

AIs and Me

ATTILA EGRI-NAGY
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In short, I'm happy with the existence of AI engines for playing Go. Though I regret missing the opportunity of being a stronger player than any computer program. Reaching dan level, before the Monte Carlo Tree Search algorithms got into full swing, would have done that. However, this is just the problem of vanity. The benefits are way bigger.

Availability is great. The best way to improve is playing against stronger players. In a family with two little kids, there is no time for going to Go salons and tournaments. For similar reasons, when playing online I'm restricted to correspondence games. Therefore, it is helpful to have strong AI engines available for practice. They can play 24/7 and they don't mind pausing the game when I get interrupted.

Some engines often play the same standard sequences (josekis) and they seem to have a limited repertoire. For instance, I can predict what Igowin HD (on iOS) will play if I take the tengen on 9×9 . This could be viewed as boring, but it's a great exercise to explore variations, trying to eke out a bigger victory each time.

What bothers me is inconsistency, uneven strength. Strong winning moves followed by silly ones. For example self-atari in a tiger's mouth (not in a ko fight). SmartGo (on iOS) does that sometimes.

It's nice to win against AIs. One can enjoy winning without worrying about the feelings of the opponent. Of course, this is only possible if the engine is calibrated to the right level. As of now, GnuGo (level 10) seems to be exactly on my level for the 9×9 board. I have about 50% chance of winning. Classical AIs are reliable opponents. After heavy losses against human players I often challenge GnuGo to boost my morale and recover my rating. If I make a mistake GnuGo wins, but if I pay attention, then there should be no surprise. Sometimes GnuGo blunders, but often I have a meaningful game with it. After all, it is well prepared for life and death problems, so playing it on the small board is a good tsumego exercise.

Playing against an AI means that I can't have any bad excuses. I can't blame my opponent for confusing me on purpose with some strange moves. It's all on me entirely. A good measure of my skills without the psychological noise. Interestingly, I frequently have a losing streak after a series of wins against the same fixed AI. That is clearly due to my own tiredness, my psychological dynamics of emotional processes. This is yet another way to use AIs to know ourselves better.

I haven't yet incorporated into my Go studies the features offered by modern Go engines. I know that professionals now train with systems that tell the winning percentages of each move. That is good if you can understand the reasoning behind the winning chance. I probably need a deeper understanding of the game before taking advantage of these features.