

Complementing, Not Competing

An Ethnographic Study of the Internet and American Go
Communities

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Culture, Knowledge, and Creativity

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Participant Confidentiality

In the course of this research, we strove to protect the identities of our interviewees. All names used in this document are pseudonyms. Some personal details have also been changed, though never those that we felt were important for understanding the context of an interviewee's stories.

Introduction

Civic engagement in this country is falling, and has been falling for a generation or more.¹ Putnam finds found this to be true around the country, across demographic groups, and getting worse with each new generation. Involvement in clubs and other community organizations plays a crucial role in the generation and maintenance of social capital – the networks of relationships that bind communities together, and grease the wheels of human interaction. We agree with both his thesis that civic engagement is in a free-fall, and that this is a trend that needs to be reversed.

Since Tocqueville’s nineteenth century survey of American democracy civic engagement through clubs and organizations has been identified as crucial wells of social capital.² They provide spaces independent of work and home for people to meet around a common interest. Often, these organizations have helped build social capital across social boundaries, bringing together people who might not otherwise know each other. Since Tocqueville’s work, technology has fundamentally changed how people communicate and organize and so the question of how these clubs and organizations use their new technological tools is an important one.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam sees the Internet as something of a wildcard; there is both promise and peril in its rapid adoption. To the extent that the Internet is like television (a major factor in civic decline, according to Putnam), he believed it could be part of the problem. Yet in his latest book, *Better Together*, Putnam points out that “as of 2002, 62.5 percent of all Americans send e-mail or instant messages.”³ It is promising that the most popular uses of the Internet are features that connect people, not those that are solitary. The Internet has the potential help old acquaintances maintain longer-distance ties and, hopefully, to build new relationships.

While the conversation about whether purely online communities, the Internet’s analogs to PTAs, Bowling Leagues, or VFW, exist is valuable⁴, we investigate the Internet’s role from another perspective. Pre-existing community organizations, many of which were

¹ Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Society*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

² Putnam, Robert D. January 1995. “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy*. pgs 65-78.

³ Putnam, Robert D., Lewis Feldstein, and Donald J Cohen. September 2003. *Better Together: Restoring American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, page 226.

⁴ Rheingold, Howard. 2000. *The Virtual Community*. Cambridge: MIT Press. Also, Putnam, 2003.

created between 1900 and 1940,⁵ have been slowly adopting Internet technologies. Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous now have websites, mailing lists, and forums. How do capabilities offered by the Internet affect these organizations? Do Internet offerings compete with the physical meetings of the group or complement the groups' missions?

To attempt to answer these questions, we studied Go players, both online and offline, in the United States. To better understand the offline context of Go, we focused our efforts on one particular club, the Massachusetts Go Association. Using a range of ethnographic methods, we describe the ways in which the growth of online play has been a major boon to the Go community in general, helping regular players sustain interest in the game, bringing new players, and making the game accessible for players who are geographically separated.

We feel that there are some specific reasons why Go players are important to study. Unlike many organizations, whose memberships are in decline, the American Go Association, Go's US national governing body, has over 2100 members, more than at any previous point in its history. More than three times their membership subscribes to their weekly email journal. Membership has more than doubled since 1985, the first year for which the AGA reports membership statistics. While these numbers are low compared to those of most national organizations, their rise in the face of the trends discussed by Putnam is significant. No small part of this success has been with young players, a demographic that Putnam identifies as being particularly unengaged.

As occasional Go players ourselves we knew enough about the community, and the role technology plays in it, to pique our interest. We were specifically curious as to whether the Internet had helped or hindered the AGA in maintaining its membership growth. Go is just one of many communities that have embraced Internet tools, and we were hopeful that our work would reveal some themes about how this can affect the number and engagement of members of such organizations.

To understand the ways in which the Internet might interact with the Go Community, we looked to previous work by Wellman, Boase, and Chen. They propose three ways in which the Internet can affect communities.

- “The Internet weakens community: The immersive nature of the Internet may be so compelling that Internet users neglect their family, friends, relatives and neighbors

⁵ Putnam 2000, page 388.

- “The Internet enhances community: People mostly use the Internet to maintain contact with existing community members, either by adding Internet contact on to telephone and face-to-face contact or by shifting their means of communication to the Internet.
- “The Internet transforms community: The Internet’s connectivity better enables people to develop far-flung communities of shared interest, possibly at the expense of local contact.”⁶

In the communities Wellman and colleagues studied, transformation was the most typical result. Based on the evidence that the AGA continued to enjoy membership growth, and on the Internet’s ability to connect dispersed Go players and Go organizations, we hypothesized that the Internet plays a transforming role in the Go community and that understanding this role would contribute to the discussion of the Internet’s role in generating social capital.

We found that the Internet enhances the Go community more than it transforms it. Players use online Go to supplement their offline Go experience; the Internet made it easier for them to keep playing the game, even when they could not make time to play offline. This plays a role in growing the American Go community. While enhancement is the primary interaction, there is some transformation as well. Online play has brought Go to people who do not have access to physical clubs. This separate group of online players might represent a transformed community, but in the end the majority players who start playing online still gravitate towards offline clubs. The Internet contributes to the success and growth of the Go community in a way that ultimately strengthens the physical clubs.

Background and Context

To build a foundation for our findings, we start by presenting background information about the game of Go, its history as a board game around the world, how the Massachusetts Go Association is organized to play the game, and how, in Go’s much more recent history, it has evolved online. These details are a large part how Go has successfully used the Internet to maintain itself. This is only an introduction to a very rich body of context, but hopefully it will prove sufficient to help explain our findings.

⁶ Wellman, Barry, Boase, Jeffrey, Chen, Wenhong. “The Networked Nature of Community: Online and Offline” <http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/itandsociety/v01i01/v01i01a10.pdf>

Introduction to Go

Go is a two-player board game, played on a 19 by 19 grid. Two players, one using black stones, one using white stones, take turns placing one stone at a time on the intersections of lines in the grid. Once placed, stones never move, though they can be captured if they are completely surrounded. Play starts with an empty board, and continues until both players pass – agreeing that the game is finished. A player wins by surrounding the most unoccupied territory on the board. Games can take anywhere from ten minutes (blitz, speed Go) to two hours. Casual games are rarely played with a clock, and tournament games usually are.

All amateur Go players have a certain rank. Go shares its ranking terminology with Japanese martial arts disciplines. Starting players are 30 kyu, and as they improve, numbers decrease. For example, a 10 kyu player could easily beat a 20 kyu player. After 1 kyu, a player becomes “dan-level,” and the ranks progress from 1 dan to 9 dan. It is a significant achievement for an amateur to reach dan-level. This ranking system is calibrated to make it easy for amateur players of different ranks to play games. If a 15 kyu player and a 10 kyu player want to play, they can add five black stones to the board (the weaker player is always black) on certain specified points. This usually makes for a fair game between the two players. Up to nine stones can be added in this way. This allows for players of very different ranks to play meaningful games together. Players maintain their own idea of what rank they are, adjusting it based on their game record playing at that rank. Online servers have greatly simplified this process, auto-calculating ranks for active players.⁷

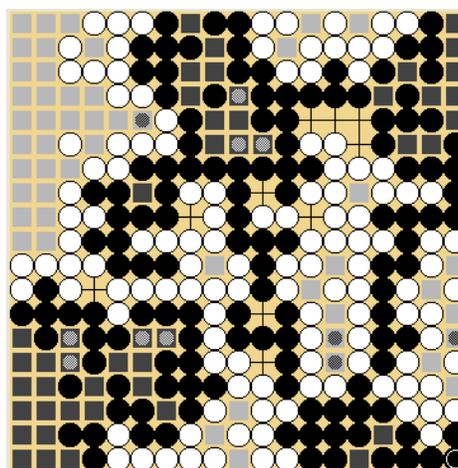
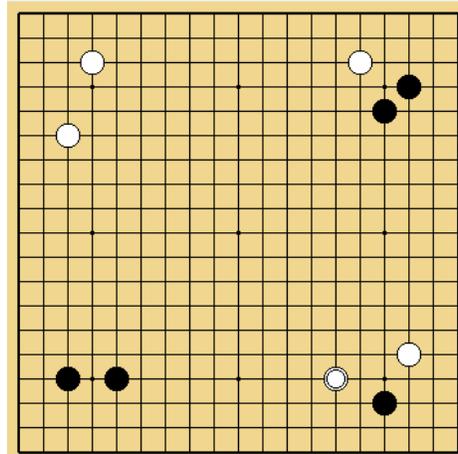


Figure 0 Examples of a Go game in progress. Top: Moves at the start of the game. Bottom: End-game moves, with final territory shown with different color squares.
Source: gobase.org

⁷ “What is Go?” 12 May 2005. <http://www.usgo.org/resources/whatisgo.asp>

Once a player becomes a professional, they are assigned a dan ranking independent from the amateur ranking system. Top amateurs can be competitive with medium level professionals, but there is no agreed upon conversion between amateur ranks and professional ranks. Among the professionals, handicaps are rarely used, but the difference in strength between a 1 dan professional and a 9 dan professional is between two and three handicap stones. Professional ranks are maintained by each country's national association, which lays out the rules by which players advance in rank. This is substantially different from the amateur ad-hoc system of self-ranking.⁸

Go was developed somewhere between 2,500 and 4,000 years ago in China. Indeed, the oldest known complete record of a game is believed to come from 196 AD, with largely the same rule set used today. Go even has its own creation myths – it is believed to have been created by a father to educate his son.⁹

The majority of Go's 100 million players around the world are in Asia, where the game is tremendously popular. In Japan, Korea, and China, Go is more popular and mainstream than Chess is in the West. The annual tournaments have substantial cash prizes, and winners are instant celebrities. There are Go television stations, weekly and monthly magazines, salons, and training programs for youths. Go is perhaps the quintessential object of the “minutes to learn, a lifetime to master” aphorism. Professional players quite literally devote their entire life to mastering the game.¹⁰

In contrast, the American Go Association has only just over 2100 members.¹¹ Very few native Americans play at a professional level, though many recent immigrants who are strong Go players have stimulated American Go communities. Unlike in Asia, the vast majority of Go clubs in the US don't have dedicated space. Most meet on college campuses, in bookstores or cafes, or in the homes of their members – the club we studied is an anomaly in that it rents a suite of office space. In the US, Go is still very much a niche game.

