



Accasta

Introduction to a Pure Stacking Game

by Dieter Stein

It was back in the seventies that I first read about *Lasca*, the Checkers variant by the famous Chess champion Dr. Emanuel Lasker. Actually, I was never very interested in Checkers. But what struck me was a picture that illustrated the *Lasca* article. It showed two players handling large stacks of playing pieces. That looked very attractive and I instantly thought that a game with stacked pieces should also have great tactical potential.

From that time on I worked on my very own stacking game. Being a Chess player it was unavoidable that some features of Chess slipped into the fundamental design. So there *are* two armies of different piece types face to face in a fixed setup marching against each other.

At about the same time I discovered Glinski's Hexagonal Chess, which I liked very much. So what I did for my game project at the beginning was putting the two elements together: stacks and a six-sided board. I also tried a traditional chessboard but that was only a short episode in the long evolution of Accasta.

Board Setup

Balancing this game turned out to be a difficult matter. I wanted the board to be sufficiently crowded for stacking to appear. It was clear that—unless you provide lots of playing pieces—the board dimensions would have to be rather small. The problem was that games on small boards often tend to lack strategic depth or, even worse, simply do not work. Sometimes in early versions of Accasta winning strategies were obvious; sometimes it was too easy to block the opponent. I remember a test game where a large stack, more than 20 pieces high, made Accasta almost feel like a game of dexterity.

Finally, in spring 1998, I came up with a total of 40 pieces on 37 spaces of a hexagonal board. The two players are provided with 20 pieces each, which are placed on two sides of the board on 9 specially marked spaces, inside a “*castle*”. Since no piece is ever removed from the board, it seemed quite natural to initiate every game of Accasta (terribly traditional) with a fixed starting position.

White always makes the first move; then players move alternately. They cannot pass a turn.

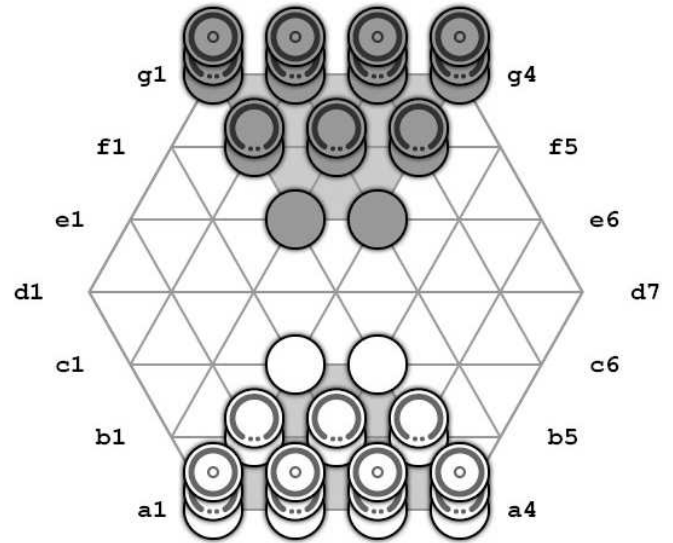


Fig. 1: Initial setup: 40 pieces on 37 spaces. The pieces are placed on the intersections of the lines. There are other board designs with hexagonal cells, which are topologically equivalent.

The coordinate system reflects the symmetry of the board setup. Beginning on White's side, the horizontal rows are labeled from *a* to *g* and then each space on a row is counted from the left to the right.

Pieces and Stacks

Accasta provides three different types of pieces: Shields, Horses, and Chariots, which move up to 1, 2, or 3 spaces, respectively.



Fig. 2: Shield, Horse, and Chariot

Unlike some other stacking games, the possible moves for a piece do not depend on its position in a stack.

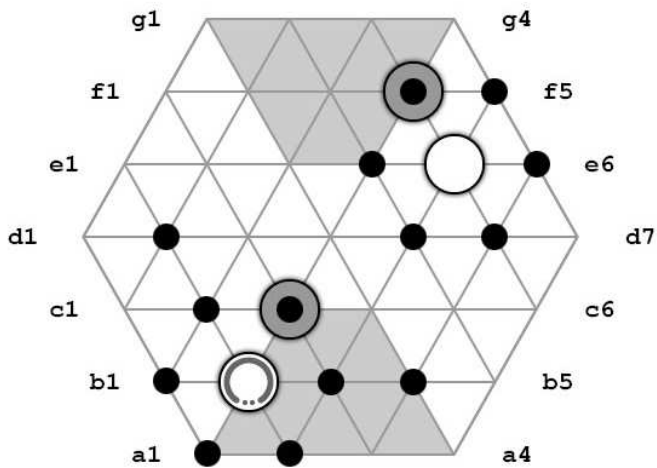


Fig. 3a: Possible moves for Shield (e5) and Horse (b2)

