Complementing, Not Competing
An Ethnographic Study of the Internet and American Go Communities

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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
In this 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam assembles a convincing supply of evidence that civic engagement in this country is falling, and has been falling for a generation.\(^1\) He finds this to be true around the country, across demographic groups, and getting worse with each new generation. He is primarily interested 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.

Historically, clubs and organizations have played a large role in anchoring communities. They provide another venue for social interaction, outside of the home and work spheres. Often, these organizations have helped build social capital across social boundaries, bringing together people who might not otherwise know each other.

One of the biggest unknowns in *Bowling Alone* is the role played by the Internet. Putnam sees 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.”\(^2\) It is promising that the most popular uses of the Internet are features that connect people, not those that are solitary. So it seems that there is potential in the Internet, both to maintain longer-distance ties between old acquaintances, as well as to, hopefully, build new relationships.

Clubs and organizations have historically served as anchors for social capital creation and community building. They provide spaces independent of work and home for people to meet around a common interest. While the conversation about whether analogs to PTAs, Bowling Leagues, or VFW can exist online is valuable (we can probably cite some stuff here), we approach the issue from another perspective. Many of these organizations, frequently created between 1900 and 1940,\(^3\) have been slowly adopting Internet technologies. Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous now have websites, mailing lists, and

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forums. What role is the Internet playing in these groups? Does it 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 also feel that there are some specific reasons why Go players are important to study. Unlike the organizations noted by Putnam, whose memberships are in decline, the American Go Association, Go’s US national governing body, has over 2000 members, more than in any previous point in its history. More than three times that number subscribe to their weekly journal, distributed by email. While these numbers are low by most organization’s standards, 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. We feel that understanding the reasons for Go’s success is important, and might have broader lessons for those seeking to increase civic engagement.

**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 it, and how, in its much more recent history, it has evolved online. These details are a large part of the reason how the 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.

**Introduction to Go**

Go is a two player board game, played on a 19x19 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, and it is not profitable for either player to continue to add stones. The winner is the player who surrounds the most unoccupied territory on the board. Games can take anywhere from 10 minutes (blitz, speed Go) to 2 hours. Casual games are rarely played with a clock, and tournament games almost always are.

Players in Go are said to be a certain rank. Starting players are 30 kyu, and as they improve, numbers decrease. For example, a 10 kyu player could easily beat a 20 kyu player in an even game. 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, but even a 9-dan amateur would have a very hard time beating any professional player. This ranking system is calibrated to make it easy for players of different ranks to play games. If a 15 kyu player and a 10 kyu player want to play, they can add 5 black stones to the board (the weaker player is always black) on certain specified points. This, in theory, makes it a fair game between the two players. Up to 9 stones can be added in this way. This makes it possible for players of very different ranks to play meaningful games together.⁴

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 enlighten his son.⁵

In Asia, Go is hugely popular – played by more than 100 million people around the world. 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.⁶

In contrast, the American Go Association has only 2017 members.⁷ Only one American, Michael Redmond, plays at a professional level. Unlike in Asia, the vast majority of go clubs in the US don’t have dedicated space. Most meet on college campuses, in

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⁵ “Go History” 12 May 2005 [Senseis Library](http://senseis.xmp.net/?GoHistory)
⁶ “The Game To Beat All Games” 16 December 2004. The Economist
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.

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, with a window that looks out on the main room. Tables and spread evenly throughout the 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 cover 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, which is setup the same as the larger room.

On an average meeting night, 12-15 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 involved in some way or another with computer software. Games can sometimes become intense, but typically they are laid back, with players asking each other questions about the reason for a certain move, or griping about the impossibility of their situation. The ranks of the players are pretty well known, and match-making isn’t a big problem. Almost all of the games played are handicap games. Most of the players have played each other before, and so have a good sense of what a fair handicap is between them, beyond what their relative strengths might suggest.

