

A game of Go

by Chris Rose

Two people sit down opposite each other to play a game. Between them is a large wooden board. The board is rectangular in shape and it has black lines drawn on it in. There are 19 horizontal lines and 19 vertical lines, making 361 small black squares on the brown wooden board. Each player has some stones. The man has 180 white stones, and the woman has 181 black stones. All the stones are round and smooth. The white ones are made from the shells of clams; the black ones are made of slate. They have the stones in wooden bowls next to the board. When it is time to start playing, they slowly take the lids off the bowls.

One of the players is an old man. He is now 89 years old. He has spent all of his life playing this game, which is called Go. There are many other names for this game in the many parts of the world where it is played, but Go is the most common. The man has been playing Go since he was a small child. His father showed him how to place the big heavy stones on the board when he was three years old. He has never stopped playing since then. He is now the most famous player of Go in the world. People from all over the world call him "the Master". People come from all over the world to play against him. Some people want to try and beat him; most people only want to watch and learn from him. The Master thinks that the game of Go is an art, and he thinks that he is an artist. He does not know how many games of Go he has played in his life, but thinks that even if he has played many thousands of games, then he has still not made anything near the number of possible combinations there are for this game. This game is very very simple, and very very complicated.

The two players place the stones they take from their opponent in the upturned lid of the wooden bowls. It will continue like this until one player can take no more stones. Then they will start to play again. They will play many games, until they eventually know who is the winner.

The other person is a young woman. The young woman has only been playing Go for three years. This is not a very long time. It takes years to become an expert in this simple but complicated game. Before this, the woman was an expert at

playing computer games. She was a computer games champion, and she won competitions in all types of computer games. She played in tournaments in Los Angeles, Tokyo and Munich, as well as many online tournaments, with people from all over the world. When she thought she could not win any more computer games, she looked for other games to play. She enjoyed playing poker, she became an expert at chess, but nothing captured her imagination like the simplicity of placing black or white stones on a simple wooden board. She studied hard and practiced a lot, the way she always did. She played to win. She thought of the game as a science. She calculated all the possible variations, using a computer to analyse techniques and strategies. She became a human computer when she played. She played Go the same way she had played computer games – by becoming a machine herself.



Both players are dedicated. Both players are obsessed. Both players think about nothing else but the game of Go from the moment they wake up until the moment they sleep, and even then they do not stop thinking about Go, as they have dreams about great games, in which they always win. Neither is married, neither has ever been in love with anything except the game of Go.

"When I was your age, it would have been impossible for us to play together" he says to her. They speak very little during the game.

"Why?" she asks.

"Young lady, you have not studied the history of this game. In the past, women did not play Go."

There is silence again. She might be irritated by

the old man's comment, but now she is playing Go, and so she feels no emotions. Her mind is not listening to the man, but calculating all the possible ways of placing her next stone. The old man, on the other hand, tries to listen to the woman very carefully. He watches her and studies her, looks at the movements of her hands and of her face. This is not only because he thinks that she is very beautiful, it is also because by understanding a person he knows how they will play. When he understands how a person moves, he understands their character. And when he understands their character, he understands their game. This has always helped him to win.

By placing the stones on the board, they both try to invade each other's space, each other's territory. White stones invade a black-bordered area, black stones try to fill a white-bordered area. At the end of each game, the board is a map of two countries, one black and one white. The board is a map of their minds. Black and white mix together. Each player is learning something from the other.

He wins the first game, and the second, and the third. The woman's face shows no emotion, and the man is confused. He agrees to continue playing. She wins the next game, and the man is shocked. This has never happened to him before. He rarely loses, and he has never lost to a woman.

The two players place their stones on the board using only their fingers, not their thumbs. It is necessary to think very carefully about where to put the stones, and to hold them properly. A long time passes between each move. They do not place the stones in the squares, this is not a game like chess or draughts, but on the corners where the lines meet.

The old man worries about the way the young woman is playing the game. He does not recognise her style, her strategy. He can't read her face; he does not understand her. Sometimes, he thinks that he does not understand the world around him any longer. "The way I think about the game" says the woman, "is that it is a series of steps for getting what I want." Again, the old man is surprised.

For him, the game is a way of life, life itself, and not a model of life. He worries about the dignity of the game, the elegance of the board. She worries about getting points.

"There is no more beauty any longer. Everything is science and rules. Everything is about winning. Nothing is about playing" he says.

"What sense does a game have if you don't win?"

"The playing is the sense" replies the man.

People have been playing this game for 3000 years. Sometimes, the two players think, this game will last 3000 years. The man feels like he has been playing Go for 3000 years.

"This game was invented by generals. They used it to work out strategies for war. They used the stones to map out positions" he tells her.

"And then they decided that it was better to have a game than have a war."

"Are we at war now?" she asks. He wants to say no, but does not know how to reply.

"There is another story" says the young woman.

"Go began when witches threw stones to tell fortunes."

"Will this game tell our fortune?"

"It is better to play a game than try to tell the future" she says, and he is surprised again. This time he is surprised by how wise her words are.

"The future is a game that has already started.

The future is waiting to see who the winner is" he says. "Every move you make determines what will happen in the future."

They play Go for six months. At the end of six months, they know that their final game is close. The final game will decide who is the winner, and who the loser.

"A game is a metaphor for life."

"No, life is a metaphor for a game."

They cannot agree; but it is not necessary. They both look at the Go board in silence. It looks like a work of art, and also a scientific document. It is a map, a map of the game they played, and a map of their thoughts.

"Change is a necessary part of life" thinks the man.

"Playing is as important as winning" thinks the woman.

They start to play their final game.