

Original Article

The winning percentage in congkak using a randomised strategy

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Abstract

Congkak is a traditional counting game played in Southeast Asia including Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Indonesia. To start a game, a board that has 16 holes together with 98 marbles are required. Each player controls a set of seven holes and own a store. The winner of the game is the player who captured more marbles into the store at the end of the game. Note that the first-move advantage exists in chess; we investigate if the first-move advantage holds in congkak also. We model the route for each player in congkak using a directed graph and adopt these graph representations in our programs, to compute the winning percentage of each player. We focus on games between novices, hence a randomised strategy is used in our algorithm. We present the first experimental results for 100,000 games between novices in congkak. We also suggest some questions for future research in this area.

Keywords: mancala, congkak, counting game, first-move advantage, randomised algorithm, winning percentage

1. Introduction

Congkak is a Southeast Asian mancala game that was likely introduced to Southeast Asia by Indian or Arab traders in the 15th century. This traditional counting game is named *congkak* in Malaysia and Brunei, *congka* or *congklak* in Indonesia, and *sungkâ* in the Philippines. Some have claimed that the term congkak originated from an old Malay term *congkak* that conveys mental arithmetic as the meaning. In congkak, a player who is able to predict the moves through mathematical calculations is believed to have an advantage to win the game.

Congkak is played by two players on a wooden boat-shaped board that has 16 cup-shaped holes—two sets of seven holes (Some congkak boards have two sets of five holes or two

sets of nine holes. However, the one with two sets of seven holes is the most common.), together with two larger holes known as the *stores* at each end (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A congkak board with two sets of seven holes

Each player controls the seven holes on their side, and possesses a store, in a congkak game. There are 98 marbles (or cowrie shells or tamarind seeds) used in a congkak game.

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- If the final marble falls into an empty (blue) hole on the opponent's side, the player forfeits his turn and it is the opponent's turn to continue the game.
- 4. If there is no marble left on the player's side when it is his turn, then he must pass.
- 5. The game ends when all the marbles are moved into the stores. The player who captures more marbles is the winner. It is a tie game if the players captured the same number of marbles.

The game can be continued in the second round by redistributing marbles from players' own stores to their own holes. Each player starts to fill their own holes starting from the rightmost hole (the one that is closest to the store). If the player has more than 49 marbles in the store, put the extra marbles back to the store. If the player has less than 49 marbles, some of the holes will either be empty or have less than seven marbles. All these holes are *burnt* and are left empty. The leftover marbles will be returned to the store.

Once the board is set up, the game is continued by bypassing the burnt holes, based on the previous rules (Note that some impose one additional rule in the second round onwards, where the marble that accidentally falls into a burnt hole will be confiscated and put into the opponent's store.). The game repeats until one player loses all his holes or concedes defeat.

3. Graph Representations

As shown in Figure 3, graphs can be used to represent congkak. We provide such a representation in this section.

A *directed graph* (or *digraph*) G consists of a non-empty finite set $V(G)$ of elements called *vertices*, and a finite family $A(G)$ of ordered pairs of elements of $V(G)$ called *arcs*. A *vertex-weighted digraph* D is a digraph whose vertices v are associated with real weights, that is $w : V(D) \rightarrow \mathbb{R}, v \mapsto w(v)$. We call $w(v)$ the *weight* of the vertex v . All weights are non-negative in any vertex-weighted digraph.

The route for each player in congkak can be represented by using a vertex-weighted directed cycle that has 15 vertices. Two such vertex weighted directed graphs are highlighted in blue and red in Figure 3.

Let D be a vertex-weighted directed graph. Suppose $V(D) = \{A_i, B_i\}$ for $i \in \{1, 2, \dots, 8\}$. Clearly, the number of vertices $|v(D)| = 16$ and $v(D)$ corresponds to the holes and stores of a congkak board, as shown in Figure 4. The directed cycles of players **A** and **B** are represented as follows:

$$C_A = (A_1, A_2, A_3, A_4, A_5, A_6, A_7, A_8, B_1, B_2, B_3, B_4, B_5, B_6, B_7),$$

$$C_B = (B_1, B_2, B_3, B_4, B_5, B_6, B_7, B_8, A_1, A_2, A_3, A_4, A_5, A_6, A_7).$$

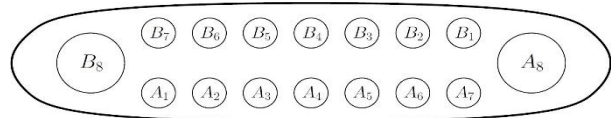


Figure 4. A labelled congkak board

If we replace the label of each vertex in C_A and C_B by its weight, the initial position for each player in a congkak game is as follows:

$$C_A = (7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 0, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7),$$

$$C_B = (7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 0, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7).$$

Likewise, we have

$$C_A = (0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0),$$

$$C_B = (0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0)$$

as the final positions where $T_A + T_B = 98$.

