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The Game of ATMALOF

ATMALOF stands for "Aim To Make A Line Of Five". The game was invented in 1984 by Richard S. Forsyth in London, under the name "Paralox", and slightly revised by him in Nottingham in 1988. The name Atmalof was only adopted in 2004.

Atmalof is one of the few games that actually justifies the overused phrase "minutes to learn, years to master". It is an elegantly simple game of strategy for two players which contains an element of luck, but requires considerable skill and judgement to play well.

The Object of the Game

Atmalof is played on a square board of seven rows and seven columns, numbered 1 to 7. The winner is the first player to arrange FIVE consecutive pieces of his or her colour in a straight line. This line may be horizontal, vertical or diagonal -- east-west, north-south, northeast-southwest or northwest-southeast. (Forming a line of 6 or even 7, which does occasionally happen, also counts as a win.)

Rules of the Game

The standard game is played with 22 red and 22 blue pieces. Initially the game board is empty. The players take turns to play. When it is your turn you have a choice of two kinds of action. You can do one of the following:

- (1) make a DROP, or placement;
- (2) MOVE one of your own pieces.

(You cannot do both in one turn.)

A Drop

If you choose to drop, you place a new piece of your own colour on the board. The square it will occupy is decided as follows. First, you must ANNOUNCE to your opponent which row or column the piece is to be placed in. For instance, you say out loud "Row 2" or "Column 4" or suchlike. Next, you roll the die to determine the position, within the row or column you have chosen, where the piece will be placed.

For example, suppose you say "Row 4" and then throw a 6 on the die, your piece will be put on the square at the junction of Row 4 and Column 6; whilst if you had said "Column 4" and thrown a 1, it would land on Column 4, Row 1. (Row and column numbers are clearly marked on the board.)

An important point to note in connection with a drop is that you can only land on a vacant square. If a piece of either colour is already located at the designated position, you simply lose a turn. So if you say "Row 3" and the die comes up 2 when the intersection of Row 3 and Column 2 is already occupied, nothing happens except that it becomes the other player's turn.

A Move

Instead of dropping a new piece of your own colour onto the board, you can choose to move one of the pieces already there. You can move any single piece of your own colour into any unoccupied adjacent square.

This resembles a king's move at chess. You can move any of your pieces one space up, down, left, right or diagonally in the eight compass directions -- N, NE, E, SE, S, SW, W, NW -- as long as that would not take it outside the playing area or into an already occupied square.

Thus there is no concept of 'capturing' an opposing piece in Atmalof: you can only move into empty squares. Nor are there any 'jumping' moves.

Notes

Row 7 and Column 7 are in play in the standard game. You can move into them or elect to drop into either of them. Remember, however, that the die has only six sides; so you cannot fall into Row 7 or Column 7 'by accident'. (The corner square, at Row 7, Column 7 can only be entered by a move.)

There is a slight advantage in going first, so in a series of games it is advisable to toss a coin to decide who begins and to alternate the starter in subsequent games.

When you elect to drop rather than move it is important to state your chosen row or column audibly BEFORE rolling the die. If you roll first, that roll is void and your opponent can ask you to roll again -- this time announcing your choice of row or column beforehand. Whispered or muttered 'announcements' are liable to cause ill-feeling!

Once you have announced a row or column and cast the die, you cannot change your mind about your choice or decide to move instead. Likewise, once you have moved and your finger is no longer in contact with the piece you cannot retract the move and decide to drop or move another piece. (It is better to stick to these regulations from the outset than to argue during the game.)

Ending the Game

Normally a game ends when one player obtains a line of 5 consecutive pieces and thereby wins. Sometimes, however, no one gets a line of five. In such situations the tie-break rule comes into force. This ensures that drawn games are rare in Atmalof.

The tie-break rule states that the game is over as soon as either player has 22 pieces on the board. If placing the 22nd piece constructs a line of five, then the player who put it down wins as usual. Otherwise play halts and the number of lines of FOUR belonging to each player is counted.

The one with more foursomes is the winner. Only if both players have the same number of fours is the game declared a draw.

Note that foursomes are counted in the same way as lines of five -- horizontally, vertically or diagonally. Be careful to count all yours, and your partner's, correctly.

Advice

Atmalof is not difficult. You will get the idea quite quickly, even though it has many subtleties. As you get deeper into the game you will appreciate the finer points, of strategy. These hints are merely provided to help you enjoy your first few games.

There are two distinct phases in the game. During the early stages -- i.e. until each side has approximately 8 pieces on the board -- there is more dropping (placement) than moving. Early on, the pieces are generally too few and too scattered to assemble a line of five. You may have to make a few moves to head off a sudden threat, but most of the time is spent building up the number of your pieces on the board.

As the game progresses, the board gets crowded and the chances of a successful drop become smaller. So the emphasis shifts towards movement of pieces already there. However, do not forget that you can keep on dropping until all your 22 pieces are on the board. The fact that your only chance of escaping defeat may hinge on one lucky throw is part of the excitement of the game.

During the early build-up phase it is important not to waste turns attempting to land in rows or columns that are nearly full, even if they would lead to a good pattern of pieces. Try to keep the odds in your favour: you'd need a very good reason to go for a row with only 2 free squares in it rather than another one with 4 free squares. Do not neglect Row 7 or Column 7 either.

