

## OCTI™: Elements of Strategy

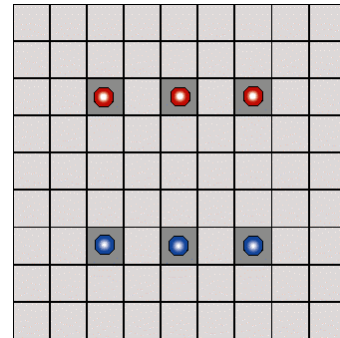
Don Green

[www.octi.net](http://www.octi.net)

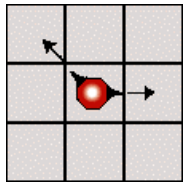
OCTI is a game of strategy in which you build your pieces as you play. Each turn presents you with a three-way dilemma: move pieces currently in play, improve their qualities, or introduce new pieces. During each turn of OCTI, therefore, you must weigh the competing demands of quantity, quality, and initiative. Learning the rules of OCTI takes very little time, but to play well, one must learn to manage scarce resources, the most precious of which is time.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of OCTI is its flexibility. OCTI may be played with two players (as in chess) or two teams (as in bridge); fast (with easily attained victory conditions) or slow (the campaign game); and with various types of advanced options.

The OCTI board is a 9x9 grid of squares, with three special “OCTI squares” on each side. For concreteness, think of the OCTI squares as cities, three friendly and three enemy. You start the game with three empty pieces on each of your three cities, four pieces off-board in reserve, and a cache of 25 pegs that can be inserted into the eight-sided pieces.

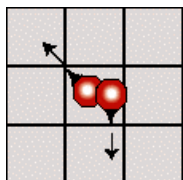
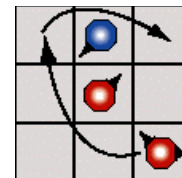


Initially, your pieces are incapable of moving. To enable them to move, you insert a “prong” into one of the piece’s eight holes. On



subsequent turns, that piece may move one square in that direction. It may also jump in that direction, as in checkers. The resemblance to checkers is more cosmetic than real, however. A piece with prongs may jump over both friendly and enemy pieces, capturing them, if desired. When you capture a piece, you seize the prongs, which is why it sometimes makes

sense to capture friendly pieces. Multiple jumps are allowed, so long as the same square is not jumped more than once per turn, but jumping and capturing are optional.



Here’s the most noteworthy departure from checkers:

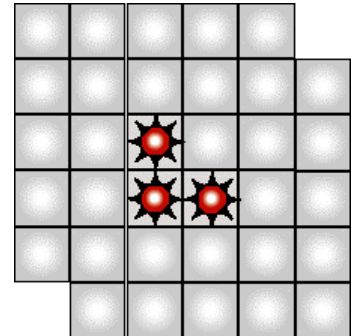
any number of friendly pieces may occupy the same square. Each of the pieces in a square is entitled to move during a single turn; thus, stacks of pieces may burst out in all directions.

The ability to move pieces simultaneously allows clever players to save time. Time is the essential ingredient in OCTI strategy, because on each turn, a player must do just one of the following: move/jump in the direction of its prongs, add a prong, or introduce a new piece onto an OCTI square. Your aim is to mobilize your forces as quickly and efficiently as possible and capture your opponent’s cities. (In the fast game, you need only capture one city to win.) If you send out your forces before they’re prepared for battle, they tend to suffer the sad fate of green troops; if you do nothing but amass materiel, you’ll find yourself the victim of a blitzkrieg. But

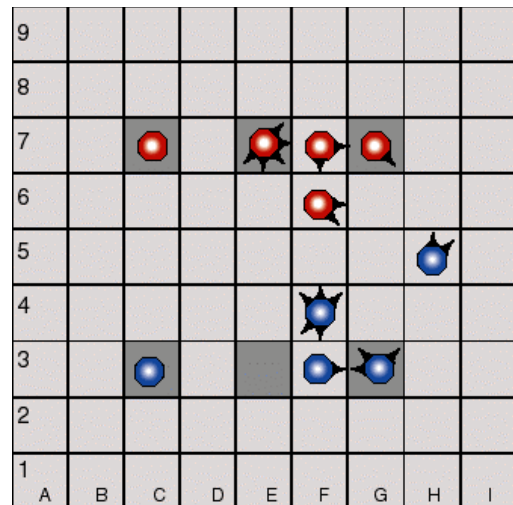
between these extremes lies an extraordinary range of possibilities. Imagine how many ways one might fill 56 holes with 25 pegs!

