February 20. 2016

Review: The Many Faces of Go Version 12
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Before I begin reviewing The Many faces of Go, for those of you who don't know what Go is, let me explain what it is and describe it: it's a board game- -the oldest board game in the world, perhaps the most popular, with an enormous literature, the most difficult to play well, and in the opinion of many people, the best game in the world.

Although the game originated in China, today it is best known in Japan, where it is called Go (in Chinese, it's called Weiqi- -pronounced something like way-chee). In the western world, it is much less popular than in the east, but it is popular enough that in most major western cities, there is a Go club–even here in Tucson.

Despite the complexity of the game and the difficulty of playing it well, the rules are extremely simple. Since it's likely that many of the readers here don't know the game, here's a quick description of the basic rules:

It's played on a board (called a Go ban) ruled with 19 lines in each direction- -horizontally and vertically. The pieces (fairly flat, about the size of a quarter) are called stones (in Japanese, Go ishi), and the game begins with an empty board- -no stones on it. Each player has a supply of stones- -one player has black stones, the other white stones. Unlike games such as chess and checkers, the go stones are never moved; each turn consists of the player placing a stone on the board, at an intersection of two lines, where it stays forever, unless it is captured. And unlike chess and checkers, moving is not compulsory; if a player doesn't want to place a stone, he may pass. When both players no longer have valuable moves to make and pass, the game is over.

And also unlike chess and winners, the winner is not the player who makes something like checkmate happen. At the end of the game, after both players pass, the score for each player is tallied, and the player with the most points is the winner.

So how are points gotten? There are two ways. The most important way is by having a group of your color stones surrounding an empty intersection or group of empty intersections. The number of points each player gets is equal to the number of surrounded intersections in all the groups of intersections he has surrounded.

Secondarily, points can also be gotten by surrounding a stone or group of stones of the opposite color. When that happens, the surrounded stones are removed from the board, and each one counts as a point for the player who removed them.

That's basically all there is to it. To really understand the above, you need a quick demonstration of what consists of surrounding and what consists of a group, but with a board and stones, that would be easy to show you and for you to understand. There are also another couple of rules, but they are minor compared to what I described above. If we were to sit down together with a board

and stones, I could should show you all the rules, even the minor ones, and make them clear in under five minutes. Unlike chess or similar games, you don't have to remember the different kinds of pieces and how each one moves. Once you've spent that five minutes, you know how to play the game, and are unlikely to forget it.

It sounds simple, doesn't it? Yes, it's very simple from the standpoint of rules, but it's extremely complex from the standpoint of playing well and winning. Let me explain why.

First, with such a large board (19x19, although shorter games can be, and sometimes are, played on a smaller board), the number of possible moves you can make when it's your turn, and the number of possible games there can be is extremely large- -much larger than in chess.

Second, chess is often called a war game, but compared to Go, it's just a game with a single battle. Because in Go, it's easiest to make points in the corners (where two sides of the board can help you do the surrounding), separate battles begin in each corner, then move to the sides, and finally to the center. That means that Go is truly a war game, with several simultaneous battles going on at once.

Third, each player has to act as general of his army. When it's your turn, even if you know the best move to make in each of the corner battles, you can place only one stone in this turn and you have to decide which of the four battles you should deploy the extra forces to.

And even in a single corner battle, you may be able to find several good moves, but deciding which of the good moves is the best move is not so easy. And if one player finds good moves and his opponent finds best moves, guess who wins the game?

Go players have rankings, as chess players do, but unlike chess, where the rankings are numerical ratings (Magnus Carlsen, the current world chess champion is rated 2844, and a strong club player might be rated around 2000), Go rankings are by title. The titles are of two types- - dan (the stronger type) and kyu. By the way, the same titles- -dan and kyu- -are used in karate; black belts are dans, the other belts are kyus.

