

How to play Go

Go is played with respect to its Oriental origins. This extends as far as the use of Japanese words for certain types of play, and even in the manner in which Go stones are handled.

In the picture below, you can see how to hold a stone before placing it on the board. Notice that two fingers are used to grip the stone. This is the conventional way of holding a stone – you remove the lower finger as you snap the stone onto the board. Some players make a strong sound when playing their stones in order to impose themselves on their opponent.



Whilst most club Go boards (called Gobans) are around 2 cm deep, a top quality Goban is a much more impressive looking beast :



The best boards in Japan are made from a rare wood called Kaya, chosen for the resonant sound a stone makes when striking the surface. Each player has a set of stones in a Go bowl.

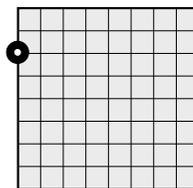
The exact number is not important – just enough stones to complete a game. If you are supple enough, you can sit on a cushion on the floor in front of the board as the Japanese often do.

The player with the Black stones starts the game by playing a stone on any of the empty intersections. White then plays a stone on another empty intersection. They continue taking turns to place stones on empty intersections. As they proceed, the board gradually fills with stones.

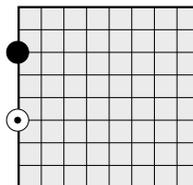
I will show the basic rules of how to play Go using a 9 by 9 beginners board just to keep things nice and simple. In keeping with convention, I will show just the playing lines – not the border around the board. Note that there is nothing special about the thickness of the outer lines.

What do I mean when I say that Go is a territorial game? Imagine that the board is an island with sea all around. The 81 intersections – we call them points – is the starting territory. To own a part of this territory, you must build a wall of stones that surround that part.

Let's see how two beginners might play. Here is Black's first move :

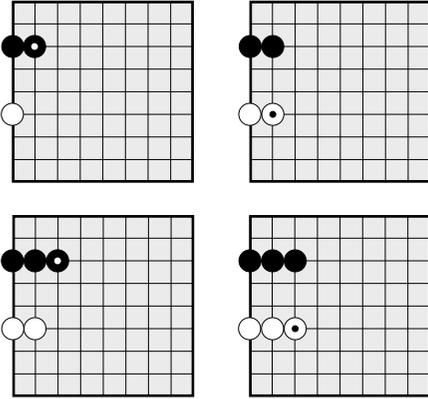


And now White plays his first stone :

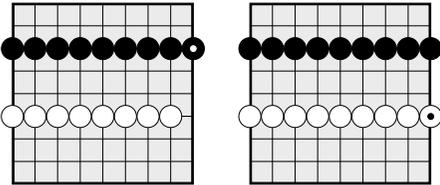


I put a dot in the middle of the last stone placed on the board. Most Go books put the move number inside the stone instead so that they can put more than one move on a diagram. I feel that one move per diagram is much easier to understand.

The game continues as below :

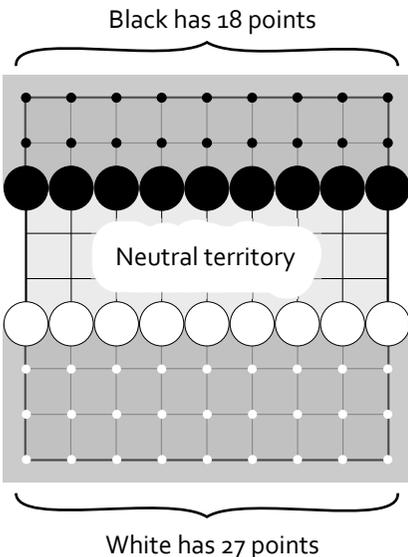


As you can probably work out yourself, the two players are making lines across the board. Let's get to the end of their moves :



Black and White have both now built walls that surround areas of the board. These areas are called territories.

Let's have a look at them :



The 18 points at the top are surrounded by the 'sea' at the left, top and right – there is no need for Black to play on these outside points to secure the area. His wall of stones fully encloses the upper side of the board – there are no gaps in his wall. Likewise, White fully encloses the lower side of the board.

Notice that the central 18 points of the board are deemed neutral territory – neither Black nor White exclusively surrounds them.