⁸ “Nihon Ki-in new promotion system” 6 June 2005. *Sensei's Library*.
<http://senseis.xmp.net/?NihonKiInNewPromotionSystem>.

⁹ “Go History” 12 May 2005 *Senseis Library* <http://senseis.xmp.net/?GoHistory>

¹⁰ “The Game To Beat All Games” 16 December 2004. *The Economist*

¹¹ *American Go Association Annual Report 2005*.. August 2005.
<http://www.usgo.org/resources/downloads/rpt2005.pdf>

The Massachusetts Go Association

On Tuesday and Friday nights, players from around the Boston metro area, and occasionally farther, get together down the hall from a Greyhound Racing Dogs advocacy group and a small publishers office to play Go. Here, in the basement of a small federal office building, is the Massachusetts Go Association. The club's suite has two rooms, what were probably originally intended to be a large meeting room and a smaller private office. A window in the latter looks out on the main room. Tables are spread evenly throughout the larger room, covered in Go boards and bowls of matching Go stones. Go related art, Go posters, newspaper articles that mention Go (even tangentially), and tournament results adorn about half the wall space in the larger room. The club's library, with a substantial collection of Go books and magazines, takes up one of the walls near the office. Players who want to talk more than might be considered acceptable, or those there for Beginners' Night, play in the smaller room that is set up the same as the larger room.

On an average meeting night, a little more than a dozen players pass through over the course of the evening, coming and going starting around 6.30 PM. Some come with dinner, often Chinese food, a burrito, a wrap, or a sandwich. Others leave to pick up dinner after a few games, and then come back to eat and watch other people's games. The atmosphere is informal. The players are largely, but not exclusively, male and often have an occupation associated with the computer software business. The mood at the club is laid back with players asking each other questions about the reason for a certain move, or griping about the impossibility of their situation. Conversation often wanders beyond Go, too, with club members talking about politics, world events, work, their families, and many other topics. Periods of intense concentration sometimes punctuate games at points when much is at stake, and any mistake on the part of either player could have huge ramifications. In those situations, conversation usually slows down or stops until the situation is resolved.

Setting up games at the club – matchmaking – has two phases. First, a player needs to find someone who is (usually) within 9 ranks. Then, both players have to agree on the appropriate handicap for the game. Sometimes the players will be equally matched and can play an even game (i.e. with no handicap stones), but this is rare. Most games are played with a handicap. Usually, this is just the difference in their ranks, but regular players often base handicaps on the results of their previous games against other club members. If they

have been beating them recently, they might add another stone to their handicap. This process is often expedited by senior club members who know both the rankings of most players in the club, and suggest appropriate handicaps if the usual handicap would not make for a good game.

The MGA is a particularly strong club. Few clubs in the United States rent their own space, or have a comparable level of revenue. The MGA is also well positioned geographically. It is minutes away from the Red Line in Somerville, providing easy access to people from around the city. Many students and faculty from nearby Tufts, MIT, and Harvard visit the club. We feel this is probably because Go is particularly attractive to students and teachers, though this is strictly anecdotal; the high numbers of students and faculty at the club may just be a consequence of Boston's high academic population. The club runs four seasonal handicapped tournaments, which attract as many as 40 people each. These tournaments, plus the annual membership dues of \$180 (discounted heavily for students and seniors) provide the money to pay the rent and other expenses. In these ways, the MGA is not a typical Go club. Its rich playing experience is unavailable to most players around the country.¹²

Internet Go

Internet Go started in 1992, with the creation of the Internet Go Server at the University of New Mexico. Written by two players going by the names of tim and tweet, IGS is a text-based service originally built to run on Telnet, a text only protocol for interacting with servers. Over the course of the next two years, IGS gained in popularity, running its own tournaments, introducing more robust servers to deal with load, while simultaneously attracting professional players to play exhibition and teaching games.¹³ Today, IGS is still popular, but is considered to have a much less flexible ranking system that makes it hard for new players to get better. Now that graphical user interfaces are necessary for

¹² Our basis for this assertion includes a review of AGA's list of where chapters meet (<http://www.usgo.org/usa/ChapClub.asp?state=ALL#listing>). Many meet in coffee shops, schools, or other borrowed institutional spaces. Some clubs do not include addresses for privacy reasons – they often meet in the homes of members, sometimes on a rotating basis. Also, in talking with players online, few said they visited a club at all, and of those that did, no one we talked with went to a club with dedicated space. We have seen a few other clubs with equal or greater resources, but we are confident that the MGA experience, while not unique, is rare in America.

¹³ "A Brief History of IGS, 1992," 12 May 2005
<http://www.pandanet.co.jp/English/essay/history1992.html>

widespread adoption, a number of IGS clients have been written on top of the original text-based Telnet system. Still, because the graphical clients are built on top of the text only system, they require knowledge of a range of text commands to manage matchmaking, communication, and game creation. As a result, for players less familiar with the game's Telnet origins, it can be daunting to learn the necessary technical vocabulary. Furthermore, graphical interfaces have been shown to significantly reduce errors and increase performance. When users directly manipulate familiar objects – placing stones on the board,¹⁴ in the case of Go – they are required to know much less about how the system works. In the case of playing Go online, a well designed interface allows users to focus on their game rather than on how to issue commands to the computer.

William Shubert launched KGS, originally called Igoweb, on April 30, 2000. In his post to rec.games.go, a newsgroup for Go, he lays out a list of features that he feels sets his new server apart from existing servers. These features fall into two categories – those that attempt to make KGS more like a physical club, and those that provide functionality impossible to implement in a physical club. For example, KGS launched with support for a variety of small rule variations and different ways to time games. This was always easy to do in person. More importantly are the ways in which he designed KGS to support game review: “On Igoweb players can cooperatively review files. After a game ends, the players can try out variations, talk together, and annotate the game. This feature is excellent for teaching games... finally you can chat about a game after, **just like you do in real go clubs!**” (emphasis added). This is the most important way in which KGS improved on existing Go servers to provide a more club-like experience. To augment the experience, KGS archives every game played on the server, and provides an online searchable interface of all saved game records. From its launch, KGS strove to be more analogous to a real club. Every one of our eight interviewees reported using primarily KGS. We believe that this success among our interviewees is in part due to Mr. Shubert's focus on providing a similar experience to real Go clubs, while adding features made possible by the Internet.

All Go services are broadly similar. They provide a system of identity that tracks player ranks and histories attached to usernames. Some sort of matchmaking system is

¹⁴ Stagers, Nancy, and David Kobus. March 2000. “Comparing Response Time, Errors, and Satisfaction Between Text-based and Graphical User Interfaces During Nursing Order Tasks,” *Journal of American Medical Informatics Association*. Mar-Apr; vol. 7(2): pp 164-176. <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=61470>.

available, where players can advertise games with particular time/rule settings and attract partners. Most servers also have some sort of public chat room. Some examples of these services are shown below.

(A) Console

```

guest on IGS-PandaNet
#64 Title: Untitled -- Open
#64 Grandad
#92 Title: Untitled -- Open
#92 profitm
#97 Title: Untitled -- Open
#97 gatto711
#98 Title: Untitled -- Open
#98 aca
klonaway [14k]: sushi for sure
Observing game 54 (UTA vs. megumilk) :
  JoeceL 2d*      aca 3d*      guest7300 NR
  surouyoko 4k*   lowell0066 2d*   TAKA715 3k*
  kumai 2d*      guest7315 NR    guest7318 NR
  guest7311 NR    ny4410 3d*     digi 6d*
  guest7302 NR    souichi 2d*    CHIN 3d*
  guest6440 NR    guest7289 NR    sanye 1k
  guest7122 NR    fto 2k*       gofan777 8k*
  Tucan 4k       guest7297 NR   Longwen 1d*
  NONHO1 4k*     mensch44 5k*   gogo24 6k*
  nonnon 2k*     guest7101 NR   tEtu 5k*
  guest7188 NR
Found 34 observers.
Set open to be True.
Set looking to be False.