When crafting your forces, keep in mind the potential synergy among the pieces you create. 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 26 times 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 devastating forks and pins. The figure at right illustrates how much territory a three-piece framework may threaten. Notice that if an enemy piece were on any of the squares shown, it could be jumped by one of the red pieces.

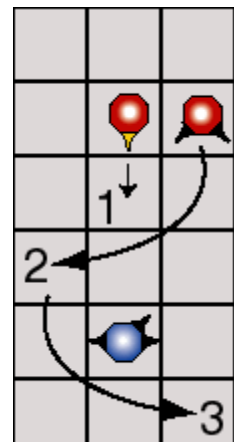


Enough of this abstract chit-chat about OCTI. The best way to appreciate the elegance of the game is to have a look at some interesting positions. The figure at right depicts a 'fast game' in which the players are trying to capture just one of the opponent's OCTI squares. On the previous turn, Red added 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. True, 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!



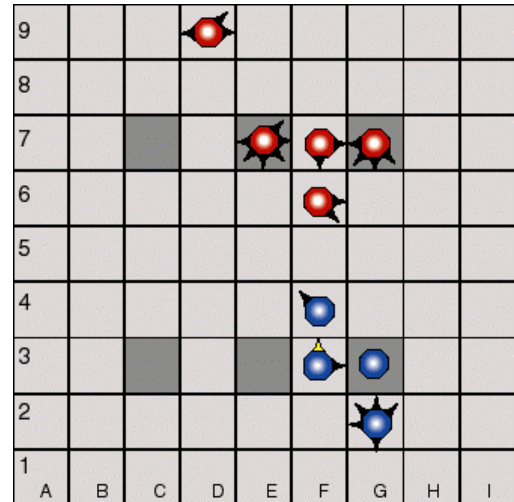
When playing the full-length version of OCTI (same rules, plus the ability to liberate captured pieces), it's best to play with an "edgeless board." By that, I mean a board that allows you to move off the east side and reappear on the west, move off the bottom and reappear at the top, etc. Thus, a piece could move southwest from B1 and end up at A9. Or move southwest from A1 and end up at I9. OCTI is one of the rare games designed to be played on a torus.

And as long as you're playing with advanced rules, you may as well go all the way and play with "superprongs." In this variant, each player begins the game with 25 prongs, one of which is a distinct color. A pod equipped with this prong may move or 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 south may move or jump that pod south, then add a prong to another piece. Or the player could move a pod with a superprong south and then move that pod again, say, to jump (as always, no captured pieces are removed until the entire turn is completed).

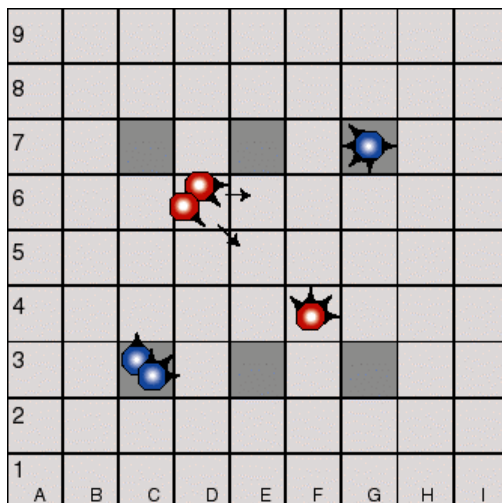
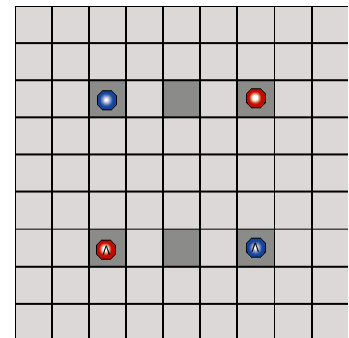
The example at right shows how powerful superprongs can be. Blue to move and capture every Red piece! The superprong jumps to F5, followed by a slashing attack from G2-G4-E6-G8-G6-E6-E8-C1. Ouch.