Note that this is highly contrived play – this is not how players normally play. But I show it to illustrate basic concepts.

A game of Chess is decided when the Black or White king is captured, or when both are safe and a draw is declared. In a game of Go, the end of the game is more subtle :

Finishing a game

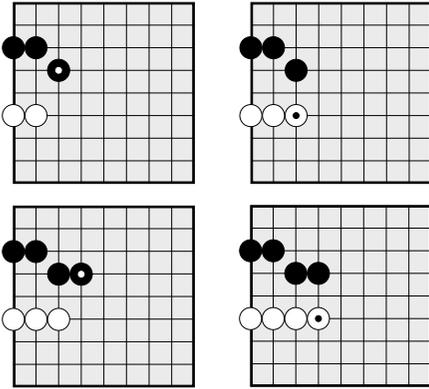
i A game of Go ends when both players agree there are no more moves to make. Or if a player resigns.

This may seem a little strange, and is certainly less decisive than a win in Chess. But how do you know when to stop?

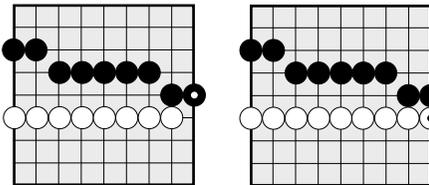
In the example game, if both players agree that there are no more moves to make, then White wins by 9 points (27-18). Black may not be happy to agree, since it means of course that he has lost. But it is too late for Black to do anything now.

So let's go back and restart the game with the knowledge that this route failed for Black. Remember that I am showing how two beginners *might* play. By revealing the shortcomings in their play I will lead you to the right way to play Go.

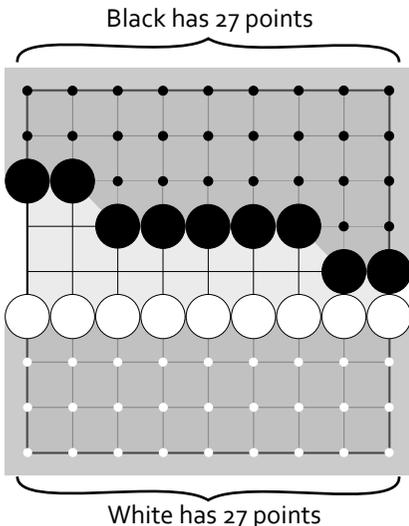
Rather than continuing to mark out a small area on the upper side, Black instead decides with his 3rd move to increase his stake of the board :



Black has so far increased his upper area by 2 points compared to the previous game. I'll let White continue as before for the purposes of the point I am making here. Black continues to make a larger territory than before :



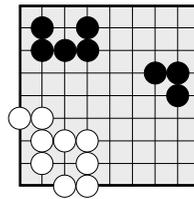
After this sequence of moves, let's see the territories each player has surrounded :



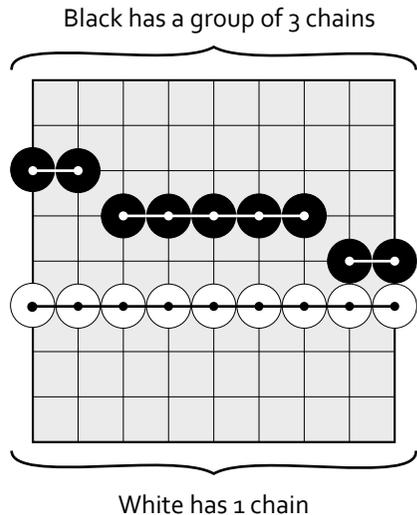
Black's change of strategy has drawn him level on points with White.

You may be wondering why I am saying that Black has surrounded the 27 marked Black points, since there are visible gaps in his wall. But first some terminology.

When stones of one colour lie adjacent to each other horizontally or vertically, they form a single unit. I'll call them **chains**. They do not have to form straight lines, but can be in all sorts of shapes, like the 3 chains in this diagram :



Let's see the chains on the current board:



You can now see that it is helpful that the stones are played on the intersections – the lines show connections between stones.

There are no lines connecting the three Black chains together. These 3 chains form what is called a **group**.

