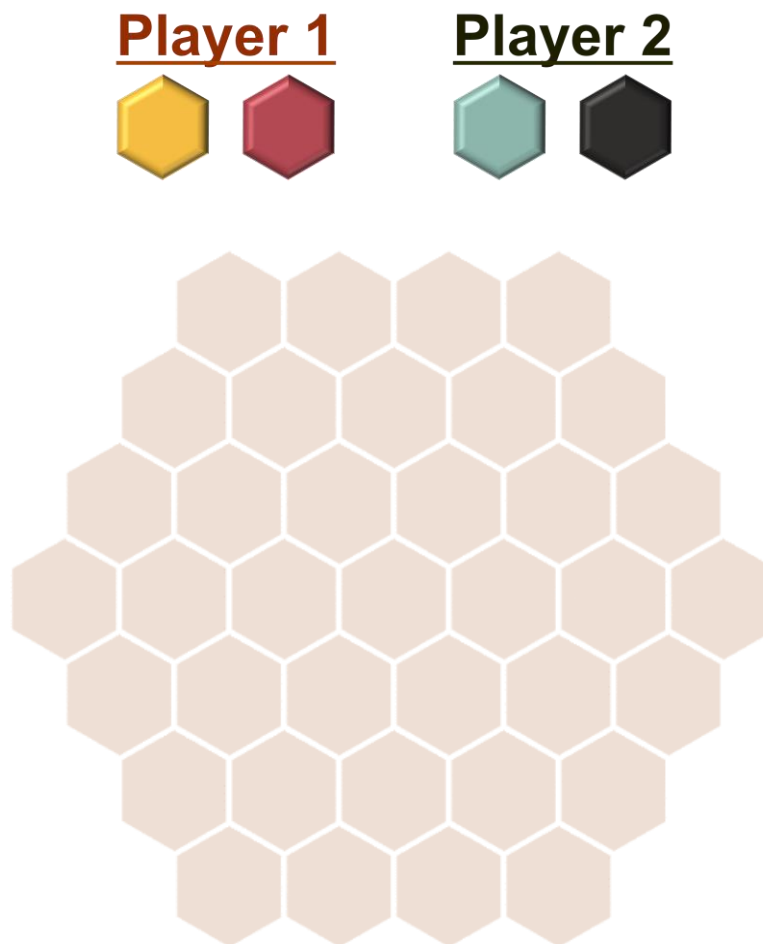


Blooms

Eureka! A breakthrough reformulation of one of my best games, Blooms

[Nick Bentley](#) November 8, 2018

<https://www.nickbentley.games/blooms-breakthrough/>



Quick background

- In January 2018 I created what I believe is the best game I've made: [Blooms](#). It's a 2 player territory game related to [Go](#), but shorter and more colorful.
- In September 2018, a flaw appeared: [cycles](#) (infinitely repeating sequences of play), so I sought a rule to address them.
- In the ensuing months I spent all my free time considering [every rule I could imagine](#), but all felt wrong. That made me think I didn't understand the game deeply enough, so I set out to see it more clearly.
- In the wee hours of November 3rd, I had a string of epiphanies leading to a new view, and in turn, a reformulation of the rules.

- In the next days, at designer [Luis Bolaños Mures'](#) suggestion, we made one final (critical, it turns out) refinement.
- I present the new rules below. If Blooms wasn't my best game before, it is now.

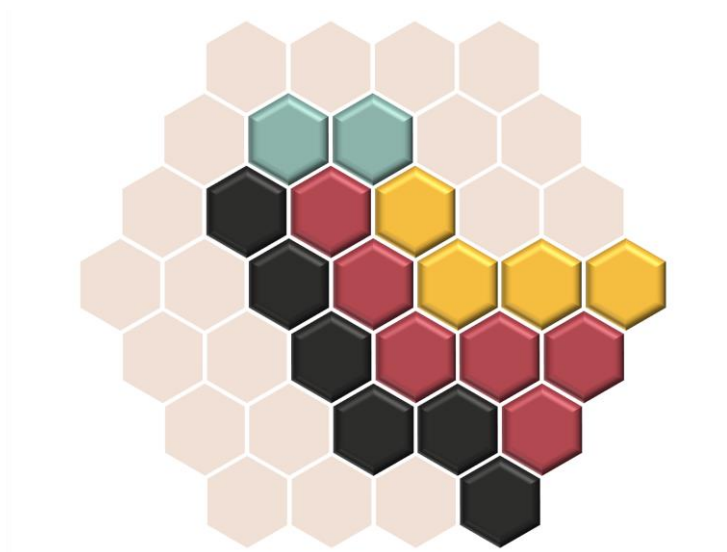
The new Blooms rules:

Definitions:

