

# Nine Men's Morris

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**Nine Men's Morris** is an abstract strategy board game for two players that emerged from the Roman Empire.<sup>[1]</sup> The game is also known as *Nine Man Morris*, *Mill*, *Mills*, *Merels*, *Merelles*, and *Merrills* in English. It is called *Mühle* and *Mühlespiel* in German, *Mérelles* and *Jeu de Moulin* in French, *Mulino* in Italian, *Trilha* and *Moínho* in Portuguese, *Moara* in Romanian, *Naukhadi* in west India.<sup>[2]</sup>

The number of legal positions in Nine Men's Morris is estimated to be  $10^{10}$ , while the total number of possible games is approximately  $10^{50}$ . In October 1993, Ralph Gasser solved the game, showing that it ends in a draw with perfect play.<sup>[3]</sup> Gasser also developed an AI player called Bushy which is regarded as the world's strongest player.

### Nine Men's Morris

A game of Nine Men's Morris. Even if it's black's turn, white can win by moving from e3 to d3 and back again, removing a black piece each time a row of three is formed.

<b>Players</b>	2
<b>Age range</b>	Any
<b>Setup time</b>	< 1 minute
<b>Playing time</b>	< 1 hour
<b>Random chance</b>	None
<b>Skills required</b>	Strategy

BoardGameGeek entry (<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/game/3886>)

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## Rules of play

Each player has nine pieces, or "men", which move among the board's twenty-four intersections. As in checkers, the object of the game is to leave the opposing player with no pieces or no legal moves.

### Placing the pieces

The game begins with an empty board. Players take turns placing their pieces on empty intersections. If a player is able to form a row of three pieces along one of the board's lines, he has a "mill" and may remove one of his opponent's pieces from the board; removed pieces may not be placed again. Players must remove any other pieces first before removing a piece from a formed mill. Once all eighteen pieces have been placed, players take turns moving.

### Moving the pieces

To move, a player slides one of his pieces along a board line to an empty adjacent intersection. If he cannot do so, he has lost the game.

As in the placement stage, a player who aligns three of his pieces on a board line has a mill and may remove one of his opponent's pieces, avoiding the removal of pieces in mills if at all possible.

Any player reduced to two pieces is unable to remove any more opposing pieces and thus loses the game.

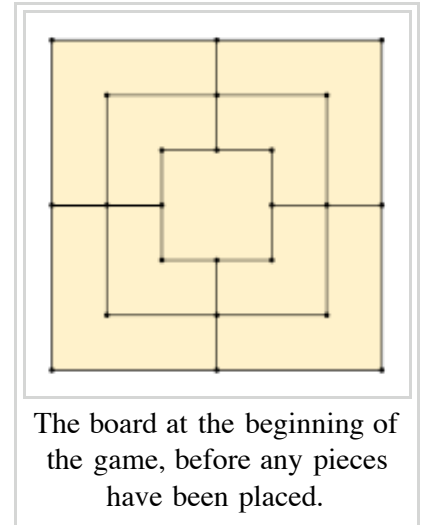
### Flying

In one common variation, once a player is reduced to three pieces, his pieces may "fly", "hop"<sup>[4][5]</sup> or "jump"<sup>[6]</sup> to any empty intersections, not only adjacent ones. Some sources of the rules say this is the way the game is played,<sup>[5][6]</sup> some treat it as a variation,<sup>[4][7][8][9]</sup> and some don't mention it at all.<sup>[10]</sup> A '19th Century Games Manual' calls this the "truly rustic mode of playing the game".<sup>[4]</sup>

## Strategy

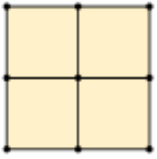
At the beginning of the game, it is more important to place pieces in versatile locations than to try to form mills immediately and make the mistake of concentrating one's pieces in one area of the board.<sup>[11]</sup>

An ideal position, which typically results in a win, is to be able to shuttle one piece back and forth between two mills, removing a piece every turn. For example, in the diagram above, white can win the game even if black moves first.



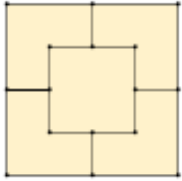
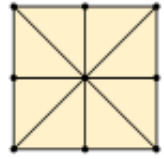
The board at the beginning of the game, before any pieces have been placed.

## Variants



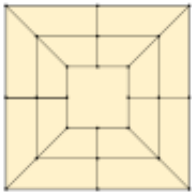
### Three Men's Morris

**Three Men's Morris** is played on a three-by-three board with just three pieces per player. Flying is allowed.<sup>[12]</sup> Diagonal lines are sometimes added to the board, reminiscent of tic-tac-toe.



### Six Men's Morris

**Six Men's Morris** gives each player six pieces and is played without the outer square found on the board of Nine Men's Morris. Flying is not allowed.<sup>[12]</sup> It "was popular in Italy, France and England during the Middle Ages but was obsolete by 1600."<sup>[12]</sup> This board is also used for Five Men's Morris. Seven Men's Morris uses this board with a cross in the center.



