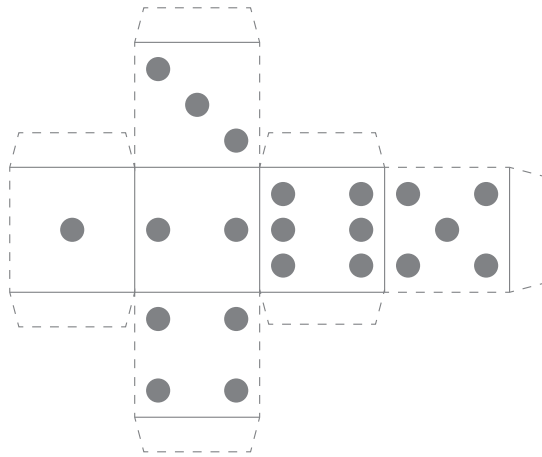
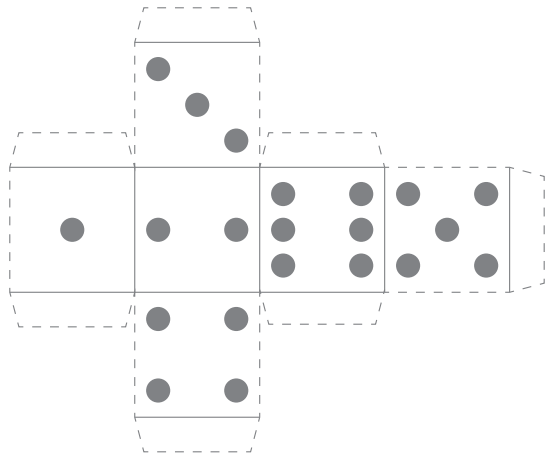
TALI (FOUR-SIDED)



To assemble, cut on dotted lines, fold on solid lines, and then glue or tape small flaps to interior of adjacent face to construct cubic forms. A glue stick works best.

ANCIENT GAMES

TESSERAE (SIX-SIDED)



To assemble, cut on dotted lines, fold on solid lines, and then glue or tape small flaps to interior of adjacent face to construct cubic forms. A glue stick works best.

INFORMATION AND RULES

TALI AND TESSERAE

ABOUT

Tali (*astragaloi* in Greek) were the six-sided “knucklebones”—ankle bones—of sheep or goats. Romans used them as dice and also made artificial versions out of many materials. Although they are really 6-sided, knucklebones are considered 4-sided because their short, rounded ends did not count (a die could not stand on them).

Since each side of a knucklebone has a different shape, it doesn't need to be numbered to be identifiable, but the four usable sides were identified as I, III, IV, and VI (missing II and V, the rounded ends). When the Romans used dice to mimic tali, they left blanks where II and V would have been. If you threw an unnumbered side, it counted as zero, or you could agree to throw again. Both kinds of tali (knucklebones and 4-sided dice) were thrown from the hand or a special box (*fritillus*). The number that was counted was face down, not face up! (You don't have to follow that rule.)



Left: *Astragalos*, 1st century BC–1st century AD, Roman. Glass. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Gift of Nicolas Koutoulakis.

Right: Roman Egyptian ivory dice from Oxyrhynchus, and container, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Tesserae are 6-sided dice, like ours, often used to move the pieces on a game board. Used alone they were generally for gambling, to provide a win with the highest number.

We do not know the rules for many knucklebone and dice games, although we can guess, and making up your own rules is not a problem. The Romans probably did that too. These are some games with rules we can reasonably guess.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 2 or more players
- Paper and pencil to record scores
- Tali or six-sided tesserae (a.k.a. regular dice)

GAMES OF SKILL AND DEXTERITY

1. Catch tali or tesserae in the air

Goal: Catch the most tali on the back of the hand over 5 or 10 turns

- Decide on a length of time or a number of throws per turn
- Hold five tali in one hand and toss them up in the air
- Turn your hand over and try to land all of them on the back of the throwing hand (also try landing them on the other hand—this is very difficult!)
- Leave the fallen tali where they are
- Throw the tali up again from the back of your hand and catch them in your palm.
- Keep going until you fail to catch any tali, fumble badly, or reach the limit of your turn, in which case your turn ends; start over at the next turn

