

# Blob Chess

## An Introduction and Analysis of a New Chess Variant

by Mel-o-rama

**The Concept:** Imagine if you will, two opposing blobs fighting to the death. They strategically approach each other, attacking and surrounding the other, until one - the loser - is finally immobilized. This is the idea behind Blob Chess.

**The Rules:** Game play is just like orthodox chess. You set up the pieces the same way. Each piece moves exactly as you would expect. Capturing, castling, en passant, pawn promotion, and checking (or mating) are still the same. However, in Blob Chess you must follow these two restrictions.

Restriction #1 (R#1) – You can move a piece only if it is adjacent (horizontally, vertically, or diagonally) to another one of YOUR pieces before you move it.

Restriction #2 (R#2) – The piece you move must land on a square that is adjacent (horizontally, vertically, or diagonally) to another one of YOUR pieces.

In Blob Chess, there are two ways to win: #1) Put your opponent in check such that he/she cannot get out of check (blob-mate); OR #2) Immobilize your opponent such that he/she cannot make any legal moves.

Checks (in the orthodox sense) are always valid, even when the checking piece would not be able to capture the opposing king under the restrictions listed above.

That's all there is to it. That's Blob Chess.

**Clarification of the Rules:** Here are some clarifying illustrations to demonstrate how the game works and to answer a few questions that have come up in the past.

The orthodox checkmate is always blob-mate, but not all blob-mates are orthodox checkmates. In Figure 1 below, white has just moved Ng5-e4+, blob-mating black. In orthodox chess, black could reply Kh7; but not in Blob Chess. Under R#2 above, the black king can only move to a square adjacent to another black piece (g7, f6, g5, or h5), but all four squares are attacked by white. Also, the bishop on e3 cannot intervene without violating R#1, as it is not adjacent to any other black piece. White wins!

In Figure 2, black has just immobilized white. White has two "lone" pieces (that is, not adjacent to any other pieces), which cannot move without violating R#1. The b and c pawns can't move because they're blocked. The h pawn can't move to h4 because of R#2; and the bishop can't go anywhere because of R#2. Black wins!

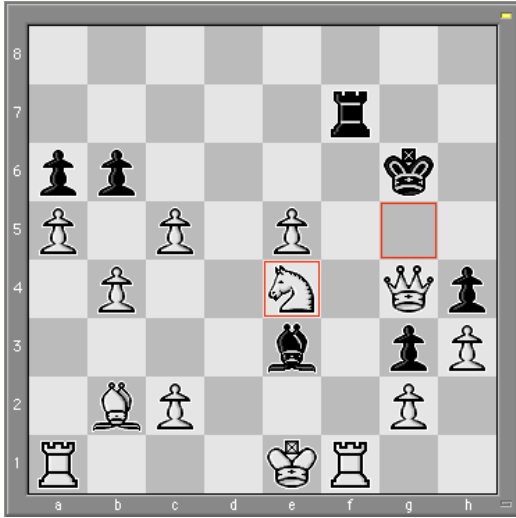


Figure 1. White Blob-mates Black.

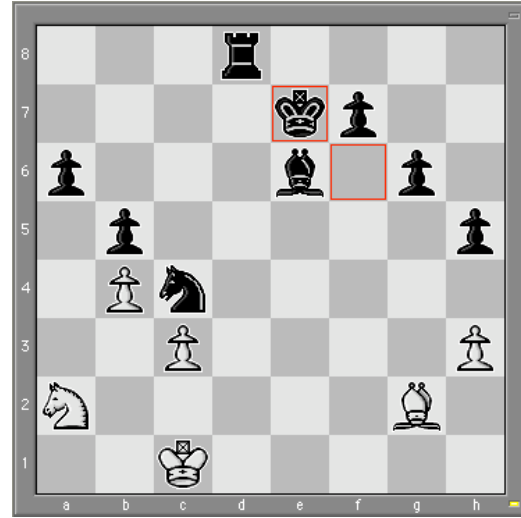


Figure 2. Black has Immobilized White.

Note that in Blob Chess, there are no stalemates; because stalemate = immobilization = a win! The only way to draw is for both players to agree that there can be no more progress made.

