OFFICIAL BEGINNERS' SECTION

White to play

Welcome to the fourth Official Beginners' Section of the British Othello Federation's newsletter. This issue we have a word puzzle by Colin Hands and an intermediate article on surviving the early midgame by Karsten Switness.

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

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Black is doomed!

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.

WORD PUZZLE *by Colin Hands*

Can you fit the words and phrases given on the next page into the shape below? Each word or phrase must read either from left to right, or downwards, and there must only be one letter in each square. Solution next issue.

WORDS AND PHRASES

GO	ERROR	ENDGAME	OPPONENTS
CUT	LEVEL	OTHELLO	POISONING
ODD	QUIET	REGIONS	SACRIFICE
DRAW	TEMPO	REVERSI	EVALUATION
EVEN	TRAPS	SWINDLE	FORCED MOVE
FREE	VENUE	WIPEOUT	LIMITATION
GAME	WHITE	X-SQUARE	UNBALANCED
MOVE	ACCESS	BALANCED	EVAPORATION
PASS	OPTION	DIAGONAL	STABLE DISCS
SAFE	PARITY	ISOLATED	CHECKERBOARD
WALL	STONER	MOBILITY	OPTIMIZATION
BLACK	TABLES	OPENINGS	SWEET SIXTEEN
BOARD	CONTROL	OPPONENT	PERPENDICULAR
DISCS	CORNERS	OUTFLANK	
EDGES	C-SQUARE	PARALLEL	

How to Survive the Early Midgame *by Karsten Switness.*

Whether or not you followed my advice in the last issue, you will soon find yourself in a position you don't know. This can happen as early as move 4, almost no matter how well prepared you are, and even the ultra-experts rarely know the opening beyond move 25. In this article, we deal with the phase of the game starting from this point, up to about half-way through the game. This early midgame is perhaps the most intriguing part of Othello, and it's one phase where the beginner is liable to get crushed by an experienced player unless they know the sorts of things to look out for.

Do read *Othello: Brief & Basic*. This will introduce you to the key concepts: mobility, compactness, walls, edges, tempi, and so on. Having done that, study the following positions, and see what move you'd choose.

1. White to move.

2. Black to move.

Position 1 is basically an example where White has an absolutely ideal move available, namely a move to e3. This has all kinds of desirable features: (a) it turns only one disc – at this point of the game, you should aim to have fairly few discs of your colour, (b) the one disc it does turn is an "internal" disc – if you're going to have discs, try to have them on the interior of the position, (c) the move you play is filling in a "hole" – if you need to have "external" discs, try to have them bunched, and try to fill in the squares nearest the centre whenever you can, (d) the move cuts Black's position into two, (e) Black doesn't have anything particularly nice to do after the move to e3 – everything he does starts to put pieces on the outside, and leaves his discs scattered. There are other reasonable moves in position 1, for instance b4 or g5, but a move to e3 is ideal; you should always look for this kind of possibility.

I hope you recognise Position 2 as one move before Position 1; if Black plays e8, then White has the opportunity to play e3. So, while e8 only turns one disc, and keeps things fairly "compact", it's a bad move. In this position, the most important feature is the hole at e3, and White's threat to play there, and Black really needs to do something about it. In general, there are four things you can

do when your opponent has a nice move available. (1) Ignore it, and let him play there – sometimes this is all you can do! (2) Play there yourself – the one way to permanently solve the problem. (3) Take away his "access" – in this case, that means flipping the disc at c5. (4) "Poisoning" the move – i.e., making the move less attractive.

In the current position, there isn't any way to poison the move to e3, so we're down to three choices.
(1) If you resign yourself to letting him play e3, then you need to think of two moves now: one to play immediately, and one to play after the e3 response. One possibility along those lines would be 1d2 2e3 3e2. In this sequence, move 1 to d2 takes advantage of the fact that you still have a disc at d4 to let you play to d2, and the whole sequence leaves your discs fairly well clustered in the centre.
(2) Playing to e3 yourself is not particularly attractive at first glance, as it turns not only the central discs at e4 and e5, but also the external disc at d3. This means you'll have rather more discs on the board than you'd like, and you'd have the beginnings of a "wall" of black pieces c4-c3-d3-e3. But it's not totally out of the question; it does after all stop White ever going to e3, and it's not clear what White is going to do next (probably a reply to g6).
(3) Turning the c5 disc by playing to b6 is probably the most attractive option here. The move turns only the one key disc, although it is a bit "straggly", placing a disc right on the outside of the filled-in region. Also, Black is threatening to play d2 next move, and e3 the move after – the point of this is that it turns just the same discs as an immediate move to e3, but Black gets to play two moves instead of just one. The consequence is that, after a move to b6, White will have to do something about this threat.
So, there are three options (1d2-e3-e2, 1e3, and 1b6). These are all much more purposeful than a move to e8, and much better moves. Incidentally, 1b5 is not as good as 1b6. It's not just that it turns three discs rather than one, but more that it allows White another nice move to c6.

Right at the start at the game, the issues you'll have to deal with are like the ones above – where is the "quiet" move, how do I stop my opponent playing a quiet move, how do I set up a quiet move for next time? The idea is to recognise which are the most desirable squares to play in (in Position 1, for instance, the squares which are the most attractive are e3, d7 and c6 – everything else is more to the outside), and try to find ways for you to play those moves rather than your opponent. Here's another position to think about.