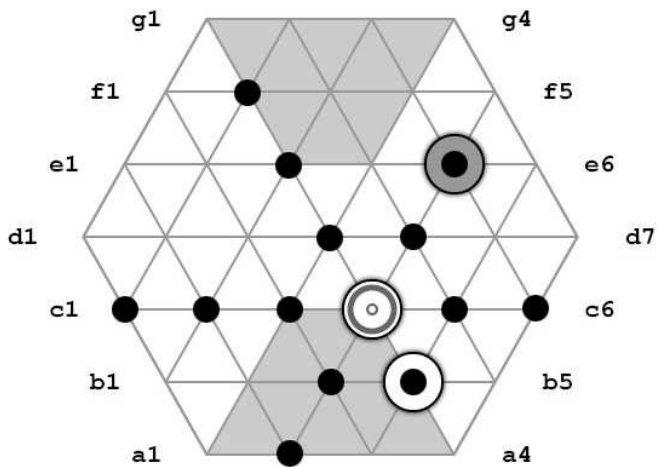


Fig. 3b: Possible moves for Chariot (c4)

All pieces move straight in any of the six possible directions. They cannot change direction during the move. Also, they cannot jump over another piece. However, they can *land on* friendly or enemy pieces or stacks that are within reach (subject to the height restrictions discussed below).

If stacked pieces are to be moved, the piece on top can carry (or “lead”) any number of friendly or enemy pieces below; in other words, a stack can be split at any point. In some situations it even can be advantageous to uncover an enemy piece. This special move is called a “*release*” and has consequences, which will be explained later in this article.

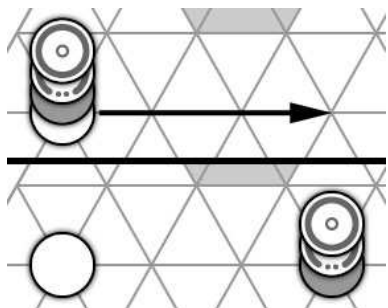


Fig. 4: Splitting a stack and “leading” other pieces

The split off part of the stack can move as it is determined by the leading piece, e.g. a Shield leads other pieces always to adjacent spaces only.

It follows from these moving rules that the topmost piece of a stack (also called the “*head*”) dominates the whole stack, i.e. all of the enemy pieces in the same stack are captured. Their owner has no access to them. However, they are not lost! By recapturing such a stack a player would liberate all of his previously captured pieces instantly and, at the same time, all previously dominating pieces are now captured themselves.

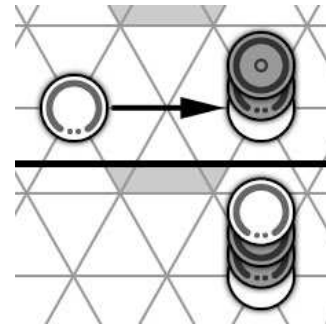


Fig. 5: A previously captured white Shield is liberated.

Multiple Moves

Another outstanding feature of Accasta derived from its stacking nature is the possibility to move more than once in one single turn. As a player splits a stack and another friendly piece comes to the surface, that piece *can* move as well, possibly into another direction, but strictly as described before. However, by releasing an enemy piece the current player’s turn is over.

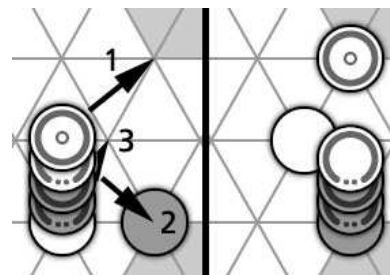


Fig. 6: Moving three pieces in one turn.

Safe Stacks

In early draft versions of this game I had the problem of stacks growing too high. With multiple moves at hands it is obviously a good strategy to build up large and therefore powerful stacks. But I had to limit the growth for the sake of playability. Imagine a player having the option to make ten or more moves in series!

Focus (a.k.a. *Domination*), invented by the ingenious and unforgettable Sid Sackson, uses the following rule to limit the growth of stacks: A stack can be no larger than five pieces high; if required, pieces are taken from the bottom of the stack off the board. This way enemy pieces can be captured.

