The idea behind OCTI

OCTI is designed to be a simple but computer-resistant game. On each turn, players must decide whether to move their pieces, add more pieces to the board, or improve the pieces that are currently on the board. To be successful, players must strike the right balance between quantity, quality, and initiative. The flexible rules of OCTI are designed to allow humans to make the most of their creativity, while thwarting ‘brute force’ calculation by computers.

OCTI is many games in one. OCTI can be played ‘fast’ (about the length of a brief game of checkers) or in its full splendor (about the length of a game of chess). OCTI can also be played with four players – a game of partnership that blends the simplicity of OCTI with the fun of bridge.

OCTI may remind you of some well-known strategy games. As in go, players continually add pieces to the board; as in chess, the pieces develop different movement capabilities; as in checkers, the pieces jump in dramatic fashion; as in bridge, players must coordinate their plans without talking. These resemblances make it easy for new players to get a feel for OCTI. And yet, OCTI is a game like no other. Unlike chess, OCTI is not a game of assassination; unlike go, OCTI is not a game of inundation; unlike checkers, OCTI is not a wanton slaughter of all the opponent’s pieces. OCTI is a race, and the winner is the player who makes the most of each turn.

Board and pieces

The OCTI board is a 9x9 grid of squares, six of which are marked "OCTI." Each player controls seven light or dark colored pieces called “pods” and 25 “prongs.”

Setup for the two-player game

Place game board between players, so that OCTI squares face each player.

At the start, place one empty pod on each of the three friendly OCTI squares.

OCTI squares do not affect movement or capture. They are not "safe" squares.

Each player holds four extra pods in reserve for future use.

Arrows on the pods should be visible and always pointed toward the opponent.

Pods never rotate. Hence the arrows.
OCTI: The Fast 2-Player Game

Objective

The winner is the first player to occupy an enemy OCTI square.

Rules of play

OCTI is a game of options. Players, in turn, must do one and only one of the following:

I. Insert a prong into a friendly pod.
II. Reposition a prong to a different position in the same pod.
III. Move a friendly pod (or pods, if more than one pod occupy the same square).
IV. Jump other pods, capturing them if desired.
V. Bring a reserve pod onto a friendly OCTI square.

When exercising one of these options, keep the following guidelines in mind:

Movement

Pods move and jump only in the direction of their prongs. Pods may move to any adjacent square that is not occupied by an enemy pod.

Pods may jump over other pods of either color. Pods jump like checkers, hopping over another pod into an empty square. Multiple jumps are allowed, but a pod may not jump over the same square twice in one move.

Stacks

Any number of friendly pods may stack together in the same square. During a single turn, some or all of the pods that start the turn in a square may move or jump, so long as each piece moves in the direction of its prongs.

Pods in reserve may be brought onto the board on any friendly OCTI square, even when that square is occupied by a friendly pod.

Pods stacked in a square ignore each other when moving simultaneously: they may jump to the same destination but may not jump over each other.

Capture

Any pod, whether friendly or enemy, that is jumped may be removed from play at the conclusion of the turn. Pods are not required to jump, and capturing is optional.

If jumped, all pods in a stack may be captured.

Players seize all prongs from pods that they capture.

Prongs

Players may spend their turn inserting a prong into any friendly pod on the board.

To conserve your supply of prongs, a prong may be repositioned in the same pod.
OCTI: *The Full 2-Player Game*

**Objective**

The winner is the first player to simultaneously occupy all three enemy OCTI squares.

**Rules of play**

In addition to the rules of *The Fast Game*, players may liberate captured pieces and bring reserve pieces onto the board on enemy OCTI squares. Reserve pods are those that have never been on the board; captured pods are those that have been removed from the board (by either player).

A reserve pod may be brought onto any enemy OCTI square that you *occupy*.

If you occupy an enemy OCTI square, you may liberate one of your captured pods on your turn; this liberated pod is stacked on any OCTI square that you *occupy*.

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OCTI: *The 4-Player Game*

**Objective**

Eliminate both opposing partners from the game by occupying their OCTI squares.

**Setup**

Players form two teams, and partners sit diagonally across from one another.

Each team receives 8 pods of one color (4 for each partner) and 24 prongs (12 for each partner).

Each player places one empty pod on a corner OCTI square, which is that player's home base. Each player's three extra pods are held in reserve.