### Twelve Men's Morris

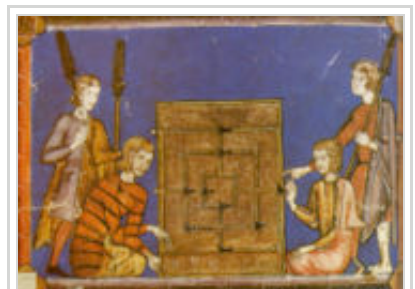
**Twelve Men's Morris** adds four diagonal lines to the board and gives each player twelve pieces. This means the board can be filled in the placement stage; if this happens the game is a draw. This board is also used for Eleven Men's Morris.

## History

According to R. C. Bell, the earliest known board for the game includes diagonal lines and was "cut into the roofing slabs of the temple at Kurna in Egypt" c. 1400 BCE.<sup>[12]</sup> However, Friedrich Berger writes that some of the diagrams at Qurna include Coptic crosses, making it "doubtful" that the diagrams date to 1400 BCE. Berger concludes, "certainly they cannot be dated."<sup>[1]</sup>

One of the earliest mentions of the game may be in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*.<sup>[12][1]</sup> In book III (c. 8 CE), after discussing *Latrones*, a popular board game, Ovid wrote:

There is another game divided into as many parts as there are months in the year. A table has three pieces on either side; the winner must get all the pieces in a straight line. It is a bad thing for a woman not to know how to play, for love often comes into being during play.



A 13th century illustration in *Libro de los juegos* of the game being played with dice.

Berger believes the game was "probably well known by the Romans", as there are many boards on Roman buildings, even though dating them is impossible because the buildings "have been easily accessible" since they were built. It is possible that the Romans were introduced to the game via trade routes, but this cannot be proven.<sup>[1]</sup>

The game peaked in popularity in medieval England.<sup>[4]</sup> Boards have been found carved into the cloister seats at the English cathedrals at Canterbury, Gloucester, Norwich, Salisbury and Westminster Abbey.<sup>[12]</sup> These boards used holes, not lines, to represent the nine spaces on the board — hence the name "nine holes" — and forming a diagonal row did not win the game.<sup>[13]</sup> Another board is carved into the base of a pillar in Chester Cathedral in Chester.<sup>[14]</sup>

In Shakespeare's 16th century work *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Titania laments that it is no longer played: "The nine men's morris is filled up with mud" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act II, Scene I).

Some authors say the game's origin is uncertain.<sup>[4]</sup> It has been speculated that its name may be related to Morris dances, and hence to Moorish, but according to Daniel King, "the word 'morris' has nothing to do with the old English dance of the same name. It comes from the Latin word *merellus*, which means a counter or gaming piece."<sup>[10]</sup> King also notes that the game was popular among Roman soldiers.

In some European countries, the design of the board was given special significance as a symbol of protection from evil,<sup>[1]</sup> and "to the ancient Celts, the Morris Square was sacred: at the center lay the holy Mill or Cauldron, a symbol of regeneration; and emanating out from it, the four cardinal directions, the four elements and the four winds."<sup>[4]</sup>

## Trivia

- The World Merrills Association ran the World Championships annually at the Ryedale Folk Museum in Hutton-le-Hole, North Yorkshire, England.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Related games

- Achi, from Ghana, is played on a Three Men's Morris board with diagonals. Each player has four pieces, which can only move to adjacent spaces.<sup>[16]</sup>
- Kensington is a similar game in which two players take turns placing pieces and try to arrange them in certain ways.
- Luk Tsut K'i ("Six Man Chess") in Canton and Tapatán in the Philippines are equivalent to Three Men's Morris played on a board with diagonals.<sup>[17]</sup>
- Morabaraba, equivalent to Twelve Men's Morris, has been played for thousands of years across Africa.<sup>[18]</sup> However, rather than men, the counters are called "cows." It is still played competitively in South Africa, where the most common rules prohibit returning a piece into a broken mill on the very

next turn.

- Shax is played on the board of Nine Men's Morris, but with somewhat different rules and with twelve pieces per player instead of nine.
- Tic-tac-toe uses a three-by-three board, on which players place pieces (or make marks) in turn until one player wins by forming an orthogonal or diagonal line or until the board is full and the game is drawn.

## References

1. <sup>^</sup> <sup>*a b c d e*</sup> Berger, Friedrich (2004). "From circle and square to the image of the world: a possible interpretation for some petroglyphs of merels boards ([http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/aura/shared\\_files/Berger1.pdf](http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/aura/shared_files/Berger1.pdf)) " (PDF). *Rock Art Research* **21** (1): pp. 11–25. Retrieved on 2007-01-12.
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12. <sup>^</sup> <sup>*a b c d e f*</sup> Bell, R. C. (1979). *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations, volume 1*. New York City: Dover Publications, pp. 90–92. ISBN 0-486-23855-5.
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## External links

- Merrills research (<http://www2.kumc.edu/itc/staff/rknight/Game4.htm>) from Kansas
- Ice Age cave excavation ([http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh\\_gfx\\_en/ART39580.html](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh_gfx_en/ART39580.html)) reveals what may be Nine Man Morris board from Roman age in Britain
- Six Men's Morris (<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/game/25702>) at BoardGameGeek
- Three Men's Morris (<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/game/19915>) at BoardGameGeek

## Software

- Nine Men's Morris applet (<http://www3.sympatico.ca/pesullivan/merrelles/English.html>) — Allows flying and plays at 7 difficulty levels
- 6 Men's Morris for Windows (<http://users.telenet.be/tablebases/6mm.htm>) — Allows flying and plays perfectly

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Category: Abstract strategy games

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