Consider the early position in Figure 3. The usual e4 is an illegal move, as the pawn doesn't land on a square adjacent to any other white pieces, violating R#2. White must make a different move, such as e3. Black, on the other hand, has made a legal move, Nc6. Note that the knight has seemingly moved through the blob, but this is okay. The blob is gelatinous! All that matters is that the knight is adjacent to any black piece before and after the move is made.

Figure 4 shows a queen moving between two distinct blobs. This is perfectly legal, as both R#1 and R#2 are satisfied. Thus, you can throw pieces of one blob to another blob long distance.

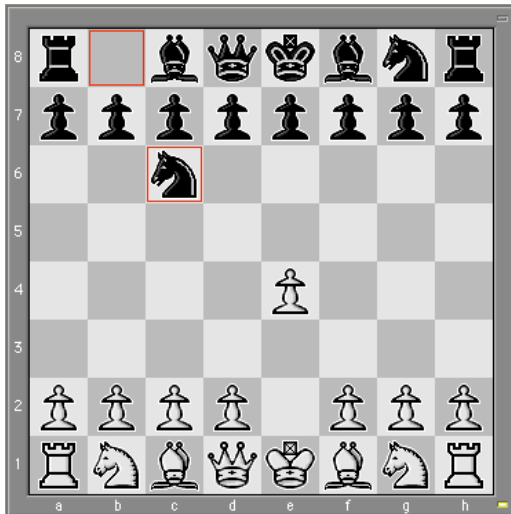


Figure 3. White = illegal; Black = legal.

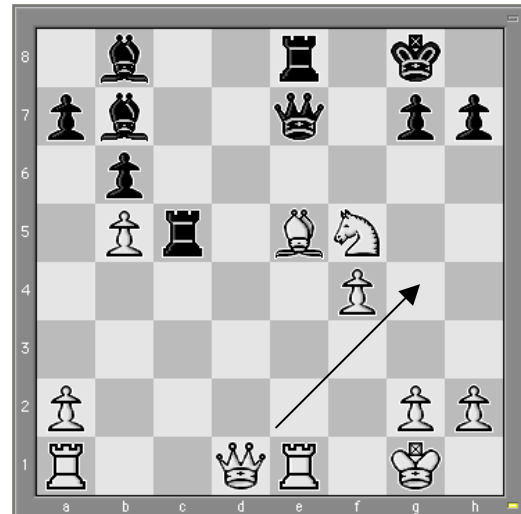


Figure 4. Qg4 = legal.

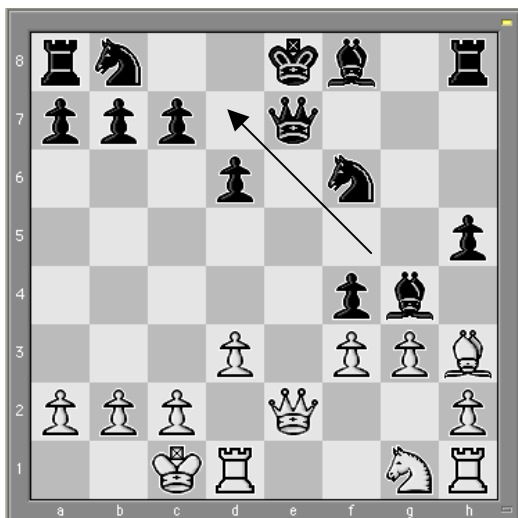


Figure 5. ... Bd7 strands two pawns.

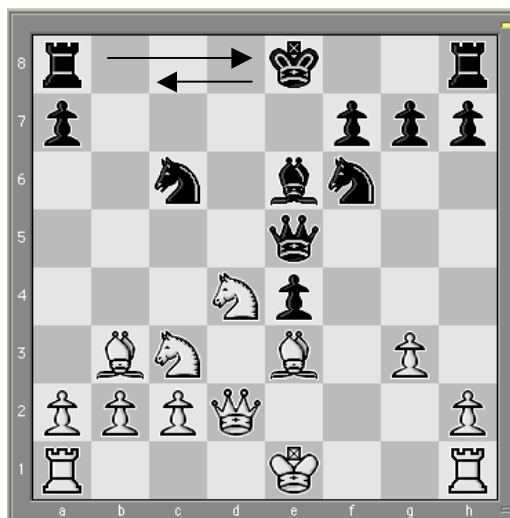


Figure 6. ... 0-0-0 creates a new blob.