INFORMATION AND RULES

TALI AND TESSERAE

2. Pick up tali or tesserae

Goal: First player to pick up 40 tali while another one is in the air wins

- This game, like Jacks, is often played on the floor
- Scatter 5 or 10 tali within a designated space, usually a circle
- Toss one in the air; sweep up as many other tali as you can and then catch the one in the air before it can fall to the ground; repeat
- When you have picked up all tali with no errors, or if you fumble, the next player has a turn
- If players are skilled enough to sweep up many knucklebones at once, change the rules to require that just 3 must be picked up in one throw, and raise the number of points to win

GAMES OF CHANCE

1. Throw tali with the emperor

Goal: The first player to throw a Venus takes the pot

Suetonius reports that the emperor Augustus loved betting on throws of dice with his guests and friends! (*Divus Augustus 71*)

- Throw 4 tali (knucklebones and or 4-sided dice); of 35 possible named throws, look for these:
 - Venus – the best throw: all the numbers were different: 1, 3, 4, 6
 - Senio (the Six) – 6 and any other combination of numbers: 6, #, #, #
 - Vulture – all numbers are the same (except 1): 3, 3, 3, 3 etc.
 - Canis (the Dog) – the worst: 1, 1, 1, 1
- Players alternate throwing and put pennies or candies into the pot for each Canis (3 pennies), Vulture (2 Pennies), or Senio (1 penny)

2. Honor Bacchus the wine god with tali

Goal: The first guest to achieve the “Venus throw” is designated the arbiter

Romans chose their *arbiter bibendi*, master of drinking, by throwing tali until someone won the Venus throw (all four possible numbers came up: 1, 3, 4, 6). The arbiter chose the ratio of wine to water in the wine mixing bowl.

- Everyone throws the tali, invoking Venus as goddess of (not what you think): seafaring, military success, civic harmony, and yes, love and passion
- Your victorious arbiter can decide on anything you like. Perhaps the music. A song everyone must sing. Pizza toppings...

