Zola for AG

Zola has been described as “brilliant”. It’s based on a simple, clever mechanism that guarantees annihilation. Zola is a concept game. A discovered game. One that happens to have high quality gameplay.

The first few moves comprise a tactical kill-fest that randomly sets up the board for more thoughtful mid-game play. And that’s ok. If the very first moves of a game are essential, strong turn order advantage may develop, and a catalog of opening plays may be required.

Pie is an ugly rule unless you need it. Pie isn’t needed in Zola, thankfully, but in connection games like Fractal, pie is a beautiful thing.

I hesitate to use words like deep, hot, cold and so forth in an attempt to scientifically quantify Zola’s subjective playing experience. The only meaningful analysis of subjective experience is how popular a game turns out to be. For me, Zola foments hard concentration, and is exciting and enjoyable. Zola is deceptively challenging. Such a simple game should be light and whimsical. But it isn’t. I like the tension of the kill by kill progression toward certain annihilation, for one of the players. Zola is scalable, so if excessive turn order advantage develops with advancing skill, you can scale up to an 8x8. No game is perfect, but Zola comes close. It’s simple, unique, easy to learn, fun to play… It’s finite with low turn order advantage on a small board… What else would you want in a game?

In opening play, it’s generally wise to make kills in the outer region, which don’t bring your checker closer (or much closer) to the center. See Figure 1. This way, at least in principle, you end up having checkers more toward the outside that can either kill inwardly or quickly move into the corners. I say “generally” because the AI I play against doesn’t strictly observe this tactic, occasionally killing near the center. Yet it somehow manages to beat me.

Corners are important. Although if you get settled into the corners too early, you can be drawn out and killed. See Figure 2. Sometimes there’s a tough choice between making a kill and claiming a corner. If you come out of a corner to make a kill, you may or may not make it back into the corner. Sometimes, but not always, you can win by waging all out war, killing as many enemy as you can, as quickly as you can, without worrying about your proximity to corners.