

How TO • WIN GAMES • AND • BEAT • • PEOPLE •



*Demolish your family and
friends at over 30 classic
games with advice from an
international array of experts!*

TOM WHIPPLE

Science Editor of *The Times*, London

How
TO·WIN
GAMES
·AND·BEAT·
·PEOPLE·



TOM WHIPPLE



DEDICATION

For **Mum**, for all the things mums do that no one notices.

For **Catherine**, for showing me what those things are.

For **Dad**, for always letting me win.

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INTRODUCTION



As everyone knows, it's not the winning that counts: it's the taking part. Nonsense! That is the battle cry of the loser. This is not a book for people who enjoy taking part; its readers are not people who, say, bring out a board game on Thanksgiving Day anticipating some pleasant after-dinner fun with the extended family over a bottle of sherry. Rather, this is a book for people who bring out a board game on Thanksgiving Day anticipating a protracted struggle that will act as a proxy conflict for long-simmering family feuds, and which will ultimately end only with the creation of more feuds or, at best, the upending of the board by a belligerent uncle.

This is a book that tells you how to win, put together after consulting the people who know. What is the best way to play Operation? Why not consult a surgeon? How do you construct the ultimate Jenga tower? Ask a structural engineer. Is there a strategy for guaranteeing victory at Connect 4? Let's follow the lead of noted player Beyoncé, and consult with the man who wrote an entire thesis on it.

And for those who say this is against the spirit of the thing, well, Risk does not describe itself as the "the game of taking part and having fun, because really that's what matters." It describes itself as "the game of world domination," because domination is how you win. (And, since you ask, in Risk that requires understanding the probabilities derived from a branch of statistics known as Markov chains, in a paper produced by a mathematician with a little too much time on his hands.)

What, though, if in your desire to win, in explaining to your opponents that you have memorized a 10 x 10 table of probabilities just so you can recapture Yakutsk, it all goes a bit like Napoleon's retreat from Moscow and becomes a messy brawl, possibly involving pillows? Well, this book can help there, too. As Special Forces hero Andy McNab explains, victory "in a pillow-fight situation" is about shock and awe: "The pillow is just a weapon. If you've got the weapon and you're there, you just get in straightaway."

So, if you are the sort of person who buys new trainers for the dads' race at school sports day, do not be ashamed. If you consult Sun Tzu before playing Risk, take heart. If you know that *qi* is a legitimate Scrabble word but you do not know what it means, do not feel alone. Instead, read on. Bad losers, we salute you.



MONOPOLY

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

A timeless classic: everyone's favorite brutal capitalist board game. Build a powerful property empire and family rifts that will persist for decades. Learn the importance of fiscal prudence, and of squeezing your opponents for everything they are worth. Oh, and win \$10 in a beauty contest.



HOW DO YOU PLAY?

Much like in real capitalism, success is a mixture of luck, judgment, and the extent of one's willingness to mercilessly crush the weak. Should you move around the board and buy properties selectively, to develop an exclusive portfolio of luxury residences, or purchase everything you land on and become an overleveraged subprime slum landlord? The choice is yours. Just remember, it might be Christmas but that's still no reason to go easy on Aunt Joan.

HOW DOES IT END?

With the losing player turning over the board or—a true capitalist simulation—going on strike.



ANALYSIS

Buy orange. If John Haigh has one tip for Monopoly players, it is that. A game theorist, John is unusual in that he has actually turned his mathematical attentions toward real games rather than, say, the financial markets. And he says that the most salient fact about Monopoly is not the cost of Boardwalk, the multiplicative value of owning all the stations, or the putative luck value of having the boot, it is that people go to prison.

“The single square that is landed on most often is jail,” says John. This is because there are so many ways of arriving at it—to land on Boardwalk you have to throw the correct numbers with the dice, but for jail, “You can hit it naturally; or hit the Go to Jail; or throw three doubles in succession.”

Ordinarily, people who have been incarcerated are not safe financial bets. No one, for instance, is making investments on the basis of Kenneth Lay's movements. Not so in Monopoly. It is not so much that one is sent to jail—it is that one leaves it. What comes next is what is important in terms of buying: where do people setting out from

jail land? Well, the most common numbers thrown with two dice are 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. So it seems the orange properties—6, 8, and 9 throws away—offer the steadiest revenue stream.



John's computer model (yes, he has indeed built one) confirms this: "For every 100 hits on purple or blue, you tend to get 110 on green or yellow, and 122 on orange or red."