```

(B) In-game

Game 54 - UTA 7d* vs. megumilk 7d*

White: UTA 7d* (04:11 (22))
Black: megumilk (01:08 (3))

Caps: 0 Caps: 0

Black to play

(C) Game List

id	White	Rank	Black	Rank	Moves	Size	H	Kom	Byo	Type	Obs
152	mainichi	9p	mainichi	9p	67	19	0	6.5	0	Teach	661
54	UTA	7d*	megumilk	7d*	73	19	0	6.5	5	Rated	32
280	SANsan	6d*	pineland	4d*	44	19	0	0.5	7	Rated	6
93	nagano	6d*	two	5d*	-1	-1	-1	0.0	-1		19
154	Cross	6d*	moon	5d*	187	19	0	0.5	8	Rated	15
270	szo	5d*	Suisei	4d*	86	19	0	0.5	5	Rated	4
9	Max	5d*	Tatibana2	5d*	112	19	0	6.5	8	Rated	3
224	ryuma	5d*	bariko	4d*	274	19	0	0.5	10	Rated	10
42	fastcat1	5d*	SkyEngel	4d*	196	19	0	0.5	7	Rated	3
79	PIKky	5d*	aca	3d*	-1	-1	-1	0.0	-1		3
253	everly1994	5d	chengdu	4d	6	19	0	0.5	6	Rated	0
155	Sanji	5d*	fernando	5d*	23	19	0	0.5	10	Rated	1
223	87270828	4d*	sergeant	1k*	8	19	0	0.5	10	Free	0
243	hjj369	4d*	Kaisan	4d	68	19	0	6.5	10	Rated	4
82	kasiwagi	4d*	koldsguy	4d*	79	19	0	0.5	7	Rated	0
246	Tatibana6	4d*	Wazmi	2d*	-1	-1	-1	0.0	-1		1
147	mahoro	4d*	neomark	3d*	-1	-1	-1	0.0	-1		3
172	jun327	4d*	lligoll	4d*	191	19	0	6.5	3	Rated	6
234	ayagawa	3d*	rxu	3d*	182	19	0	0.5	5	Rated	1
169	SCN2	3d*	samsel	1k*	-1	-1	-1	0.0	-1		0
39	Dragonball	3d*	masamach2	2d*	133	19	0	0.5	10	Rated	2
140	mickey	3d*	sendan	2d*	-1	-1	-1	0.0	-1		2
168	pnmm	3d*	pde	3d*	300	19	0	6.5	6	Rated	2
52	jit327mie	3d*	denghui	2d*	27	19	0	0.5	10	Rated	1
107	duke	3d*	nisiki	1d*	28	19	2	0.5	10	Rated	0
254	pep	3d*	remh	2d*	0	19	0	0.5	2	Rated	0
278	xiaochch98	3d	goronta	3d*	72	19	0	6.5	3	Rated	0
80	masachan	3d*	Go4D	1d*	72	19	0	0.5	5	Rated	0
266	Hiro	3d*	KAN	2d*	65	19	0	0.5	10	Rated	0

(D) List of Users

Fig	Name	Rank	Play	Obs	Win/Loss	Idle	Country	Match settings	Info
5	mainichi	9p	152	-	0 / 1	49s	Japan		<none>
S-	Kitano	7p	-	-	118 / 78	1m	Japan		<None>
-X	chaos	8d*	-	-	375 / 250	1m	Japan		<None>
--	gisel	8d*	-	-	271 / 102	2m	Japan		<None>
-X	hakodate	8d*	-	-	175 / 96	1m	Japan		<None>
--	oman	8d*	-	-	735 / 619	6s	NET		1/6-1/8
QX	aman	7d*	-	-	152 / 112 / 37	6m	Taiwan		<none>
-X	angelsan	7d*	-	-	14 / 6	2m	Japan		<none>
QX	carp1	7d*	-	-	152 / 87 / 48	3m	Japan		30秒秒読み、速多感な年頃の1
QX	Garigari	7d*	-	-	152 / 123 / 95	4m	Japan		1/7
--	lin8d	7d*	-	-	467 / 244	51s	NET		21d0 卓 チヤ
--	megumilk	7d*	54	-	151 / 112	8s	Japan		<None>
Q-	UTA	7d*	54	-	235 / 123	9s	Japan		<None>
--	WINTARO	7d*	-	-	9 / 6	2m	Japan		<None>
--	zawa	7d*	-	-	49 / 27	7s	Japan		<None>
--	Cross	6d*	154	-	1464 / 849	6s	Japan		1/5-1/7
QX	digi	6d*	-	-	152 / 2 / 1	1m	EDU		<None>
-X	HIKARUnoCO	6d*	-	-	83 / 4	3m	Japan		☆☆ 1/10☆☆1
--	nagano	6d*	93	-	668 / 438	54s	Japan		<None>
--	natural	6d*	-	-	152 / 224 / 168	20s	China		1/5
-X	Nie9p	6d*	-	-	152 / 34 / 39	3m	COM		9x9
--	SANsan	6d*	-	-	54 / 634 / 439	13s	Japan		1-5~7
-X	whale	6d*	-	-	152 / 20 / 16	47s	Taiwan		I am strong!
--	zoft	6d*	-	-	93 / 448 / 206	3m	USA		<none>
-X	dove	5d*	-	-	152 / 510 / 337	1m	EDU		have u had sou
-X	elh	5d*	-	-	152 / 528 / 437	11m	COM		1/8 to 1/12, p
-I	everly1994	5d	-	-	7 / 3	3m	China		<None>
--	fastcat1	5d*	42	152	60 / 54	11s	China		1/5-1/8

Figure 1 IGS client glGo. (A) console, (B) in-game, (C) game list, (D) list of users

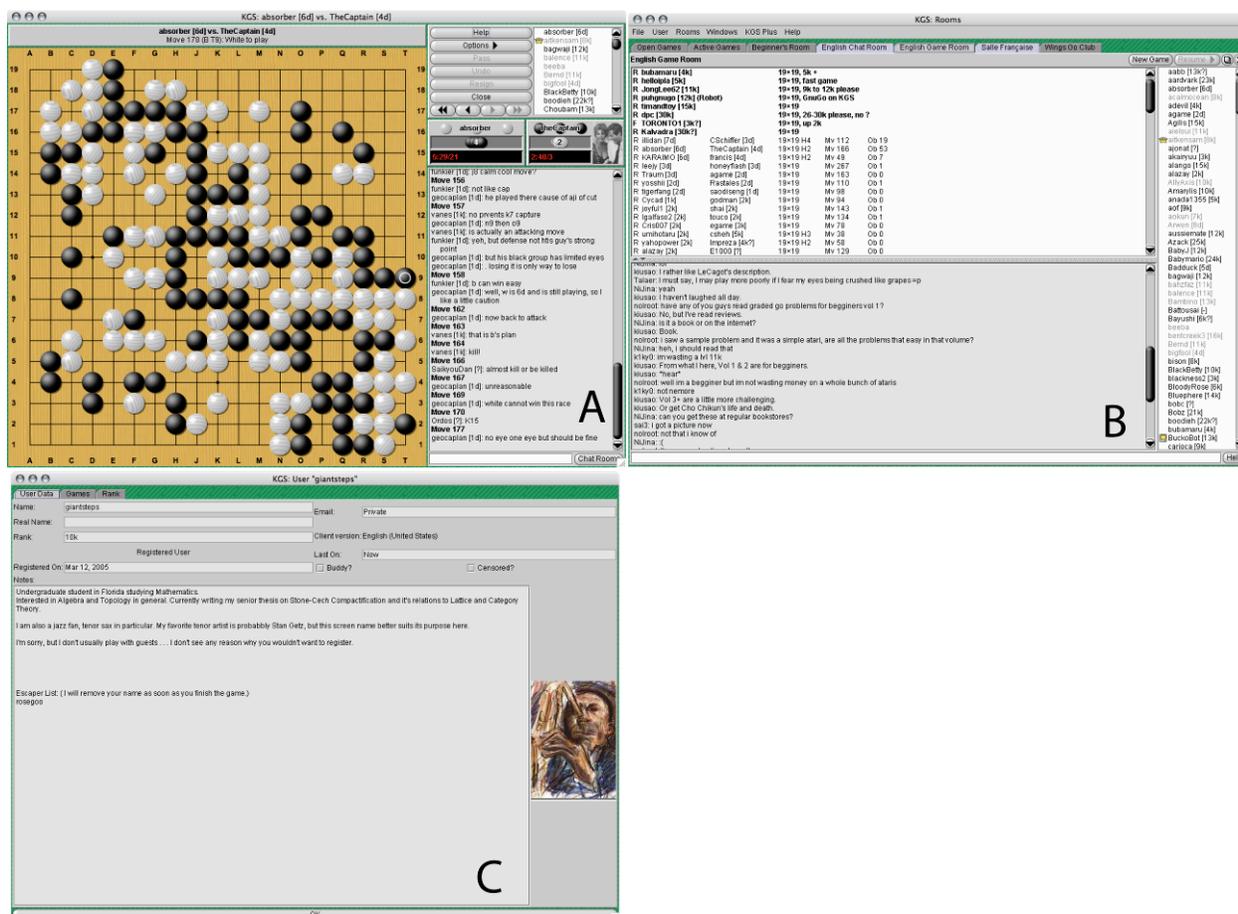


Figure 2 KGS client. (A) In-game -- note kibitzing at right, (B) the game room, and (C) a player's profile

Research Methods

To build an understanding of the Go community, we relied on a combination of semi-structured interviews, photo-interviews, participant observation, and primary source analysis. We also built on our personal experiences playing Go, online, at the MGA, and elsewhere. We feel these methods enabled us to broadly understand the context in which the Internet has had an effect on the Go community.

