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Counterplay
The publisher gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the General Endowment Fund of the University of California Press Foundation
The essence of chess is thinking about the essence of chess.
—David Bronstein

Chess is life or death. The pieces are alive, but what actually happens on the chessboard is about 1 percent of the game. It goes on in the heads of the opponents, at almost a psychic level, and that’s what makes it so absolutely intense.
—Maurice Ashley

... and everything disappeared save the chess position itself, complex, pungent, charged with extraordinary possibilities.
—Vladimir Nabokov, The Defense
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Khan’s got a bishop aimed at my kingside. He’s staring at the guts of my position, looking for weaknesses. He wants to slice my pawns open to get at my king. I watch as his eyes scan the board. He sees how his queen can take action. He grabs that potent piece, slides it three squares forward, swings his arm to the side of the board, and hits the chess clock, stopping his timer and starting my own.

It’s my move. There are two minutes left on my clock. I take seconds to decide on a good response. Khan’s on the attack. I’ve got to get some counterplay going, some active maneuvering to keep his initiative at bay. I drop my knight onto a square in the middle of the board. The move looks good, but I’m not sure. I hit my clock. It’s back to Khan, his eyes trained on the board.

We’re playing five-minute blitz games on a damp summer night at a chess club that convenes Monday evenings on the ground floor of a Presbyterian church in the crowded suburban city of Yonkers, New York. We’re tossing pins and skewers, forks and double attacks. We’ve been at it a good hour now, each of us winning and losing playfully cutthroat games, but I’m starting to fade. I’m trying to hold on, but it’s not easy playing Khan. He has a sharp eye for tactics. He’s infinitely resourceful and thinks and moves fast. I feel like a middle-aged jogger trying to keep pace with a track star.

The position is fraught with possibility, but neither of us has the time to consider it closely. We’re down to a few seconds each. A fierce tension heats the board; something’s going to break. Khan snares my king in a
deadly mating net. I try some desperado moves, sacrificing my knight for two pawns; but Khan sees through my tricks, and my pieces lie scattered about. No choice but to resign. I stop the clocks.

“Damn,” I say. “I thought I’d get out of that.”

Khan smiles as he gathers up the pieces.

It’s late, close to midnight. Other club members were here earlier tonight, playing rounds of a tournament, but they’ve all gone home.

We switch colors and arrange our pieces. Khan resets the digital clock.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

Khan taps the clock. I make the first move of a new game.

COGNITIVE JUNKIES

I first met Khan in November 2002, at the same chess club, when he was nineteen. Since then we’ve played hundreds of blitz games together. When he worked at a restaurant in my town, he would drop by my place during his lunch break. We would play for an hour or more, racing pieces around on a cloth board at my kitchen table, until he had to return to work. The games were a gleeful respite from our daily labors. Once the clocks start, I find myself trying to follow his imaginative, quick-witted play while plodding through my more methodical moves.

A bright guy with a movie-star-handsome face, Furqan Tanwir—or Khan, as his friends know him—grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Yonkers. By his late teens he had severed ties with his parents. Without family support to fall back on, he has gotten along in life through his resourcefulness, his smarts, and his good nature. I sometimes wonder if this is reflected in his approach to chess: he’s wildly creative at the board; he takes a lot of chances, some of which fail; and he plays best, by his own admission, when he’s faced with a losing position. “My strength lies in creativity,” Khan once said. “I’ll salvage something, and I find that when I’m down, I’ll tend to play a lot better, for whatever reason. I think largely for me a survival instinct kicks in, and in a sense it becomes almost easier. You don’t have the choice to create anymore because you’re forced to find the right moves, and if that pressure is not on you, it’s much more difficult to find the same moves.”

Khan enters a lot of tournaments, where he’s out for the big-money prizes. He also likes to play quick games, day or night. He has an abiding love for the game.