No “table talk” is allowed between partners after the start of play.

To distinguish between partners’ pieces, make arrows visible for one player and hidden for his/her partner.

**Rules of play**

If an enemy pod ends its turn on a player's home base, that player is out of the game -- all of his/her pieces on the board are captured and their prongs seized by the enemy player who just moved.

Partners cannot share pods or prongs, but allied pieces may stack together.

A player who occupies the home base of an eliminated teammate may use a turn to liberate an allied pod on that square. The liberated player may then play normally.

One may liberate captured pods on any enemy or neutral OCTI square.
**OCTI: Advanced Rules**

**Edgeless board**

Rather than treating the borders of the 9x9 grid as a rigid edge, assume that the bottom of the board links up to the top and that the east side of the board connects to the west side (as would be the case if the board were stretched over the surface of a large doughnut). For example, a piece can move east from the (9,5) square and end up at the (1,5) square. Or it can move southeast from (3,1) and wind up at (4,9). By this same logic, a piece moving northwest from (1,9) ends up at (9,1).

Playing on an edgeless surface increases the range of strategic possibilities. Now you can back up into your opponent!

**Superprongs**

Each player begins the game with 25 prongs, one of which is a distinct color. A pod equipped with this prong may move, jump, or multiple-jump only in the direction of its superprong before the player exercises any of the move-jump-build options listed above. In effect, the prong entitles the player to a certain type of free move prior to the usual turn.

For example, a player with a superprong facing north may move or jump that pod north, then add a prong to a different pod. Or the player could move a pod with a superprong north and then move that pod again, say, to jump (as always, no captured pieces are removed until the entire turn is completed).

Superprongs that are captured may be used later by the capturing player in the usual manner. Thus, a player may conceivably place two superprongs on the same pod, in which case that pod may move or jump twice (once in the direction indicated by each superprong) prior to the usual phase of a turn.

Once placed, superprongs may not be repositioned. However, by jumping and eliminating a friendly piece armed with a superprong, a friendly player gains an opportunity to redeploy the superprong on a different pod.

The superprong version of OCTI is best played on an edgeless board.
OCTI: *Strategy and Tactics*

**The object of the game**

The most important thing to bear in mind about OCTI is that it is a race. In every version of OCTI, the object is to seize the opponent’s starting squares. Tempting though it may be to capture opposing pieces, one must always keep one’s eye on the central objective: capturing OCTI squares.

**Managing trade-offs**

Each turn of OCTI presents player with a trade off between moving and building. Moving therefore entails what economists call ‘opportunity cost’: in effect, the moving player gives up an extra prong or pod. So if you’re going to move, move with a purpose. Wandering around the board can lead to difficulties later if one’s opponent is spending those turns developing his/her pieces. By the time your forces meet, your opponent’s pieces will be more fully developed.

Because movement is costly, it pays to save turns by stacking pods and bursting them out in a single turn. Not only does simultaneous movement conserve moves, it also enables a player to strike in ways that catch the opponent off guard. Stacking is also one of the many features of OCTI that makes it computer-resistant. Three powerful pieces stacked together can burst out in hundreds of different ways.

**Synergy**

Another important aspect of OCTI is the synergy among the pieces. Even if equipped with eight prongs, a lone pod can move at a rate of just one square per turn. Unlike chess, in which a queen can run the length or breadth of the board in a single move, OCTI is a game with slow pieces. On the other hand, the fact that pods may jump over both friendly and enemy pods creates the possibility of long-range attacks. In principle, a pod may jump 13 times and thus travel 26 squares during a single turn – enough to traverse the board several times over!

Because friendly pods work best in conjunction with one another, it’s best to plan your strategies in terms of frameworks, or teams of friendly pieces that can use each other as springboards into the opponent’s lines. When deployed wisely, these frameworks can create many different threats – what chess players call ‘forks.’ The figure at right illustrates how much territory a three-piece framework may threaten. These pods could jump an enemy pod occupying any of the squares shown.

When creating frameworks, strive to move and build efficiently; if you waste a few moves by building or moving unnecessarily, your opponent will take the initiative. Also, bear in mind that if you launch an attack, you may leave your pieces scattered and vulnerable to counterattack. Don’t be afraid to capture your own pieces, rather than allowing them to become stepping stones for your opponent. Although capturing in this way costs you a pod, there is some consolation: it prevents prongs from falling into enemy hands.