We adopt these representations in our program in Section 4.

4. Experimental Results

We study if there is any advantage for one specific player in congkak, particularly the first-move advantage that exists in chess. We focus on games between novices, by using the assumption that no counting occurs throughout the game, i.e., players are not allowed to memorize the number of marbles in each hole for counting purposes.

We let the player **A** be the first player, and since no counting is allowed, each player picks their moves randomly (hence the randomised strategy) in the game. Note that we determine the winner of the game based on the result obtained in the first round, given that the mechanism of the game in the remaining rounds is similar. The algorithms of our programs are shown in Algorithms 1-4 (see Tables 3-6). By implementing some minor modifications, these algorithms can be used to determine the winner of the game in the remaining rounds.

Let w be the number of games won by a player out of t games in congkak. The *winning percentage* of the player is w/t . Given that the nature of tie games in congkak is quite different from chess, we exclude the percentage of tie games in our calculation.

We use Python 3 in conducting the experiments. We determine the winning percentage of each player in congkak, based on the experimental results that are derived by using 100,000 games. One sample output of a congkak game can be found in Appendix. We split the games into five categories, where each category consists of 20,000 games. The overall winning percentage is calculated by using the average percentage of all these categories. The statistical results of the 100,000 games are summarised and shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The experimental results of 100,000 games between novices in congkak

Category	A wins	B wins	Tie	Winning percentage of A	Winning percentage of B	Percentage of tie games
I	12249	6962	789	61.25	34.81	3.94
II	12122	7105	773	60.61	35.53	3.86
III	12152	7110	738	60.76	35.55	3.69
IV	12212	6990	798	61.06	34.95	3.99
V	12121	7090	789	60.60	35.45	3.95
Total	60856	35257	3887	60.85	35.26	3.89

Table 3. Algorithm 1

Algorithm 1 Congkak(*aList*)

Input: A list *aList* that represents the initial position of the directed cycle of the first player in congkak

Output: The winner of the game

```

1:  bList ← [0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0]
2:  totalA, totalB, currentPlayer, currentList ← 0,0, A, aList
3:  randomStart ← True
4:  while totalA + totalB ≠ 98 do
5:      if randomStart = True then
6:          if the first seven elements in currentList are not all zero then
7:              currentHole ← RandomHole(currentList)
8:          else
9:              if currentPlayer = A then
10:                 UpdateList(currentList, aList, bList, totalA, totalB)
11:                 currentPlayer, currentList ← B, bList
12:                 continue
13:             else
14:                 UpdateList(currentList, bList, aList, totalB, totalA)
15:                 currentPlayer, currentList ← A, aList
16:                 continue
17:             currentList, currentHole ← Sowing(currentList, currentHole)
18:         if currentHole = 7 then
19:             randomStart ← True
20:             totalA, totalB ← aList[7], bList[7]
21:             continue
22:         else if currentHole < 7 then
23:             if currentList[currentHole] = 1 then
24:                 randomStart ← True
25:                 if the hole H that is opposite to currentHole is not empty then
26:                     Put the final marble and all the marbles in H into the current player's store
27:                     if currentPlayer = A then
28:                         UpdateList(currentList, aList, bList, totalA, totalB)
29:                         currentPlayer, currentList ← B, bList
30:                         continue
31:                     else
32:                         UpdateList(currentList, bList, aList, totalB, totalA)
33:                         currentPlayer, currentList ← A, aList
34:                         continue
35:                     else
36:                         if currentPlayer = A then
37:                             UpdateList(currentList, aList, bList, totalA, totalB)
38:                             currentPlayer, currentList ← B, bList
39:                             continue
40:                         else
41:                             UpdateList(currentList, bList, aList, totalB, totalA)
42:                             currentPlayer, currentList ← A, aList
43:                             continue
44:                     else
45:                         randomStart ← False
46:                         continue
47:                 else
48:                     if currentList[currentHole] = 1 then
49:                         randomStart ← True
50:                         if currentPlayer = A then
51:                             UpdateList(currentList, aList, bList, totalA, totalB)
52:                             currentPlayer, currentList ← B, bList
53:                             continue
54:                         else
55:                             UpdateList(currentList, bList, aList, totalB, totalA)
56:                             currentPlayer, currentList ← A, aList
57:                             continue
58:                     else
59:                         randomStart ← False
60:                         continue
61:             if totalA – totalB > 0 then
62:                 print The player A is the winner.

