

## Kyu Level Baduk

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Kyu players suck! Nah — just kidding. Think about it — that statement doesn't make any sense in the first place. Ability is relative!

It was only during my first four years playing Baduk that I was really devoted to my improvement — back then you'd seldom find anyone more devoted or enthusiastic! While I no longer aspire to reach the top and other priorities and dream pursuits have taken precedence in my life, one conceptual weapon remains ever sharp and lustrous: my love of teaching. Don't get me wrong, I still train myself here and there. Like anyone who has sold their soul to the goban, I simply cannot stand letting my game degrade to a rusty, clumsy *Bad-uk*.

Despite my eight or so years' playing experience, the fraction of that spent as a kyu player was definitely the most memorable. I can still vividly recall my thoughts and experiences from those times and this ability contributes to my confidence in teaching others. I hereby offer a piece of this recollection through writing in what I hope to be a sympathetic summary of kyu level thinking that can serve as a guide for students of Baduk through their ambiguous — albeit joyous — struggle as they chase after the fleeting mirage of “true strength.” In this article, I will address the mistaken thinking of kyu and faulty dan level players, hopefully expanding their Baduk paradigms.

First of all — and this is addressed to at least half if not all kyu level readers — stop spending so much time studying opening and joseki patterns!

By saying that, I have just become the CGA's biggest hypocrite. But here's what I mean: think about the ratio of time you spend studying these things versus the time you spend studying tsumego, endgame, middle-game tactics, and other such small-scale (or large but stone-filled) puzzles. It's fine that you think big and like to apply abstract and strategic ideas to the game — and that's great because it's integral to good play! But there are more efficient ways to quickly improve your Baduk and, at times, the saying “no pain, no gain” becomes quite practical.

I used to focus heavily on the abstract and creative areas of Baduk, such as opening theory, because I found them the most enjoyable. This got me to about 2nd dan. After that, however, I had to seriously — *seriously* — work on my reading and middle-game tactics; basically, I sucked at “fighting.” Oh, that's a funny word, and I have something to say about it later. Anyway, I've asked a few professional players, “which do you think is the most difficult part of Baduk?” One common answer was that the opening is the most important decider of games — between professionals, that is. They all agreed that for amateurs the middle-game takes the cake. Many amateurs come up with vehement justifications for their skewed focus on the opening (and

consequently, joseki), clearly trying to avoid tsumego, endgame, and other tactically convoluted areas of study. I'll say it again — no pain, no gain!

I have no intention of refuting the importance of studying joseki or the opening. However, I believe that once your understanding of the opening is at least on par with your overall level you should focus your studies on the gritty, detailed tactics of Baduk. Are your opening skills greater than those of others around your level, or at least greater than those associated with your approximate Baduk rating? If so, then logically other aspects of your Baduk must be below par since your overall success in games — your level — is an average of these skills (and of other factors, discussed later). Developing skills of reading and shape sensitivity requires persistent effort, but their effects on your overall Baduk ability are immensely more crucial than anything else you may be studying. Even as a higher level dan player, I find myself constantly falling behind from the opening. Yet, I still win plenty.

In recent years I've had great confidence in matches against 5th dan players and generally perform just fine against 6th dan opponents as well — perhaps because I have become one myself. But as previously mentioned, one recent trend is that I tend to fall behind in the opening, even against some 4th dan opponents. Having played thousands of games already, I play a lot of experimental moves, hoping for intriguing and novel developments. If experimenting in this way were consequential enough, I would have learned my lesson by now, especially regarding tournament results. Yet, this “fun” approach has yet to hinder my results, as I often find some way to turn games around by reading a lot and taking risks. In fact, as far as recent tournaments are concerned, I've managed just fine even at 6th dan. Clearly then, although the opening is important, it isn't everything; amateurs usually defeat each other through superior reading complemented by creativity. Reading and creative thinking are of paramount importance!

When we speak of ratings, or “strength” as we Baduk players put it, we have a tendency to make excuses and give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. This of course depends on the person, and is something I've not only done, but experienced a great deal through social Baduk interactions. While some players will inflate their supposed rating — especially on the cusp of 1st dan — the more universal fallacy at play is the justification of their Baduk rating or performing ability through excuses (in endless supply). One day during my five months learning Baduk in Korea, I was unhappy about having lost a seemingly won game due to poor time management and my opponent's tactics of time pressure exploitation. In retrospect, it was all fair game. A teacher of mine said, in response to my excuse-riddled denial, “that's your skill.” Eventually, this simple little line really struck home and I started to reconceptualize “strength” altogether.

