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Nine Men's Morris - the Game

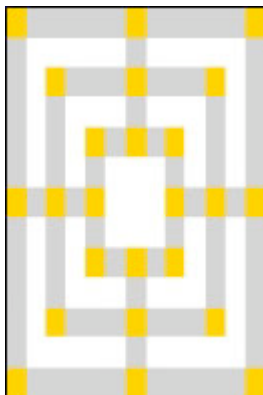
The Nine Men's Morris is filled up with mud.

- William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act 2, Scene 2)

Nine Men's Morris has to be a contender as one of the world's oldest board games still being played today. The game is known by many different names - Morelles, Merelles, Merels, Mill, Mühle, Möll, or just plain Morris to name but a few. Often linked with the traditional Morris Dancing 'phenomenon' found in many European countries, this is in part due to the movement of the pieces on the board appearing as if players are trying to out-dance their opponent.

A Special Board

Two people with nine pieces each play the game, using a special board. The board itself has three concentric squares, or levels, linked at the midpoints of each of their sides, providing 24 intersecting points arranged in 16 lines of three as shown in the diagram below.



History of the Game

Nine Men's Morris is believed to be an extension of a much simpler game called Three Men's Morris. There were two different versions of this game, one had a board with diagonals (which later evolved into the game we now know as [Noughts & Crosses/Tic-Tac-Toe](#)), the other did not. The pattern of a Nine Men's Morris board was found engraved in the stonework of the temple at Kurna in Egypt and was dated at around 1440 BC. Boards have also been found around Europe in such places as the Acropolis in [Athens](#), the first city of Troy and within a bronze age burial site in Ireland.

In England around the 14th and 15th Century, Nine Men's Morris was played by placing black

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Entry Data

Entry ID: A666209 (Edited)

Written and Researched by: [Crozz](#)

Edited by: [Lonnytunes - Winter Is Here](#)

Date: 23 January 2002

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and white pebbles on a board engraved on the tables in the local taverns. Outdoors, boards were cut into village greens using a trowel. As the quote courtesy of Shakespeare points out, due to England's climate, boards made in this way tended to get washed away with all the rain.

Boards have also been found in places where play of the game would be deemed impossible, such as high up an exterior stone pillar at Pickering Church in Yorkshire, England. Stonemasons must have played the game on the pillars prior to using them in the construction of the church. Visitors to Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey can also find boards cut into the cloister seats by monks who were playing rather than praying.

Rules of the Game

Play of the game is divided into three stages; the opening, midgame and endgame. The object throughout remains the same, eliminate your opponents pieces by getting three of your own pieces in a line (also known as a mill) along the horizontals or verticals (you cannot move diagonally in this game. It is also not possible to form a mill along the diagonals). The player that forms the mill can then remove one of their opponent's pieces as long as the piece does not belong to a mill itself - mills are safe from capture. However, the player can remove from an opponent's mill if those are the only pieces they have left.

Once a piece is removed it no longer takes part in the game. If one of the players reduces their opponent to two pieces, the game is won. The game is also won if a player blocks their opponent from being able to move a piece, although a variation in the rules allows a player to pass their turn if this happens.

Opening

The game starts with an empty board. Like in Noughts & Crosses/Tic-Tac-Toe, each player takes turns in placing one of their pieces on any vacant space on the board until all nine of their pieces have been placed. Play then moves on to the midgame.

Midgame

Play continues alternately with each player moving one piece to any adjacent point, until one or both players are reduced to three pieces. Once this occurs, play moves on to the endgame.

Endgame

The endgame can be played in two different ways depending on the rules decided for the game. One option is to carry on with the midgame, the other is to allow players with only three pieces left to move any piece to any empty space on the board. Play continues to alternate until one of the players is reduced to two pieces and consequently loses the game.

Strategy

One tactic effective throughout the game is to try and obtain three of the corners within the same square. This is especially useful during the opening phase when there are fewer pieces on the board, increasing the chances of a mill being formed early in the game.

Tactics really come into play during the midgame. Forming a mill, opening it in one turn then closing it again with your next turn will result in an opponent's piece being removed every other turn. A more ruthless variation of this involves constructing one mill and a part mill on the adjacent side. Opening the mill results in closing the other, so the opponent loses a piece every turn.

Game Variations

There are several variations of Nine Men's Morris that have also proved popular over the ages. Some of these include:

Twelve Men's Morris

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Play is essentially identical to that of Nine Men's Morris, but with two distinct differences. The game is played with 12 pieces each rather than nine, and it is possible to form a mill along the board diagonals. With this version of the game, if both players are equally skilled, a stalemate can occur before reaching the midgame by all 12 of each players pieces being placed with none forming a mill. Since there are no board spaces left to move pieces to, the game is a draw.

Dice Men's Morris

This variation dates back to around the 13th Century. During the opening phase of the game, players cast three dice before placing a piece. Rolling three dice of the same value results in that player removing any of the opponent's pieces. Once all the pieces had been placed on the board, play continues as with the normal game.

A Game on the Web

You can play against the computer with the [Nine Men's Morris Web Game](#).

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