

The Game of Go

Introduction

Go players are ranked according to their ability. When the two players have the same rank, they play an even game, otherwise they normally play a handicap game.

This is how you play an even game of Go.

1. **Equipment.** You start with an empty board, which is a 19x19 grid, and each player starts with a sufficient number of pieces, called 'stones'. Traditionally, one player has 180 black stones, and the other player has 180 white stones; we can refer to the players by the colour of their stones.
2. **Game.** Black moves first, then White and Black move alternately until neither player wishes to make any more moves, which is normally when the players make two consecutive passes.
3. **Move.** When it is your turn to move, you normally place one of your stones on an empty intersection of the grid, and then remove any prisoners – any of the other player's stones which you have captured. However, you may instead choose to pass and not place a stone on the board.
4. **Capture.** A stone, or a group of stones which are all the same colour and joined by grid lines, can only remain on the board if it has an adjacent empty intersection: you capture one or more stones or groups belonging to the other player when you fill in their last remaining empty intersection.
5. **Restriction.** When it is your turn to move, you can play on almost any empty intersection, with just two restrictions: at the end of your move, you cannot leave any of your groups with no adjacent empty intersections (so you cannot 'commit suicide'); and you cannot repeat a previous position on the board.
6. **Score.** At the end of the game, any stones which can be captured are removed as prisoners – if you can't agree on this, then simply keep playing. Your score is then the number of empty intersections on the board completely surrounded by your stones, plus the prisoners which you have captured from the other player, plus any adjustment agreed before the start of the game; the player with the highest score wins.
7. **Adjustment.** White is often given a few extra points (7½ points is common) as compensation for playing second.

You play a handicap game like an even game, with two small changes.

1. **Handicap.** The difference in ranks is the handicap. With a 1 point handicap, Black plays first; with a greater handicap, Black starts with this number of stones on the board, placed in certain traditional positions, and then White makes the first move.
2. **Adjustment.** Any adjustment to the score is agreed before the start of the game: very often, no adjustment is made in a handicap game, but sometimes it is set at ½ point to avoid the possibility of a draw.

Playing and Talking About Go

While Go is very common across Asia, we learned Go from the Japanese, so the terms we use are the Japanese ones.

The board is called a 'goban'. On the goban are nine points marked with a dot: they are called 'hoshi' (Japanese for 'star') points, and indicate where the handicap stones are placed.

There are two sets of handicap ranks: the weaker ranks, called 'kyu'; and the stronger ranks, called 'dan'. You can think of the kyu as being negative numbers, so 1 kyu is the strongest kyu, 2 kyu is one stone weaker, and so on. There is no weakest rank, but it is unusual for a beginner to be ranked as weaker than 20 kyu. After 1 kyu, you move up to 1 dan (also called 'shodan'), then 2 dan and so on.

The rule about not being allowed to repeat a board position is called 'ko', Japanese for 'eternity': if you were allowed to repeat positions, the game could in theory keep going for eternity. It is not uncommon for both players to want to play in the same place, and sometimes this results in a 'ko fight', but this is not something you need to worry about when learning how to play – the other player will point it out when the rule becomes relevant.

Stones of the same colour and directly joined by grid lines are called a 'group'. Stones and groups which cannot be captured are said to 'live' or 'be alive'; conversely, stones and groups of stones which can be captured are said to be 'dead'. If neither is the case, they are said to be 'unsettled'. A move which ensures a group can be captured is said to 'kill' it; an empty intersection next to or inside a group is a 'life'; an empty space within a group is an 'eye'.

When playing, if you make a move which fills in the last-but-one life of any of the other player's stones, giving you the possibility of capturing on your next move, it is traditional and polite to say "Atari," roughly the Go equivalent of "Check" in Chess.

When playing, it is not acceptable to place a stone but then change your mind and take it away; it is also impolite to 'hover' over the board: decide where you want to move, and then make the move.

It is traditional – and practical – to hold your stone between your first and middle fingers before placing it on the board. It is also traditional to place your first move on the side of the board closest to the other player.

If you are clearly losing and see no way to recover, it is perfectly acceptable to resign.

The adjustment to the score given to White for playing second is called the 'komi'.

Games are, in general, either friendly or formal. A friendly game is played as described above. A formal game is usually played as part of some competition or 'tournament', so the result is recorded and there are a few other differences. Most obviously, the time allowed for each player is limited, usually by the use of a 'Chess Clock'; and there will be other tournament rules covering details such as when to start the game if the other player is missing, and when to ask for a referee's help.

Strategy

The primary aim when playing Go is to surround territory: you generally end the game with significantly more territory than prisoners. Your score depends both on the prisoners you capture and on the amount of territory you surround at the end of the game – and territory depends on having stones which, at the end of the game, cannot be captured.

Empty intersections which are joined by grid lines and entirely surrounded by stones of the same colour are called an ‘eye’. A group with only one eye can generally be captured if the other player can fill in the eye. But a group with two eyes (or more) is generally alive, as the other player cannot fill in both eyes – unless they can create a living group (with two eyes) within the eye space they are filling.

However, a group with one eye can be made alive if you are able to divide that eye into two distinct parts. Some eye shapes can always be divided in this way, some can be divided by adding a single stone, and some can only be divided into two through the placement of two stones – which means that these shapes can be used as ‘ko threats’. Recognising shapes of each type is one of the early skills you learn.

The aim of surrounding territory is achieved by the strategy of forming live groups, or collections of stones which can be turned into live groups whatever the other player chooses to do, and you try to surround more territory than the other player.

A basic challenge in playing Go is that you want to place your stones closer together, because that makes it easier to turn them into live groups; but you also want to place your stones further apart, because that makes it easier to surround more territory. You are constantly balancing security against territorial profit.