Baduk strength is not simply the *skill* of a player, neither is it “the rating that would be achieved should internal and external hindrances be controlled for.” Strength is discernible only through game results; anything beyond that is meaningless. For example, players will make a blunder, missing an atari or some kind of disconnection, and consider it unrelated to their Baduk strength.

That is nothing but wishful delusion. Skills, knowledge, experience, concentration, health, stamina, and all other affective factors comprise what we ought to conceptualize as our “strength.” Some other common examples of self-delusion are thoughts like, “I beat this guy who says he’s 2nd dan, so I guess I’m at least 2nd dan now.” Get real. Assessment of one’s Baduk level is done by averaging the results of a long string of games over at least a few days or weeks — without excluding a single game.

High level players don’t walk around with a scouting gadget over one eye, ready to measure your strength at a moment’s notice. I’ve seen interactions between dans and kyus wherein the weaker player, 11th kyu or 6th kyu or some other kyu level, would ask the dan player for a rating guesstimate upon completion of their teaching game. The dan, thinking either to boost his friend’s self-esteem, justify the merciful shape of the game result, or even just out of indifference, might bring surprise to the anticipating eyes of his friend with a flattering reply like “3rd kyu” or “1st dan.” The truth is that higher level players often can’t tell how strong you are, as playing you may feel the same to them whether you’re 10th kyu, 7th kyu, or 4th. When someone’s guess regarding your Baduk rating is significantly off from what you’d thought, it’s most likely just that: way off. Regardless of how accurately a stronger player can identify your rating for you, immediately accepting the new idea like some sort of medal or certificate is dubious; you must form an idea only after gathering sufficient evidence.

Sometimes players will take any chance they get to inflate their supposed rating and then proudly immortalize that achievement even should their short-lived glory return to the regular trend from mere days prior. Sometimes players will exclude certain games from their average because they were sick, tired, stressed, not paying attention, or blundered during the game. First of all, blunders are a part of our strength. That’s why some players blunder more than others and why higher dan players blunder a lot less than kyu and lower dan players do. Secondly, it’s no one’s fault but the players’ for lacking focus or for playing when they may be at a disadvantage. To properly assess your level you must include all game results and nothing more or less; it doesn’t make sense to include games you won while you were sick, for example, but exclude the ones you lost while in the same state. In the world of Baduk, results are everything and no one understands this truth better or more painfully than do professional players. If we’re going to obsess about ratings, we might as well be a little professional about it.

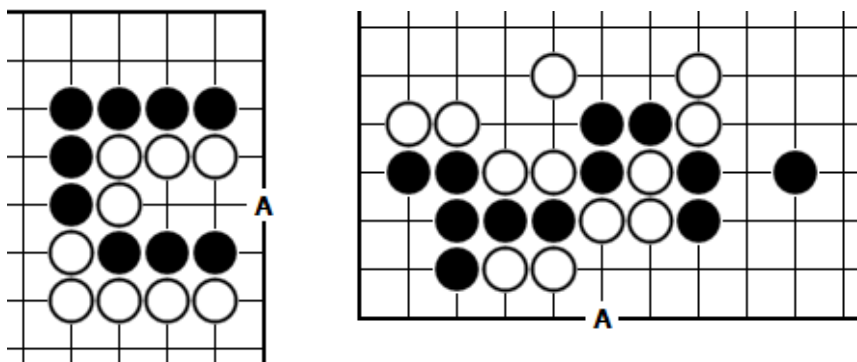
It’s time to follow up on some things I’ve touched upon thus far, starting with joseki. There are proverbs along the lines of, “learn joseki and lose two stones’ strength,” and other advice to this effect circulating around the Baduk world. But there are two sides to this coin as far as this particular proverb is concerned. The message conveyed is that relying on joseki too much can distract from whole-board analysis and inhibit creativity and fresh thinking. Kyus need to learn that dan players choose their joseki only after thinking about the whole board situation and planning ahead (i.e. analyzing every side and corner position, including empty ones). The status of a sequence as joseki or not is utterly meaningless. Even a locally detrimental result can lead to

a win on the board. A lot of kyu players just immediately plop down one of the few joseki they know and, if asked why, they say something akin to “it’s all I know,” or worse: “It’s joseki.” A greater problem than these players knowing only a few joseki is the fact that they feel limited to them, neglecting to think for themselves and make something up.