3. Black to move.

4. After a move to g4.

In Position 3, the square that Black would most like to play to is c6 – a hole in the position. At the moment, the move isn't legal for Black, so it's a good idea to try to make it legal, and play it, before White can do much about it. So the move that stands out is a move to g4, turning the e4 disc and securing access to c6. But before rushing to play g4, we should see what's likely to happen afterwards. (See position 4.)

Maybe White will respond with a move to c2, turning back the e4 disc. If that's the best he can do, then we shouldn't worry, as the c2 move is rather on the outside of the position, and builds a bit of a wall in the North, but all the same it's a good idea to think what we'll do afterwards. One possibility is a move to f2 – this both regains our access to c6, and removes White's access to his desirable move at g5. There are other possibilities too, so we don't need to worry too much about c2.

Another option for White is just to take the attractive move to g5 in Position 4. Our move to g4 created this option for him – certainly a drawback of the move. But after White's g5, we can play the move to c6 that we've set up, and now White will have to find something else to do.

One other thing that White can do in Position 4 is to play to b4. This takes advantage of another drawback of our g4 choice – it made the 4th row all Black, so the move to b4 turns only one disc. It's also an example of "poisoning" our move to c6 – playing that move will now turn the c5 disc as well as the internal d5 disc. After a move to b4, we could still play c6 regardless, but it's probably better to do something about White's move to g5 first – maybe d2 (a move we might want to play anyway) to take away his access.

The upshot is that the move g4 from Position 3 is not ideal – few moves are – and it might be worth looking for an alternative. Another move to look at would be g5. This has the serious disadvantage that now it's White who gets to play the lovely move at c6, so probably g5 isn't a very good idea.

To be an expert, you need to be able to think of most of this before you make a move in Position 3. To be a dangerous opponent, you don't need to do anything

like as much as that, but the key thing is to be thinking about the right type of moves. An example of a move that isn't worth considering is f8 in Position 3. This kind of move seems to be attractive to many beginners, probably because it connects the Black pieces, or because it plays to an edge, or because they don't see anything else to do. But really it's not good – it turns the beginnings of a White wall into a Black wall, and it leaves plenty of easy responses (d8,d7,c6) in the Southern area, as well as the "compact" move to d2. Connecting your pieces isn't really an end in itself, it's more of a symptom of a neat, compact position.

What we've discussed so far is all very well, but it doesn't take very long before all the desirable squares are used up, and the players are obliged to play to the edges. It is not necessarily a bad idea, in itself, to play to an edge, but usually one does it because there isn't anything better to do. Here is one position where going to the edge is the right thing to do.

5. White to play.

I recommend that White play to a6 here. Why? For one thing, there aren't any really good moves in the more central area, but also the move is actually attractive in itself. Here are a few of the move's good features: (a) it takes away Black's access to e2 – one of several moves that Black might consider now or soon, (b) it sets up a "compact" move to b6 (this would pinch two moves out of the small region in the SW of the position), (c) (most importantly), it "poisons" Black's potential move to a4. Let's look at this last point more carefully. Compare the effect of (i) White playing a6 and Black replying a4, (ii) Black playing a4 and White replying a6. The only difference is that the b5 disc ends up black in (i) and white in (ii), which is to the advantage of the player who doesn't own the disc, since he then gets to play another move in the region, turning the b5 disc again. So, in Position 5, one should think that Black is threatening to play a4 (a compact move, turning only central pieces, in only one direction), and White is making the move less desirable by playing a6 first. In response to a6, by the way, a good move for Black would be c7, poisoning White's potential next move to b6.

Once one player has "initiated" an edge, the other squares on the edge become less undesirable, and there is the usual scramble to organise the moves. Quite soon, three or four of the squares in the middle of the edge are played in, and you are confronted by a classic Othello decision: whether or not to "take" the edge, i.e., to play so as to turn the opponent's pieces on the edge.

The next position is an example where it is necessary to take an edge early on in order to survive.

6. Black to play.

This is a position from a Regional this year. White is already ahead, mostly because of Black's large wall in the North. However, the game is far from over – one of the things that Black has in his favour is that the wall is "flat", so whenever White plays a move through the wall, onto the second row, the squares next to the move played are bound to become legal and highly desirable for Black. Meanwhile, White has just played to h6, and Black has to decide whether to play h7.

What happened in the game was this. Black chose not to take the edge, and played instead to b6. White took the edge by playing to h2, and Black went to d7. Now if Black had had to move again, he would have been completely dead, so it only remained for White to "gain a tempo", i.e., to play out a sequence of moves which left it with Black to move and nowhere to go. White has a choice of looking to the North, the South, or the West for a suitable sequence, and it is not surprising that he found one. (As a matter of principle, it is better to look in the North than in the South, because if White plays to the South, then Black might get an extra move with g7, meeting h8 with h7 – as it is, g7 will always be met with h7. So White played f2-e2-e1-d1-c1-g1-f1-b1-d2 – you're not expected to spot this sequence, but you should realise that it is heavy odds-on that there will be some such sequence.)

Back in the diagrammed position, I don't think it's too hard for Black to realise that, if he lets White take the edge, then he will soon be very short of moves. The only solution is for Black to take the edge himself with h7. This has the extra good feature that it turns the f5 disc, and removes White's access to d7. After this, White is still well ahead, but at least the game isn't over yet.

So we've seen three good reasons to take an edge. (1) To avoid running out of moves. (2) To run the opponent out of moves. (3) Tactical reasons: to gain access somewhere, or deny the opponent access. If none of these apply, and you have something else to do, then you probably shouldn't take the edge. More of this next time, when we look at what happens later in the midgame.