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Journal of Historical Archaeology & Anthropological Sciences

Opinion

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Why are people still enthusiastic about Go competitions after AlphaGo?

Volume 11 Issue 1 - 2026

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Received: February 10, 2026 | **Published:** February 18, 2026

Opinion

I love playing Go. During the Cultural Revolution, when school was suspended, I played Go with friends and elders in the courtyard, gradually improving my skills. I consider myself to have a certain level, roughly amateur 3-dan. When working in a factory, I won second place in the factory-wide Go competition. In college, I was always the top player in my class, though I was defeated by a classmate who was obsessed with Go just before graduation. I remember participating in the school competition and winning second place too (?). During my postgraduate studies, I also took second place at the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Later, due to busy work and feeling that playing Go was tiring, I chose to watch games instead. Occasionally, when classmates visited, I would play a few rounds with them, but I mostly watched Go programs on TV. I particularly enjoy programs with excellent commentators. Nie Weiping explains Go in a simple, straightforward way, hitting the key points without jargon, which is very insightful. Wang Yuan's language is vivid, describing the game as a battle while conveying philosophy, making it fascinating. Liu Xiaoguang and Cao Dayuan are more professional, explaining principles clearly and understandably. Even just watching game records played with music, I find it enjoyable it feels like a logical unfolding with its own beauty. I remember Yu Bin once said that a Go game "grows" organically.

Watching Go games is my greatest pleasure, especially when combined with other activities. For nearly two decades during winter weekends, my family would go skiing, return home for a bath, then watch Go matches a truly sublime enjoyment. Now we no longer ski, we hike every weekend instead. After showering post-hike, I still relish watching Go, which remains equally satisfying. Yet often, as I watch, drowsiness creeps in, and I sometimes even doze off, missing thrilling moves. But this, too, is delightful. Sleepiness signals complete relaxation a cozy, contented feeling.

Naturally, I followed the AlphaGo versus Lee Sedol matches. The outcome was staggering. Later, I bought an AI Go program online not one of the top-tier ones like TopArt, but one reportedly coded by a computer science Ph.D. It was formidable; I stood no chance to defeat it, losing repeatedly until my interest waned. So I returned to spectating. Then suddenly, the Tianyuan Go TV channel became closed, leaving only a subscription-based mini-program at ¥360 per year. Initially resistant, I boycotted it for a while. But my craving for Go prevailed, and I eventually paid up.

Why do I Still watch "weaker" players when AI is clearly superior? First, these players' levels are all higher than mine, and I can't even see where they fall short. Although commentators often use AI to judge the quality of moves, I don't truly understand what these differences signify. What interests me is the progression of the game how battles unfold, how clever moves resolve attacks, how situations reverse or turn around, how certain moves inspire me or connect to life insights, and so on. For those participating in the matches, the joy goes beyond this. They learn Go out of interest, step by step advancing to professional levels. Playing itself is the pleasure. Of course, winning and losing matter, but truly skilled players take outcomes lightly. They wouldn't lose interest in Go just because AI is stronger.

In reality, humans long ago adapted to such realities. Otherwise, why would people still race when cars outrun them? There are likely two reasons: People believe competitions should occur between those of comparable ability. If not, it's unfair like weight classes in weightlifting or boxing. Humans and cars differ in capability: their power and energy consumption aren't the same. A human's running power is about 300–400 watts, peaking at over 1,000 watts when sprinting, while a car's power generally ranges from 80 to 100 kilowatts, with high-end sports cars reaching 500 kilowatts. The gap spans 200 to 1,000 times. Their energy consumption during motion also differs. According to AI, a human's running energy use is about 1/12 of a car's, and humans are far less enduring. Cars are much heavier; their mechanics differ humans rely on legs, cars on wheels, the latter being far more efficient, smoother, and naturally faster. But this is conditional: on flat roads. If the path is rugged or involves climbing, cars might not outpace humans. Thus, humans and cars can't be compared. In human consciousness, they also can't compete fairly.

Another reason is that humans derive pleasure from sports, while machines experience no such joy. The outcomes produced by machines are merely mechanical results they cannot "enjoy" the process. Even if they outperform humans, they cannot replicate the human experience of competition. Thus, despite cars being faster, people refuse to abandon the joy of racing. For spectators, the unpredictability of outcomes is part of the thrill. The appeal of sports lies not only in witnessing athletic prowess but also in the drama of the contest itself, which often surpasses scripted theater in excitement.

