

GO CULTURE IN THE EMERALD CITY

by Player Zero

If in a meditative moment you should let fall to your perfectly polished mahogany desk that fascinating proposal to Improve Everything From Messituppe & Glitch and instead glance out the windows of your elegant office in the graceful spire of the Chrysler building, you will see across the East River the unprepossessing precincts of Long Island City. There is nothing to recommend this view of low tenements and squat electrical warehouse except a single green enormity rising full fifty stories above its tawdry neighbors. This is One Court Square, the New Citicorp Center, or, as it is generally referred to by its denizens, the Emerald City. (The thinking there is so like that in Oz.)

This enormity is ruled by John Reed. (No, not John Reed the hero of *Reds*, the only American buried in the Kremlin. A different John Reed.) This other John Reed, who has had the good sense to keep his office in the more tastefully designed *Old Citicorp Center* on 53rd Street (now owned by a Japanese firm) is the chairman of the board of Citicorp. And he is a go player. This is actually fairly well known. In a recent interview with the *Harvard Business Review*, Mr. Reed spent some time expanding on the similarities between strategies for global banking and the game of go. Less well known is the fact that a go culture is growing inside the Emerald City, much as some environmentally stressed bacterium might grow a mutant strain in a green petri dish.

Genesis

This contamination was introduced, as one might expect, by a consultant. But it has now spread not only from consultant to consultant but also to officers of the corporation as high as vice president. Those who succumbed first played only in a closed office at noon. When the absence of these few from the obligatory lunchtime bouts of Tetris was first noted, curiosity was piqued. The infection spread from office to office, then burst into full flower with go openly played in the cafeteria every day. One or two members of the corporation in whom go had long lain dormant began hanging about the games and soon were drawn into playing as well. One chess player held out for quite some time but, his only partner having been drawn deep into the whirl of stones, he too eventually succumbed.

What is this culture like? How do the stresses and strains of international banking in this harrowing day of lending hazards and tightly targeted marketing, affect those who come to this meditative game of territory, death and survival? As one would fear, the culture is strange and the players bizarre.

Taxonomy

None of the players is strong; the best among them is eight kyu on a good day. He was only 15 kyu (if that) when he "taught" the others. They retained the deformities attendant upon such a start in life, just as those whose first computer language was BASIC carry that scar for all time.

Odd things develop in such a culture. Errors are, of course, common. For the first six months or so, mistakes of the most elementary kind were quite frequent. Some players would put stones into the tiger's mouth crying "Atari!" at full throat (often when it actually was). Others, during a race to capture, would attack their opponents with a vicious self-atari. Due perhaps to natural variation in species, certain players turned out to be more prone to one type of error than another. Eventually, particular mistakes came to be identified with certain players.

What was the response of such a group to these identifications? Well, as good capitalist tools (or perhaps these days we should say "market enforcers"), they naturally patented their mistakes. Mike Ryan owns the patent on playing into the tiger's mouth; Steve Sutton owns playing into atari on the first line; Daphne Grosset-Ryan has the rights to self-atari; Mike Roth holds the "non-atari" patent - that is, calling atari when your opponent has more than one liberty left. Anyone committing one of the patented errors must pay a penny to the owner of the patent. A good bit of money has changed hands in this way.

In the stress of their environment, each member has developed certain compensating mechanisms:

Stuart Whalen *always* plays sente. You might ask, "How can one always play sente?" In a recent game, Stu had eight groups in atari. Needless to say, on his next turn he answered not a one of them, playing instead an invasion of a thoroughly secured area. Known as "Sente Stu", he is rightly feared (among us) for his devotion to the proverb, "When you can cut, cut!"

Steve Sutton talks to the stones. When about to invade, he will raise up his stone and whisper to it, "Here's your knife and parachute and don't forget, your code name is Stu." Sometimes he tries to propagandize his prisoners. More than once he has been heard to tell captured White stones, "Turn to the Dark Side!"

Daphne Grosset-Ryan and Mike Roth, both charter members of the League Of Quiet People, are the opposite of Sente Stu. They strive never to contact any enemy stone except to build mutually acceptable walls. The sort of game they play naturally requires long periods of thought. The pleasure of viewing such a game has been described as "Like watching a truck rust."

Tony Stackow professes a preference to *watching* go over *playing* it. In fact, he says he only plays so that he can sharpen up his watching. When he plays, he tries to get through the opening as quickly as possible "so that there is something to think about." He has been known to play two and three stones at a turn, finding it hard to believe that his opponent hasn't played in the half-second it takes him to get the next stone out of his bowl.

He does take some pleasure in go, though. He's known to the rest of the group as the "Undertaker" for his inordinate delight in watching groups die. Whenever any large group is in peril, Tony suspends his game so he can watch. He often implores players to let him remove the dead stones. He caresses them in his hand remarking "They feel different when they're dead."

Ming-sen Hwang, who has not played go since junior high school, recently joined the group. In spite of his Chinese heritage his approach to the game is wonderfully Irish: he doesn't know what he wants and he'll fight anyone to get it. You can count on him attaching to the third stone you put down. (He usually captures it too.) When Min plays Sente Stu, the undertaker refuses to play so that he can watch the carnage. Ming's fighting is so superior that it has been agreed that if he ever actually looks at the whole board before deciding on his move, he will have to be killed.

Steve Sutton is the inventor. Like all inventors, his inspiration derives from sheer laziness. (When his opponent counts, he always asks, "How did it come out?") Steve has invented special glasses which he plans to sell to the techno-ravenous go community. The left lens has a ladder pattern etched on it and rotates so you can fit it to any situation on the board and save all that tiresome "Black here, White there, Black here . . ." The right lens, also rotatable, will be inscribed with several common snapback positions. They will of course be sold as "reading glasses."

As befits a group so deeply embedded in the free enterprise tradition, they often look to the market to solve their go problems. For example, if Steve Sutton has gotten a couple of stones into his opponent's corner and wants to make life there, he might sub-contract the job to small-life consultant Mike Roth. Anyone who wants to begin a hopeless invasion calls on Stu Whelan. Players who can't figure out what wall plan to use often retain Daphne Grosset-Ryan ("Just keep putting your stones along one of these black lines. Pay no attention to what your opponent does.") Mike Ryan, whose inaccurate reading while kibitzing is legendary, is often asked to give advice to the opponent. Fees for these services vary.

In addition to this open festering of go, a strange muted strain of covert go fever has developed among those who refuse to play any humans, but secretly play *Many Faces Of Go* or *Nemesis* on their computers; surely a strain in which the go mutation is recessive.

Prognosis

What of the future?

The members of the Citicorp culture have developed a theory, based primarily on the recognized fact that they themselves are not getting any stronger. After all, the players all still lose about half their games so they can't be improving.

Mike Ryan, who taught them and could give them enormous handicaps at first, barely holds his own on the White stones these days, so it follows that he must be getting worse.

Mike and his wife Daphne also play outside of the Citibank go culture, primarily at the Brooklyn Go Club, where their handicaps continually improve. Since we already know that Mike's strength is actually decreasing, it appears that the strength of the Brooklyn Go Club is also dropping, no doubt from their contact with the Citicorp go culture.

Now, the Brooklyn Go Club numbers among its members not only the President of the AGA but several others who at times play go in Japan, China, Korea and other places. Since *they* do not show a decrease in strength internationally, we can only conclude that the entire worldwide go playing community is being dragged down by contamination from the Citibank go culture.

The Citicorp players predict that five years from now, *no one* will play go, out of sheer embarrassment. Those who scoff should remember that bankers have a certain amount of experience with such matters. Remember the S & L's?