There are several different dan titles and several different kyu titles; a number is used to differentiate between them. A first dan is the weakest dan; a ninth dan is strongest. Oddly, the numbers for kyus go in the opposite direction; first kyu is stronger than second kyu and so on. I never played Go as much as I played chess, so I was never a very good Go player; back in the days when I was playing fairly actively, I was around ninth kyu, much weaker than my chess rating, which was around 2000.

I was always a much better chess player than a Go player, but I know several people who were around my strength in chess, who decided that Go was a much better game, and gave up chess for Go, and achieved a rank of first or second dan. Were they right that Go is the better game? Yes, I think so, even though I never did what they did.

Over the years, there have been several programs that played Go. Until fairly recently they all played poorly; I could easily beat the best of them. But things have changed dramatically; there

are now several that play extremely well, and can easily beat me and even some of the best players in world. The Many Faces of Go is one of them.

When you play against the program, you can choose the size of the board, anywhere from 19x19, the standard size for a full game, down to 7x7 if you want to play a simpler, shorter game. You also get to tell it what your rank is, and what you want the computer's rank to be, up to first dan (or 3rd dan if you want to play on a 9x9 board).

If you want the computer to play well, but are not a good player but you still want to give yourself a chance to win, you can set a handicap. Go has two kinds of handicap- -the first is having the weaker player start with some number of stones already on the board (in prescribed positions), the second is called komi and that's starting the game with some number of points. You can set either handicap or both. Handicaps are often used in Go to roughly equalize the opportunity to win between two players of unequal strength. So, for example, if I were a 3rd kyu player and you were 7th kyu, we would subtract the number of my rank (3) from the number of yours (7) and get 4, the number of stones you would start out on the board with. By the way, in a game without a handicap, black (the weaker player always gets black) always starts first, but in a handicapped game, black starts out with stones on the board, and that's treated as if he made some number of moves already, so white (the stronger player) makes the first move.

As I pointed out above, unlike chess, Go has four openings, one in each corner, going on simultaneously. Go openings are called joseki. But like chess, there are many standard joseki variations, and a good player has many of these memorized. So both good chess players and good Go players don't look at their opponents first, second, third, etc. move and say to themselves "what do I do I do now? I have no clue." Good chess players have memorized many opening variations and already know what their best choice is, or else know that there are several good choices in that position, and perhaps even know which of the equally good choices is their preference. The same is true of joseki in Go. A good player knows what good choices he has in the opening and knows how to choose between them.

But remember that there are four openings going on at once. What is much more difficult than finding the best move in each joseki is knowing which of the four joseki it's most import to play in each time it's your turn. So The Many Faces of Go comes with an excellent joseki tutor.

And closely related to that is the relationship between a move in one joseki and the other two joseki on the two adjacent corners of the board. That relationship, called fuseki, is important to know and is used to help decide which of the several good joseki variations is your best choice. A good understanding of fuseki is the province of strong Go players. The many Faces of Go also comes with a fuseki tutor.

Also included are a number of tactical Go problems. There are three types, easy, medium, and hard, and these are excellent practice for those learning the game, and even for those who already play but want to improve their game

The many faces of Go also come with hundreds of excellent viewable games by professional Go players, many with comments on some of the moves that were played. There are also many other

games that are available for download on the internet in a format that The Many Faces of Go will recognize and let you view them. Just as in chess, it is extremely valuable to study the games of strong players, and learn from them.

You can also log onto an internet web site for Go, and have the computer play against challengers from all over the world.

Many Faces of Go comes with a standard help dialog, which is fairly complete, and it also comes with a Go tutorial, which much more completely explains the rules than I did very briefly above. Beside the rules, it also explains the basics of strategy and tactics, which I didn't describe at all above.

Many Faces of Go is highly recommended for those who already play Go and want to practice against a strong opponent, or view professional games, or study joseki and fuseki, and improve their game. It's also highly recommended for those who don't play, but want the opportunity to learn the game; it's excellent both for playing and as an educational tool

Many Faces of Go
http://www.smart-games.com/manyfaces.html
$89.95