As every decent profiteering landlord will tell you, though, it is not just about the frequency with which you can take rents, it is also about the amount you can extract. On this measure, too, the oranges do well. You may get more from renting a bijou flat in Manhattan to a Russian oligarch, but it costs you more, too. In Monopoly, as in life, there is a happy medium between an efficiency on Mediterranean Avenue and a penthouse on Park Place. "Add up the total required to buy all the properties and put hotels on them," says John. "Then add up the maximum rent on each property. The higher the ratio of income to cost, the more attractive the set is to own. On this measure, light blue is best at 1.59, then orange (1.41), deep blue (1.27), purple (1.24), yellow (1.15), brown (1.13), red (1.09) and finally green (1.01)."

Assuming you've beaten your opponents to the best property, and achieved the optimal cost-to-income ratio, what next? Well, it is time to crush them. Here, too, it is not the high-rolling glamour of Boardwalk that is your friend, but the steady, dependable mediocrity of St. James Place.

How, asks John, do you most quickly get to the situation where you can extract rents "large enough to cause embarrassment"? Let us assume that \$750 is a sufficient sum to bankrupt Uncle Simon after a few glasses of sherry, what then is the minimum for each set of properties that we can spend to achieve that?



With brown and light blue you can't get this sum; for the rest you can get there by spending \$1,760 (orange), \$1,940 (purple), \$1,950 (deep blue), \$2,150 (yellow), \$2,330 (red) or \$2,720 (green).

Of course, all this highlights is that this isn't really a perfect simulation of the capitalist market at all. Orange is clearly undervalued without a way of correcting the price—an economic problem that is compounded by the game's shameless quantitative easing in the form of \$200 every time you pass Go. Real Monopoly players have long known this, which is why a serious game will see side deals in the form of offers to do the washing-up, risk-offsetting in the form of promises to take the dog for a walk and,

ultimately, capital flight into stabler currencies. Such as Russell Stover chocolates.
Isn't the free market wonderful?



“Monopoly,” says Mark Littlewood, waving a cigarette in one hand while bashing a pint on the table for emphasis with the other, “is a vicious North Korean fight to get your hands on other people’s property.”

Doesn’t it represent the ugly side of unfettered capitalism? “Absolutely not. It is intrinsically anti-free market.”

Mark is director general of Britain’s Institute of Economic Affairs. A strident opponent of the state, of socialism, of the minimum wage for disabled people (and, in fairness, for everyone else), he doesn’t buy the idea that Monopoly epitomizes the grand capitalist struggle. Quite the reverse. Instead, it is a communist fifth column.

“The problem is, it’s a zero-sum game: if I win, you lose. A free market is not a zero-sum game. In the real world almost everyone leaves the Monopoly table a bit richer. There is no growth mechanism in the game. No one ever says, as they do in life, ‘Oh, I’ve got Mediterranean Avenue now. I’ll retire, watch TV, and live off my pension.’ ”

He goes on, invoking Adam Smith. “The size of the pie in Monopoly is fixed, but what free markets do is expand the pie. Last time I checked, Boardwalk was worth more than \$400.” At one point, though, it was, and the fact it is not now, says Mark (and Adam Smith) “isn’t just because [you] get \$200 every time they pass Go,” it is because, ultimately, capitalism makes everyone richer.

So how do you create a Monopoly that is capitalist? Well, as a start you open it up to the idea that, as in the market, anything can be bought—including your position on the board. “If you had the situation whereby you said the winner would be given \$500 that is sitting under the Christmas tree, things would be very different.

“You would then get people trading in their position in Monopoly against the \$500 under the tree.” For those unlikely to find \$500 under the Christmas tree, a box of chocolates works just as well—or, indeed, anything else that is divisible and valuable.

In Mark’s version of the game people could make an assessment of their position as they go along and decide, say, that they have a 50 percent chance of winning so it is worth cashing out and selling their properties to an opponent for \$250. “Or