What makes superprongs so interesting is that both players have an incentive to wait to see where the other player places his/hers. Once you know where my superprong is, you place yours so as to capture it. This peculiar dynamic introduces an element of suspense, as players await the unsheathing of the superprongs. Those who are drawn to games with come-from-behind victories will like this variant of OCTI.

To this point, we've focused attention on the two player games. If one is in the mood for a more social game, try the four-player version of OCTI. This game, which is played with pairs of partners, has some of the features that make bridge such an enticing game. First and foremost, one must coordinate plans with one's partner without communicating directly. Equally important is loyalty: since players can seldom withstand a two-on-one attack, you must quickly come to your partner's rescue if he/she is under siege. Unlike bridge, OCTI can be learned in five minutes. The four-player game is not easily mastered, but at least you won't have to tackle a statute book of bidding conventions.

The setup for the four player game places the partners diagonally across from each other. Each player starts the game with one pod on the board and three pods and twelve prongs in reserve. Play rotates counterclockwise. Players are eliminated from play if either opponent occupies their starting square. The game ends when both partners on a team have been eliminated. As a practical matter, the game tends to end soon after one partner is eliminated, due to the difficulty of battling two opponents simultaneously.



The beauty of the four player game becomes apparent when partners work together. Consider an attack in which one partner steps in front of the other, setting up an attack to the left. In this situation, the attackers move twice before the victim can react.

In this diagram, Red bursts to E5 and E6. Regardless of how Blue moves out of C3, he/she is powerless to

protect his/her partner, and Red next jumps F4-D6-F6-H8. The Blue team isn't finished, but it's not looking good for them, now that the northwest partner has lost a prize piece.

Those of us who hang out with self-styled game experts hear a lot of talk about so-and-so's ability to see five or ten moves into the future. Four-player OCTI is a good way to tell who's full of hot air. Three moves go by between one's turns; it's not easy to anticipate how the board will look on your next turn. In this fluid strategic environment, it is difficult to coordinate plans with one's partner. But when partners are able to work together efficiently, it's a beautiful sight to behold.

So much for the breathless exegesis of OCTI. Doubtless, Games Café readers, drawn as they are from the ranks of chess and go aficionados, view claims of greatness with the special brand of skepticism available to those whose loyalties lie with brands that have withstood centuries of product testing. OCTI has been on the market for less than a year, that much is true. On the other hand, propelled by coverage in *Games Magazine*, the *New York Times*, and *CNN-Headline News*, it is rapidly winning the affection game players in an ever-lengthening list of countries.

One interesting feature of each of the OCTI variants – including the simplified version of OCTI sold commercially as “OCTI for Kids” – is that they tend to resist computer analysis. The range of permutations introduced by the various ways one might move or augment one's pieces seems to defy effective computer play. Much of the press coverage of OCTI since its release in the summer of 1999 focuses on the man vs. machine theme, and this fall will witness a competition between humans and computers at Yale University's tercentennial. Vast uncharted terrain awaits exploration by both human and computer OCTI players. But given the game's intrinsic depth and range, it is not absurd to think that it might one day take its place in the pantheon of great games.

N.B. Internet play (free of charge) is being beta tested at [www.octi.net](http://www.octi.net). Drop me a line if you'd like to have a game or simply wish to register a complaint ([donald.green@yale.edu](mailto:donald.green@yale.edu)). And if you're in New Haven, put on your thinking cap and join the Yale OCTI club for lunch and some four-player OCTI.