Because launching an attack can disrupt one’s own framework, sometimes the threat of capture is better than capture itself. If by building a friendly piece one can threaten a strong opposing piece, forcing it to move, one in effect gains a free prong; and one may be able to place the prong so as to force another move. Grabbing the initiative in this manner can often tip the balance in one’s favor. In the figure at right, blue can insert a prong northwest, guaranteeing an opportunity for at least one more build in upcoming turns.
The OCTI board

The OCTI board resembles a map with three cities on each side. Players mobilize their pieces in their cities and send them off to capture opposing cities. The fact that both players are racing to control enemy territory often creates dramatic swings in fortune, as pieces scurry back and forth to secure victory or stave off defeat.

The OCTI board is designed to be large enough to offer players a wide range of strategic options, yet small enough so that frameworks may span the length of the board.

Unlike a chess board, the OCTI board has an odd number of squares and a ‘center’ square. It takes four steps to walk a pod from a friendly starting square to an enemy starting square; five steps if one chooses to wrap around the edgeless board. The asymmetry between the ‘direct route’ and the ‘edgeless route’ tends to make the former more efficient. On the other hand, the fact that one can ‘back up’ behind one’s starting squares and attack the opponent from behind makes the edgeless route more attractive. When behind one’s own starting squares, one threatens to surprise an advancing opponent by introducing a new pod onto the board, creating an opportunity for a forward jump.

Another important feature of the board is the fact that the starting squares are just one ‘jump’ away from each other. This feature enables a player to swing rapidly from side to side, but it also allows a marauding opponent to wreak havoc in one’s back lines. In the full version of OCTI, forming a beachhead on an opposing starting square is usually the beginning of the end. One may then recover captured pods and break out to nearby starting squares.

Limited resources

In contrast to checkers or chess, the number of OCTI pieces in play tends to rise as the game progresses. That’s part of the reason why computers have difficulty playing OCTI – the number of possible moves continually expands.

Among skillful and evenly-matched opponents, it is not unusual for the initial supply of 25 prongs to become exhausted. Running out of prongs is not a pretty picture. Although you may reposition a prong on a pod, you may not switch prongs from one pod to another. That’s why capturing enemy prongs is important. If you end up with 28 prongs in your pieces compared to 22 in your opponent’s, you’ll have a decided advantage. The only word of caution to prong-hunters is to be sure that you hang on to a sufficient number of pods. It’s rather frustrating to have a large reserve of prongs but no pods in which to insert them.

The foregoing discussion of pods and prongs raises a more general point about resource limitations. In OCTI, players are given 7 pods and 25 prongs. For those who revel in large numbers of permutations, imagine all the possible ways one might fill 56 holes with 25 prongs! Still, the ratio of prongs to pods is 3.6:1, which means that players cannot hope to project strength in every direction. Even if a player finds time to deploy all 25 prongs, the resulting force will be still be vulnerable to some kind of attack.

Strategy and tactics in The Fast Game

Playing for just one opposing OCTI square allows you to get in touch with your sneaky and perhaps even reckless inner being. In this game, you can afford to squander your pieces so long as one of them crawls onto an opposing OCTI square. Many players, myself included, have lost games in which they held a decisive advantage in pods and prongs. And very often the race is won by a nose, as the winner is just one turn away from defeat.

One of the key insights into the fast game is the importance of building pods that can go both forward and backwards. Pods that are so equipped threaten to jump an opposing OCTI square and win on the following turn. The illustration at right shows how dangerous such pieces can be. Although Red can still place reserve pods, this reserve will quickly become depleted and Blue will win.
The ability to move backwards can allow a piece to greatly extend its offensive reach. Consider the example at right, which illustrates how elegant OCTI strategies can be. On the previous turn, Red added a southwest prong at E7. Red considered capturing the piece at H5 but thought the better of it, for fear of the winning counterattack by the Blue piece at G3. Unfortunately for Red, Blue now captures G7 and E7 (See how? Start with a jump from F4-F2…) and ensures victory. Red can stall by placing the last two reserves at E7, but Blue will quickly snap them up and walk into that square. It certainly is handy to be able to move backwards!