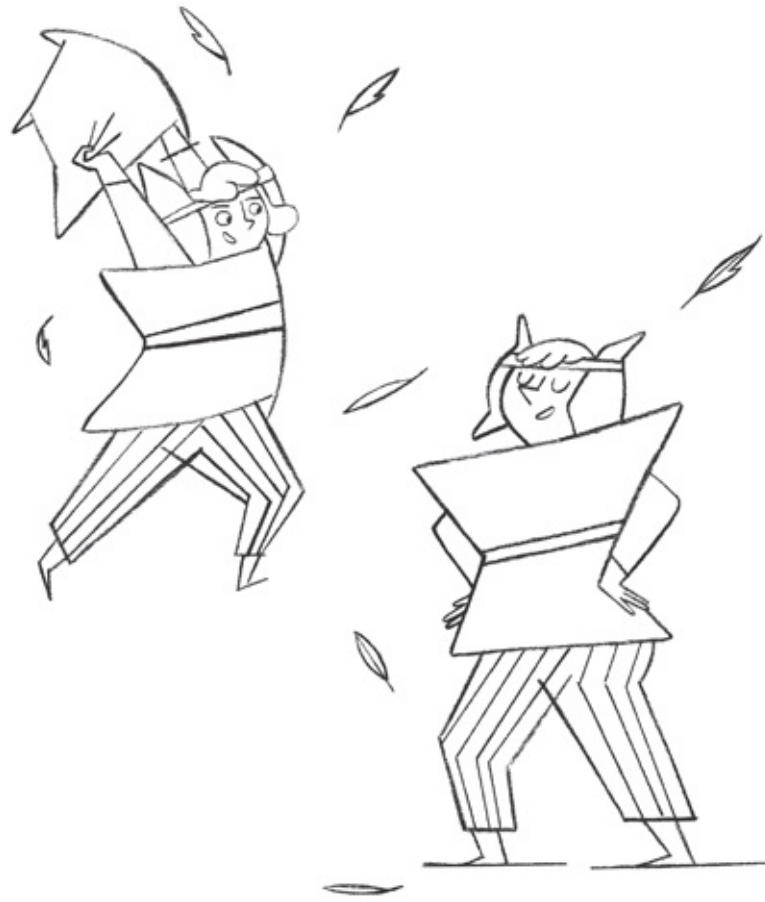
even,” Mark suggests, “they might say, ‘I’m well ahead, but I don’t want to die of boredom over the next four hours. I’ll take the \$250 and divide the rest between everyone else, just so that the bloody thing can end.’ ”

If Monopoly sometimes feels unfair, if success or failure seems arbitrary, that may be because it is meant to be. Monopoly was created in the early twentieth century by a woman named Elizabeth Magie, and in its original guise as the “Landlord’s Game” it was designed to demonstrate the benefits of “Georgism.” This was an economic analysis named after Henry George, a man who believed that unfair benefits accrue to landowners as they can extract money from owning their property without ever adding value or improving society through it.

Writing in the 1902 edition of the (much-missed) *Single Tax Review*, Ms. Magie wrote of her game, “It is a practical demonstration of the present system of land-grabbing with all its usual outcomes and consequences. It might well have been called the Game of Life, as it contains all the elements of success and failure in the real world, and the object is the same as the human race in general seems to have, i.e., the accumulation of wealth.”

FACT

During World War II, Allied soldiers were sent Monopoly games in the mail—but with one small change: the money inside was real German and Italian currency, the playing pieces concealed compasses and files, and the board hid a printed silk map.



PILLOW FIGHTING

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

As Clausewitz should really have said, “Pillow fighting is the continuation of war by other means.” As Sun Tzu did say, “Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.” And never use one of those cheap foam pillows, for they have no weight behind them.

HOW DO YOU PLAY?

First, find a pillow. Next, hit someone with it. Repeat.



HOW DOES IT END?

With a lot of feathers, a bit less usable bedding, and, if you use one of those orthopedic pillows, an overwhelming victory only slightly tempered by the mild concussions of your opponents.

ANALYSIS

“All you are,” says Andy McNab, in the kind of voice Jack Bauer uses while searching for the clamp with which to attach electrodes to a terrorist’s nipples, “is a platform for the weapon. It doesn’t matter whether it is a rocket launcher or a pistol, if the platform isn’t right the weapon won’t do what it is supposed to do.”

Andy—Special Forces hero, private security contractor, veteran of covert operations around the world, victim of torture after being captured in the first Gulf War—has been in a lot of fights, and won a lot of fights. Pillow fights, to his mind, differ only in the fact that they involve pillows. Rather than, say, choke holds, shrapnel, and high-velocity 7.62 bullets. Oh, and also in that, ideally, he explains, “You shouldn’t really bite, gouge their eyes, or grab their bollocks.”



“The pillow is just a weapon,” he says. “The principles are the same as for any weapon: your position and hold must be firm enough to support it. The chances are you are going to have it in one hand, so you can have the other hand free to push the target away from you, or to grab the target toward you and control it.” He advocates a stable stance with feet set firm and apart. “The next principle is that the weapon must point naturally at the target. It’s no good being in a great stable position if the target is

behind you. When you swing the pillow you need maximum damage with minimum effort. You won't hit the target with maximum force if you have to use some of that force to move your body around."

Andy believes his chief advantage, though, in a really serious pillow fight situation, would be the willingness to go in fast and hard with overwhelming force. He is a firm advocate of the shock and awe approach to late-night dormitory squabbles.