The comparison between AI and the human brain follows a similar logic. Data indicates that AlphaGo operates at 150,000 watts, consuming approximately 3,000 megajoules (MJ) per game roughly 300 times the energy expenditure of a human brain. According to Yann LeCun,[1] the human brain typically requires just 25 watts; even during intense Go play, it may use around 100 watts, merely 1/1500th of AlphaGo's power. Alternative estimates suggest AlphaGo consumes 30,000 kWh per game (costing ~$3,000), whereas humans expend less than 1 kWh. In terms of calculation capacity, human

players can analyze only 30-40 moves ahead with limited branching options, while AlphaGo employs brute-force searches (via Monte Carlo methods) during pretraining, exhaustively testing moves to select optimal outcomes. From a conventional fairness perspective, this imbalance is stark. True equity would require competitors with matched power or energy constraints.

As for pleasure, it remains a core reason humans persist in Go competitions. The thrill of pitting one's intellect against an opponent embodies competitive joy. That eureka moment when a brilliant move resolves a desperate situation becomes unforgettable. While the players themselves experience the greatest exhilaration, spectators too marvel at such ingenuity. Even decades later, people still savor historic masterstrokes. AI may produce equally ingenious moves, but it feels no pleasure. Humans might borrow these tactics for practical gains, yet the adrenaline of independent discovery remains irreplaceable. Moreover, as human players' strengths are relative and ever-shifting, outcomes stay unpredictable. But if AI overwhelmingly surpasses humans, matches lose their suspense and with it, the electric tension of uncertainty.

I'm merely an amateur enthusiast. At sixteen, I could reconstruct every move of a game from memory this total recall was only possible through the intense concentration that comes with genuine obsession. Without deep love for the game, such focus would be unattainable. Though far from professional, my joy mirrors theirs. My other hobby, soccer, deepened this understanding. Back when I worked at the factory, we had a soccer field where my young coworkers and I played every morning. Though my skills were modest, I earned a spot on our workshop's team. The annual factory league felt like a festival. Two goals are forever vivid: First, as a striker receiving a cross, I controlled the ball with my chest, rounded the onrushing goalkeeper, and calmly finished into the net. Second, during our corner kick, I positioned myself at the far post and powered home a header. To this day, I can still picture our captain's jubilant dash across the pitch.

Human behavior is not only utilitarian but also aesthetic. This is especially true for the Chinese: their houses, courtyards, furniture, and tableware are not just functional but also visually pleasing. Even writing a tool for recording and transmitting information has evolved into an aesthetic art form: calligraphy, which holds an elevated status in Chinese culture. Another beautiful form of linguistic expression is poetry. Poetry is not only to be appreciated, but the act of composing it is itself a sublime pleasure. We cannot know the exact delight Li Bai felt when crafting his ethereal verses, but we recognize it in lines like "Not boarding despite being summoned by the Son of Heaven, for I see myself as an immortal in wine" and "Throughout history, sages have been silent; only those who drink are remembered".

In recent years, I too have tried writing poetry. Though my skill is modest, I've glimpsed the joy of the creative process. First comes a general direction for expression, then tentative lines that fit the theme. Often, the initial attempts fall short, but by refining alternatives, better lines gradually emerge. Sometimes a word in a line feels inadequate, so I experiment with substitutions or rearrange phrases to improve rhythm, rhyme, or tonal elegance. When a satisfactory poem takes shape, the satisfaction is profound especially when the words align perfectly with the intended meaning, producing an indescribable thrill. If even an amateur like me feels this, imagine the euphoria of genius poets who compose masterpieces. As the French poet Paul Valéry observed, poetic inspiration is like "a faint flash of lightning".[2]

Indeed, AI can now compose poetry so convincingly that it becomes indistinguishable from human-written verse. This capability certainly has its uses and can provide aesthetic appreciation. Art encompasses not just creation but also the exercise of aesthetic judgment. In a poetry competition without restrictions on AI assistance, those with refined aesthetic taste would likely prevail. However, such contests would lack the joy inherent in the creative process of poetry composition.

Even seemingly rational pursuits ultimately rest on aesthetic foundations at their highest levels consider scientific thinking. As Poincaré profoundly observed: "Scientists study nature not because it is useful; they study it because they delight in it, and they delight in it because it is beautiful. Were nature not beautiful, it would not be worth knowing; were nature not worth knowing, life would not be worth living".[3]This insight is profoundly moving. While utility serves to sustain and propagate life, without beauty, life loses its worth - rendering utility itself meaningless. Beauty constitutes both the purpose and motivation behind all utility. Therefore, pursuing utility alone is meaningless. AI may replicate utilitarian processes, but cannot preserve meaning. To maintain meaning, humans must continue performing these utilitarian acts themselves - though this doesn't preclude AI from partially assisting in meaning-preserving human creation of utility.