Our most useful sources for general background have been Internet Go resources. We have been tracking the Usenet discussion group for Go, `rec.games.go` (often called RGG among its members), to see what sorts of conversations are taking place about online Go. As with many newsgroups, RGG often descends into argument, but it has still proved to be a very valuable record of conversations about social norms and etiquette online, as well as provided insight into the politics behind the creation and administration of online Go resources.

Another valuable online resource is Sensei's Library. This site describes itself as "a collaborative website about and around the game of Go." Sensei's Library (often called SL) is a wiki – a network of webpages that can be edited by any user. SL contains a vast variety of resources. There is substantial content about how to learn to play Go, how to improve at Go, how to teach Go, and so on. SL also contains a variety of pages on subjects like "Why Did You Start Go?" and "Face to Face Vs Internet Go." Pages like this gave us many more "mini-interviews" with people on certain topics. This helped build our confidence in our findings, by showing us that patterns we noticed in our eight interviews might play out over much larger samples as well. Because its readers created the site, we also learned valuable lessons from the general focus of the site, the way it is organized and the tone of discussions. All of these, we feel, are a decent reflection of the general attitudes of English-speaking Go players.

Interview Profiles

During the course of our research, we held eight conversations with Go players from a variety of backgrounds and ranging in ages from 18 to 62. One of these conversations was on the KGS in a public chatroom, and because of the number of people and the chatroom's short attention span, this worked out to be a mixture of participant observation and group interview. The other conversations were semi-structured interviews with just one person at a time.

The youngest players we interviewed were Gabe and David, both 18. David originally learned Go from his grandfather but did not really get into the game until after he and a friend started encouraging each other to play after David's friend noticed he had a Go board. Now he is a 4kyu and plays once or twice a week at the club, plus almost a game per day online. Gabe, a 21kyu player, began to play after watching *Hikaru no Go*, an anime series¹⁵. For him, there are not people around with whom he can play a game, and he feels somewhat awkward playing anonymous people online, so Gabe most often watches online games or plays against a Go computer program, Igowin.

Paul, who is about 20, learned to play from his high school physics teacher. Paul had been playing chess for a while, but the physics teacher, who was also the chess coach,

¹⁵ *Hikaru No Go* tells the story of a young boy, Hikaru, who finds a Go board (Goban) in an attic. The ghost of a former Go master inhabits this board, and gets Hikaru to begin playing.

eventually talked him into trying Go. Today, Paul thinks Go is a superior game and would always prefer to play it over Chess, so long as he can find an opponent. Paul has gone through phases where he has played online almost every day or regularly visited clubs, but in his current situation – as a college student in suburban Massachusetts – he plays in person very infrequently but still manages to play a game or two online each week.

We also had the opportunity to talk with Adam, a past leader of a Go club. Adam is self-employed and is in his forties. He used to play mostly in person, but started playing online so that he could play more games. Online play makes this easier because he can find someone to play at any time of day, not just during club meeting hours. For Adam, whose rank is 12kyu, Go is about exercising the mind, and he has been playing since learning from a college roommate.

Steven, a player in his late fifties, got into Go because he was looking for games that would help him teach students in his computer class. He had played chess in college, and some of his colleagues told him he should really try Go, and so he learned from the college's Go club. We met Steven online, where he plays "very infrequently" but finds and watches a game almost every day. In addition to Go online, Steven plays regularly but infrequently, about four times a year, at the club.

Heather, the only female player we interviewed in depth, learned Go at a trade show. She used to have a print shop where she did Japanese typesetting. In 1989, she was at her print shop's booth at a tradeshow and looked over to see that the booth next to her was from the American Go Association (AGA). The booth consisted of three rows of tables, each with twenty-six players on one side and one professional player on the other. Within weeks, Heather was hooked. Most of the Go she plays now is her weekly teaching of children at a bookstore in a Boston suburb and has previously taught at libraries, though recently she has also attended two tournaments.

Interview Analysis

We coded qualitative data from the interviews, looking for both items that map to ideas in existing theory and our original questions and hypothesis, a process known as deductive

coding,¹⁶ and codes that emerge from the interviews, also known as “inductive coding”¹⁷ or “open coding.”¹⁸ Analysis and coding were facilitated by the ATLAS.ti software package, and coded quotes were organized into themes for more detailed review.

Why Do People Play Go?

The players we interviewed generally play Go for similar reasons, some combination of enjoying the mental exercise, aesthetics, beauty of the game, teaching, and competition. Many of our interviewees talked about the state of mind they achieved when playing Go. Paul, in particular, brought up Csikszentmihalyi’s ideas about flow states¹⁹ – the point at which the challenges of the game exactly match the players’ ability to meet them. Following his 1990 work *Flow*, which described flow as “optimal experience,” Csikszentmihalyi went on to identify ways in which it can be found in every day life. In a 1997 book,²⁰ Csikszentmihalyi redrew the originally proposed flow channel to define more states, and to account for low-skill, low-challenge activities. He then mapped these to common household activities, with “flow” states being matched to “favorite activities.”

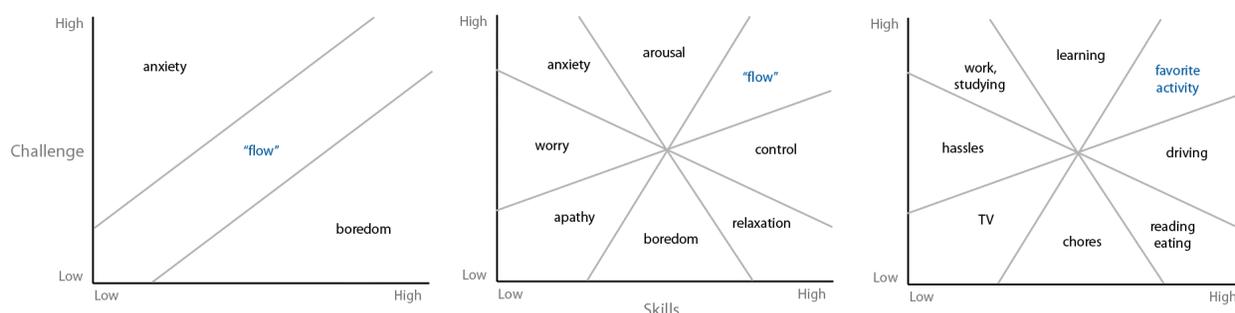


Figure 3 Flow States. (left to right) Initial map of flow channel; 1997 revision of skill and challenge pairings; mapping of every day activities to skill and challenge pairings.

¹⁶ Bernard, H. Russell. 2001 *Research Methods in Anthropology*, third edition. Maryland: Altamira Press, page 464. Also: Maxwell, J.A. 1996. *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

¹⁷ Bernard 2001, page 465.

¹⁸ Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

¹⁹ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Collins.

²⁰ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1997. *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. New York: Harper Collins.

While other players did not bring up the idea of flow states idea specifically, their stories about their favorite games often included references to close games and even matches. For David, his favorite games are “when I feel that nothing happened by chance, I feel like it’s a good game. When I feel that I really controlled the game, that it’s not that my opponent made a really bad move.” This sentiment was shared by many players we interviewed, and fits very well with the matching skills and challenges requirement for flow. Players also reported losing track of time and feeling exhausted after playing important tournament games. These feelings of mental engagement form the foundation of why people play Go, and make sense in light of Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow states.

The Go aesthetic involves both the physical equipment as well as game-play. The smooth black and white pieces recall classic Asian yin/yang imagery. The organic patterns that form on the board in each game evoke powerful images of creation. Even the way in which pieces are held and placed on the board is formalized and dramatized. *Hikaru no Go*, a series of comics and animated television shows from Japan about Go, consciously plays off these ideas, and attempts to introduce them to readers early and often. Beyond the physical, Go’s rules also inspire a particular way of thinking. Part of this is a keen sense of balance. As Adam put it, “...if you play too tight, too concentrated, you’ll get everything you ask for, but you’ll still lose. You have to be in the middle. It turns out there are a lot of middles you have to play in to play well...” The same idea was expressed by another interviewee, while explaining why he liked Go: “it’s almost like it’s a direct mirror of your mind and personality is played out on the board. It’s so much about balance. I really like it. It’s about control.”

Extending Go’s lessons – including subtle pieces of strategy and proverbs that help players think about the game – into a way of thinking about life adds appeal for many players. Seeing applicability of lessons learned while playing the game in life in general helps players feel like their time spent is more meaningful than strictly recreational. It also serves as a major motivator for teaching others the game. For Go players, teaching the



Figure 4 Hikaru no Go places strong emphasis on the physical aesthetic of the game.

game is not just about giving someone something fun to do – it is about teaching them a way of thinking which can evolve into a way of life. Heather explains why she chose to teach children go at a local library:

The kids I was targeting were junior high / high school. They're the ones that make such awful decisions. Go helps them make better decisions in the case of kids. Or at least keeps them out of trouble while they're playing.