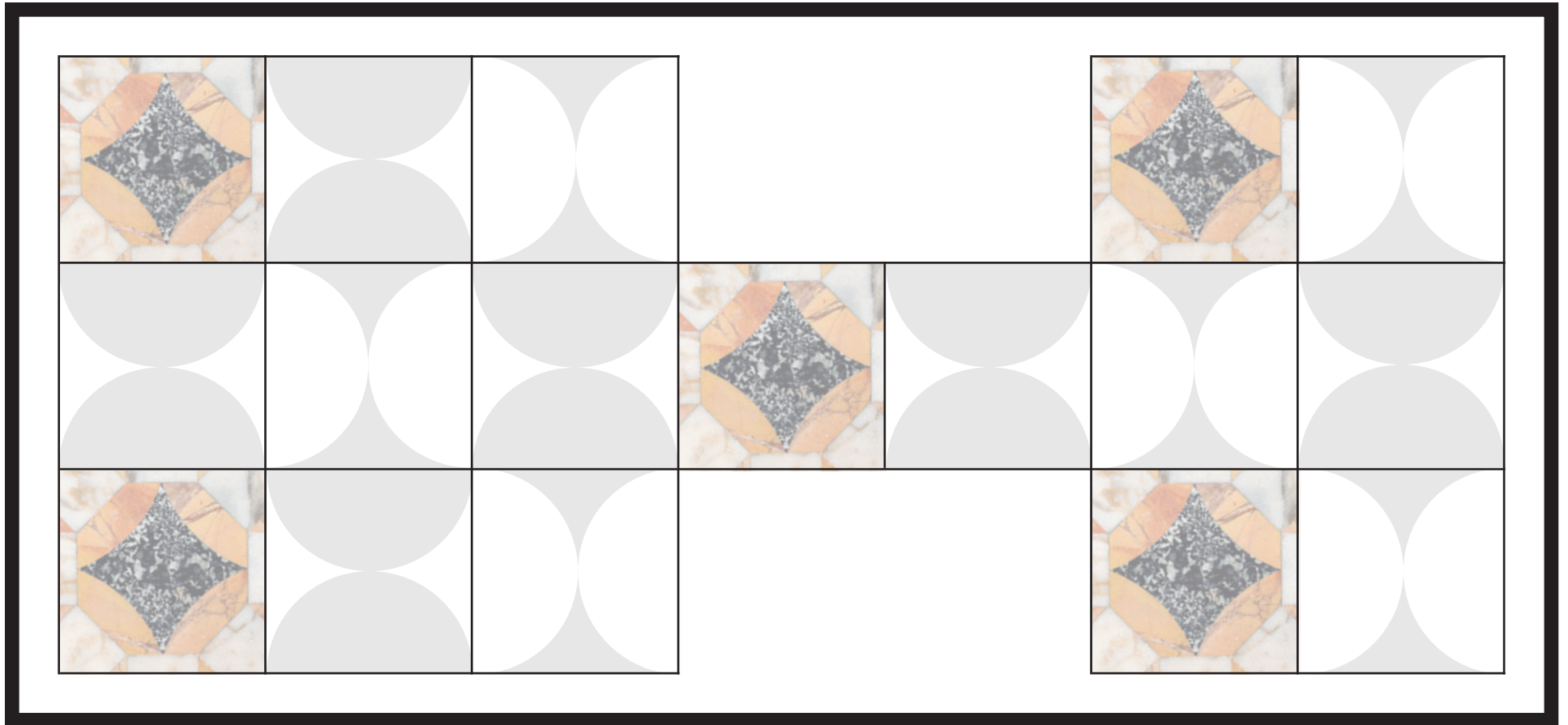


Statuette of a Roman girl playing tali, Altes Museum, Berlin.

Photo: Zde, 2014. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International, via Wikimedia Commons

GAME BOARD

ROYAL GAME OF UR



INFORMATION AND RULES

ROYAL GAME OF UR

ABOUT

The Royal Game of Ur, a speed and strategy game, is one of the oldest and longest-lived board games ever discovered. This template is based on a 4,600-year-old board from the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). Although first excavated in a royal cemetery, this game was not only played by the elite—it was popular with all levels of society. It fits within a category of games played on varied configurations of 20 squares.

After about 1,000 years the game evolved into a more complex version, whose rules are partly explained in a cuneiform tablet in the British Museum deciphered by Irving Finkel. Working backward, he designed this simple version of the game.

You will have to play this game a few times to understand it. Remember its remarkable age and popularity, and settle in to learn winning strategies.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 2 players
- A game of Ur board (download and print ours, or draw your own)
- 7 game pieces for each player, such as light and dark pebbles or coins (heads and tails). You can also cut out our gaming pieces and glue them to pennies or circles of cardboard
- We recommend a 6-sided die. (The ancient players might use tetrahedrons, 2-sided dice, 4-sided dice/knucklebones, or throwing sticks)



Wooden Game of Ur board inlaid with shell. British Museum.

Photo by BabelStone, 2010. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication

INFORMATION AND RULES

ROYAL GAME OF UR

RULES

Goal: The first player to move all playing pieces off the board wins

- The first player is selected by the roll of a die (the higher number plays first)
- Players begin on opposite sides (see diagram)
- Moves are determined by a throw of the die; only 1, 2, 3, and 4 count
- If you throw a 5 or 6, try again until you throw 1-4
- A number may not be split to move multiple pieces
- New pieces may enter on any throw
- A player must always move if possible
- An opponent can land on and capture a solitary piece in the central long "bridge" (except on the colored square); this knocks it off the board to start over
- Pieces may be doubled; they can then move together and are safe from an opponent
- Pieces are also safe from capture in the outside squares on each player's side of the board and on the colored squares
- Landing on a colored square gives the player another throw
- Exiting requires an exact throw (so to exit from the final square requires throwing a 1)