However, White cannot squeeze between these gaps. As it stands, Black's wall is said to properly enclose the upper side.

If both players agreed that there were no more moves to make, this game would be a draw.

Jigo

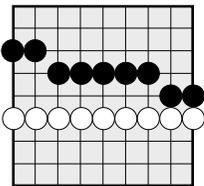
i The traditional (Japanese) term used to describe a draw is 'jigo' (pronounced jee-go).

Draws are quite rare in Go, especially with games between beginners. Black is happy to get a draw now, rather than lose. So he chooses to pass rather than play another stone.

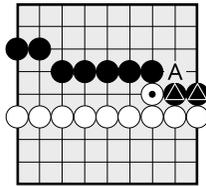
Passing

i A player may 'pass' instead of playing a stone.

However, White believes that he can still win the game. So he will play a stone rather than pass. Even though he cannot place a stone directly between any of the Black chains, he can still try to disrupt his wall :

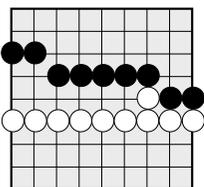


Black passes

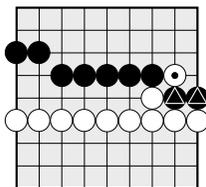


White looks to 'cut' at A

White's move now threatens to disrupt the Black wall, by cutting at A and thereby separating the marked Black chain from his five stone chain. If Black ignores this threat:

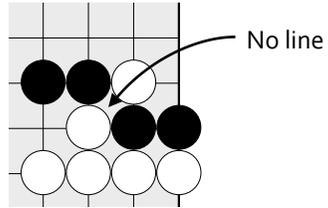


Black passes again



White cuts

If we look more closely at this situation :



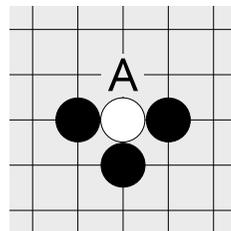
There is no line connecting Black's chains together – this means these chains have been disconnected. White has disrupted the Black wall.

Now the upper side is shared between Black and White – it is not entirely enclosed by a wall of Black stones. So Black has temporarily lost all of his territory!

Until now, the play I have shown has been peaceful. Each stone played remains on the board. However, in most games of Go, some stones get captured and removed from the board.

Before I return to the position we have found ourselves in, I will show a simple example of a capture.

On the board below, the White stone is surrounded on 3 sides by the Black stones :

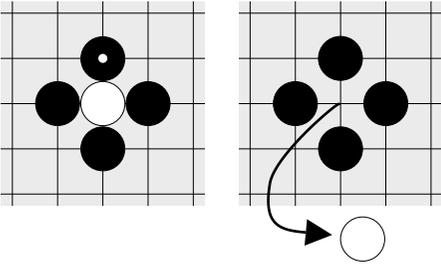


The only place where it is not surrounded is at A. Black does not have to surround the White stone diagonally as well. Only horizontally and vertically.

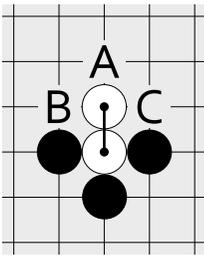
The lines help to show this.

This point A is described as a 'liberty' – literally a point of freedom.

Black can capture the stone, and remove it from the board by playing at A, taking away its last liberty :



White could have avoided or delayed capture by defending where Black played :



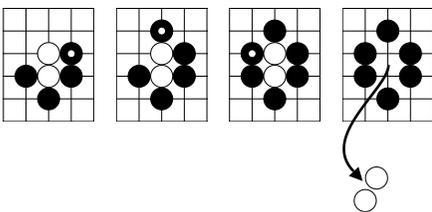
By adding one stone, White creates a 2 stone chain with 3 liberties at A, B and C. If Black wants to capture this White chain, he requires 3 moves now!

This brings us to a very important rule in Go:

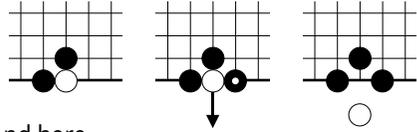
Capture

i A stone or a chain of stones that has had its last liberty removed is captured and removed from the board.