Steven, a former computer teacher at a prestigious university's Day School, used games such as Go and Reversi (Othello) to help challenge his students to “think about whether peoples' brains are wired differently,” since some people were better at one game than another. In this way, teaching the game becomes an integral part of playing the game. Players are encouraged by example to teach the game to others, sharing knowledge about the game with less skilled players. This is done most frequently through discussing games after they're finished, as well as playing teaching games with weaker players. For some, teaching can become a bigger part of their relationship to Go than actually playing the game. Go players also frequently evangelize the game amongst friends and acquaintances, searching for potential new players.

Understanding how Internet and face-to-face Go play supports players' goals was crucial in developing and understanding of the role of each form of play.

The Relationship Between Online Go and Offline Go

We focused our inquiry on the differences between playing Go online and offline. Our interviewees' responses were surprisingly consistent. None of our interviewees would rather play online than offline, and they all treated online play as a way to sustain their interest in the game between in-person experiences, whether through studying, watching other games, or playing games online themselves.

One of the paramount advantages in-person play has over online play is that a player can have much more of a sense of the other person while sitting across a physical board. “It's much more of a human thing. War is becoming impersonal because you can kill them from long range. It's no longer combat. [Go is] an emotional struggle,” reports David, who likes to see his opponents sweat. He elaborates,

I think I can play better when I can see my opponent reacting to what I do. It's both a matter of being there, and not just being on the Internet. You're basically forced to

behave to stay on task, and you can see your opponent, because no one can keep a straight face. I like seeing my opponent's reaction.

Gabe confirms that he has an easier time playing in person because got a better sense of how the “opponent is thinking and what they're doing.” By noticing where they are looking he can better anticipate the opponent's moves or areas of the board about which he might have plans or was concerned. He concludes, “it's more enjoyable in person.” Adam says: “The club is a much more immersive experience. You have the touch, you have the sound, the interpersonal. I'm a sociable kind of person. You're participating in a social experience playing at the club. There's more of a connectedness if you will.” David also enjoys the social side of club play. He finds that getting teaching games – a game in which the merits of certain moves are discussed, players think aloud, and backtracking to replay some moves is not uncommon – from stronger players or discussing a particular Go problem is easier in person. All of this, to him, adds up to an experience that is “not just Go,” it is about being part of a community.

For Steven, the experience of going to his club is about more than just Go as well, but for him the personal element is not the draw. Steven relives a bit of his college days – when he used to get high before playing – by first stopping at a nearby bar, having a “martini, a beer, a glass of wine,” and then settling in to play a few games. “By the time I get to the club, I'm a little bit toasted and I don't mind playing Go a little bit high, a little bit sloshed.” His nights at the club are a ritual of relaxing escape.

We found no one who would rather play Go online than in person. The impersonality of the online experience felt lacking. Some, such as Harold who does not play online, felt more strongly than others that “There's no point in playing with a disembodied person.” A person who plays both online and off went further, saying that “there is no person when you play online.” Initially, this seems counter-intuitive. If anything, Go – with rules describing precisely how two players interact – should be an experience that is easy to replicate online. But Harold's point is an extremely common one. Online play fails to capture some key sensory aspects of playing Go: the feeling of the stones in your hand, the sound of placing them on the board, the body language of your opponent, and the sigh that frequently accompanies a major blunder. This fits well with findings in the field of computer mediated communication. Text-based modes of interaction sacrifice social context cues. Usually, this

means people misunderstand each other.²¹ In the case of Go, losing these social context cues make the experience of playing the game less enjoyable. While Harold and others did not explicitly identify these as the reasons they do not like to play online, from our perspective they seem to fit well with words like “disembodied” describing online play.

Due to the allure of offline play, online play instead tends to serve as a supplement for when users cannot make it to the club or find an in-person match. As Adam notes, there are reliably people at the club on Tuesdays and Fridays during the evening. If he budgets time to visit the club at one of those times, he is guaranteed a game. However, if Adam gets done with his work at eleven at night, it is too late to go to the club, but he can still catch a quick game online; “there’s always someone there.” We learned of another woman, a mother of six children she home schools, who plays Go online after the children go to sleep.

Players also use online games to challenge themselves. Adam increased the number of games he played online to increase his overall number of games per week, so that he could more quickly progress through the ranks. Paul plays online to get challenging games with players who are closer in rank. “Playing in person is hard when you are the only person in the area who is within five stones; getting a decent game is hard.” While Go’s handicapping system makes it possible to play a fair game across a substantial range of strengths, there are limits, and a handicapped game is not quite the same experience as an even game. If a player wants to play an even game against a player of very similar strength, there is almost guaranteed to be an appropriate opponent online.

Adam laments that while “you can find the game and play the game [online], it’s hard to say that you actually get to know the people you play online.” Asked to elaborate on how he related to other online players, Adam says:

There are people out there and I get randomly connected to people. Plus you’re playing on a clock, so it’s hard to type chat while you’re playing Go, and trying to hit your time limit. It’s much easier to get used to playing the same people and getting to know them [at the club]. Online I remember a few of the IDs, but only because they were memorable IDs. But that doesn’t ... I have no idea from any of them where in the country/world they’re from, how old they are, what they do when they’re not playing Go. It’s almost like online we’re all using each other for the purposes of the

²¹ Sproull, L. Keisler, S. “Reducing social context cues: Electronic mail in organizational communication.” *Management Science*. 32:11. 1986.

game of Go. It's cooperative and by agreement, but it seems to not really go beyond the playing Go.

Paul told us that he did get to know some people online during his senior year of high school, at least well enough to recognize their screen names. However, knowing or not knowing someone did not seem to have much of an impact on the way he used KGS. "There were a few other people I'd recognize and invite them to play," but if they were not there it was not a big deal; Paul would move on to someone anonymous.

David, however, found that it was relatively easy to get to know people online. He became so immersed in the social aspects of KGS that he ended up spending most of his time in a chatroom where the discussion was rarely on topic. "Go wasn't even an emphasis there, if you did, it was just in passing. We never seriously studied it. It wasn't 'Go.'" He eventually grew frustrated with how the time spent there kept him from progressing, and moved on to playing games both in person and at the club. However, this did not come easily, as other members of the chatroom kept tracking him down for conversation. David tells us that he eventually had "thirty different accounts so I could remain anonymous." Eventually, to his relief, David reached a point where the others forgot him.

Players are split on the level of focus that online play affords. Paul says that online games are much more "serious" than in person games, which are generally only serious during tournaments. This is probably related to the persistence of information about online games. Every game played on KGS is recorded and included in each player's profile, and many games played are also factored into players' online rank. This adds a level of stress that, for Paul, makes the games feel more "serious". For Adam, who works at home, there are too many distractions to really focus on playing Go online. This sentiment was shared by many players, who found that committing to play an entire game online was risky. You had to be sure you could finish it, without any major interruptions. For some people, this was another reason not to play too many serious games – usually ranked or tournament games, where both players are really focused on the game – online. It is not just time, though. Gabe said, "I'm not quite sure why, it's just that I get nervous when I play on the Internet against other players. I can't concentrate as well." Gabe's nervousness combines Paul's feelings of seriousness with Adam's issues with distraction. Feeling both that games matter, while at the same time being unable to perform at what a player feels is his or her optimal level, can be very frustrating.

At the club, the situation is entirely different. Because the club is a separate space, people leave behind other distractions and focus just on Go. David tells us that people bring him back to the game if he gets “loud” at the club, compared to how, when he is “at home, there are just too many distractions.” It may be that the players who play consistently online have developed strategies for avoiding distraction, while players who come to the club rely on social pressures to stay focused. Also, because of the fixed playing times, and the time overhead to get to the club in the first place, playing at the club is an easy way to set aside a certain amount of time for Go each week.

Many players also reported that watching games was one of the big draws of online play. This is one of the few areas in which online services can offer meaningful features that are not possible in clubs. Any player on KGS can observe any game currently taking place on the server. They also have the ability to roll back the game state to see the progress of the game from the very beginning. Players can also copy the game at any point and explore variations that were not played originally. When playing in a club situation, there are a fair amount of games to watch, but unless you have watched from the beginning, it is somewhat harder to learn as much. Steven reported watching and replaying someone else’s online game about once a day – much more frequently than he actually plays, online or offline. The same is true for Heather and Paul. Because Gabe is generally uncomfortable playing people online, watching games is the only feature of KGS he uses with any frequency.

This is one of the clear ways in which KGS (and Internet Go in general) has complemented the offline community. Watching games is an integral part of growing stronger at Go, and in-person play does not support this activity very well. Watching online is especially attractive because it does not have the time commitment requirements of playing a game online – it is easy to jump into a game, skim quickly through its moves and leave. If a player wants to watch the game as it unfolds, that is easy too. If one game is going too slowly, the observer can watch more than one game at once. This helps keep players’ thinking about Go, even if they do not have time to make it to the club or play a full game online. We feel this is a major part of how Internet Go has effectively supported offline Go.

