

# MARGO



An abstract game  
for two players by  
**Cameron Browne**

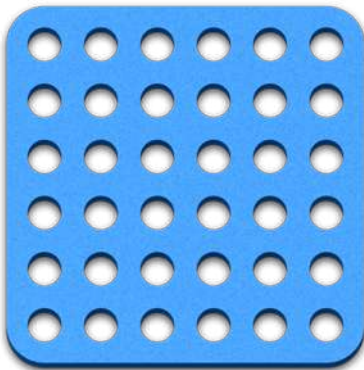


Margo is similar to Go but played with balls that stack. Pinned balls survive capture to remain active in the game.

## EQUIPMENT

Square board with a 6x6 grid of holes.

72 balls (36 white and 36 black).



x 36



x 36

## OBJECTIVE

*Beginners:* To make the first capture.

*Advanced:* To have the most balls in play.

## PLAY

The board starts empty. White plays first.

Players take turns placing a ball of their colour on either:

- an empty board hole, or
- a square 2x2 platform of balls (of any colour).

Passing is not allowed.

## RULES

### 1. Freedom

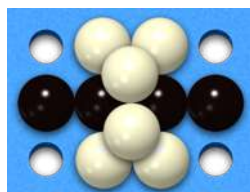
The ball being placed must have **freedom** after the move. That is, it must be either:

- adjacent to at least one empty board hole, or
- visibly connected to at least one empty board hole by a chain of touching same-coloured balls.

It is not allowed to place a ball in a space without freedom, unless that move captures enemy balls to create freedom.

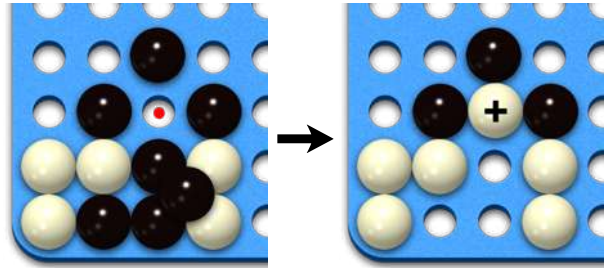
### 2. Overpasses Cut Underpasses

Only visible connections (viewed from above) count. This means that higher-level paths cut lower-level paths that they cross over. The position on the right shows a white overpass cutting the black balls into two separate groups.



### 3. Capture

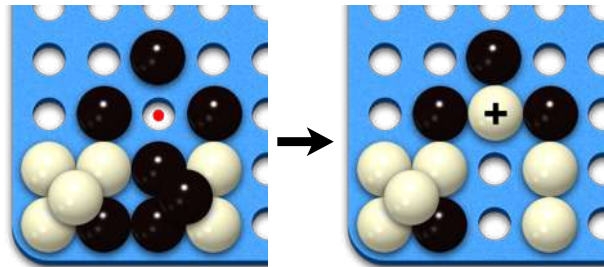
Enemy groups with no freedom are captured after each move. For example, the black group below has one freedom ●, but White's move + removes that last freedom to capture the entire group.



Note that this move is played in a hole that initially has no freedom for White, but that the capture creates a freedom for the white ball + placed there.

### 4. Zombies

An exception to the capture rule is when balls are *pinned* by one or more enemy pieces. Such pinned balls survive capture and remain active in the game as **zombies**. For example, the pinned black ball shown below survives capture + to become a zombie. Zombies are dangerous.



### 5. Ko Rule

Players may not make a move that would repeat the board position of their previous turn.

### 6. Ending

*Beginners:* The game is won by the first player to make a capture. This is guaranteed to occur at some point.

*Advanced:* The game ends when the current player has no legal moves, and is won by the player with the most balls in play (including zombies).

## SWAP RULE

Advanced players might like to play with the following additional rule, to reduce any first move advantage:

*In reply to the opening, the second player may elect to swap colours in lieu of moving.*

This effectively steals the first player's opening move, and encourages them not to make too strong an opening.

## MARGO



*The roots seek freedom  
but the soil is hard and rare.  
Not enough for both.*

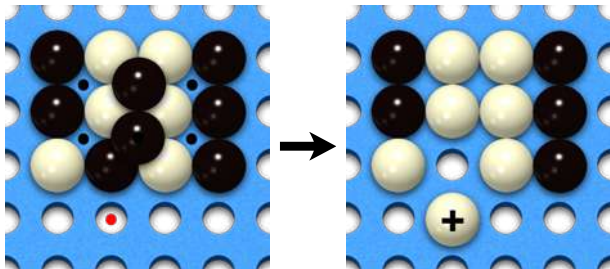


# NOTES

## FREEDOM IS ON THE BOARD

Some players have trouble remembering that freedoms only exist on the board level. One way to visualise this is to think of each group as a tree with roots on the board; as soon as those roots lack freedom to grow then the tree dies.