"The fact is, once you commit, you commit. Culturally, from films, we are conditioned to think you've got to dance around first. But once you're in a situation, the principle is there's no turning back. It's that recognition that you've got to fight, or you're in the shit—so you get on and fight. If you've got the weapon and you're there, you just get in straightaway." Or, just go for their bollocks.



FACT

In 1897 *The Times* of London first mentions pillow fighting in its report of a divorce proceeding. The husband conceded, when asked about the couple's turbulent relationship, that they "used frequently to have pillow fights."

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

The Romans played it. So, too, almost certainly, did the Ancient Egyptians. Which is hardly surprising since the prerequisites are just sand and boredom.

HOW DO YOU PLAY?

By finding a very, very stupid opponent.



HOW DOES IT END?

In an unsatisfying impasse. If it doesn't end in an unsatisfying impasse then one of two things has happened. 1. You lost—in which case it seems doubtful you are competent enough to read this. 2. Your opponent lost—in which case hopefully they are not someone you consider a good friend and/or your intellectual equal.

ANALYSIS

Most reasonable assessments would have to conclude that one notorious American competitor, named Ginger, has an unfair, to the point of being insurmountable, advantage in tic-tac-toe. Traveling the country's casinos, gamblers line up to play her, but while they only win if they beat her, she gets to keep their money even if there is a draw.

Given that two half-decent tic-tac-toe players always draw, the results are hardly surprising. "Usually we will play about 500 people a day," says Kelly Boger, Ginger's manager. "We would maybe expect one or two losses."

There is only one detail that might explain why gamblers continue to believe they might have an edge. Ginger is a chicken.

In fact, Ginger is the latest in a long line of chickens that has been enriching the Boger family of animal trainers for the past twenty years.

"My dad started training animals years and years ago for circuses," says Kelly. "Buffaloes, camels, mountain lions, giraffes." As a sideline, Kelly trained up some chickens—getting them to peck at the right squares in tic-tac-toe—and began taking them around to fairs. He didn't think much of it initially. "It was just a quarter a play. Then I got some chickens stolen when I was in Pennsylvania." That turned out to be Kelly's big break. "It went on national news, and I started getting these calls from casinos. So I had to train some more."

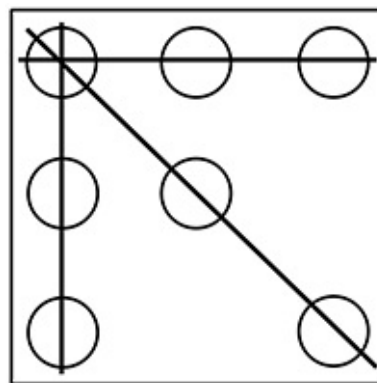
Since then, Kelly has trained several hundred chickens—and has the process down to a fine art. "It's positive reinforcement. If they do something correct, you give them a

reward for it. Then it just takes a lot of patience, and a lot of time.” Is there anything that human players can learn from his training regime? “They pick a middle or a corner if they go first,” he says of his trained chickens. “That’s where you’ve got to start. Then you get them to start strategizing where the person’s going to go versus where they are actually going to go.”

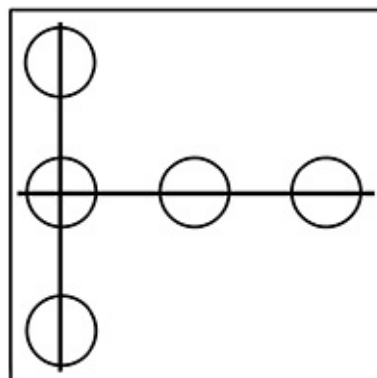
Basic tic-tac-toe strategy is simple. The diagonals—the corners and the center—are most valuable. Three different lines can start or end on a corner square, whereas the four squares not on a diagonal can only be part of two lines.



Three lines possible from one corner

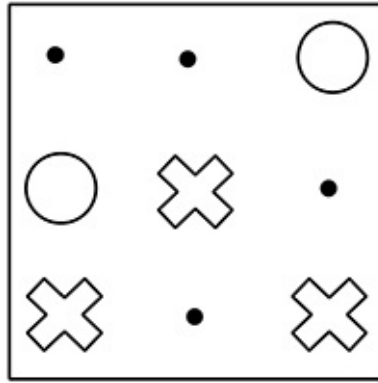


Just two lines possible from one edge



So, initially, the best move is a center or a corner. If the center isn’t taken by the first player, it should be by the second. After that, each move is either about blocking any threats from your opponent or, if there aren’t any, making threats of your own. Ideally, you will look to get a “fork,” where on the next go you are threatening two separate lines.