Etiquette, Norms and Values of the Go Community

An important part of what holds a community together is its shared ideas about etiquette, norms, and values. Work by Jenny Preece and other has shown that development of norms in a community is necessary for providing empathy and comfort in a community.²² If the Go clubs and servers are a community, we would expect to find active discussion about what is and is not acceptable. We found this to be true; Go players had pretty much sorted out etiquette issues for in person play, but with the advent of online play and a much wider audience for the game, new norms are being negotiated for a new medium.

Both Sensei's Library²³ and IGS's website²⁴ include etiquette guidelines. General topics include asking for a game, saying thank you for a game, and reviewing the game. Proper use of handicaps is a major etiquette point, as they help make the game enjoyable for the weaker player and still challenging for the stronger player. Go players also consider it impolite to disrespect their opponent's strength. They avoid trick moves, because trick moves are based on the assumption that the opponent will not see a trap, and are consequently seen as insulting. Players in teaching games will still sometimes play a "trick" move, but at the same time announce that it should not work, and then use the subsequent play to show their opponent how to avoid the trap and prevail.

Some elements of Go etiquette are specific to in-person play. Some of these are drawn from historical practices, such as *nigiri* – the process by which players determine who will play which color of stones. Players are also expected to play the first move in the upper right corner to show respect for their opponent and make it easy for him to reach the attacking stone to respond to it. Other rules of etiquette relate to concentration. Players should avoid rattling the stones and are generally discouraged from picking up a stone before they are ready to place it on the board, though our observations and experiences indicate that these etiquette points are not followed very strictly. Unlike the traditional, almost ceremonial etiquette elements, these norms relating to concentration tend not to be verbalized and are instead learned by example. *Hikaru no Go* has been another source of etiquette, and Heather reports that the children she teaches "who do see [the anime] come

²² Preece, Jenny. April 2004. "Etiquette Online: From Nice to Necessary," *Communications of the ACM*, vol 47, no 4, pages 56-61.

²³ "Go Etiquette." 23 May 2004. *Sensei's Library*. <http://senseis.xmp.net/?GoEtiquette>

²⁴ Lounela, Olli, Ken Warkentyne, and Frederic Chauveau. "Go and IGS Etiquette Guide," version 2.11.

polite. When they first started playing and hadn't seen it, they wouldn't even say 'thank you for the game.' Once they came in [after seeing it], they started playing much more polite."

Both online and offline games have some norms for talking, though this tends to vary by player. In person, players find talking loudly while others are playing to be rude, much as one might feel in a library. David, who admits he tends to get distracted and perhaps talk too much, appreciates this norm and that people will remind him of it:

If I go off on random loud tangents, there are always people around to call me on it and quiet me down and focus me back on Go. Go is being played. People say "shut the hell up, we're trying to play."

Talking between players during a game is generally up to the two of them, though it is polite to defer to the person who wishes to talk the least. Most of our interviewees talk less online, either because of some technical discomfort or frustration (Steven), because online games are more serious (Paul), or because online games are more likely to be on the clock, so there is limited time available to be spent on talking. Paul, describing an online game, also tells us that players can be suspicious when another player talks.

It's considered not polite for talking while inside a game. At one point I got yelled at when I laid a trap, and started talking to them, and they got distracted and missed the trap. They got really mad at me. In my mind, I had already won and they were going to lose regardless, so it wasn't really intentional, since I assumed they'd fall for it anyway. It went back and forth twice, and then we continued playing, and he/she missed it, and they got upset. And so now I say 'hello, good luck' and that's about it until the end of the game.

A separate or supplementary etiquette has also developed for online play. Players agree that "escaping" – disconnecting rather than resigning from or finishing a game in which loss is inevitable – is extremely impolite. On IGS, this can result in a player's account being banned and their etiquette guide suggests that players who have had someone escape from a game send a note to the Go newsgroup, rec.games.go, publicly noting the user's identity so that others players do not play them. "Escaping" does happen, and we found a number of examples of complaints on RGG about a specific user, often with

detailed transcripts of the game and board state at the time of escape.²⁵ Heather and Adam both described being frustrated by times this happened to them; Adam feels that online play allows for more etiquette lapses than in person.

“Sandbagging,” the practice of advertising a lower rank than accurately represents the player’s strength, also annoys players. Some players do this because they enjoy winning, but it results in a much less enjoyable game for their victim. Heather describes one experience while playing Go on Yahoo! Games: “There was also this one guy who would say over and over that it was just his second game so he could win, but I had played him four times, so I knew that wasn’t true, and finally I told him that.” KGS and other services that determine a player’s rank by their performance against other known players, rather than allowing them to enter it themselves, have helped to reduce sandbagging.

While most in-person Go etiquette has evolved over thousands of years, online play has presented new dilemmas. It is possible to click and accidentally play a stone in the wrong space, and so it is generally considered polite to allow your opponent to undo a mistake if they ask promptly. Some players wonder, though, if they should only allow this a certain number of times per game. Players are also not sure about whether or not they should give their competitors extra time. Many possible reasons to do so are cited, such as if the player short on time experienced network lag, if something distracting happened in their environment (such as a phone call or a child waking up), or just because players enjoy knowing that they played a game in which their opponent was playing at his or her best. Others say that the time for a game is one of the terms to which they agreed and that they manage it as part of their strategy, so giving additional time would be inappropriate. These arguments about norms often involved comparisons to in-person analogs (e.g. “if I dropped a stone on the board accidentally, would you let me play it again?”), but there appears to be no clear consensus about appropriate behavior.

In addition to the etiquette points, some questions of players’ “rights” as “members” of the IGS community have been raised on the newsgroup rec.games.go. Periodically, there are posts from former IGS members whose accounts have been banned. Some say they may have made a stupid mistake, others claim they have been banned because of posts to the newsgroup or websites about frustrations with IGS’s features or members, and some say

²⁵ Exemplar threads: “Escape and Complaints,” started by Frederic Chauveau, 27 December 1994; “Blatant Escape Attempt on IGS,” started by Eric Liu, 22 November 1993, “Escapers,” started by Hans-Georg Michna, 3 January 2004.

they have no idea why their accounts were locked. One user, Bill, posted to RGG that he lost his ability to broadcast to IGS users after mentioning his rank on the No Name Go Server (NNGS), which had once split off from IGS. He was later banned, and his best guess was that this happened because he had gotten into public disputes with IGS supporters²⁶:

At the time I was banned I was using IGS, but never used foul language, never mentioned NNGS or any other server, and never broke any other written rule of conduct I could find. But I was very active on RGG, getting into arguments with IGS supporters. I even dared to question some of [the administrator's] actions and motives, and I was vocal about this.

Bill's story is not unique – others tell of mysterious banishment – and has caused a significant amount of concern on RGG.²⁷ For some Go players, most of their play has been on IGS, which holds their rankings and game history. The risk of being banned from IGS is scary to them, and, in order to prevent retaliation, some take care to hide or separate their identities on IGS when they post potentially critical thoughts about IGS on RGG.

This raises the question: does IGS have a strong enough community feel, in which its members have enough of a stake that they should not be subject to administrator's decisions about whether or not to ban them? In discussion on RGG, players have come down on both sides. Some say that since IGS is a free, private server, its administrators should be able to limit its use to people of their choosing, even if that means they remove dissenters' accounts. Others see such actions as a violation of their rights as community members – this debate often includes references to the US Constitution, the UN Human Rights Convention, and other documents that attempt to organize a community or capture its values – and feel that no administrator should be able to wipe out a part of their Go-playing identity without some form of due process.

Regardless of whether or not members and administrators have fairly applied discipline and order to IGS and KGS, technical means of enforcement and public

²⁶ "IGS – Where is your response?" 2 April 2000.

http://groups.google.com/group/rec.games.go/browse_thread/thread/a131f878eb1b4ff2?tvc=2&hl=en

²⁷ "IGS regarding my kick!" 28 August 2001.

http://groups.google.com/group/rec.games.go/browse_thread/thread/2c6828267446b094/8c76e103ca281a01?rnum=54&hl=en and "The Banning Controversy: Let's stay reasonable." 11 April 2001.

http://groups.google.com/group/rec.games.go/browse_thread/thread/e70e5d501085bf98/bb1e25ba063b02d6?rnum=137&hl=en.

humiliation, the two forms of discipline common to online groups,²⁸ exist on the Go servers. In Go clubs, we were only observed norm enforcement via informal communication, including polite corrections or requests for a person to change their behavior or quiet murmurings that certain player is generally loud or rude; we are not aware of any cases of a person being “banned” from a club. In both online and offline situations, relevant etiquette and norms have been formed and are enforced, something that is an act of a community and also helps provide the support for one.

Conclusions

The ways in which Go players use both in person and online settings and tools to study, play, and socialize represent just one example of a group adjusting to the Internet. In the case of Go, their use of the internet has correlated to continued growth in the United States. We examine other research on groups that exist both online and offline, and we explore the reasons why Go has been succeeding among young players. Finally, we discuss Go players in terms of community of practice theory, to evaluate if Go players really do form a community, and if their interactions develop social capital.

