The History of the Boardgame

FENIX

Article by Fred Horn

Peter Vosters and Fred Horn playing FENIX at the ViaamsSpellenarchief in Brugge Belgium. Hendrik Cornelis takes an interesting look at the gameplay.
Last year in October at Essen, the German firm HUCH! at last launched my game FENIX after three years of negotiation and test-playing at their side, but also because of internal policies of which games should be first published.

When HUCH! took an option on my game back in 2017, they also licensed the series games of Kris Burm (GIPF Project) which got preference to be published first. But for me, it wasn’t really that very long of a “wait” because the game had originated a long time ago when I was still young and at the dawn of my game-authors’ career. In fact, I am really proud this game finally reached the market and with such a wonderful design.

But the story of how this game was developed and why I think it’s my best abstract/strategic game will be explained in relaying its history. The game FENIX did exist, but was named differently, more than 45 years ago. I had it recorded §July 1975 by the (then existing but now ceased) Foundation SEBA under the name STRIKE. (Editor: see accompanying article on page 16)

The Convenient Opportunity to Invent a Game

In 1974, I was employed at the housing administration of the University of Amsterdam. During our lunchbreak, while my colleagues ate their lunch, they also held a game competition. Mostly CHESS or DAMMEN (Continental CHECKERS) was played, but the CHESS players did not like to play DAM and vice versa the DAM players did not want to play CHESS.

To cool tembers down, when on the verge of wanting to split up and organize their own competition, I said, “There is no need to quarrel! I will invent another game as interesting as both of these two so we can keep on playing together.”

It just so happened I had already been thinking for near a year about a game mechanism for an abstract game in which the “higher” pieces could be removed out of other pieces on the board after being captured. This of course was a nice idea but to get from the initial idea to a real solution within the boundaries of a game proved to be not so easy. Questions arose like: What should the size of the board be? How many game pieces were needed? How was the game to be made interesting and with an in-build consistency? And above all, how to shape the rules for a game that could be played in a not-too-long timespan?

After much “trial and error” and play-testing with my game loving friends, a 9 x 9 square board with the use of 28 playing discs per player proved to be the best option for an interesting game. I provided a few games for my colleagues by drawing the 9 x 9 playing grid on a piece of cardboard (the game board) and for the playing discs I was lucky to find them on the Waterlooplein (the famous flea-market in Amsterdam) in some inexpensive boxes with Damstenen (Checker discs), perfect for the game pieces!

After explaining the rules and distributing the game everybody became enthusiastic and from that moment on only STRIKE was played at the office during lunchtime.

Next Episode

For some 20 years thereafter the game was stored in my files and every once in a while I took out the test-version when interested players asked to play STRIKE on our “game nights.” But I could not have been more surprised when some 25 years later in early 2000 I stumbled upon a former colleague from the UvA who, after saying hello to each other, pointed his finger at my chest and said: “Do you remember that game of yours, STRIKE? We still have a competition with the game and we continue to play it!”

I was flabbergasted to hear that. It sure said something about the longevity and durability of the game! But for sure there was even more praise. During the 1990s I was introduced to the famous game inventor Alex Randolph at a Board Games Studies (BGS) Colloquium. I had brought my game STRIKE along with me and showed it to Alex. He immediately took an interest in the game, and above all, the principle of remaking the higher pieces (a real innovation was his analysis). We exchanged addresses and I sent him one of my test versions.

In a return letter Alex proposed another name for the game. He believed it deserved a “better” name and his suggestion was Phoenix after the mythological bird rising out of its own ashes. When the German firm HUCH! some three years ago, showed interest in the game and because of their policy to start a series of abstract games, I immediately proposed Alex’s suggestion of Phoenix, in this way honoring him, instead of its original name of STRIKE.

The company agreed on the name as they thought it a better commercial name, but only when written in the more “international” way: FENIX.