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, which makes it easy for Tufts, MIT, and Harvard students, faculty, and staff to get there. Other Boston schools are only slightly farther away. The club runs four seasonal handicapped tournaments, which attract as many as 40 people. These tournaments, plus the annual membership dues of
$180 (discounted heavily for students/seniors) provide the money to pay the rent and other expenses. In this sense, the MGA is not a typical Go club. Its activity level, dedicated space, and frequent tournaments set it apart from the majority of other US Go clubs. If anything, players here are spoiled. The MGA provides a playing experience unavailable to most players around the country.

**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. 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. 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. IGS also has more non-English speaking players, and so is generally less social and welcoming of new players.

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

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8 “A Brief History of IGS, 1992,” 12 May 2005
among our interviewees is in part due to Mr. Shubert’s focus on providing a similar an 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 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.

IGS client g1Go. (A) console, (B) in-game, (C) game list, (D) list of users
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, both 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’ve 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 tools, and Go more generally. As with many newsgroups, RGG has a tendency to descend into meaningless argument, but it has still proved to be a very valuable record of conversations about social norms and etiquette online, as well as providing 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 the site is created by its readers, 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 attitudes of Go players more generally.

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 series. For him, there are not people around with whom he can catch a game, and he feels somewhat awkward playing anonymous people online, so Gabe currently most often watches online games or plays against a Go AI, Igowin.

Paul, who is about 20, learned to play from his physics teacher. Paul had been playing chess for a while, but the physics teacher, who was also the chess coach, 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 college student in suburban Massachusetts – he plays in person very infrequently but still managed 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 get more games. 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 computers 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 an 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, picked up Go at a trade show. She used to have a print shop, and 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. Most of the Go she plays now is her weekly teaching of children at a bookstore in a Boston suburb, 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,9 and codes that emerge from the interviews, also known as “inductive coding”10 or “open coding.”11 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.

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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 states\textsuperscript{12} – the point at which the challenges of the game exactly match the players’ ability to meet them. While other players didn’t bring up this 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.

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 of creation. Even the way in which pieces are held and placed on the board are formalized and dramatized. Hikaru-no-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.”

Go players are fond of their proverbs – short heuristic to help them think about the game. Some of them are very technical, used for remembering particular patterns, like “\textit{hane} at the head of two” or “strike at the waist of the \textit{keima}.” The more strategically oriented ones sound a lot more like Adam’s quotes, and have meaning beyond Go. For example, “don’t throw an egg at a wall” has a specific meaning to Go players, but is also a good general life idea. The same can be said for “a rich man never quarrels,” “play urgent points before big points,” and “give your opponent what they want.” In general, these

proverbs help players organize their thinking, much in the same way that religious proverbs serve as thinking prompts.

This way of thinking is a major element in why people play Go. 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 game is not just about giving someone something fun to do — it’s 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, who used to teach computers at the Day School of a prestigious university, 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 expected to teach the game to others, and be a good representative of the community to outsiders. For many, this expectation is part of the enjoyment of the game, and teaching can become a bigger part of their relationship to Go than actually playing the game.

Because of the relative popularity of Chess in the United States, Go players are constantly defining their choice of hobbies in terms of Chess. The perceived deficiencies of Chess, as understood by Go players, are too numerous to catalog here. The more popular complaints are that Chess requires too much memorization and not enough intuition, Chess computers can beat Chess masters – Go computers can barely play at an amateur level, “Go is war, Chess is just a battle,” and so on. Still, some Go players feel it is unjust to make negative comments about Chess, and strive to promote Go on its own merits.

Even for players who never played Chess seriously, it is still used to define their stories about why they play, or how they started to play Go. Paul shared with us an anecdote from another player he met at a tournament. This other player was trying to pick a game to study in some depth. He suggested chess, but “his father said ‘that game doesn’t involve any skill, try [Go]!’” Two of our interviewees also had stories about learning Go from
people who were primarily chess players, showing how both games attract similar kinds of people.