This beauty, as Poincaré elaborates, is of a particular kind: "I mean that more profound beauty which comes from the harmonious order of its parts, and which a pure intelligence can grasp. It is this that gives a structure the iridescent radiance that satisfies our aesthetic senses, without which this fleeting, dreamlike beauty would remain imperfect vague and always ephemeral. In contrast, intellectual beauty achieves its own perfection, and perhaps it is for this beauty, more than for humanity's future welfare, that scientists devote themselves to prolonged and arduous labor".[3] This beauty is not merely motivation but also enjoyment the highest reward of scientific pursuit, worthy of dedicated striving.

The moments when scientists experience inspiration are particularly sublime. Poincaré recounts how during a journey, as he stepped onto a carriage, the realization suddenly struck him: "The transformations I had used to define Fuchsian functions were identical to those of non-Euclidean geometry"[2] a revelation later proven correct. Similarly, Penrose describes walking with a colleague when, while crossing the street and pausing conversation, an idea emerged with "an inexplicable feeling of excitement," though the resumed talk obscured it. This thought, later systematized, became the criterion known as "trapped surfaces". This discovery made him "overjoyed".[4] I too have known such moments often during countryside walks, when a brilliant theoretical insight or perfect sentence surfaces, only to slip away before full recollection, leaving me straining to recall what had sparked that initial thrill.

This aesthetic impulse is by no means exclusive to scientific research. More human activities are driven by aesthetic motivation. As Poincaré clarifies: "The beauty I speak of here is not that which appeals to the senses, nor beauty of quality or appearance not that I undervalue such beauty, far from it".[3] The joy of aesthetics isn't reserved for elite scientists, artists, or 9-dan Go players either. Ordinary people, even at modest skill levels, experience universal aesthetic fulfillment. Their processes playing chess, sports, calligraphy, painting, or poetry are all aesthetic acts imbued with enjoyment. For instance, in brush writing, one needn't rival Wang Xizhi to derive pleasure; improving slightly from yesterday's effort can spark delight. Playing table tennis, not everyone is like Ma Long or Sun Yingsha. As long as the level gradually improves and a few good shots are played, it feels very satisfying.

This process aesthetics extends to broader human endeavors. While I disagree with some of Marx's conclusions, I admire his

Citation: Sheng H. Why are people still enthusiastic about Go competitions after AlphaGo? *J His Arch & Anthropol Sci.* 2026;11(1):43–45.
DOI: 10.15406/JHAAS.2026.11.00338

argument in Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 about humanity's creative and multifaceted nature both qualities being inherently aesthetic. Creativity embodies the beauty of novelty and craftsmanship; multiplicity, the beauty of diversity. Marx viewed labor as originally creative and varied, thus enjoyable. Only when reduced to a specialized, "alienated" tool for survival does it become pain what economics terms "cost." There's truth here. Today, many artisans take pride in their craft, pursuing technical excellence and savoring unalienated labor, along with the achievement-satisfaction of finished work.

Many artisans continue crafting by hand even in the machine age precisely because they find joy in the process. Take pottery-making: each piece approaches artistic uniqueness, making identical replication impossible. Conversely, monotonously repetitive labor lacks this pleasure precisely the kind of work AI can replace. It's said Native American craftsmen charge more for the second identical chair due to waning patience during repetition. The AI era has slashed design costs, enabling greater product personalization and smaller batch production, thereby reducing simple repetitive tasks. AI can also assume other joyless labor arduous, hazardous, or unsanitary work. Yet its substitution has natural limits.

Thus, we conclude: even when AI outperforms humans in many domains, replacing activities that provide process-based aesthetic fulfillment for mere efficiency gains would strip human existence of meaning. If, as some envision, AI someday supplants all human labor enabling effortless abundance, it would trigger a profound existential crisis the loss of life's purpose. The Universe 25 experiment demonstrated this: when mice faced no survival pressures, they grew lethargic and apathetic, abandoning mating and childrearing until their utopia collapsed.[5] Biological societies require not just utility but meaning. Without purpose, even with material abundance, the will to live diminishes. Humans will persist in activities where AI excels because our total gain is products' utility plus process-derived aesthetic value the latter's meaning value being immeasurable.

Acknowledgements

None

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Citation: Sheng H. Why are people still enthusiastic about Go competitions after AlphaGo? *J His Arch & Anthropol Sci.* 2026;11(1):43–45.
DOI: 10.15406/JHAAS.2026.11.00338