Accasta, on the other hand, comes with a very simple and straightforward rule to limit stack height: *Stacking is only allowed if there are not more than 3 pieces of the same color in the resulting stack.* It is important to note that this

obviously refers to landing on a friendly stack as well as capturing an enemy stack!

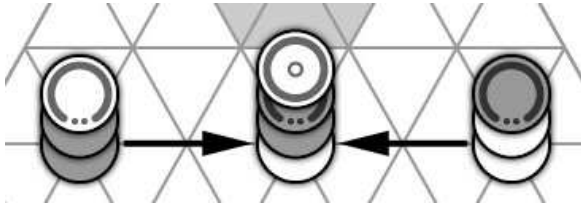


Fig. 7: White has to split his stack on the left to land on the white stack in the middle, as well as Black on the right, who cannot capture the middle stack without releasing at least one white Shield.

The 3-pieces rule has a drastic effect: A stack containing 3 captured pieces cannot be captured again; it becomes invulnerable, a “safe stack”. Safe stacks are the central tactical aspect of Accasta. It is important to keep in mind that a player can gain a safe stack rather quickly when leading one or even two enemy pieces.

Object of the Game

Players attempt to end up with at least 3 stacks of their own in the enemy’s castle to win the game of Accasta.

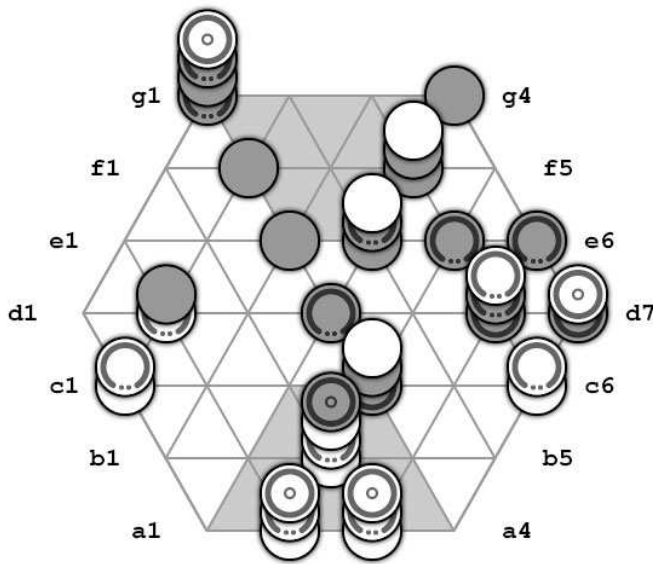


Fig. 8: White wins with his stacks on e4, f4, and g1.

A safe stack in the enemy’s castle is generally a big advantage: since it is invulnerable, it is a stable platform for others to enter. The only possible defense then is to block this enemy stack. But often a game is already lost in this situation.

Finally, there is one rule to add: releasing an enemy piece in one’s own castle is illegal. This is due to the following situations: First, a player could commit suicide this way. Second, a player could potentially achieve his own and his opponent’s victory condition in the same turn. I decided on the most painless solution, which was to forbid the *release at home*.

Conclusion

Accasta is a fast and suspenseful game. The distances on the board are short; multiple moves can change a position on a

large scale. A bad move can often be decisive. On the other hand, a player who appears to be playing a losing game can sometimes rally his forces. Together with the consistent rule set and the aesthetic aspect I was quite satisfied with the outcome of my stacking game project.

Notation

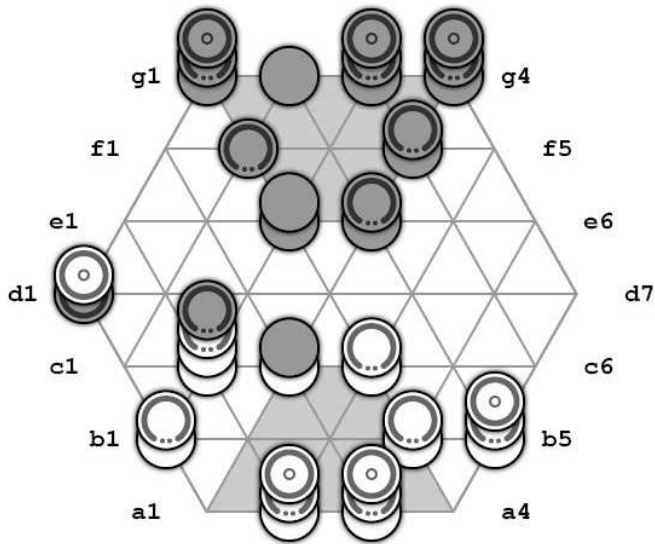
Shields, Horses, and Chariots are identified by the letters **S**, **H**, and **C**, respectively. Moves are indicated by “-” for moving to an empty space, “+” for landing on a friendly piece, and “x” for capturing. Notation of a complete move starts with the origin space, followed by a colon. Then the submoves follow, separated by commas. Each submove is written as “*piece(s) move-type target-space*”. One’s own pieces are written upper case; enemy (i.e. captured) pieces lower case.