Bloom: a *bloom* is an entire group of connected stones on the board of the same color. A single stone (unconnected to others of the same color) is also a bloom. For example there are four Blooms in this image:



Fenced: a bloom is *fenced* when there are no empty spaces adjacent to any of the bloom's stones. For example, the red bloom is fenced here:



Gameplay

1. *Each player owns 2 colors of stones. To start, Player 1 places 1 stone of either of her colors on any empty space.*
2. *From then on, starting with Player 2, the players take turns. On your turn, you must place 1 or 2 stones onto any empty spaces. If you place 2, they must be different colors. Then capture all fenced enemy blooms.*
3. *The first player to have captured X stones wins.*

Note: if the game reaches a state where only blooms with 3 eyes ([in the Go sense](#)) remain, each player owns at least one bloom, and there are no empty spaces remaining but their eyes, the lead won't change, because the players will trade 1 point per turn by sacrificing single stones into enemy eyes until a player reaches the win condition. Therefore, the leader at that point wins, just like in the original pass-allowed version of the game (similar to Go).

I recommend new players start on a board with 4 cells per side (as pictured in this post), and set $X = 15$. Once you gain experience, try a board with 5 cells per side and $X = 20$. You can (and maybe should) play on even larger boards with yet more experience, but I'm not sure yet what X values to recommend for larger boards.

What's X ?

I have lots to say about why these rules are an improved embodiment of the game. Let's start with X :

- For sufficiently large values of X , the game is like the original game: it evolves until only living blooms remain, and the leader at that point wins. The result is similar to [territory scoring](#) (with a 3-point [group tax](#)).
- By reducing X , we make capture more important relative to territory. In the extreme, where $X = 1$, the game is the Blooms-analogue of [Atari Go](#), where capture is all that matters.
- The ideal X won't be inconveniently large for Blooms. Initial tests suggest, for the board pictured in this post, $X=20$ makes the game similar to the original pass-allowed version of Blooms. For a board with 5 cells on a side, try $X = 25$.
- The more you reduce X for a given board size, the more important capture becomes. Unexpectedly, I've found I enjoy the game as much at somewhat lower X values, which makes it more attacky. If you play, do try it for different values of X and report your findings/opinions in the comments here.

Other consequences of the new rules

- Blooms is now drawless and finite, and the rules are easier for new players to understand.
- There are no illegal placements. The new options open new tactical avenues. AI players are also easier to make.
- There's no explicit territory definition. Territory emerges from the rules.
- [Seki](#) remains: rather than fill a seki space, players would rather sacrifice a stone to an enemy eye, to keep a seki group alive. Blooms in seki remain alive just like blooms with three eyes.
- There are cycles (which are ended by the scoring threshold win condition), and they're similar but not identical to the cycles of the original pass-allowed version of Blooms. But now they're tactical tools instead of nuisances.
- For physical sets, I imagine using a scoring track circling the board to track captured stones. That allows players to return captured stones to their opponent, which reduces the number of stones needed and thus price. I've come to love scoring tracks: they clearly and simply convey useful information about game-state, and they create tension for players, as they watch pawns move past one another on their way toward the goal.
- The fact that X provides a sliding scale means you can teach the game by setting X low and raising it as players gain experience. The teaching game is conceptually the same as the actual game.
- To handicap, just spot the weaker player some points at the beginning of the game.
- If you want to make your head spin, try making captures optional.

I've revised the rules on the [original Blooms' rules page](#).

Applying the same principles to Go

It hasn't escaped our notice we can apply the same principles to Go, in which case we get laughably simple rules:

1. Starting with black, the players take turns.
2. On your turn, you must place 1 stone on any empty space, then capture all surrounded enemy groups. The [ko rule](#) applies.
3. The first player to have captured X stones wins.

