OFFICIAL BEGINNERS' SECTION

In this issue of the Official Beginners' Section of the British Othello Federation's newsletter we have the first part of an article by Karsten Switness on surviving the endgame.

Puzzles, articles, letters, cartoons etc. should be sent to the Section editor:

Joel Feinstein, 324 Queens Road West, Beeston, Nottingham NG9 1GS.

Phone: 0115–9251120 Fax: 0115–9031035

email: jff@feinst.demon.co.uk

Notation.

The start position

a1	b1	c1	d1	e1	f1	g1	h1
a2	b2	c2	d2	e2	f2	g2	h2
a3	b3	c3	d3	e3	f3	g3	h3
a4	b4	c4	d4	e4	f4	g4	h4
a5	b5	c5	d5	e5	f5	g5	h5
a6	b6	c6	d6	e6	f6	g6	h6
a7	b7	c7	d7	e7	f7	g7	h7
a8	b8	c8	d8	e8	f8	g8	h8

The names of squares

a1	C					C	h1
C	X					X	C
C	X					X	C
a8	C					C	h8

Special squares

The board is split into eight columns and eight rows. We label each column with a letter, from 'a' for the left-hand column to 'h' for the right-hand column. We number the rows from '1' for the top row to '8' for the bottom. This is the opposite convention to that used in chess. So, as shown above, the top left corner is called 'a1', and the bottom right is 'h8'. The pieces used in the game are called 'discs'.

Some of the squares on the board are especially important. The four corner squares (a1, h1, a8 and h8) are very useful to have, since they can never be taken away from you. As a consequence, it can be dangerous to play to a square next to an empty corner too early in the game (your opponent might be able to use your disc to play a move in the corner). The squares b2, g2, b7 and g7 (one diagonally in from a corner) are known as 'X-squares'. The other squares one away from a corner are called 'C-squares'. These are shown in the third diagram above.

We sometimes use compass directions when describing regions of the board, so for instance the area of the board near to h1 is called the North-East corner.

How to Survive the Endgame (part 1)

by Karsten Switness.

If you have read my previous articles in this series carefully enough, and played the right moves all the time in the opening and midgame, you will undoubtedly have reached lots of won positions. This means that you will equally undoubtedly have experienced the unique frustration of losing from a won position. If it's any consolation, everyone does this from time to time; the better players simply do it a little less often (and somehow seem to win from lost positions more often as well). So, this article will not tell you all you need to know about the endgame, but I hope it'll be a start.

Let me start with a heresy. Contrary to the impression you might get from a large proportion of articles on the game, counting discs is not a very important part of Othello. For sure, it's a useful skill, and worth acquiring, but let me assure you that experienced players don't find it as easy as they sometimes try to make out in their articles (though practice helps), and that in most games there is never any real need to do any counting.

Exception: when there are just two empty squares in a region (especially the last region), and it's your move, and both moves are legal, it's very often not obvious which is the better move. Then you ought to be able to count discs well enough to play the right one. This is just a matter of (i) count how many discs move A will turn, and subtract the number of discs your opponent's reply will turn back, (ii) repeat for move B, (iii) play the move with the higher difference.

1. White to play and win

A typical thought process (in Figure 1, for example) is "(with a1) I turn three, and he turns back two, which is plus one; the other way (b1) I turn four, and he turns lots, so the first one is better". Once you get good at this, you'll realise that it's worth your while to count when there are three empty squares in a region, but that really is about all you need to be able to cope with until you reach a very high standard.

So, if you're not going to spend time counting discs, what are you looking to achieve in the endgame? Well, the basic aims are (1) to arrange to play moves that turn lots of discs, while preventing your opponent doing so – in particular, it's usually a good thing to secure an edge, which guarantees you seven or eight discs, but it might well be just as important to get an interior line of discs, and (2) to arrange to play lots of moves! Let's look at an example.

2. White to play at 56

It's White's move and she can take the corner at a1, getting the West edge. If she doesn't, then Black can play a1 instead, and keep the West edge. So is a1 the right move? Absolutely not!

Suppose that White does play 56a1; what will happen then? Don't believe that Black will lazily play 57b1; instead he'll play 57g8, when White can choose to play either 58h7-59h8 or 58h8-59h7 (you should be able to see, without counting, that the first of these is obviously better), then White will have to pass and Black gets 60b1. Black gets three of the last four moves, and (as it happens) snatches a victory. Or rather, White has snatched defeat.

Instead, White should play absolutely any move in the South-East region. Indeed, Black gets a1, but then White gets a reply at b1 that turns a decent number of discs, and White gets two of the three moves in the South-East. 56g8 looks much the most attractive of the three ways to start, since it secures the g-column, and White's last move in that region is bound to sweep the h-column. As it happens, 56g8 and 56h7 win, whereas 56h8 only draws. (Why? Because after 56h8 57h7, 58g8 doesn't turn very many discs.)

There are several lessons here. For a start, there is the general principle that you do need to think ahead, and that it's necessary to look at more than just the move you're playing right now. With six or fewer empty squares, don't play your move until you're pretty confident that you've looked at all the ways that the game is likely to finish.

Figure 2 will also serve as an illustration of the first of my Three Principles of Endgame Play.

1. Parity

3. Black to play at 51

You are Black, and the game has gone well for you. Your opponent has had to sacrifice a corner, and indeed you can play h8 and h1 whenever you want, securing the North edge as well as the East. And on the other side of the board, White has a weak edge. Nevertheless you are lost. Why? Parity!

Looking around the board, you can see that there are four regions of empty squares left, and all of them contain an even number of squares. So what is going to happen is that, whichever region you play into, White will follow into the same region. That means that White

will get the last move into every region. As you will see, getting the last move means hanging on to many of the nearby discs.

For instance, play might go: 51h8 52g8 53h1 54g2 55b7 (exploiting the weak West edge) 56a8 57a7 58b8 59a1 60b2, which is 29-35. Play this out and look at the final position: you have your three edges, as advertised, but not much else. White's moves proved at least as effective as yours. No other sequence is any better.

This is a "parity loss", and sometimes after a defeat like this it will seem that your only mistake was choosing to play Black in the first place. But quite often you can do something about it if you realise the danger early enough ...

4. Black to play at 49

Was this the position two moves earlier? If so, then this is where you blew it! Look at the North-East region. This is an "odd region" (i.e., a region of the board containing an odd number of empty squares) into which White has no access nor any immediate prospect of access. It is usually a mistake for Black to play into such a region; we've already seen why! Indeed, if you play the tempting move 49g1, then White replies with 50g7, and we've reached Diagram 3. White's 50g7 is the "parity move", playing into the odd region whatever the cost. Your 49g1 is said to "lose parity".

So, what should you have done instead? If you disregard the North-East region, then there are two even regions and one odd one, so Black should play into the odd one: 49g7! Now *you* can play parity, just following White into whatever region he plays into. For instance, the game might finish 49g7 50h8 51g8 52b2 53a1 54b7 55a7 56a8 57b8 (P) 58g1 59g2 60h1, which is 40-24 to you. In fact, White can't do any better than that.

Next time, in part 2, we will look at my other two principles of endgame play: Diagonalisation and Swindles.