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History and Theory of Games

### Wei Chi (Go)

As a young girl living in Hong Kong, my mother played a game known as Wei Chi or “Go.” The game was developed in China over 2000 years ago and was originally played by Chinese elite. Since then it has spread throughout Asian culture and is played by millions. The game can be played by anyone but the strategic complexity of the game lends itself to those that play similarly complex games such as chess.

Go is played on a tabletop using a large lined 19x19 board rectangular board by two people on opposing sides placing black and white stones on the intersections of the grid. There are 181 black stones and 180 white stones held in two bowls. The use of bowls to keep the stones from clacking around in a player’s hand is done out of respect. Typically players are very quiet and focus solely on the game. It is the Chinese “thinking man’s” game and players are expected to play it in such a way.

To begin, black always goes first. On their turn, each player places a single stone on an intersection with the goal of covering more of the board than their opponent, which is accomplished by creating chains of stones and pursuing the removal of the opponent’s stones. Connecting two or more stones either by connecting them vertically or horizontally on the intersections creates a chain. In order to remove the opponent’s stones, they must be blocked in such a way that they can no longer link stones onto the individual stone or chain being taken. Similar to chess in which players cannot put their king into a suicide position,

players cannot place a stone in Go that would prevent them from expanding on a chain. The final rule of Go is the “ko rule” which prevents repeated movements, meaning that no play can be made that would return the opponent to their last position on the board. So if they were to place a stone down that could be captured, you must wait a turn to do so. This essentially prevents cheap moves from happening. While the operational rules seem very mundane, the implicit rules make it very complex. An example of one is that when a group of stones is surrounded by an opponent’s chain it cannot be captured if it has two open spaces that are not connected and are fully enclosed by a chain within the group. Also, when playing on a board that has 361 spaces can get confusing very quickly.

The game is over once either side can make no more moves and the winner is determined by area scoring. Basically, the amount of intersections either occupied by a player’s stones or surrounded by their stones is counted as a point.

It is extremely hard to critique a game that has been play tested for thousands of years. Based on my understanding of the game, I can find no moves that “break” the game or moves that can be considered “cheap.” I can only come to the conclusion that it is without any flaws. The best tactics are the same as those in chess or checkers, the ones that either distract or lead your opponent away from the big move. While the ko rule prevents players from taking stones recently placed, by threatening stones elsewhere on the board the opponents attention can be averted away from where the saving their stones before the ko rule wears off. Also the best rule of thumb is to always try and keep your stones chained otherwise they are at greater risk of being captured. The bigger the chain, the harder it is to be removed.

As stated earlier, the game may have simple rules but the complexity that those rules allow is what makes this game stand out. In my opinion it trumps chess because it creates much more dynamic game-play with far fewer rules. Also it is extremely hard, mainly because of the “epic” scope of the board, to “solve” the game. Whereas in chess it is easy enough to make calculations for each space, in Go with its 361-space board, it becomes insanely hard to win by math, at least for a human, meaning much more strategizing is required. Also, while it may be satisfying to take a queen in chess, to make thirty of your opponent’s stones disappear from the board is just far superior in terms of gratification.

Millions of people have been playing Go for thousands of years. Very few games can even come close to scratching that. Traditionally, playing of the game defined Chinese gentleman and it continues to be a game for the intellectual. Huge Go tournaments are commonplace in Japan and Korea, spurring many to aspire to become professional Go players. Oddly though, the game has not spread so well in Western culture. Divided in our cultures, divided in our games I suppose; we have our chess, they have their Go.

#### Works Cited:

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<<http://www.tradgames.org.uk/games/wei-chi.htm>>.