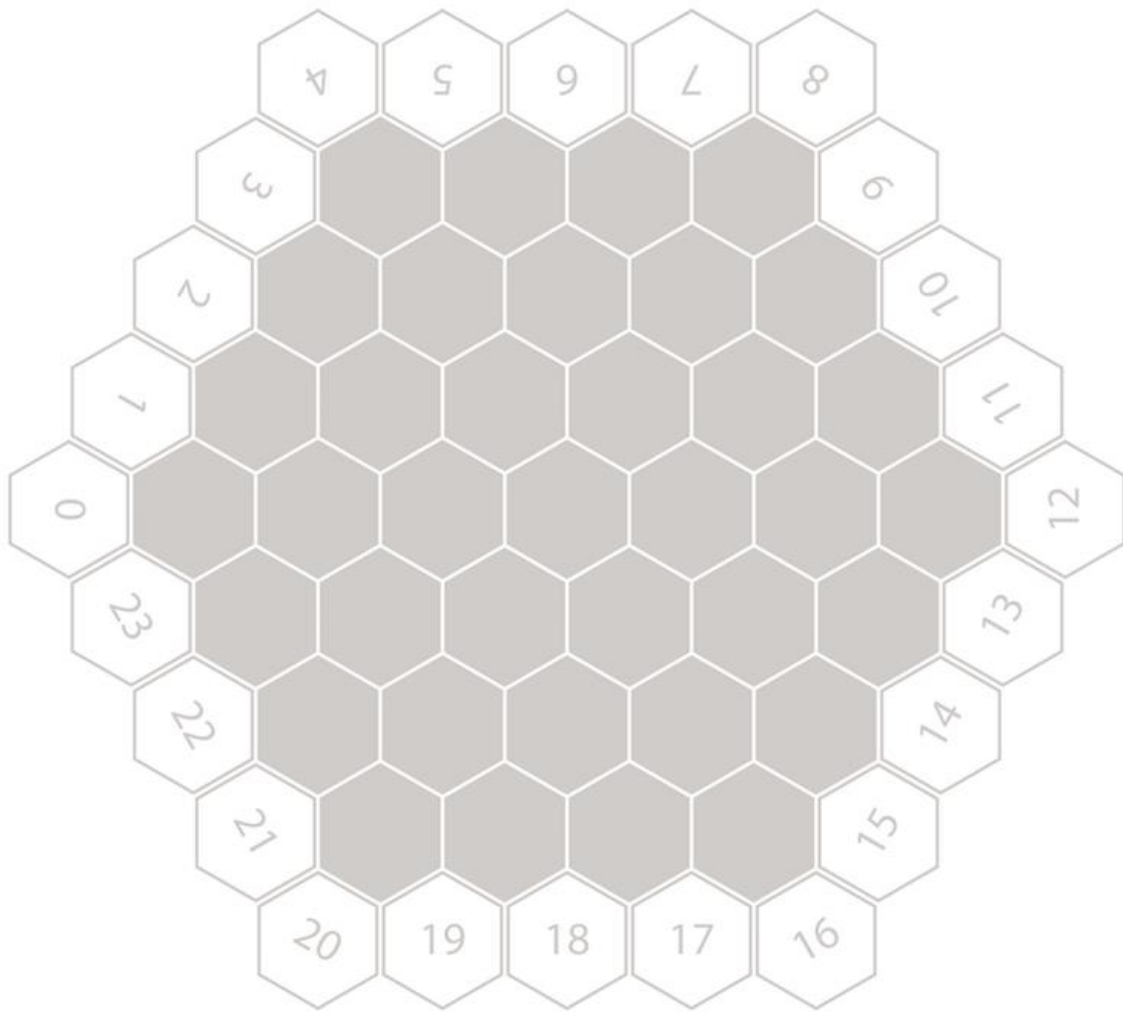
We've been calling this Free Go. For sufficiently high values of X, it gives a game similar to Go with area scoring, with suicide allowed. We've included the ko rule even though it's not technically necessary. Without it, the leading player would win every ko situation, and because ko is so common, that might make the game too much like Atari Go (Blooms doesn't have this issue because it doesn't have ko, and the longer cycles it does have are rare and mostly asymmetrical). Luis is investigating the game now.

Try the new Blooms yourself

Board Game Arena – Board Game Arena is possibly the world's most popular online board game platform, and [you can play Blooms there](#). It offers three different board sizes (4 spaces on a side, 5 spaces on a side, and 6 spaces on a side), and you can choose how many stones you need to capture to win. Right now, we're experimenting with "holes" in the board, so the two largest boards have missing spaces. No idea if it'll stick. I'd love your feedback.

Digital Version – You can play Blooms against a weak AI, or against yourself, using Stephen Tavener's [AiAi system](#). To run it, you'll need [Java](#) and you may need to change your security preferences. You'll get some zipped files when you download AiAi. The file to run is "ai ai.jar". Once opened, load Blooms by going to: File → Choose Game, then select Blooms.mgl. You can change the AI settings from the AI menu.

Print & Play – Here are printable boards (pdf) in three sizes, with scoring tracks: [4 spaces per side](#), [5 spaces per side](#), and [6 spaces per side](#). When printed at full size, they can accommodate pieces 1.75 inches in diameter ([these](#) and [these](#)). Those pieces are large and expensive, so you may want to find smaller pieces and print the boards out at smaller sizes. For example, you can print a board onto a regular sheet of paper and use M&Ms as pieces. Here's what the board with 4 spaces per side looks like:



I've contacted [BoardSpace](#), the other place where Blooms is played, to alert them of the change.

The more people sign up, the more likely I am to take Blooms to Kickstarter. I have an idea about how to make an unusually beautiful physical set.

Thanks to...

Luis Bolaños Mures. Without his terrifying mind, I wouldn't have been able to complete the game.