The worst problem I have with the proverb, “learn joseki and lose two stones’ strength” is the fact that the players who actually know or care about this proverb are often the ones who misunderstand it. As I recall, pretty much everyone who’s ever mentioned this proverb to me was someone who, as eventually became apparent, gravely misunderstood it. To some players it’s the perfect excuse to skip out on one area of study. I’ve heard several people mention the first part of the proverb, but I’ve never heard anyone utter the rest of it. I looked it up, and apparently it reads thus: “Learn joseki and lose two stones’ strength. Study joseki and gain four stones’ strength.”

A lot of Baduk proverbs are horribly misunderstood, so we should remind ourselves that they’re not to be taken literally, as they’re generally of poetic nature. Let me give you a great example. When I was some kind of s. d. k. (single-digit kyu) I was playing at the Toronto Go Club one evening and my opponent, then 8th kyu, captured one of my stones even though there were urgent matters elsewhere on the board. When questioned — no, without having even been asked — he said, “thirty points,” in a confident, reminding tone. This is why proverbs are not to be taken literally. Thirty points is on the higher end for the value of a ponnuki shape, since most of these occur near an edge of the board or in some otherwise less-than-ideal context. With my opponent neglecting to account for context, it was almost inevitable that I would win that game.

I learned a great deal from studying joseki. I used the old *Ishida's Dictionary of Basic Joseki* volumes and learned joseki whenever I could — during spares at school, at home, at the Korean Baduk club I frequented after school, and so on. While I can’t say I’ve always studied joseki in the most fruitful manner, I remember generally engaging with the joseki variations I was learning one move at a time, playing out potential variations I was curious about and studying the extra variations these dictionaries would include, such as naturally occurring capturing races. Sometimes the extra variations, although convoluted and ever-branching, taught me crucial Baduk techniques that have surely won me countless games by now. For example, first-line tesuji for capturing races.



Joseki are not memorized to be permanently remembered. True strength, after all, is the ability to apply to novel situations techniques derived from the study of more common ones. We should aim for fluid as opposed to crystallized intelligence in Baduk, though the latter, as explained earlier, can in fact lead us to the former.

Back in my kyu and lower dan days I memorized *at least* five or six hundred joseki variations, though I eventually forgot many of them. Having learned the lessons they had to offer, I couldn't care less about having forgotten them. Not only did I learn about shape and various techniques for close combat, capturing races, and creating the impetus for desirable continuations, I also learned through exposure training how to assess the results of corner sequences. These skills have proven invaluable, and, if nothing else, have developed my ability to judge positions, thereby improving my ability to hone in on optimal variations during the reading process. After all, "the journey is the reward." By the way, this proverb applies especially well to the solving of tsumego.

There are many reasons why the universal advice for any Baduk player is to do more tsumego. Note that "doing" should be interpreted as "working through" them as opposed to "solving" them. Think of it this way: learning the answer to a problem cuts down its usefulness. Remember: "The journey is the reward." Kyu players are by default generally poor at reading — in the eyes of relatively strong players, that is. It's important to understand this, rather than doubting your own ability to practice or develop the skill. Think of it like a muscle; even the best of us were at one point terrible at reading. Strong players can read well because they failed, failed, and failed again — but kept at it!

Anyone who questions the worth of tsumego training probably hasn't done it consistently over at least a couple of weeks or months and is probably not very good at reading. People have actually asked me about the worth of tsumego, failing to understand how that worth manifests itself in every stage of the game. Regardless of if they were 30th kyu, 3rd kyu, or 3rd dan players, none of these people had any real reading skills either. A deep understanding of life and death can

insightfully motivate decisions even during the opening stage, such as making a checking extension, reinforcing a group, planning an invasion, and so on.

One of the many issues with skimping out on tsumego practice is that you'll hit some really hard walls along the way. Another is that you'll lose to players below your level due to lacking leverage over them in complicated situations. A third is that you'll rarely, if ever, pull off unexpected victories against stronger players. Reading power is to a Baduk player as weapons are to a soldier; you can try running at your opponent with nothing but your fists and a loud, hysterical battle cry, but you're basically dead if you do so unless they've forgotten all their ammo back at the base. Rules of thumb are not going to cut it forever.