**The Relationship Between Online Go and Offline Go**

We focused our inquiry on exploring the perceived 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 it easier to get teaching games from stronger players or to discuss a particular Go problem in person. All of this, to him, adds up to being “not just Go.”

For Steven, the experience of going to his club is more than just Go as well, but for him the personal element is not the draw. Steven relives a bit of his college days 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; “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 its 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. There is something about Go that online play does not yet (and perhaps never will to some players) capture.

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’s 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. 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, 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
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,” and eventually reached a point where the others forgot him.

Players are somewhat 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. For Adam, who works at home, there are too many distractions to really focus on playing Go. 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 online. It’s 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.” This might be related to Harold’s feelings about disembodiment.

At the club, the situation is entirely different. Because the club is a separate space, people leave behind their other distractions and focus just on Go. David tells us that people bring him back to the game if he goes on a “loud tangent” in 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, and 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 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 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.

Differences in Online and Offline Users
The use of the Internet to support for Go players’ in-person activities contrasts with some of the early research of communities that have in-person and online components. In particular, our findings go against Dr. Joyce Nip’s study of Hong Kong-based lesbian activist group Queer Sisters.13 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

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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 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 their etiquette and norms. 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 being slightly more suited to serious games and review of games than in person play, and associated differentiation in the uses of the different media. 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.

**Etiquette, Norms and Values of the Go Community**

Part of what holds a community together are its shared ideas about etiquette, norms, and values. We would expect to find active discussion about what is and is not acceptable. Historically, Go had pretty much worked out these issues. Now, with the advent of online play and a much wider audience for the game, new systems are being negotiated.
Etiquette, Online and Offline

Go’s aesthetic includes a certain amount of etiquette; both Sensei’s Library\textsuperscript{14} and IGS’s website\textsuperscript{15} include etiquette guidelines. General topics include how to ask for a game, saying thank you for a game, and reviewing the game. Proper use of handicaps are a major etiquette point, as they help make the game enjoyable for the weaker player and still challenging for the stronger play. Go players also consider it impolite to not respect their opponent’s strength. This means that they shy away from trick moves, since 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 play in person. Some of this is traditional, such as nigiri, or the process by which players will determine who will play which color of stones, and the traditional first move in the upper right corner. Others relate to concentration. Players are supposed to 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 followed very strictly. Unlike the traditions, these norms 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 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 them, though it is polite to defer to the person who wishes to talk the least. Most of our interviewees were more concerned about the amount they talk 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 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. Still, “escaping” does happen. 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 on Yahoo!: “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.” Services such as KGS which 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 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 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.

Rights of Online Go Players
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 (RGG). 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 they have no idea why their accounts were locked. One user, Roger, says 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 because he had gotten into public disputes with IGS supporters:

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.

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

This raises an important 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, or 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.

**Player Types**

To understand the norms of an online community it is necessary to understand the different types of people that inhabit it. While we didn’t do this ourselves, we suggest that the methodology used by Ginsburg in his study of the Internet Chess Club\(^\text{16}\) would be a good place to start. In his study, he identifies five different types of players: Chess Players, Social Addiction, Enjoy ICC, Anarchists, and Flirts. Such a categorization for KGS sounds like a reasonable place to start, and would go along way towards understanding how Go differs from other online game communities. We would expect that because of Go’s intangible offline value, that the distribution of players would be noticeably different. It is possible that we just did not interview people from groups other than KGS’s equivalent of Chess Players, but we feel that it is more likely that Chess Players type personalities are more dominant on KGS, likely because of the ways that Go as a game is different from Chess as a game, as well as differences in community attitudes. If this were true, it would help explain how etiquette, norms, and values have developed online.