All in all, it took three years to release the game at the Essen Fair in 2019 (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMySXT575-A) as a “Neuheit” (New product). The publishing of Kris Burm’s GIPF series got preference in the years before. Also, the firm’s test panel found the game very interesting but, in some way, a bit complicated. Thus, they asked me to develop a “junior” or a “simpler” variant so players could start with that version to learn the mechanism and the tactics of the “normal” game.

By reducing the board to 8 x 7 squares and the number of discs per player to 21 a less complicated and faster game appeared possible. In the play-testing of this variant, it was easier but at the same time players did have to use slightly different tactics! >>
Both versions are now in the box of the published game. Before HUCH! took the option on the game it was given as a Christmas gift back in 2005 for the members of a volunteers organization where I was served as Chairman of the Board.

One hundred cardboard game boxes with wooden game materials inside (for three of my games: STRIKE, FIANCO, and RENPAARDEN) were manufactured by Gerhards Spiel & Design in its usual wonderful execution. For that order, my friend Ludwig Gerhards, the director of the firm, gave me a more luxurious game set with iron pieces as a “thank you” gift. (Shown above)

In that same year (2005) the game principle was also used for an offer (done by the small firm Nova Carta with which I had an association with) for a series of games for the television firm TALPA. On a board, inspired by their logo, I had developed a simple version of STRIKE. However, in the end it was “not to be.” Everything was canceled by TALPA.

And now, 45 years after its conception, the game is on the market in a really beautiful execution.

If you think you would like the game, order it, which will make me happy in many ways!

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5. To continue, Red starts by moving a Soldier, a Councilor, or his King.
   a. Soldiers move orthogonally one step to an adjacent square.
   b. Councilors move any distance orthogonally, like a chess rook.
   c. The King moves one step to any surrounding square, like a chess king.

6. Capture is compulsory if possible. A Soldier or King captures by jumping over an enemy piece occupying a square to which it can legally move, and landing on the square immediately beyond it in the same direction, provided that the landing square is vacant. A Councilor captures in the same way but may land on any successive vacant square in line of travel beyond the captured piece. If the capturing piece can then make another capture, it must, and it must continue doing so until all possible consecutive captures have been made. An enemy piece can only be jumped once in a single turn. If it is reached a second time it forms a block and ends the turn. At the end of a capturing turn all captured pieces must be removed from the board before the next player moves.

7. If more than one capture is possible you must choose that which captures the greatest number of pieces, counting a King as three, a Councilor as two, and a Soldier as one. If two possible capturing moves offer an equal number of pieces, you may freely choose between them.

8. If one or more of your Councilors is captured in one turn you may use your next turn to create just one Councilor (not more) from two adjacent soldiers anywhere on the board. However, you may not also move in the same turn. If you do move, instead of creating another Councilor, then the right to create one is lost.

9. If your King is captured you must, if possible, use your next turn to create another King by placing a Soldier on top of an adjacent Councilor.
Some Comments about the Game FENIX

All further comments on strategy concern the game being played on the larger 9 x 9 board because that is the "original" game. The smaller board was developed at the request of the publisher and I play-tested that version of the game many times with other game-buffs. Our opinion was the game's strategy was not significantly different. The attacking of the opponent seemed to begin immediately and thus the game progressed to the later phase much quicker than on the larger board.

So, from now on, I will only make statements concerning the "original" game!

In the Rules to the published game, the first phase (see 4. above) is as follows:

When it's your turn, take any one of your game pieces and place it on any of any corner square or any square of your own choice, with the own starting formation. At the end of the phase ("Preparing for battle", both players have also placed their 59 Soldiers (9 x 9 game) or

Here the word adjacent is missing when describing the higher tokens/game pieces. A 'fault' made by the publisher, but how does one deal with this 'incorrect' rule?

In my discussion with the publisher after receiving the games in hand, we agreed that changes were not an option, so I returned to my test-players and we tried it this way. The assessment was unanimous in that one could very well start the game this way but it generated a different strategy, certainly in the opening phase of the game, by forming the higher game pieces from not adjacent soldiers.