```

Table 3. Continued.

Algorithm 1 Congkak(*aList*)

```

63:  else if  $totalA - totalB < 0$  then
64:      print The player B is the winner.
65:  else
66:      print This is a tie game.

```

Table 4. Algorithm 2

Algorithm 2 RandomHole(*L*)

Input: A list *L* of integers
Output: Return an index *r* where $L[r] \neq 0$

```

1:  temp  $\leftarrow$  create an empty list
2:  for i in L do
3:      if i is not zero then
4:          append the index of i to temp
5:  Randomly pick an element r from temp
6:  return r

```

Table 5. Algorithm 3

Algorithm 3 Sowing(*L*, *r*)

Input: A list *L* that contains 15 integers, and an index *r*
Output: Return the updated list *L* and the updated index *r*

```

1:  marbleInHand  $\leftarrow L[r]$ 
2:   $0 \leftarrow L[r]$ 
3:   $k \leftarrow r + 1$ 
4:  while marbleInHand  $\neq 0$  do
5:       $L[k] \leftarrow L[k] + 1$ 
6:      marbleInHand  $\leftarrow marbleInHand - 1$ 
7:       $k \leftarrow (k + 1) \bmod 15$ 
8:   $r \leftarrow k - 1$ 
9:  return L, r

```

Table 6. Algorithm 4

Algorithm 4 UpdateList(*tempList*, *oriList*, *modifiedList*, *oriTotal*, *modifiedTotal*)

Input: Three lists that contain 15 integers each, and two integers
Output: Return two updated lists and two updated integers

```

1:  oriList  $\leftarrow tempList$ 
2:  oriTotal  $\leftarrow tempList[7]$ 
3:  modifiedList[7]  $\leftarrow modifiedTotal$ 
4:  Replace the first seven and the last seven elements in modifiedList by the last seven and the first seven elements in tempList, respectively
5:  return oriList, modifiedList, oriTotal, modifiedTotal

```

From Table 2, we can see that the first-move advantage exists for games between novices in congkak. The player **A** who is also the first player in these 100,000 games has a winning percentage of 60.85%. On the other hand, the winning percentage of **B** is just 35.26%. The rate for tie games is about 4%. If these results are compared with the statistical result for chess in Table 1, we can see that the first-move advantage is slightly more significant for games between novices in congkak.

Overall, based on the winning percentage of **A** in each category, we believe that the first-move advantage is approximately 60% based on the randomised strategy that is used in our algorithms. We however foresee that this advantage becomes more significant for games between experts, since players are only allowed to move following the directed cycle, and the number of vertices in the cycle is fixed. Therefore, if the first player manages to control and get the best location of the final marble in each move (according to Rule 3), the player will certainly have a higher winning rate.

5. Conclusions and Future Work

In this study, we introduced the history of congkak and the rules of this board game. We gave a graph representation of the route for each player in congkak, by using vertex-weighted directed graphs. The representation was then used in our programs to determine the winning percentage of each player by simulated runs of the game. We then presented the first experimental results for 100,000 games between novices in congkak. Under this setup, we conclude that the first-move advantage exists in the game where the winning percentage of the first player is about 60%.

Apart from the first-move advantage, people with a good memory are believed to have a higher winning percentage in congkak. They could probably count and make a better choice in order to start the sowing process. Hence, we believe that appropriate machine learning methods will always lead to a win in congkak. We now suggest some relevant questions for future research.

1. A player is an *expert* in congkak if the player is able to predict the moves through mathematical calculations. Logically, people believe that the winning percentage of an expert is higher compared to others. For a game between an expert and a novice, if the expert is also the first player, it is almost sure that the expert will win the game by taking the first-move and the counting advantage. On the other hand, if the novice starts the game, who would be the probable winner in this scenario? Does the first-move advantage or the counting advantage contribute a greater impact to the game?
2. Does the first-move advantage still hold for games between experts?