**Youth Adoption of Go**

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam attributes much of the decline in civic engagement to changes in generational values\(^\text{17}\). 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

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\(^\text{17}\) Putnam 2000, 277.
updated version of Scouting’s ingenious combination of values and fun.” 18 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 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)19 – a Japanese comic book and animated television show, first released in 1998. The plot follows a 6th grade student named Hikaru Shindo, who discovers an old Goban 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.20

The comics also use both explicit and implicit ways of teaching readers about the game. Interspersed among the plot pages are little “ads,” explaining the rules of Go, posing simple Go problems, and 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.21

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18 Putnam 2000, 406
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, 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. 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; what opportunities might this mixing of ages present?

Researchers Shepherd Zeldin, Trisha Day, and Gary Matysik at the University of Wisconsin have developed a Program Activity Assessment Tool (PAAT) that evaluates whether youth programs are helping “youth to develop into productive and healthy adults.” They find that optimal programs will encourage “exploration and reflection,” by

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engaging children’s curiosity in a hands-on way, and 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. 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 an older player 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 the characteristics of the challenge, 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. 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 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. Instead, most of the pressure seems to come from
the players themselves.

The challenges offered by the game Go as well as the environments in which is played are supportive for youth development. In our observations, this occurs 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.”24

Research also consistently proves that interaction with caring adults in “organized recreational activities” during non-school hours can contribute to students’ success.25 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.26 David’s story,

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.

appears to contradict research showing better performance in school. However, our observations and research 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 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 Go the “community” is or is not a community as formally understood by sociologists. Sociology accepts multiple definitions of

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


community\textsuperscript{27}, though most focus on interpersonal relations and/or physical neighborhoods. Wellman finds that looking first to physical locations is a poor choice today, and chooses to define communities 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.”\textsuperscript{28} Putnam, in his discussion of social capital, focuses on relationships of trust and reciprocity between members 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.”\textsuperscript{29} Members have their questions answered and pursue their mutual activity, but Preece notes that they also “get support, reassurance, insights, and exposure to different value systems and beliefs.”\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, 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 possibly the free Go servers, are communal resources and spaces. Etiquette and norms – both for game play and for how the groups function and accept members – are actively debated among members of the community. During a game, Go players receive advice about their play and sometimes for other aspects of their lives. The teaching and review elements are particularly valuable in providing support between members. However, most of the relationships formed between players in the club tend to remain one dimensional. With some notable exceptions, club 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 from Go players tend to be weak, especially for activities beyond Go, we do not feel that what we have observed qualifies as traditional community. However, communities of practice are just as dependent on trust and reciprocity for their

\textsuperscript{27} George Hillery discusses 94 separate definitions in 1955’s \textit{Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement}.
\textsuperscript{30} Preece 2004, page 1.
success, and so we do believe that Go activities have value for social capital, particularly with respect to youth engagement. We have primarily seen bonding social capital developed through common goals and norms. Lesser and Prusak also propose that a key implication of social capital in communities of practice in corporations is that managers should identify a clear system of experts to provide mentoring and training. 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. 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 that allow for bridging between people who are as dispersed in ideas and values as they are geographically. Go is a community of practice, but it nonetheless bridges between people who are members of other communities of the traditional sense as well as of practice.

Conclusions

Wellman proposes 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
- 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.

Wellman proposes that of the communities he studied, transformation was the most typical result. We found that in our study, the Internet enhanced the Go community. Players reported using online Go to supplement their offline Go experience, which made it easier for them to keep playing the game, even when they could not make time to play offline. We believe this has played an important role in growing the Go community nationally. While enhancement is the primary interaction, there is some evidence of transformation as well. Because the AGA can interact frequently with its members through the E-Journal, a more

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national Go identity is being built, independent of offline clubs. Because of this, the Internet has played a major role in the success and growth of the Go community at large.

We return, in the end, to Putnam’s concerns. Why has Go continued to grow even as so many traditional activities have declined? Part of the answer 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.”

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. We speculate that 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. However, for many, the Internet has become an integral part in learning and getting better so that they can have more enjoyable games in person. People who start online, at least in the examples we heard, eventually begin to play in person. This in turn 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 as a way to replace their existing community, but as a way to make it stronger.