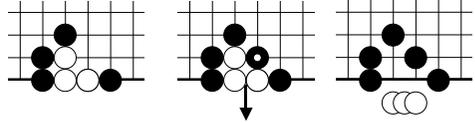
Here we see how Black can capture the White group, but note that White does not defend. In a real game, White would defend against capture if these stones were important :



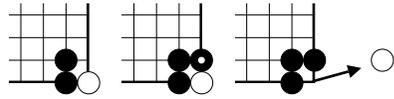
Whilst these captures have been in the centre of the board, capture is also allowed on the edge of the board such as here :



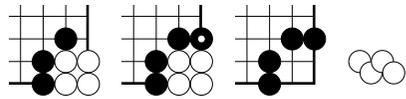
And here :



And capture can also take place in the corner of the board, as here :

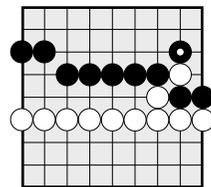


And here :

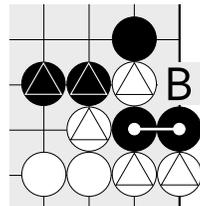


Notice in all these cases that the White stones have no liberties around the outside of the board – it is enough for Black to surround as he has.

Returning to the game, Black starts to seal up his upper side again :



If we look at the situation closely again :

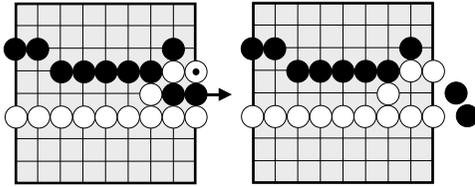


The two stone Black chain is almost completely surrounded by the marked White stones. The only place where it is not surrounded is at B.

Remember that there is no diagonal connection between this Black chain and the marked Black stones.

This point B is Black's final liberty – there are no points to the right of the Black chain (the board is, as it were, surrounded by the sea).

White can play on this last liberty of the 2 stone Black chain, and thereby capture:



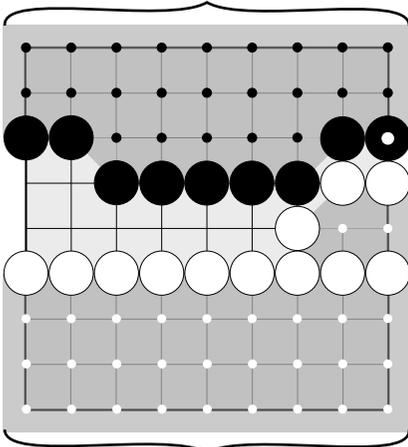
After White surrounds the two Black stones, they are removed from the board as prisoners. And yes, captured stones are of value :

Prisoners

i Captured stones add to the territory count for a player.

Note also that White gets the bonus of 2 extra points of territory where the Black stones had been sitting. This represents a net gain of 4 points by White. And Black still has to seal his upper side :

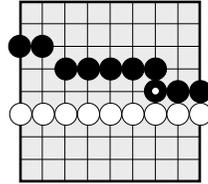
Black has 23 points



White has 29 points

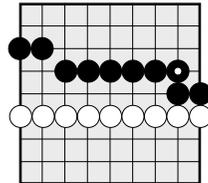
White has 6 more points of territory than Black **and** he has 2 captured stones. So White wins comfortably by 8 points.

If we go back to the start of this sequence we can see that Black could have avoided this problem by defending rather than passing :

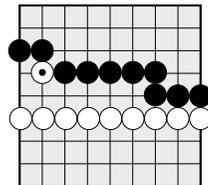


By defending here, he prevents White from cutting his wall. Because he played this defence in the neutral zone, he still held onto his 27 points of territory. He draws with White, who has 27 points of territory and no captured stones.

If he played as below instead, he would have reduced his own territory by one point and lost the game:



It is White's move now. He is not happy with a draw, and still wants to try to win. He may try cutting the two stones on the left, much as we saw before on the right :



But this is a mistake by White. Unlike on the right, his wall of stones is one line further away. This means it is less able to help White carry out this tactical play.