In the original game it is a 'killer' to use pieces from the 'frontline' to make a General or a King. Now it is easy to take one out of the frontline and use it in the 'crowd of soldiers' to make that higher piece.

Also very different is the fact that one of the strategy axioms of the first phase (as I wanted them when inventing the game) should be the compulsory creation of empty squares within the players starting the formation of their army. With this "new" rule it is possible to create a 'connected' organized army without having empty squares within the troupe. I can only mention this difference, as I am not mathematically savvy enough to analyze the differences properly.

N.B. This other (wrong) rule does have more impact when playing on the smaller board as we found out when playing testing that version.

Although I prefer the original way of creating the higher pieces, one would have to follow the rules as they are written with the published game rules. I do not have any proof, but I believe it is tactically better to have some 'empty squares' or 'holes' within your army. This section covers the first phase of the game.

In the second phase of the game, players begin to arrange their army in such a way that a maximum defense is organized. Also some pieces are positioned in a way that an easy attack is possible.

The two corners, where the army is not located, are strong places to position a soldier. This creation of a tactically strong place with only one soldier can also be done "in the open" anywhere on the board when the Generals are still behind the troupe and have little space to maneuver.

To come 'in play' and to have room for maneuvering, the Generals need open lines behind the troupe. Thus, the first and the second row (line) of squares next to the edge of the board both function as defense lines as well as creating that space that must be used to get the Generals 'in play.' Of course, holding your own 'occupied' corner is an easy way to defend your territory. Most first-time players use this square for positioning their King, but in reality, it makes your King (one of the strongest pieces on the board) nearly powerless.

A good defense necessitates well-built fortifications. In this game, a square of four adjacent soldiers on the board is a stronghold capable of good anticipation when the opponent begins an attack. Some of these fortifications made next to each other give a well built defensive line! When positioning Generals behind these fortifications, plans can then be made for attacking the opponent's forces.

N.B. Be aware of the fact that the game "looks like" some of the "endgames" which are well known in Chess and International Draughts (Game with a King, 2 Towers and pawns / Game with 3 Dames and some disc). Players have the intention to bring all of their pieces in front of one of the edges of the board; this action generates a quick self-destruction!

In the third, (middle) phase of the game, players must try to attack the opponent's forces in such a way that for themselves, after the 'capture' moves, a better strategic territorial position has been realized on the board.

Because capturing is compulsory, one of the real strategic features of this game is forcing the opponent to make capture(s) which end up giving you an overall advantage. This can be achieved when you can, by answering your opponent's capture, take more soldiers, along with putting the opponent's Generals in such a position they become vulnerable.

The aim for both players is, of course, getting into a position where multiple captures in one move is possible. This is accomplished most of the time by offering one of your own pieces that forces the opponent to make a move not in his strategic concept.

But keep an eye out because in that same move other captures are possible, the one that generates the highest number of captured 'original pieces' (a soldier) goes first.

Capturing a General, or more Generals in one 'capture move' can result in kind of an advantage, but the other player can lose momentum. But be careful: capturing opponent's Generals gives him/her the possibility to make a new one in his next move.

N.B. The published rules concerning this much important point are now correct!!

This is the real new feature in the game. When losing one or more Generals the player is allowed to make one new one in his turn next to one of two orthogonal adjacent soldiers on the board. It is in some way comparable to "parachuting" a piece in the Japanese chess game SHOGI in a turn.

When the player has enough soldiers on the board, a tactically strategic turn is possible by bringing your "strength" to an opponent's less favorable place. But there is still the option not to create a new General when an attractive multiple capture move is possible.

In this phase, players try to spread out their opponent's pieces all across the board. This makes it much easier to use one's Generals for captures. Also, when there is more space on the board the use of the King for capturing purposes can be the outset of winning the game. But always try to keep a General with an adjacent soldier on hand for making a new King when you must 'offer' your own King.

The fourth (end) phase is how to capture the opponent's King! I cannot help you with that. You are on your own now and the author wishes you successful play with FENIX!

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