Suppose we categorize games in congkak into the following scenarios.

- *Scenario I*: games between novices.
- *Scenario II*: games between a novice and an expert where the novice is the first player.
- *Scenario III*: games between a novice and an expert where the expert is the first player.
- *Scenario IV*: games between experts.

We say that a move is *maximal* in congkak if the maximum number of marbles is deposited into the player's store when the player forfeits his turn.

3. If every move of an expert player is maximal in Scenario II, what is the lower bound of the winning percentage, given that the expert player is likely to win the game by taking the first-move and the counting advantage?
4. If every move of an expert player is maximal in Scenarios II, III and IV, what is the minimum number of moves that are required to end a congkak game?

Note that the percentage of tie games in Scenario I is about 4%. If it is a tie, players might have to restart the game in order to determine the winner.

5. Under which scenario will the percentage of getting a tie game be the highest? (We believe that this occurs in Scenario IV, when each move

of each expert player is maximal.) What will be the upper bound?

Well defined graph polynomials provide a variety of information about the enumeration of graphs or digraphs (Chung & Graham, 1995; Gordon & McMahon, 1989; Tutte, 1954; Tutte, 1967; Welsh, 1999; Yow, 2019; Yow, Farr, & Morgan, 2018).

6. Does any of the existing graph polynomials relate to some graph representations of congkak? If not, does there exist one such definition?