Kyu players tend to have either an inflated or a deflated opinion of how well dan players can read. Sometimes they won't believe it when you tell them you can read twenty or thirty moves ahead, regardless of how many variations you're talking about. It goes without saying that they won't believe you when you say you can read out a ladder in under three seconds. Most "legitimate" dan players, especially those above 4th dan, should be used to basic ladders to the point of heuristic recognition, reading them out almost instantly. Playing games is another great way to develop the skill of reading, due to the pressure. However, this is less true for players more conservative (lazy or uninspired) about reading in their games. Not only should you read out everything that's happening as much as you can, you should also read the things that have yet to happen, or that may never happen at all. This is how you come up with interesting in-game ideas or catch on to critical weaknesses in yours or your opponents' positions.

"The journey is the reward;" calculating everything you can in your games grants you greater chances of victory and also heightens your Baduk skills for the long haul. Both in tsumego solving and in competition, "the journey is the reward."

Never convince yourself that it's pointless trying to read things out, just because it seems difficult or futile. Everyone has felt that way before and everyone starts from there. I *guarantee* that, as most players are casual and honestly pretty lazy when it comes to reading and tsumego solving, persevering and forcing yourself to read frequently and indiscriminately will eventually forge you a mighty weapon far outshining the plastic butter knives held two-handedly by your peers.

Doing this for an entire game is what high level Baduk is all about. Reading ability is of utmost importance, especially since raw reading skill is hardly limited by one's overall Baduk level. There's no reason why a 5th kyu can't power through tsumego until his solving ability is that of a 5th dan. At least as far as corner life and death is concerned, anyway.

While overall playing level does not restrict reading ability, an increase in reading ability does, on the other hand, usually increase overall Baduk strength. While it's true that dan players can



easily read out branch after branch of ten- or even thirty-move sequences depending on the person and context, sometimes we have a kind of “stored reading,” or heuristic, for situations that occur in just about every game of Baduk — for example, ladders, push-and-cut sequences, and so on. When a situation is both heuristic and truly linear, like your typical ladder sequence, it should be no surprise that even a twenty- or forty-move ladder could be read out in under five seconds.

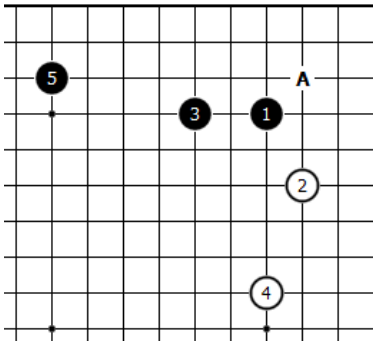
Let’s switch to how some kyu players overestimate us dan players. Sometimes they think we’re reading branches of forty or sixty moves each. I can’t say that’s impossible but, coherently, we can only read that far when the situation is predictable and when some or all of it is linear. Doing this sort of complex reading may entail reading out one part then reading deeper by continuing from there to other parts of the board. This style of reading can seem difficult or impossible, but it’s just another reading skill that develops over time through practice. Reading something like forty or fifty moves ahead is not unheard of at all, though in some more complex situations even twenty moves may be quite the feat. The point to take home is that a large portion of the reading dan players appear to do in their games is not reading at all, but rather something recognized heuristically due to experience.

Earlier I mentioned how “fighting,” as it pertains to Baduk, is a funny word. “Going against your opponent’s plans” or “playing aggressively and attacking whenever possible” is the wrong way to think about it. As far as real Baduk is concerned, there are just too many things wrong with those modes of thinking. Seeking to obstruct your opponent’s plans is a perfectly effective and natural instinct for Baduk. But what if your opponent’s plans aren’t even good? For kyu players especially it can be really difficult to devise the blueprints for victory. For this reason, that kind of antagonistic thinking should be secondary, as it can lead to self-destruction if it gets the better of you. The primary mode of thinking should involve formulating your own plans and making decisions that will lead to victory. It’s also important to be flexible, willing to completely change your plan on a move’s notice. This is huge in Baduk. Strong players will destroy you if you’re unwilling to change course. All it takes is an iceberg or two to sink you if you play that way.