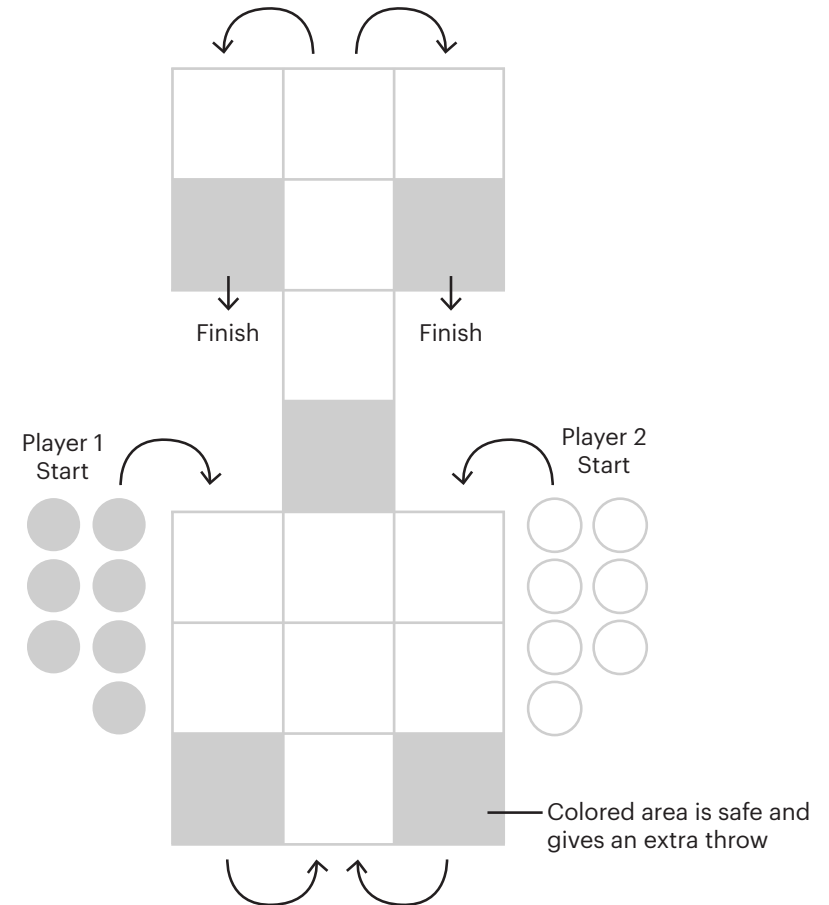
Need help?

Irving Finkel Teaches the Game of Ur:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZskjLq040I>

Deciphering the World's Oldest Rule Book:

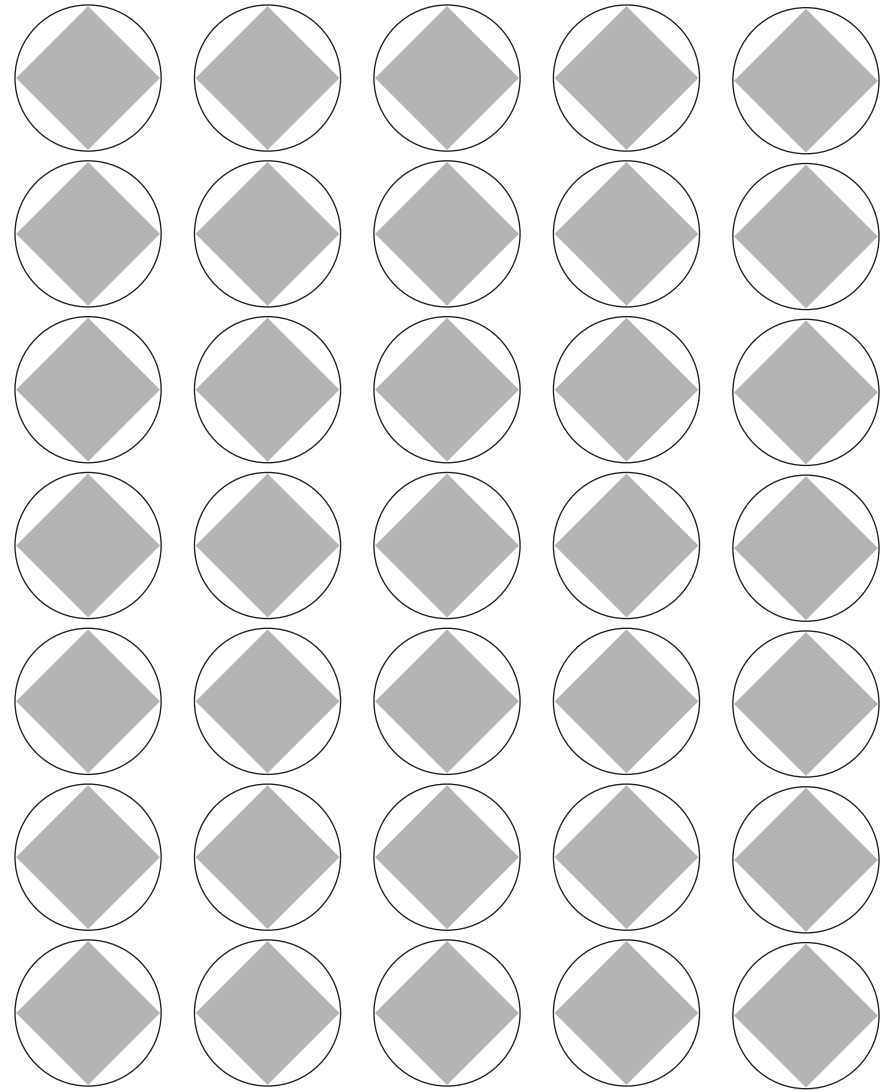
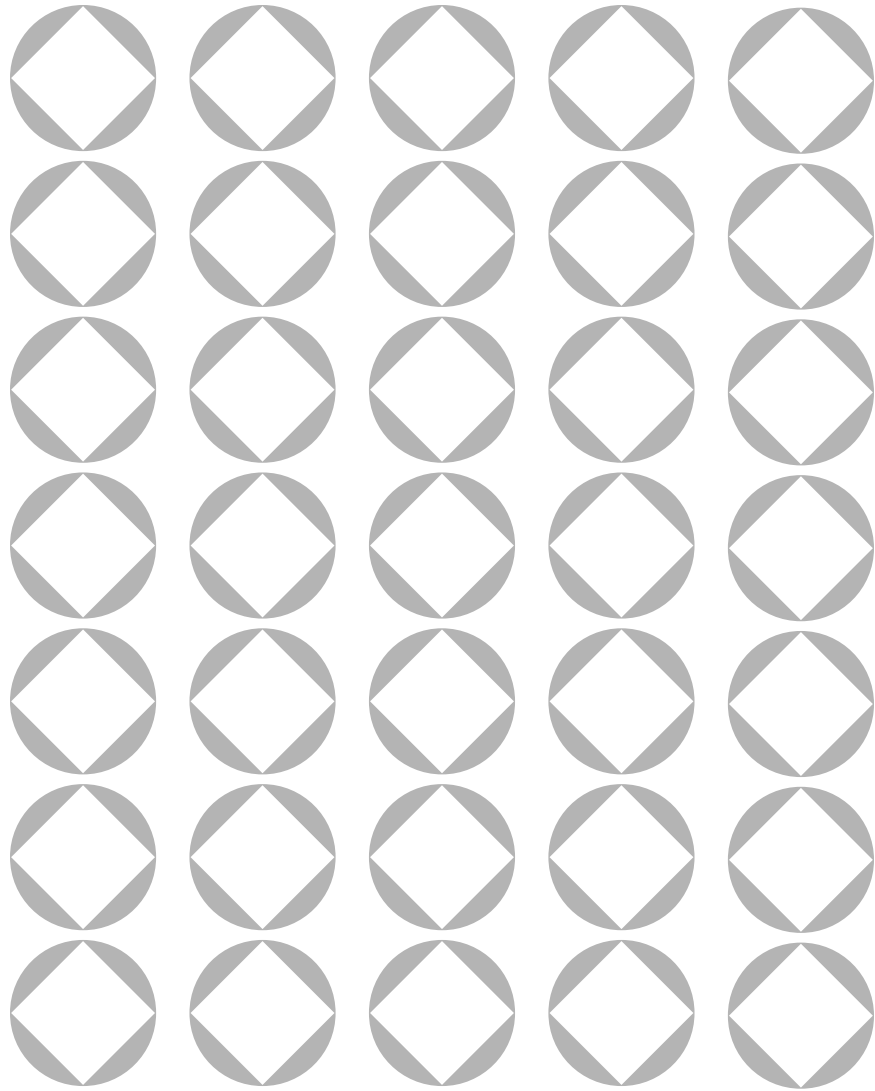
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Adapted from Irving Finkel's *Games: Discover and Play 5 Ancient Games*.

ANCIENT GAMES

GAME PIECES



Print to heavyweight paper, or use standard paper and glue it to cardboard (a cereal box is a good option). Then cut out the game pieces. You can also glue the paper pieces onto pennies. A glue stick works best.