What about the move in Figure 5? Even though the bishop leaves two pawns behind, it's perfectly legal. You only need to consider the one piece that's moving. Of course, this move immobilizes the two pawns left behind (at least temporarily).

Castling is an interesting situation, because no matter the starting position, the ending position will always have the rook next to the king. R#2 will be always satisfied. Thus, you can castle anytime you would be able to castle in orthodox chess, but only if BOTH the king and rook are adjacent to other pieces. Figure 6 shows that you can even create a new blob through castling. This is perfectly legal.

In summary, if you're in doubt whether or not a certain move is legal, just ask yourself if R#1 and R#2 are satisfied. If both restrictions are satisfied, then it's a legal move.

### **Blob Chess Strategy**

How does one win at Blob Chess? Which of the orthodox strategies apply in Blob Chess, and which ones don't? What are the point values of each piece in Blob Chess? What's the best opening? The game is too new to answer these questions definitively, but let's look into some of the nuances of the game.

#1) Immobilization is Key. If you isolate your opponent's pieces, they can't move, and you can walk all over them. Consider Figure 7 below. Rxe5 is the winning move. Before the capture, the knight and queen were mobile, but in one move they lose all mobility.

What if we add one more piece for black (Figure 8)? If you attempt to interrupt four pieces in a row, one of the opponent's pieces will likely be able to recapture. While you attempt to immobilize your opponent, make sure they really are immobilized and can't fight back.

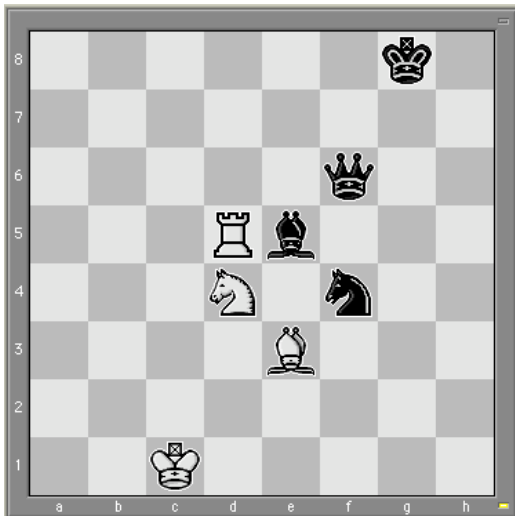


Figure 7. Immobilizing a 3-chain.  
Rxe5 wins.

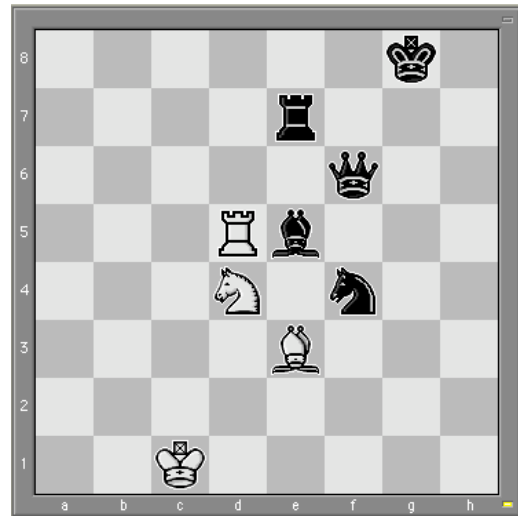


Figure 8. Trying to Immobilize a 4-chain.  
After Rxe5, black can recapture.

#2) Majority wins. There is strength in numbers. A 3-blob (a blob consisting of three pieces) can almost always overpower a 2-blob, as the 3-blob only has to capture one piece to win, while at the same time, the 2-blob must not only capture two pieces, but must do so in such a manner that it doesn't lose one of its own pieces. Extending this theory, a player who can maintain a 1-piece advantage will win (here, "piece" includes pawns). In particular, exchanging a rook for a minor and two pawns could actually grant you a large advantage.