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Appendix

A = [7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 0, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7]
 A = [7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 0, 1, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 7]
 A = [8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 1, 1, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 0, 8]
 B = [0, 8, 0, 9, 9, 1, 9, 1, 9, 9, 9, 8, 8, 8, 0]
 B = [1, 9, 1, 10, 10, 1, 9, 1, 9, 9, 0, 9, 9, 9, 1]
 B = [1, 9, 1, 10, 0, 2, 10, 2, 10, 10, 1, 10, 10, 10, 2]
 B = [2, 10, 1, 10, 0, 2, 10, 2, 10, 10, 1, 10, 10, 10, 0]
 B = [2, 0, 2, 11, 1, 3, 11, 3, 11, 11, 2, 11, 10, 10, 0]
 B = [3, 1, 3, 12, 2, 4, 12, 4, 11, 11, 2, 0, 11, 11, 1]
 B = [4, 2, 4, 13, 2, 4, 0, 5, 12, 12, 3, 1, 12, 12, 2]
 B = [5, 3, 4, 0, 3, 5, 1, 6, 13, 13, 4, 2, 13, 13, 3]
 B = [5, 0, 5, 1, 4, 5, 1, 6, 13, 13, 4, 2, 13, 13, 3]
 B = [5, 0, 5, 1, 0, 6, 2, 7, 14, 13, 4, 2, 13, 13, 3]
 B = [6, 1, 6, 2, 1, 7, 3, 8, 0, 14, 5, 3, 14, 14, 4]
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 B = [7, 2, 7, 3, 1, 1, 5, 10, 2, 16, 7, 5, 16, 1, 5]
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 A = [7, 21, 2, 10, 2, 3, 0, 15, 1, 4, 1, 8, 4, 6, 4]
 A = [8, 1, 4, 12, 4, 5, 2, 17, 2, 5, 2, 9, 5, 7, 5]
 A = [9, 1, 4, 0, 5, 6, 3, 18, 3, 6, 3, 10, 6, 8, 6]
 A = [0, 2, 5, 1, 6, 7, 4, 19, 4, 7, 3, 10, 6, 8, 6]
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 A = [1, 0, 4, 0, 9, 17, 14, 23, 7, 1, 0, 0, 2, 1, 1]
 A = [2, 1, 5, 1, 10, 18, 0, 24, 8, 2, 1, 1, 3, 2, 2]
 A = [3, 2, 6, 2, 11, 1, 2, 26, 10, 3, 2, 2, 4, 3, 3]
 A = [4, 3, 7, 3, 11, 1, 2, 26, 0, 4, 3, 3, 5, 4, 4]
 A = [4, 3, 7, 0, 12, 2, 3, 26, 0, 4, 3, 3, 5, 4, 4]
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 A = [5, 4, 8, 1, 13, 2, 0, 27, 1, 0, 4, 4, 6, 5, 0]
 A = [6, 5, 9, 1, 0, 3, 1, 28, 2, 1, 5, 5, 7, 6, 1]
 A = [6, 5, 0, 2, 1, 4, 2, 29, 3, 2, 6, 6, 7, 6, 1]
 A = [7, 6, 1, 2, 1, 4, 2, 29, 3, 2, 6, 0, 8, 7, 2]
 B = [0, 3, 7, 1, 0, 7, 2, 18, 7, 6, 0, 2, 1, 4, 2]
 A = [7, 6, 0, 0, 1, 4, 0, 39, 1, 3, 7, 0, 0, 7, 2]
 B = [1, 3, 0, 1, 1, 8, 3, 22, 8, 7, 0, 0, 1, 4, 0]
 B = [2, 4, 0, 1, 1, 8, 3, 22, 8, 0, 1, 1, 2, 5, 1]
 B = [2, 0, 1, 2, 2, 9, 3, 22, 8, 0, 1, 1, 2, 5, 1]
 B = [2, 0, 1, 2, 2, 0, 4, 23, 9, 1, 2, 2, 3, 6, 2]
 B = [3, 1, 1, 2, 2, 0, 4, 23, 9, 1, 2, 2, 3, 6, 0]
 A = [9, 1, 0, 3, 4, 0, 0, 39, 3, 0, 1, 2, 2, 0, 4]
 A = [9, 1, 0, 3, 0, 1, 1, 40, 4, 0, 1, 2, 2, 0, 4]
 A = [9, 1, 0, 3, 0, 1, 1, 40, 0, 1, 2, 3, 3, 0, 4]
 A = [10, 1, 0, 3, 0, 1, 1, 40, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 5]
 A = [0, 2, 1, 4, 1, 2, 2, 41, 1, 2, 3, 3, 0, 1, 5]
 A = [0, 2, 1, 4, 1, 2, 2, 41, 1, 2, 0, 4, 1, 2, 5]
 A = [1, 2, 1, 4, 1, 2, 2, 41, 1, 2, 0, 4, 1, 0, 6]
 B = [1, 0, 1, 5, 1, 0, 0, 30, 0, 2, 1, 4, 1, 2, 2]
 B = [1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1, 1, 31, 1, 2, 1, 4, 1, 2, 2]
 A = [1, 2, 1, 4, 1, 0, 3, 49, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1, 1]
 A = [0, 3, 1, 4, 1, 0, 3, 49, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1, 1]
 A = [0, 0, 2, 5, 2, 0, 3, 49, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1, 1]
 A = [0, 0, 2, 5, 0, 1, 4, 49, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1, 1]
 A = [0, 0, 2, 5, 0, 1, 0, 50, 2, 1, 2, 0, 2, 1, 1]
 A = [0, 0, 2, 5, 0, 1, 0, 50, 2, 1, 0, 1, 3, 1, 1]
 A = [1, 0, 2, 5, 0, 1, 0, 50, 2, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 2]
 B = [2, 1, 0, 0, 1, 2, 0, 31, 0, 0, 2, 5, 0, 1, 0]

A = [0, 0, 0, 5, 0, 0, 1, 53, 2, 1, 0, 0, 0, 2, 0]
B = [0, 0, 1, 0, 0, 2, 0, 34, 0, 0, 0, 5, 0, 0, 0]
A = [0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 1, 1, 57, 1, 0, 1, 0, 0, 2, 0]
B = [1, 0, 0, 1, 0, 2, 0, 34, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 1, 1]
A = [0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 1, 57, 1, 0, 0, 1, 0, 2, 0]
A = [0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 58, 1, 0, 0, 1, 0, 2, 0]
A = [0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 59, 2, 0, 0, 1, 0, 2, 0]
A = [0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 59, 0, 1, 1, 1, 0, 2, 0]
B = [0, 0, 2, 1, 0, 2, 0, 34, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]
B = [0, 0, 0, 2, 1, 2, 0, 34, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]

B = [0, 0, 0, 2, 0, 3, 0, 34, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]
B = [0, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 1, 35, 1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]
A = [0, 1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 59, 0, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 1]
B = [0, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 36, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]
B = [0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 1, 0, 36, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]
B = [0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 0, 38, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]
B = [0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 38, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]
B = [0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 39, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]

Player A owns 59 stones and Player B owns 39 stones.
Player A is the winner.