Sample Game

White: Dieter Stein; **Black:** John Williams; played by email, January 2004.

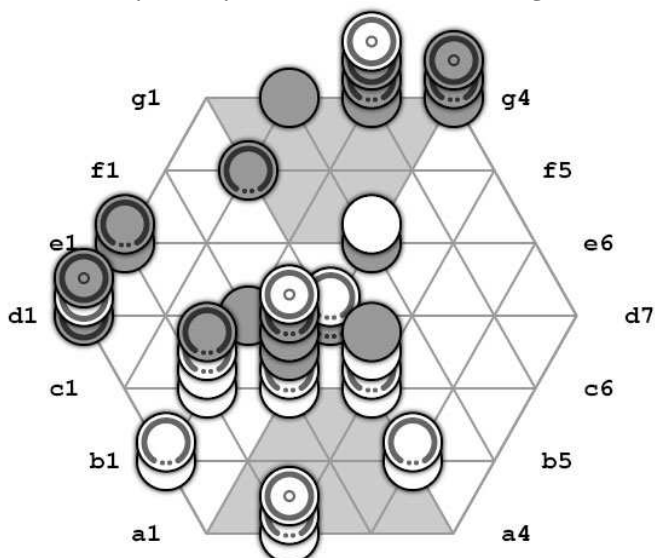
1. a1:C+b2,HS-c1; (An opening that requires covering c1 in a subsequent move.) **g2:C+f2,H+f3;** (Developing the pieces from the rear and also attacking c1.) **2. b2:CHS-c2;** (White does not want to lose tempo and therefore does not respond directly to the threat to c1. c2 now gives strong support for c1 and also seems to try entering Black’s castle at e3. Black now attempts to capture c1. But after f2:Cxc1,HS-e2 White could capture and block with c2:Cxe3,H-d2,Sxc1; but going after e3 would be foolhardy.) **f2:Cxc1,HS-e2;** (Capturing c1 seemed worthwhile, since after White recapturing on c1, e2 could gain a safe stack there and at the same time could enter White’s castle at c3.) **3. c2:Cxc1,H+c3?,S-d2;** (Recapture blocked with Shield on d2, but H+c3 is a mistake.) **e2:Hxc3,S-d3;** (White did not anticipate that S-d3 sufficiently supports the capture on c3. With d2:Sxd3 Black can gain a safe stack on d3 with c3:Hhsxd3, which is a strong position although it withdraws an already entered stack.) **4. c1:Cc+d2,HS-b1;** (A defensive move; White has to avoid c3: Never get in a stacking fight in your own castle! Black could gain a safe stack on b3 or c4, but that would destroy the bridge over d3.) **f3:H+e4,H-f2,S+e3;** (Additional support for d3. Black places another defender for c3 [H+e4], an attacker for d2 [H-f2], and e3 [after S+e3] can respond to a double capture from d2.) **5. d2:Cc-d1,Sxd3;** (Black could invade with e4:Hxc3,S-d4, which depends on the support on d3. b2 covers the capture on d3 and also the threat to g1 from d1, which is not very strong, because White would have to release a black Chariot.) **c3:Hhsxd3;** (Leaving White’s castle, but there is an option to return with d3:Hhss-c3,S+c3. That would give Black a safe stack with two of his pieces on top. One more [e.g. from e4:H+c3] and White cannot stop Black from splitting his pieces off and establishing a winning position.) **6. b3:H+c4,S-c3;** (Blocking Black’s major threat. Black cannot return to c3 with his stack on d3 without releasing a strong white stack there. Furthermore, White is attacking e3 again [from c4]. And finally, a3:CHS is activated now and supports c3 as well. However, b1 will be undefended if d1:Cxg1.) **d3:Hhss-c2,Sxc3;** (c3 is supported by e4, c2 is safe.) **7. a4:CHS-b5!** (White—being under attack—sees a chance to take the initiative again by

threatening e4, which is effective because from there Black planned to get his third piece for a win.)