Consider the central black group on the left. This group has five growth points but only one of them • is on the board level. This is the root's growth point and the group's only freedom (the others • are just branches). If White suffocates this root (+) then the entire group dies (right).

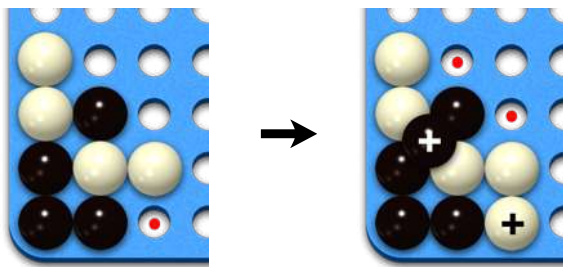


## MARGO AND GO

While Go lies at the heart of Margo, there are significant differences in play that distinguish the two games.

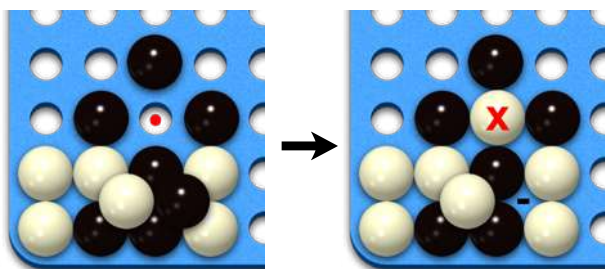
### 1. Jumping the Wall

The most obvious difference between Margo and Go is the 3D aspect of stacking. This allows groups under threat to "jump the wall" to escape. The following example shows Black jumping the wall with black move + to save their group. Even if White closes the group down with white move +, the black group has grown new freedoms.



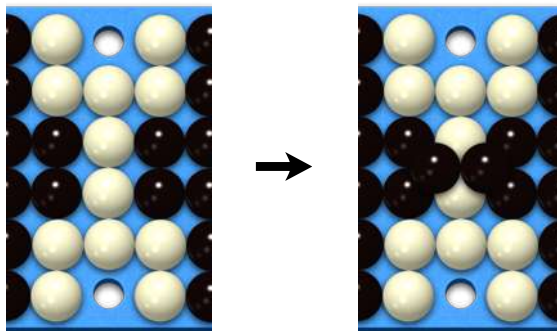
### 2. Single Eyes May Be Safe

Unlike Go, groups with a single eye can be safe if zombies guard that eye. The following example shows a black group with one freedom •. If White moves there, then one black ball is captured but the three pinned zombies remain (right). The white ball would have no freedom after the move, so this is not a legal move. The zombies protect this eye and the black group is safe.



### 3. Double Eyes May Not Be Safe

The white group (left) has two eyes so appears to be safe. However, Black can build a path across this group to cut it into two vulnerable single-eye groups (right).



### 4. Eye-Filling Races

The fact that passing is not allowed may not sound that important, but it has serious implications in the late game. Players *must* move, so if there is no other option then they must play in their own territory and even fill in their own eyes. This makes captures inevitable and territory critical.

## STRATEGY

Where to start? Margo is as complex as Go with another dimension added. There are two main rules of thumb:

- 1) *Higher is better*: higher pieces maximise your options.
- 2) *Avoid enemy zombies*: **zombies often decide games!**

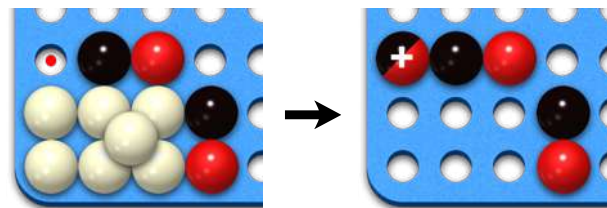
These two rules are in conflict, as the easiest way to build upwards is usually over enemy pieces. The decision to pin or not is difficult and depends on the circumstances.

Territory is important. Create safe points that you can play in but your opponent can't. These become increasingly crucial, and the first player to run out of safe points will lose.

More details can be found on Cameron's [Margo page](#).

## THREE PLAYERS

Margo can be played with three colours using the same rules. This example shows a white group with a single freedom that can be captured by either black or red.



A red ball expansion kit is available from [nestorgames](#).

## SPARGO (4x4 MARGO)

Spargo is the mini (4x4) version of Margo. The game works surprisingly well at this size, and with so little room to develop territory takes on a different character; it is more aggressive and tactical, with greater swings of fortune.

Spargo is available from [nestorgames](#) as part of the Shibumi set. You can also expand many 4x4 Shibumi games to 6x6 versions using your Margo set!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to Richard Reilly for extensive play testing and useful analysis over many games and many years.