#3) Be Careful – Not all Exchanges Work Out. It's easy to make mistakes in Blob Chess. In Figure 9, white accidentally played Qxd6, thinking that after ... Qxd6, he could answer with cxd6. But alas! That last move is illegal! You should be extra careful when planning a major sequence of exchanges – as you may not be able to make your last move (losing a piece).



Figure 9. Qxd6??

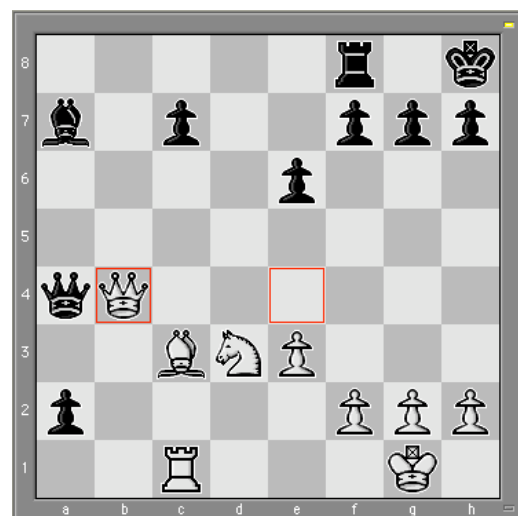


Figure 10. Can Black queen his pawn?

#4) Do Not Overextend Yourself. This is another trap that's easy to fall into. If you play too aggressively, you may find yourself stretched out too thin. Even though you may achieve your short-term objective, your opponent may attack you in the middle and immobilize most of your pieces. Figure 10 shows a hilarious example of this. Black really wants to queen his pawn, but what happens?

Black plays 1. ... Rb8. White moves 2. Qd4. Then comes 2. ... Rb1. Oooh! Now there's no way for White to stop the pawn from queening. He plays 3. Bb2 !. After 3. ... a1 = Q, White plays 4. Rxb1!! immobilizing the newly formed queen, and now black can only move his king and pawns. He'll most definitely lose the game.

After any aggressive attack, it's always a good idea to retreat, pull your pieces back together, reorganize, and then attack again.

#5) Rescue Isolated Pieces. This is a simple concept. Isolated pieces can't move, so they're vulnerable to attack. To rescue a piece, simply move another piece next to it, then retreat both pieces into a bigger blob.

#6) Surround and Smother Your Opponent. If you've ever played GO, you'll understand the concept of grabbing territory. In likewise manner, if you surround your opponent, they'll eventually be forced to move their pieces into danger, and you'll win. This is easier done in the endgame – especially if you have a 1 or 2-piece advantage. In the opening, I've found it effective to move the pawns ahead of your pieces, and advance as often as you can. But don't advance too far – so that your pawns don't lose the support of your pieces being nearby.

### Sample Endgame

Figure 11 begins an analysis from an actual endgame.

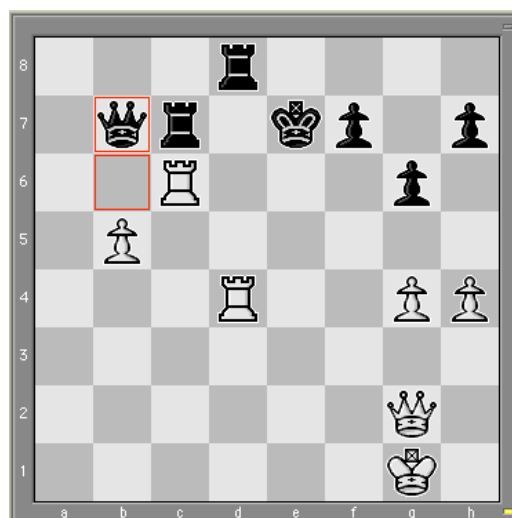


Figure 11a. White to play and win.

Look at this position. White is overextended. He has an isolated rook. The rest of his pieces are in three distinct 2-blobs. In contrast, black has all of his pieces together in one big 7-blob. Yet, White is in a better position if he plays correctly.

1. Kh2

A simple move. The king is heading to the safety of the two pawns (which will free up the queen). If 1 ... Rxc6, then 2. Qxc6 Rc8 3. Qc5+ will win the game faster for white.