Notice the importance of rank 5 in The Fast Game. Once a pod occupies that row, it becomes a stepping stone for either side. Here, Blue was able to make the most of it, but had Red equipped the pod at F6 differently, it would have been the one to go on a rampage. The Fast Game is all about finding a weak spot in the opponent’s defense and charging into it – or, conversely, recognizing where one’s own weak spots are and preventing the opponent from charging into them!

**Strategy and tactics in The Full Game**

A few short paragraphs can hardly do justice to the range of strategies and tactics that inhabit the full game, but here goes. The full game tends to follow a four-part sequence. During the opening phase of the game, players jockey for position and construct a set of pieces that can be used to exploit weak points in the opponent’s configuration. This phase ends with a bang, as one side attacks and the other counterattacks. This exchange tends to leave the board wide open, with disjointed sets of isolated pieces. During the game’s second phase, players scramble to reassemble their forces and regain the initiative. Typically, one player emerges from this phase with a distinct advantage in terms of pieces or position, and drives toward the opponent’s OCTI squares. In phase three, a player seizes an opposing OCTI square and begins to build a beachhead in the opponent’s back lines. Sometimes both players do this simultaneously, in which case the race is on to secure all the necessary squares. In other games, this beachhead is hotly contested, with the attacking player seeking to expand from a strongpoint, perhaps liberating some captured pods in the process. In the final phase of the game, one player strives to secure all three opposing squares. This may be easy if the opponent is outnumbered or out of position. But if the opponent still has control of several potent pieces, securing all three squares may require some delicate planning and execution, lest one seize defeat from the jaws of victory.

The end game in OCTI can be extraordinarily intricate, as the example at right attests. Here, one player has backed the other into a corner, seizing two of the three opposing OCTI squares. Yet, the attacker’s advantage is wafer thin: both players have 25 prongs, but the attacker has a 7 to 5 advantage in pods. This (actual) game has been nearly bloodless up to now, with the capture of just two of the defender’s pods. Red, naturally, has declined to take the bait of capturing the big 8-prong Blue pod, since the counterattack would be devastating.

Blue senses that it is time to press the attack and springs forward with a stack of pods. Things are looking rather grim for Red, but it’s not over.
Red counters with an advance that is calculated to produce a costly exchange for the straggling Blue pieces. The move also force Blue to press the attack, because otherwise Red will capture the lead Blue pod (H6-F8-F6x-H6).

Blue decides that the time has come to force an exchange.

Red counterattacks ferociously.

…But Blue has one more attack remaining. It leaves Red outnumbered, badly divided, and without any way of regaining the offensive initiative. Blue can easily chase Red’s pieces away and jeopardize Red’s starting squares.

Might Red have erred in its bold counterattack? How would the game have worked out had Red played H6-F8-F6x-H6-H8-A8x? (Notice that no square is jumped twice in this move.) Set up an OCTI board and find out!

The previous example underscores the importance of thinking ahead. Tempting though it may be to launch a quintuple jump, the wisdom of doing so depends on the broader strategic situation. Red was out of reserve pods and nowhere near Blue’s starting squares, where it might have gotten more. In this situation, Blue is looking to whittle Red down; occupying Red’s starting squares, Blue can continually replace lost pods. Red, for its part, is looking for a way to deal out an attack that thoroughly disrupts Blue’s ability to attack. Red’s counterattack fails to do so. One reason why OCTI games are often fairly bloodless is that both players recognize the advantages of holding their fire and playing for position.

Before leaving The Full Game, here are some things to consider.

1. The easiest way to measure the opponent is to count the number of prongs in his/her force. This is not a foolproof rule, but it’s a good shorthand as you contemplate exchanges. Bear in mind, however, that the attacking piece tends to be isolated after it jumps into the opponent’s lines – what will you do with it then?

2. One important resource for quick attacks or rapid lateral movement is the ability to bring in reserve pods. It’s nice to have one or two on hand to surprise the opponent.

3. If you don’t build any backwards prongs, none of your pieces will be able to retreat. That can be a problem; when threatened, they can only escape by moving closer to the opponent.

4. Look for the opportunity to strike early in the game. Experienced OCTI players like to hatch grand schemes, and sometimes they get so wrapped up in their elaborate building plans that they let down their guard.

5. A good intermediate objective is to capture and secure an enemy OCTI square. That usually leads to victory.