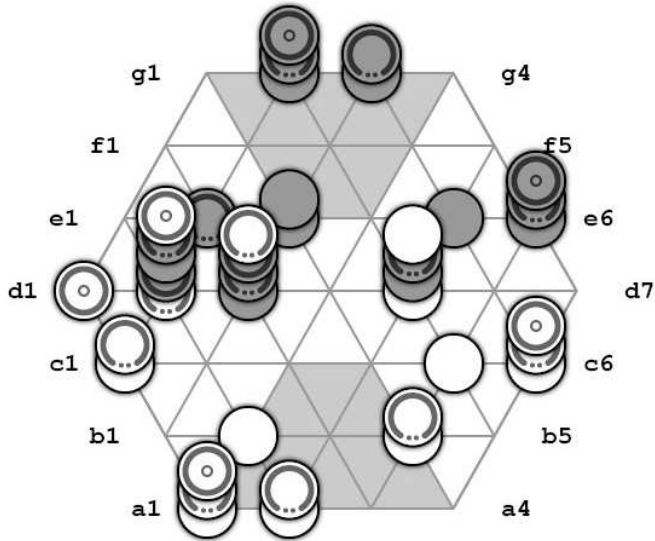
Position after 7. a4:CHS–b5

c3:Ssxc4; (Black ignores the threat and gains his second safe stack. This is where the race begins...) **8. b5:Cxe4,HS–d5;** (Again, Black would have to leave White's castle to capture d5 releasing a powerful white stack on c4. The Shields on e3 are out of reach.) **e3:S–d3,S–d4;** (Black continues to ignore White's attack since he thinks that the defenders on g3 and g4 are powerful enough and White would have to release a black piece on e4 anyway which would isolate his Chariot.) **9. a3:Cxd3,HS–c3;** (If d4:S+c4, then d1:Cxg1, which places the second white piece in Black's castle. If d4:Sxd3, then c3:H+e4,Sxd3; finally, if d4:Sxc3, then e4:Chsxc3.) **d4:Sxc3;** **10. e4:Chsxc3;** **f4:H–d4,S–e4;** (Trying to block White's stacks on c3 and d5.) **11. d5:Hxd4,Sxe4;** (Now the Black attackers on c2 and c4 are isolated.) **g1:Cxd1,HS–e1;** (Finally capturing d1, liberating his Chariot there and trying to regain the attacker's role.) **12. d3:Cxg3;** (White is only one step ahead now, which is enough to win. The best defense would be c4:Sshxd4, but then b1:Hxd1,S–c1, which would end with a safe stack for White on d1.) **Black resigns.**



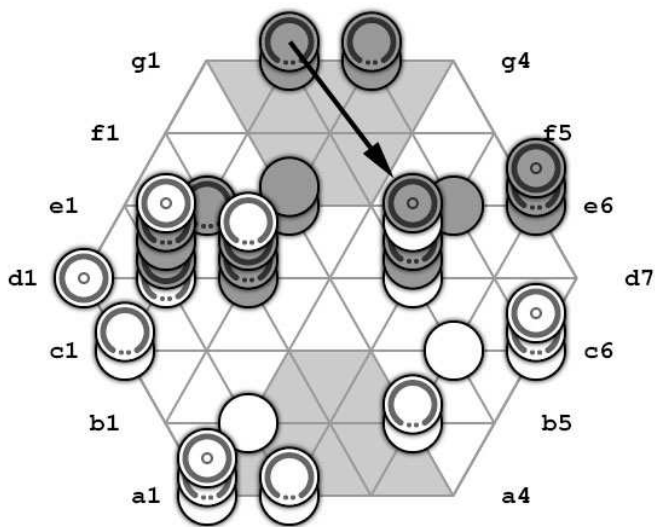
Final position

An Accasta Problem



Black to move. White seems to have a comfortable position. But his last move **c4:S×d5?** opens a path for Black to win.

Solution



g2:C×d5! threatens to win with **d5:Cs×a2,H-b3,Ss-c4**. But White cannot recapture, since c5 has to avoid **e6:CHS×b4**, which is a win for Black in the next turn. Also, d3 cannot help, since solely the Horse on top could capture and therefore is forced to release a black CHS stack at d3, which can easily enter the white castle establishing a winning position with **d3:C-a3,H-b3,S-c3**. Finally, blocking c4 does not help either, since Black can always gain a safe stack there with his stack on d5.