1. ... Rc8

Now white must move the rook. At the same time, he'll rescue the isolated rook on d4.

2. Rc5 Qb6  
3. Re5 + !

A very important move. This cuts off the king from joining black's major piece 3-blob. When white finally gets his queen into play, the b-pawn will act as a 4th piece to over power black's 3-blob.

3. ... Kf8  
4. Kh3

With the king touching the two pawns, the queen is now free to roam.

4. ... Re8  
5. Qd5 Qb8  
6. Qc5 +

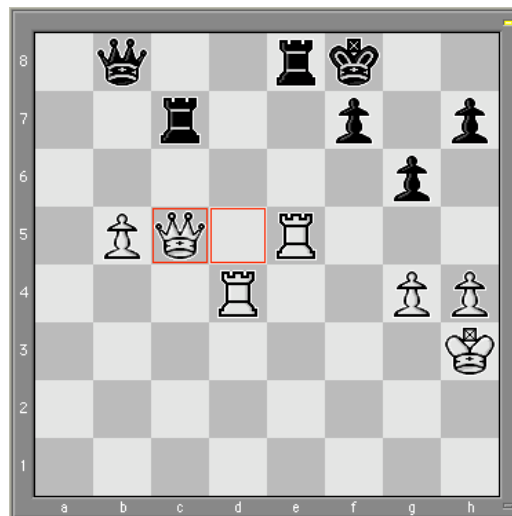


Figure 11b. Position after 6. Qc5 +

The 4-blob is formed and is ready to close in for the kill.

6. ...	Kg8
7. Rd6	

Pushing ahead, threatening a crushing Qxc7. In the meantime, one wonders if black could get something going on the king-side by using the pawns to expose and blob-mate the king. Alas, any attempt would be futile, as white could easily regroup and then take practically all of black's attacking pawns.

7. ...	Rb7
8. b6	Qc8

To stop Qc7. Would Rc8 have been better? Not really. Here, white plays a simple regrouping move.

9. Rd5	Re7
10. Qc6	

White is willing to sacrifice the queen with Qxb7 as white's remaining two rooks and pawn would overpower black's queen and rook!!

10. ...	Rb8
11. Rd7!	Re8
12. b7	resigns

That extra pawn is just too much for black to handle. There's no way for him to win. See for yourself – can black get his three pieces to wiggle away from white's fantastic four? Can he stop white's pawn from queening? Can he get something started on the king side?

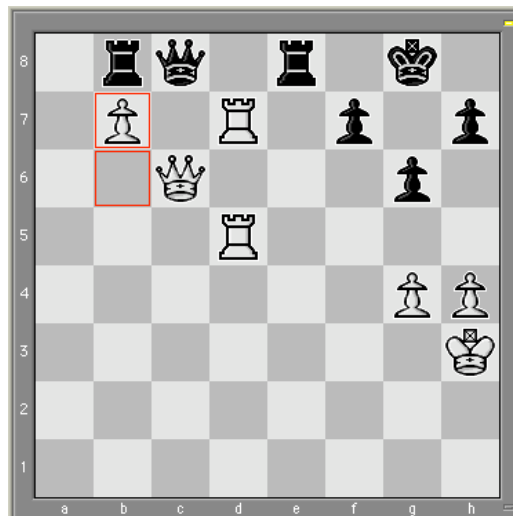


Figure 11c. Final Position. Black to play and lose!

Here's one possible continuation: 12. ... Qd8 13. Rc7 Qe7 14. Qd6 Qf6 15. g5 Re6 16. Rc8+ Kg7 17. Rxb8 Qf5+ 18. Rxf6 gxf5 19. Rc8 Re4 20. Rc5 ... etc. Black's best hope is to sneak in a blob-mate before white immobilizes him, but he just can't make it happen quick enough.

### **Test Your Knowledge**

Okay, do you think you have what it takes to win at Blob Chess? Give it a try. See if you can solve the following two puzzles.