Differences in Online and Offline Users

The use of the Internet to support Go players’ in-person activities contrasts with some of the early research on communities that have in-person and online components. In particular, our findings contrast with Dr. Joyce Nip’s study of Hong Kong-based lesbian activist group Queer Sisters.²⁹ The Queer Sisters was founded in 1995, and its in-person activities are organized by a core of volunteers. In 1997, the group created a website, to which they added a bulletin board in 1998. Nip’s study found that a strong community formed on the bulletin board, one in which people felt a “sense of belonging” and made friends on the board. As the bulletin board evolved and developed into this community, however, its membership began to overlap less and less with the members of the in-person group. Goals also diverged; Queer Sisters maintained a significant political and educational agenda, but bulletin board members used the Internet for sharing and expression of their

²⁸ Reid, Elizabeth. 1999 “Hierarchy and power: social control in cyberspace,” *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, eds.

²⁹ Nip, Joyce. February 2003. “The Relationship Between Online and Offline Communities: The Case of the Queer Sisters,” *Media, Culture, and Society*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

identity. Informal get-togethers emerged from the board, while the Queer Sisters volunteers organized larger, social events. Different sets of people attended each. Norms and etiquette also grew apart. Nip also had one other surprising observation: board members generally felt like they belonged to Queer Sisters even if they did nothing to contribute to its activities and goals nor even attended them, but Queer Sisters volunteers did not necessarily feel as though they were a part of the board.

Go seems to be different. Overlap between people who play online and offline is very high in terms of who is playing, why they are playing, and associated etiquette. Mailing lists, such as the MGA's, are used to plan club and outreach events, and the attendance is very similar, though the Internet casts a wider net. We do see some similarities – the online medium is slightly more suited to serious games and review of games than in-person play, and consequently the use of the Internet in somewhat different ways than Go is played in clubs. We do not know what accounts for the broad differences between Nip's observations of the Queer Sisters and its bulletin board and our own work with Go players, but we speculate that a major factor is that Go organizations online and off are activity-based, and therefore demand a certain commonality. In contrast, Queer Sisters is largely an identity-based organization, and so women looking to express or advocate for their identity will choose the medium most appropriate. Since women of the same identity may still have different levels of need for the variety of possible related activities, some differences in who uses each medium is therefore to be expected.

Youth Adoption of Go

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam attributes much of the decline in civic engagement to changes in generational values³⁰. In order to reverse this trend, he advises, it is necessary to better engage younger generations. In his final chapter, "Towards an Agenda For Social Capitalists," he seeks "the internet-age equivalent of 4-H or settlement houses," and suggests that "what we need is not civic broccoli – good for you but unappealing – but an updated version of Scouting's ingenious combination of values and fun."³¹ While Go is certainly far too small and niche to be an answer to his call, it has proven successful at attracting younger players. In this section, we explore one way in which youth are attracted

³⁰ Putnam 2000, 277.

³¹ Putnam 2000, 406.

to the game, followed by a discussion about why Go clubs are a good place for youth to spend time.

The Role of Popular Media

Go has enjoyed a recent resurgence in popularity in Japan as a result of the publication of *Hikaru no Go* (HNG)³² – a Japanese comic book and animated television show, first released in 1998. The plot follows a sixth grade student named Hikaru Shindo, who discovers an old Go board in his attic which is inhabited by the spirit of a long-dead Go master. This spirit inhabits part of Hikaru’s mind, and teaches him to play Go. The story plays out much like a sports drama, with team rivalries, cheating, intrigue, and climactic games.³³

The comics use both explicit and implicit ways of teaching readers about the game. Interspersed among the plot pages are little sidebars explaining the rules of Go, posing simple Go problems, and offering informational tidbits about the game. It also glorifies the game through dramatic imagery, playing off the classical Go aesthetics. It also teaches Go etiquette by example, showing readers how to politely ask for a game, play in a tournament, observe a game politely, and so on.

American players hope that its effect in Japan can be repeated among American fans of Japanese culture and media. It’s come up as an issue in the last two AGA annual reports, with changes to the budget made to build more youth outreach and marketing materials using HNG imagery.³⁴ This shared readership among go-players also serves to create the sort of imagined community described by Benedict Anderson.³⁵ Through players’ shared language of the game, and a variety of media sources, including the AGA’s weekly Go newsletter the E-Journal, players can feel connected to other players who they have never met. While certainly not as powerful as nationalistic communities in which Anderson is most interested, this sense of connection is still important.

³² Shimatsuka, Yoko, “Do Not Pass Go.” *AsiaWeek* 23 August 2004.

<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/magazine/nations/0,8782,132162,00.html>

³³ “Hikaru No Go” 10 May 2004. *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hikaru_no_Go

³⁴ “American Go Association Annual Report FY 2004”

<http://www.usgo.org/resources/downloads/rpt2004.pdf> and “American Go Association Annual Report FY 2003” <http://www.usgo.org/resources/downloads/rpt2003.pdf>

³⁵ Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso.



A: Hikaru attends his first Go lesson, and learns to ask politely for a game.

B: Placing a Go stone – with style.

C: Introducing the beauty and aesthetics of Go.

Figure 5 Examples from *Hikaru No Go*³⁶

Youth Engagement

Looking around the club or through the photographs our subjects showed us, we could not help but notice the wide range of players' ages. The clubs are filled with people from all stages in life; elementary school children, high school kids, college students, people just starting their career, and some who are about to retire or have been retired for years. In one photo taken at the club, a six or seven year old girl is playing a man who is probably in his sixties or seventies. The media has reported at various times on negative effects of diminishing cross-generational experiences in the United States.³⁷ Researchers and educators are concerned that reduced adult-youth interaction shelters children and prevents them from learning life lessons and cultural values from their elders. At the Go club, generations do interact; we turned our attention to potential consequences of this mixing of ages.

³⁶ Hotta, Yumi and Obata, Takeshi. 2004. *Hikaru No Go*, vol. 1-3. Viz Communications: San Francisco.

³⁷ e.g.: Reimer, Susan. 3 March 2005. "Youths need more interaction with adults: A pediatrician says they get more college prep than life prep," *Southern Oregon Mail Tribune*. <http://www.mailtribune.com/archive/2005/0303/life/stories/02life.htm>.

Program Activity Assessment Tool (PAAT), developed by Shepherd Zeldin, Trisha Day, and Gary Matysik at the University of Wisconsin, helped us to understand the benefits of cross-generational interaction. The PAAT is used to evaluate whether programs are helping “youth to develop into productive and healthy adults.”³⁸ They find that optimal programs will encourage “exploration and reflection,” by engaging children’s curiosity in a hands-on way and will challenge children to use creativity in decision-making. Go, as a game, achieves this stimulation in those who choose to continue playing the game. The proverbs and thinking associated with Go are also not exclusive to the game, and can equip its players with broader ways of thinking about life decisions and problems. According to Zeldin, Day, and Matysik, successful programs make youth feel like equal members with adults, and give them opportunities to organize and carry out activities alongside their elders. In Go, where experience and skill are not necessarily connected to age, youth can feel respected and competent playing against older players at the club. They also have the opportunity to attend outreach events, such as an arts fair or dragon boat festival, and teach others, and through these sorts of activities can also participate in “contribution and service,” another characteristic of activities that help youth develop.

In addition to outlining characteristic of challenges that are likely to engage youth, the Program and Activity Assessment Tool describes some traits of the support network that helps youth succeed. Zeldin et al say that the environment should be caring and support friendships. Go players are generally interested in teaching weaker players and supporting each others’ improvement. While Go players tend to keep their discussions reasonably focused on the game, they also develop some weak ties for additional support. In one example, a student was about to graduate from a college computer science program and received job placement advice and help from others in the club. This advice was particularly relevant and helpful because of the high density of players who work in the software industry. Some level of emotional support and challenges, another element of the PAAT, may also exist in Go, as players are challenged to be good sports in defeat and gracious in victory, with adults present to serve as role models. Review of the game encourages continued interaction between the winner and loser, and the handicapping system is designed so that players get a game of a difficulty level at which they feel they can do well.

³⁸ Zeldin, Shepherd, Trisha Day, and Gary Matysik. *Program and Activity Assessment Tool*. University of Wisconsin-Extension. <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/paat/index.html>.

The researchers also find that successful programs include clear boundaries of what is and is not acceptable behavior, and Go captures this in its etiquette. To succeed, youth also need access to resources that will help them develop their skills. At the Go club, this takes the form of advice from stronger players and the wealth of resources for studying Go in the library. Online, players have access to websites with Go problems and strategies as well as a large number of games to watch and review for study. Finally, Zeldin et al say that a successful program should have high expectations of performance. Our research is inconclusive about whether or not Go clubs and servers expect this of their members – most of the pressure seems to come from the players themselves – but the expectations exist nonetheless.

The challenges offered by the game Go as well as the environments in which it is played are supportive for youth development. The Go play we observed occurred in groups of mixed ages, which research confirms helps “youth realize that there are many people, in addition to their parents, who are concerned for them and want them to be happy.”³⁹ Research also consistently proves that interaction with caring adults in “organized recreational activities” during non-school hours can contribute to students’ success.⁴⁰ Finally, confirming Heather’s instincts, researchers note that teens with stronger adult relationships and more frequent adult interaction are less likely to engage in “at-risk behaviors,” are more likely to do community service, perform better in school, and have higher self esteem.⁴¹ David’s story appears to contradict research showing better performance in school:

I’m not the most motivated in other areas; work is never really an obstacle. My parents think I should be doing [school] work... there are other things I might be doing, like work, but work sucks, so I play Go.