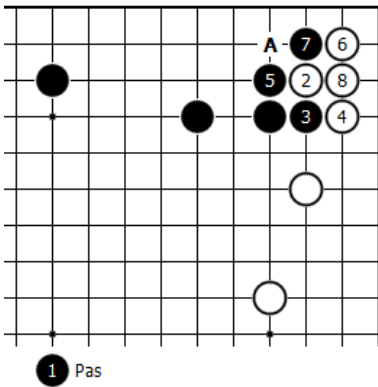
“Fighting” in Baduk means making every possible effort to win, refusing to relinquish even a single half-point ko that you could reasonably expect to win. A pacifistic manner of play is perfectly fine if it’s the surest path to victory and, as such, should also count as “fighting” — that is, fighting to prevent the opponent from turning the game around.

The term “fighting spirit” is often misconstrued in the same manner. Don’t let your opponent pressure you into a complicated situation they call “fighting” if your goal is to win the game. Read, calculate, think about what it’s going to take to win the game, and decide for yourself which course of action to take. Cowardice and reservation are two different things; the former has no place in high level Baduk, while the latter does and is often justifiable. Baduk is not a game played against your opponent, but against your self.

Let me pass on some advice that worked for me but may not work for everyone: the value of influence and strong shapes is heavily reliant on a player's understanding of Baduk. Kyu players are generally better at securing territory near the edges of play than they are at attacking, securing a large territorial framework, or close combat in general. This is because the art of securing side and corner territories safely and efficiently can be learned from any book and generally isn't complex or even skill intensive. While I don't recommend adopting a purely territorial or pacifist style of play, as exemplified in my aforementioned summary of personal progress, I believe that a territorial mode of thinking can benefit any novice or intermediate player and teach them how to control and predict game results. Even some advanced players could be in for a big surprise regarding the specific point values of common moves. Allow me to elaborate!



This is a common corner position that is generally left as is until some time during the middle-game. The local continuation here for white is the invasion at 'A.'



The moves up to 8 are a set sequence. The exchange of 7 for 8 is beneficial to black even without connecting at 'A' afterwards. The move at 'A' for either player is left for later. Having completed her corner invasion up to 8, white would be ecstatic if black were to immediately connect at 'A' and give up the initiative. However, the move at 'A' is large enough that it's sometimes played even before the early endgame.

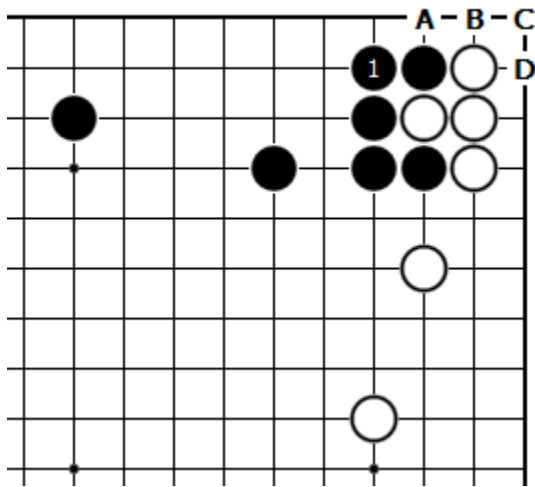
Roughly how many points do you think it's worth?





around 'B,' 'C,' or 'D' — the modest count assumes that they will eventually have stones located on the triangled points, blocking off territory. Thus, black has at least six points here and white has at least fourteen including one from the captured stone at 'A.' Thus, we can say that when white captures the stone at 'A,' it results in white having eight more points than black.

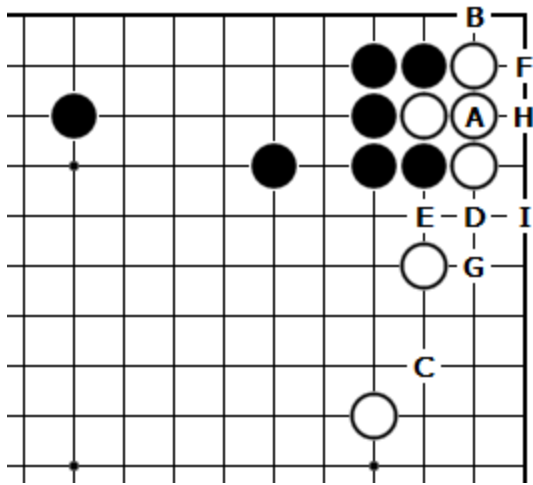
However, we must realize that the one-stone capture has resulted in a weakness in black's shape. In the diagram on the right, white can choose to clamp at 'B' rather than playing out the endgame peacefully. Up to 'E,' white can next play 'F' or 'G' and give black a hard time. This also means that black may have to let white connect under, which loses him a lot of territory.