During the second stage (the moving phase) you should try to establish 'interlocking' threats. A single line of 3 or 4 can usually be blocked, but two or more lines of 3 or 4 pose a more serious threat. Aim to make pieces do double, or multiple, duty wherever possible by being part of two or more lines or potential lines. X-shaped and cross-shaped formations are the most useful.

Of course the art lies in creating positions which look innocuous but which can be made into a five by just a few moves.

If the game appears to be heading towards a situation where the tie breaking rule comes into operation then lines of four become valuable. Towards the very end you should start attempting to form foursomes and block your opponent from doing so. But beware: it is all too easy to slip up at this stage and let the other player make a five because you are concentrating on fours!

Junior Atmalof

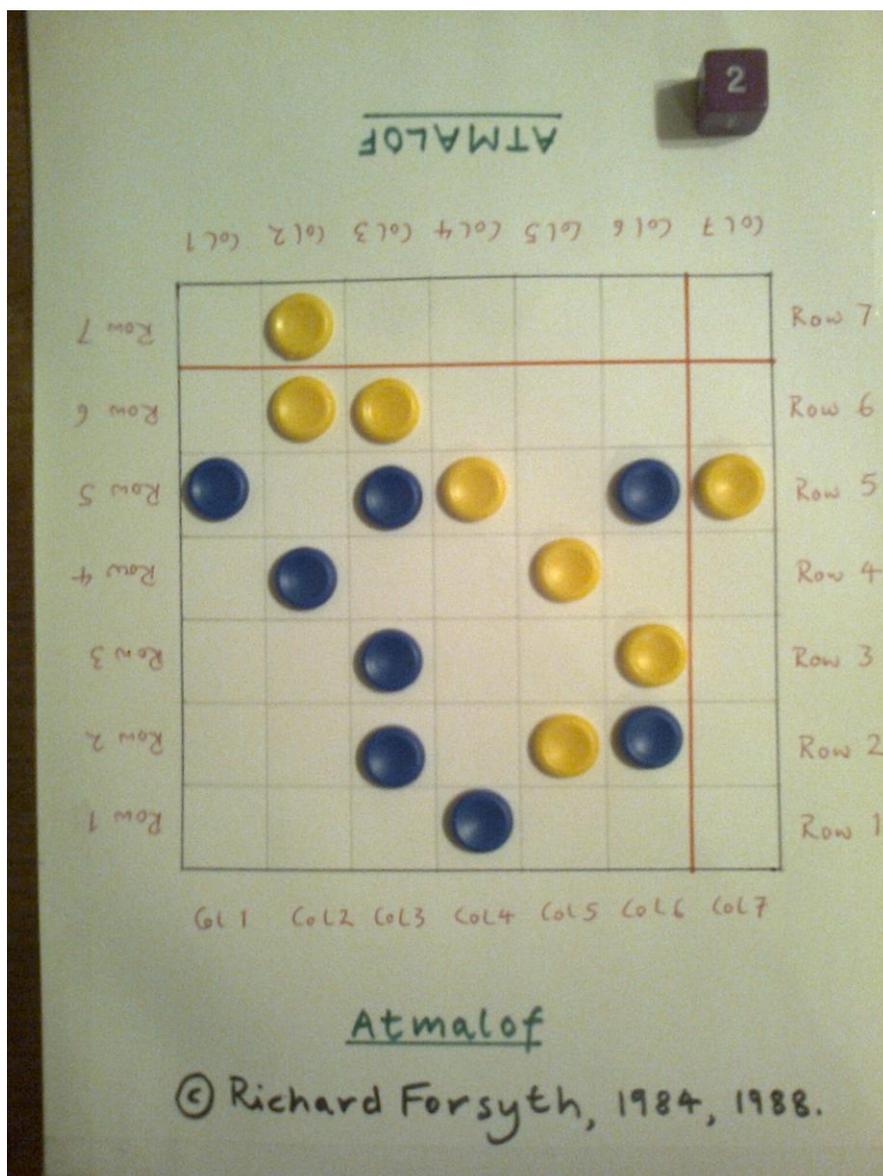
So far we have described standard Atmalof, but there is also a simpler version called Junior Atmalof (or Criss-Cross). The rules are the same as normal except that Row 7 and Column 7 are out of bounds. The playing area then consists of six rows and six columns containing 36 (not 49) squares. Each player is allowed to use a maximum of 16 (not 22) pieces. As soon as one player has 16 pieces on the board the tie-break rule is applied.

Junior Atmalof is suitable for getting used to the game or for warm-ups.

Extensions

It has not escaped the author's attention that it is possible to devise a family of related games on the "atmaloid" pattern, by varying the following parameters: R and C (number of rows and columns) hence also D (highest number of the die) along with X and Y (number of rows and columns beyond the edge that can't be reached by a drop), as well as P (number of pieces allowed each side). For example, one could envisage Atmalos (Aim To Make A Line Of Seven) with 8 rows and columns in the basic square using an 8-sided die. As well as standard 6-side dice, physical dice with 4, 8, 12 and 20 sides do exist, though for certain (e.g. uneven) board-sizes some other kind of randomizing device would presumably be necessary. Even with R and C equal (as is most convenient) and X and Y both always restricted to 1, an endless number of potential games can be conceived. However most of them would be totally impractical. The "classic" version, described here, has been fairly thoroughly field-tested and proved satisfactory. If anyone finds an extended version more satisfying, the author would be interested to hear about it.

Illustration



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