However, our observations confirm that Go has many of the characteristics of programs and activities that contribute to healthy youth development. This may well be tightly related to

³⁹ Pyfer, Tami (ed), with Thomas Lee and Glen Jenson. *Helping Youth Succeed*. Utah State University.

⁴⁰ Policy Studies Associates for the United States Department of Education. 1995. “A Clear Focus on Using Extended Time Effectively,” *Extending Learning Time for Disadvantaged Students*. Washington, DC. Also: Banicky, Lisa. April 2000. “Mentoring Students,” *Education Policy Brief*, College of Human Resources, Education, and Public Policy; University of Delaware.

⁴¹ Roehlkepartain, Eugene C. March 1992. “What Teens Need from Adults,” *RespecTeen Newsletter*. Search Institute.

the success Go has had among young people, and be part of why membership rates have not fallen as they have in many other organizations.

Communities of Practice

Throughout this paper, we have been using the word “community” to describe the group of people who play Go in the United States, both online and offline. We have used it colloquially, but would now like to be more specific about the ways in which the Go “community” is or is not a community as formally understood by sociologists. Sociology accepts multiple definitions of community⁴², though most definitions focus on interpersonal relations and/or physical neighborhoods. Wellman finds that looking first to physical locations is a poor choice today considering his own observations of the Internet’s ability to offer many of the same advantages associated with communities. Wellman instead defines communities, based on these benefits, as “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity. I do not limit my thinking about community to neighbourhoods and villages.”⁴³ McLaughlin et al approach the place question from a different perspective, noting that users talk about Usenet groups and other conceptual rather than physical spaces as they are “real” places to which they can go.⁴⁴ Putnam, in his discussion of social capital, focuses on relationships of trust and reciprocity between members as the key elements of a community.

Another possibility is that Go players, united by their common passion for the game, would be better described as a community of practice. “A community of practice (COP) is a group of people who come together to learn from each other by sharing knowledge and experiences about the activities in which they are engaged.”⁴⁵ Members answer each others’ questions and pursue their mutual activity, but Preece notes that they also “get support, reassurance, insights, and exposure to different value systems and beliefs.”⁴⁶ Furthermore,

⁴² George Hillery discusses 94 separate definitions in 1955’s *Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement*.

⁴³ Wellman, Barry. 2001. “Physical Place and CyberPlace: Rise of Personalized Networking,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol 25.

⁴⁴ McLaughlin, Margaret L, Kerry K Osborne, and Christine B. Smith. 1995. “Standards of conduct on Usenet,” *Cybersociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community*, S.G. Jones, ed. Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.

⁴⁵ Wenger, Etienne. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press as quoted in Preece, Jennifer. 2004. “Etiquette and Trust in Communities of Practice: Stepping Stones to Social Capital,” *Journal of Universal Computer Science*.

⁴⁶ Preece 2004, page 1.

Preece finds that etiquette and norms are essential criteria for a group of people to be a “community” of practice rather than just a group of people. “Ideal” communities of practice, she says, have communal resources that support their goals.

Go players easily meet these criteria. Go clubs and Go servers are communal resources and spaces. The etiquette and norms discussed earlier are actively debated among players online and in person. During a game, Go players receive advice about their play and sometimes about other aspects of their lives. The teaching and review elements are particularly valuable in providing support between members. This aspect of Go, online and in person, correlates to findings that information exchange is the primary form of support and reciprocity, a key element of network building, in virtual communities.⁴⁷ However, most of the relationships formed between players in the club tend to remain one dimensional. With some exceptions, club and Internet server members do not seem to often spend time together in activities other than Go, and this makes us hesitant to describe Go players as more than a community of practice.

Because networks formed among Go players tend to be weak, especially for activities beyond Go, we do not feel that what we have observed online and offline qualifies as traditional community. Rather than being defined by a sense of place (either physical or virtual), networks among Go players are defined by activity, and the strength of these networks is usually focused on the rather narrow scope of the activity of playing and studying Go. We also do not see people who played together doing other activities together, which we would expect from a community. However, communities of practice are just as dependent on trust and reciprocity for their success,⁴⁸ and so we do believe that Go can create social capital, particularly among youth who have been historically hard to involve. Putnam describes two types of social capital that community activities can help develop: bonding social capital, which ties together people of homogenous interests and backgrounds, and bridging social capital, which brings together people of heterogeneous interests and backgrounds. We have primarily seen bonding social capital developed through common goals and norms. Go’s proverbs, traditions, and history create a shared context that anthropologists have long noted to be a catalyst in the development of social

⁴⁷ Blanchard, Anita and Tom Horan. 2000. “Virtual Communities and Social Capital,” in *Social Dimensions of Information Technology*, C. David Garson, ed. North Carolina State University, page 10.

⁴⁸ Preece 2004, page 5.

capital.⁴⁹ In communities of practice, Lesser and Prusak observe that a clear system of experts who provide mentoring and training can be crucial to building social capital;⁵⁰ in Go, the ranking system and a normative expectation that people should often play weaker players to help them learn combine to produce the same effect.

We also observed the creation of some bridging social capital; Heather describes getting into a discussion about politics with a player in Turkey following an online game, a conversation spanning their national communities and facilitating an exchange of views that, without Go, would be quite unlikely. To some extent, the online servers that serve as “broker between people who want to play across the world,” as Adam describes them, are boundary objects – settings or situations that facilitate interactions between communities – that allow for bridging between people who are as dispersed in ideas and values as they are geographically. The range in ages of participants in Go clubs also brings together people of different perspectives, but the lack of gender diversity, and (at least at the MGA) remarkable uniformity in occupations of players likely somewhat limits the amount of bridging social capital. Go is a community of practice, and it creates links between people who are members of other communities of the traditional sense and as well as of practice.

Complementing Not Competing

In this paper, we have considered in some detail the ways in which the Internet has affected the Go community of practice. We have examined the differences between online and offline players, seen how Go has succeeded in engaging young players, and shown how Go players form a community of practice. We now return to the questions we posed in the introduction. What role does the Internet playing among Go players? Does it compete with the physical meetings of clubs, or complement the clubs’ missions?

Revisiting the original framework by Wellman and colleagues – does the Internet weaken, enhance, or transform the Go community? – we found that the Internet enhanced the Go community, but did not transform it. Players use online Go to supplement offline Go, particularly when in person play was not available but also to watch or review games and

⁴⁹ Daniel, Ben, Richard A. Schwier, and Gordon McCalla. 2003. “Social Capital in Virtual Learning Communities and Distributed Communities of Practice,” *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, volume 29(3).

⁵⁰ Lesser, Eric and Larry Prusak. August 1999. “Communities of Practice, Social Capital, and Organizational Knowledge.” IBM Institute for Knowledge Management.

improve their skills, activities to which the Internet is better suited than clubs. There is some evidence of transformation, in the form of players learning to play primarily online and building the “far-flung communities of shared interest” that Wellman describes as an indicator of transformed communities. Still, these online players typically end up becoming involved in offline clubs. The Internet also enables the AGA to publish the weekly *E-Journal*, helping to create a more significant national Go identity independent of offline clubs. The Internet enhances the Go community by allowing new players to become engaged in Go more readily. These players often begin attending clubs but still use the Internet to keep up with the game and develop their skills, and still feel connected to a larger Go community.

We return to Putnam’s observations. Why has Go continued to grow even as participation so many traditional community activities has declined? Part of the answer is probably that there were already relatively few Go players in America, and so the Internet has made it possible for more people to hear about Go and begin playing, even if they know of no other players in their local area. The American Go Association noted in their 2004 Annual Report:

The fears of a few years ago that the Internet servers would draw membership away from both chapters and the AGA is now dispelled by reports of people who learned on the Internet coming to clubs wanting to play on a real board. The once remarkable anecdote of a high kyu or even dan player showing at a club being clumsy playing with stones for the first time is no longer remarkable. Our challenge for the year to come is to do a better job of welcoming new members and retaining them.⁵¹

In addition to providing access for new players, the Internet Go servers allow existing members to continue playing in times when they cannot find an opponent in person. This may help Go retain some players, such as Paul, whose only way to play Go for a summer was over the Internet. At the same time as offering a compelling and challenging experience and indeed managing some experiences better than in person, such as watching and reviewing games, Internet Go servers are still unable to rival the personal aspect of sitting across a board from another person. For many, the Internet has become an integral part in learning and getting better so that they can have more enjoyable games in person.

⁵¹ American Go Association. 2004. *Annual Report*.
<http://www.usgo.org/resources/downloads/rpt2004.pdf>

People who start online, at least in the examples we heard, eventually begin to play in person. This strengthens the physical community, which in turn fosters the creation of valuable social capital. Other organizations would do well to consider the success of the Go community at harnessing the Internet, not to replace their existing community, but to strengthen it.