Next, we must consider what happens if black connects his stone. However, it's a little tricky in this case. Since neither black 'B' nor white 'A' will be sente, neither of them count as privileges, in which case we'd normally split it off evenly by imagining a black stone at 'A' and a white stone at 'B.' But here, that wouldn't be quite even. The corner is special. While black 'A' increases black's territory by one point, white 'B' increases hers by two. Therefore, the best even split we can imagine is having a black stone at 'A' and white stones on both 'B,' and 'C.'

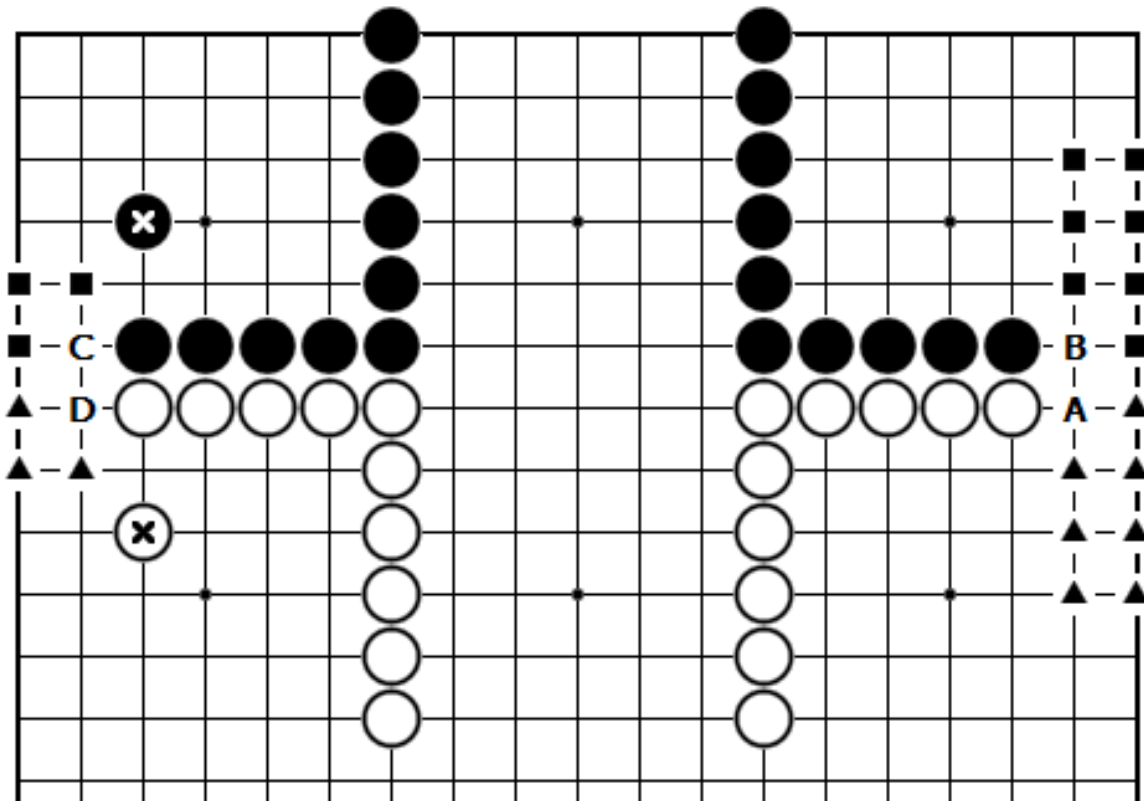
Using the same counting method as earlier we find that black has at least thirteen points and white has at least ten. Since we find that this time black has three points more than white, we can add that to the result that gave white eight points more than black and find a grand total of eleven points. As explained, however, the value is actually larger than that due to the additional effects white's one stone capture would have on black's shape.