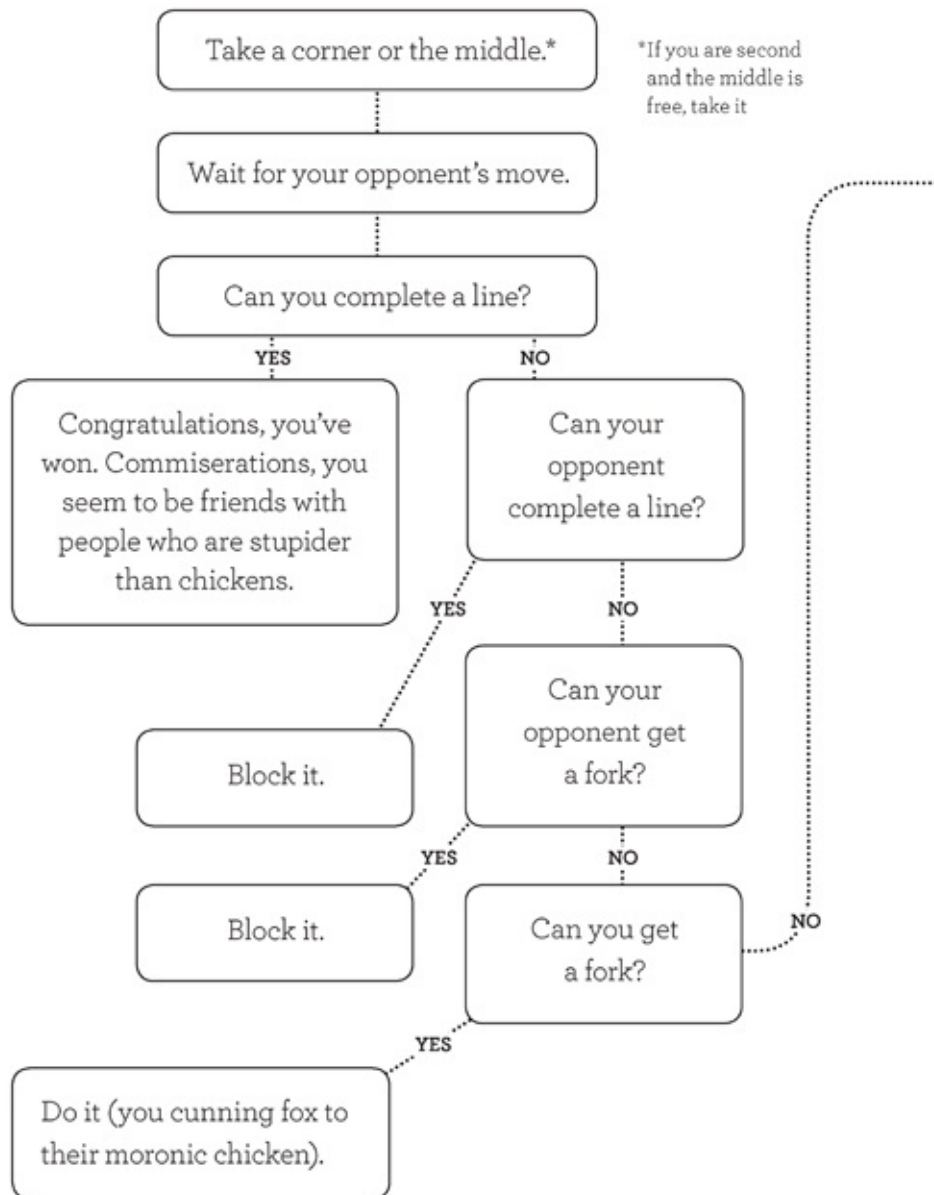
Fork



It may not be the most complex of games, but isn't it still a little humiliating for humans that something as stupid as a chicken can master it? Kelly has a correction: "Maybe when I first get 'em they're stupid, but not when I'm done with them. It's like you," says Kelly. "I could get you to do a lot of things for food."

START+ ←

+You will notice there is no box in this flow chart representing defeat. We assume that, if you are able to read, you are also clever enough not to lose.



Back we go to the beginning. But really we all know this is heading for an unsatisfactory draw. Why not try something involving more skill, like scissors, paper, stone, or roshambo?

Are there any
diagonals left?

NO

I suppose you can
keep playing

FACT

Tic-tac-toe was probably the first game to be "solved" by a computer. It is trillions of times simpler than some of the games solved today, but even so there are 26,830 potential positions.