It is easiest to create a live group in the corner, because you only need to protect two sides; the next easiest place to create a live group is on the side of the board, because you only need to protect three sides; the hardest place to create a live group is in the centre of the board, because you can be attacked on all four sides.

As a result, the focus of play often moves from the corners to the sides and only then to the centre of the board. But sometimes large areas of the board remain almost empty for a long time because the players invest too much in the battle for control of a corner or a side and find they cannot afford to play elsewhere (or ‘tenuki’).

Another strategy is to play in a way which forces the other player to respond when they would much prefer to play somewhere else. When you do this, you are said to have the initiative (or ‘sente’); the opposite is to play somewhere which allows the other player to choose where they want to play next: this is called ‘gote’.

As you gain experience, you will come to recognise familiar patterns of good play (called ‘joseki’), and learn how to respond when the other player does not follow the joseki – how to ‘punish’ the poor play.

At the End

You can stop playing when you can't gain any more points; you should stop playing when any move would lose you points. When you want to stop, confirm with the other player which groups are alive, and which are dead.

If you agree, then pass; if you disagree, then keep on playing until you do agree, and then pass. You normally fill the empty intersections which are not territory (called 'dame') at this point, but it's not essential. Remove the dead stones as prisoners, and count the scores.

Counting

There are two basic systems of counting: they arrive at the same result, but use a slightly different route. The 'Japanese system', described above, is most commonly used in the UK. With this system you add to your territory the prisoners you have captured – although in practice you generally use the prisoners you have captured to fill in the other player's territory: the winning margin is the same, but you don't need to do so much counting.

Alternatively, you can use the 'Chinese system', where you add to your territory the stones you have on the board. Obviously, this involves more counting, but it is considered to be simpler to understand, and you can determine the score simply by looking at the board, because you ignore the prisoners. In most cases, this will produce the same winning margin as the Japanese system as long as both players have made the same number of moves.

With the Japanese system, you can ignore the dame, but with the Chinese system you will fill in all the dame because each one is worth a point. Of course, whichever system is used, you need to add the agreed komi to White's score.

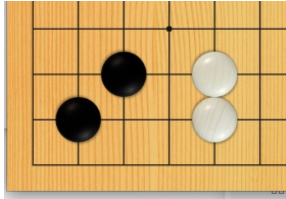
Tournament rules are often used to ensure that the outcome will be the same whichever counting system is used: this generally involves giving the other player a prisoner each time you pass, and (when White passed first at the end of the game) ending the game with an additional final pass by White, to ensure that both players have made the same number of moves. White moves last because Black always moves first, whether by playing the first stone or placing the handicap stones.

The main complication when counting is rare; it arises when some stones appear to be dead – they don't have two eyes – but neither player can gain any advantage in attempting to capture them, so they are actually alive: this situation is called a 'seki'. The Chinese system applies as normal in a seki, but when using the Japanese system for counting, no points are counted in the seki. This situation is unlikely to arise while you are learning the game, but see the example below; it might be fun and instructional to find a few other positions with a seki and work out what is happening.

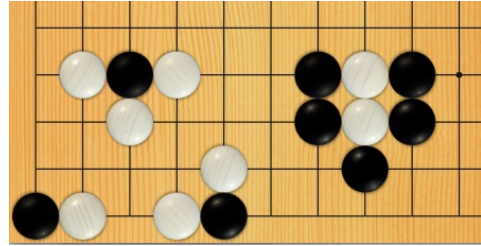
Much more information about the game of Go, and where and how to play it, can be found on the *British Go Association* website: <https://www.britgo.org/>.

Examples

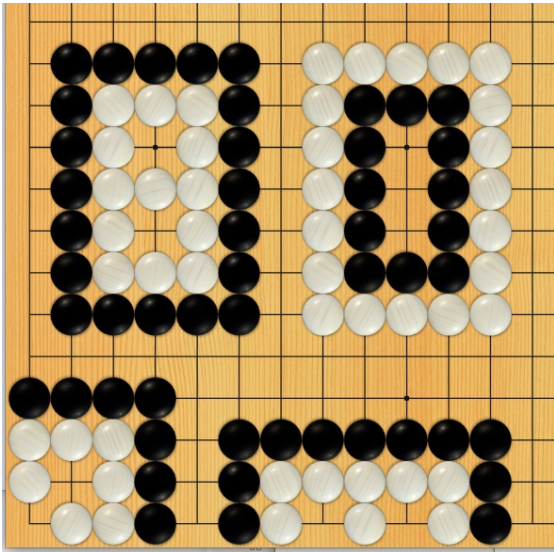
Two Black stones
and one White group



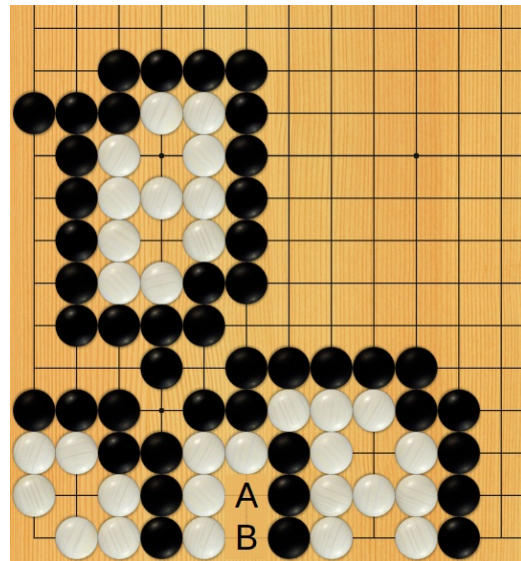
Three Black stones and
one White group in atari



Three live White groups
and one unsettled Black group



Three more live White groups, three live
Black groups, and one seki (neither player
will choose to play at either A or B)



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