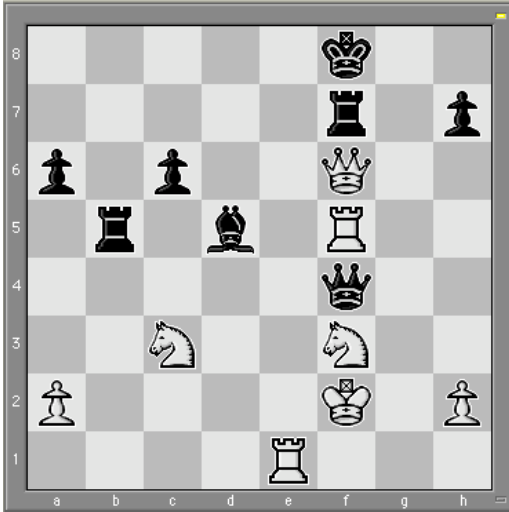


Figure 12. Black to play and win.



Figure 13. White to play and win.

Some other classic puzzles to consider: What is the shortest possible help-blob-mate from the starting position? What is the shortest possible help-immobilization (that is how many moves to immobilize your opponent without blob-mate)?

### **Blob Checkers**

Before taking on Blob Chess, consider playing this simpler variant: Blob Checkers. It's just like Blob Chess, only you use checkers instead of chess pieces. You start with 16 checkers in the place of chess pieces. Each checker moves and captures like a king in orthodox chess (one square in any direction). There are no checks, and you win only through immobilization.

This variant is easy to learn and easy to play, and it can help you learn how to master some of the Blob Chess strategies listed earlier. 3-blobs always beat 2-blobs. See for yourself on the chessboard (or is it checkerboard?). Place a 2-blob and an opposing 3-blob anywhere on the board, and you'll see that the 3-blob can back the 2-blob against the side of the board and win.

To win at blob checkers, all you have to do is achieve a one-checker advantage, exchange checkers, then win with a 3-blob vs. a 2-blob.

## **Blob Chess History**

I created Blob Checkers and Blob Chess in 2004 in response to a chess variant revival on an online forum called the Actuarial Outpost. I announced the games and held two Blob Chess tournaments.

The first began in 2004. It was an informal tournament where one player could challenge another one. The person with the highest winning ratio in the end won.

The second tournament began in 2006. It was a double elimination tournament. (It's actually still going on.) In the end, the last person standing will win.

This variant was well received on the actuarial forum. We had one debate over whether or not long-distance checks should be allowed when the checking piece couldn't capture the king due to blob-restrictions. At first I resigned myself to allow the long-distance checks so that we could have a tournament on any chess server (we would self-enforce the blob restrictions). But then, when put to the test, it turns out that game play is much more exciting when allowing the long-distance checks, so that has become an integral part of the rules.

Between the two tournaments, I had 30 games at my disposal to analyze and borrow examples from. Out of these 30, this is my favorite game:

1. g3 Nf6 2. f4 d6 3. Nf3 Nc6 4. e4 e5 5. Nc3 Be6 6. Bc4 d5 7. fxe5 Bc5 8. Bb3 Qd6 9. d4 Bxd4 10. Nxd4 Qxe5 11. Be3 dxe4 12. Qd2 O-O-O 13. O-O-O Rd6 14. Rhe1 Rhd8 15. Nf3 Bd5 16. Bf4 Qf5 17. h3 g5 18. Nxg5 Qxg5 19. g4 Qg6 20. h4 h5 21. g5 Ng4 22. Bc4 Be6 23. Rxe4 Qf5 24. a3 f6 25. Bd3 fxg5 26. Bxg5 Nce5 27. Rf4 Qf7 28. Ne4 Bf5 29. Kb1 Rd4 30. Rxf5 Ng6 31. Nf6 Nxf6 32. Rxf6 Qxf6 33. Bxg6 c5 34. Bxf6 1-0

**Acknowledgements:** Many thanks go to all the chess players who participated in my Blob Chess Tournaments on the Actuarial Outpost: Bama Gambler, rekrap, Car'a'carn, Darth Tater, Red Sox Fan, Utanapishtim, Cynical Realist, SirVLCIV, Werewolf, Hagbard Celine, and Ramanujan. Thanks also to Ole K. Christensen for his freeware Sigma Chess made for the Macintosh. And finally, thanks to Scheming Mind for keeping chess variants alive and for helping me pass the time enjoyably these past couple of years.