Furthermore, capturing one stone in the corner would make white's corner independently alive, opening options for dealing with conflicts south of the corner in the above diagram. Finally, I'll provide one more piece of emphatic evidence regarding the total value of this capture/connect play:



Black's one-stone connection has the additional effect of leaving white's corner shape at 'A' reliant on outside connection — especially when black has occupied 'B.' Black 'C' is one potential way to exploit white's shape, which is why in this shape white tends to invade deep in the corner rather than "slide" to the spot above 'D.'

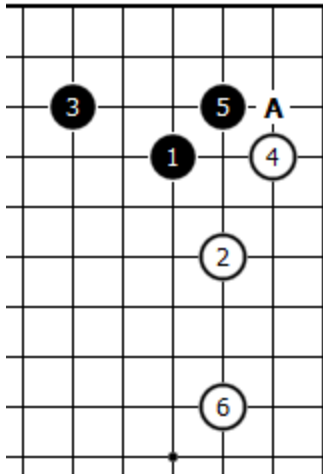
After black plays hane at 'B,' he can follow up with the endgame tesuji of 'D' and follow it up to white 'I.' White's corner shrinks significantly as a result. In reality, the one-stone capture/connect play we've discussed is probably worth closer to twenty points, rather than just eleven.



Here's another example of how moves near the edge can be really valuable. I emphasize this because it's a lesson I learned along the way that really powered up my Baduk. I realized that endgame moves out in the center tend to be far smaller than they appear; you can count with your finger and see that sometimes, they really only surround four or five points — or less. Those moves can be embarrassingly small!

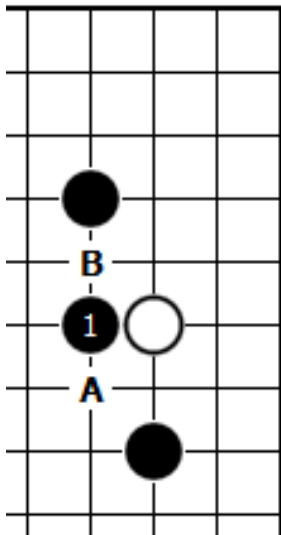
In the diagram above the right side displays the territory that's at stake due to black 'A' or white 'B.' If black, for example, makes the hane at 'A,' followed by white's block and black's connection at 'B,' if we assume that white plays elsewhere, black's first-line endgame moves are a privilege that will fill up all of the triangled spaces that could have been white's territory. The reverse, after a white hane at 'B,' is represented by the territory at stake for black, marked by squares. Now you can see that this second-line hane is worth a total of fourteen points for either player!

The left side of the diagram represents one of the game's smallest possible second-line hane plays ('C' or 'D'). Following the usual counting method we find that each one is worth six points. In most cases this six points is still larger than a lot of early endgame moves played near the center of the board.

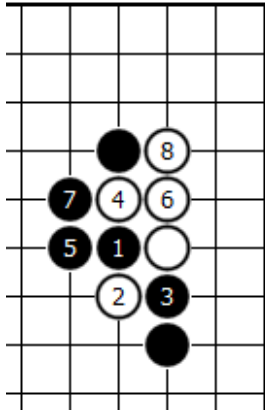


This is a basic joseki that even most novice players know. It appears extremely often, even in high level dan games. The move at 'A' for either side is another famously larger-than-it-looks second-line play that often occurs even in the early middle-game with the right incentive.

Lastly, I will briefly discuss one of many universal bad habits of kyu players. It's what I would call a "preparation" move.



Here is an example of a common situation that is usually misplayed by kyu players. I've even seen lower dan players make this mistake. Where would you play?



The hane at white 2 is a common pitfall for kyu players. Thinking that a direct play at 4 causes complication and ultimately white's destruction, they play at 2, allowing black to cut at 3 so that 4 will be atari on black, allowing them to make life after 6 and 8. The rest of the sequence is even worse. I've chosen not to show it, as it may not be appropriate for minors.

Playing directly at 4, without exchanging 2 for 3, is correct. There are ladders involved, however, and if they don't favour white, white can just respond to black 1 with white 6. Of course, white could also ignore black 1 altogether.

I hope this long and whimsical article has been amusing, if not enlightening, for the reader. I wanted to share just a few of my thoughts about the kyu level Baduk world as I remember it and as I see it now. My greatest hope is to have had an influence on the way you study, play, and think about Baduk.