Chess gets a hold on some people, like a virus or a drug. Just as the chemical properties of heroin directly and immediately affect the central
nervous system, so chess can lock into certain pathways of the mind, and it doesn’t easily let go. “Playing chess got to be a problem,” writes Charlie McCormick in one of his poems, published on his blog:

Because I would play
To the exclusion of everything else,
Including eating and sleeping.
I quickly discovered
Chess was my one real addiction,
That it would get in the way
Of all the other areas of my life
If I let it.¹

This has been going on for centuries now. A person’s body, thoughts, consciousness become wrapped up in the ideas of the game. “It hath not done with me when I have done with it,” laments the anonymous author of “A Letter from a Minister to His Friend Concerning the Game of Chess,” penned in England in 1680. “It hath followed me into my Study, into my Pulpit; when I have been Praying, or Preaching, I have (in my thoughts) been playing at Chess; then have I had it as were a Chess-board before my eyes; and I have been thinking how I might have obtained stratagems of my Antagonist, or make such motions to his disadvantage; nay, I have heard of one who was playing at Chess in his thoughts (as appear’d by his words) when he lay a dying.”

Marcel Duchamp, the French artist, was similarly smitten. “My attention is so completely absorbed by chess,” he wrote in a letter in 1919. “I play day and night, and nothing interests me more than finding the right move. . . . I like painting less and less.” Duchamp gave up painting altogether to concentrate on chess, for he found chess to be a purer, more compelling medium for artistic creativity. The story goes that when he married in 1927 he spent much of his honeymoon in Nice at a chess club. One week into the marriage he stayed up late studying chess problems. The next morning he awoke to find that his wife had glued the pieces to the board. They divorced weeks later. “Duchamp needed a good game of chess like a baby needs a bottle,” his good friend Henri-Pierre Roché wrote in 1941. He wasn’t the only one. Many committed chess players are cognitive junkies. They need their daily fix of tactics and strategy.

CHESS OR DEATH

I felt the same way a while back, the year Khan and I first met. I am an anthropologist by trade—a sociocultural anthropologist, to be precise. By
training and inclination, I am interested in getting a read on the social, cultural, and experiential dimensions of people’s lives around the world in an effort to understand better what it means to be human. Many evenings and weekends these days, however, I can be found seated before a chessboard, looking for good moves. I’ve got the fever.

I returned to playing seriously in the summer of 2002, after a twenty-year break from competitive chess. I had played as a teenager while growing up in a residential town in western Massachusetts. Chess was one of my main interests in life. “All I want to do, ever, is play chess,” Bobby Fischer once said. That idea made perfect sense to me then. I homed in on the game’s strategic nuances and competitive challenges. During my high school years I woke up early to study the masterworks of Fischer and Anatoly Karpov, the best players of that era. I snuck a pocket chess set into my classes to mull over game positions. I felt at home at the board, less so anywhere else. Chess formations patterned my thoughts. Some days, after looking at a board all day, my chess-crazed mind would construe game positions—a knight here, a rook there—out of the arrangements of people and furniture in a room.

Like other young people captivated by the game, I entertained the notion of devoting my life to it and becoming a professional chess player. But since I wasn’t especially talented, and since the mill towns and farmlands of western Mass. were by no means a hotbed of chess praxis, there was little logic in doing so, and I played competitive chess only infrequently in college. When I left for graduate school in California in 1985, I sold all of my once-cherished chess books at a used bookstore.

Over the next twenty years I played casual games with friends now and then or against a program on a computer. I had other priorities; chess was only an occasional, fleeting diversion. I also knew that even a half-serious flirtation with the game could chew up valuable time. One day, while perusing a bookstore in Manhattan in the mid-1990s, I came across a collection of the games of Garry Kasparov, then the world champion and widely regarded as one of the greatest players of all time. The diagrams of the chess positions found on every page—pictures of dynamic forces in tension, the product of richly creative ideas—hit me hard. The intense pleasures I had known as a teen but long ago effaced surged through my nervous system. I thought about buying the book, to work through in my spare time, but it was dangerous, addictive stuff. I put the three-hundred-page narcotic back on its shelf.

On a Saturday in June 2002 I found myself walking through the streets below Washington Square Park, in New York. I happened upon one of the
chess shops on Thompson Street, where anyone can play for a dollar an hour. I had been there once or twice before. I decided to try a few games and soon realized how much I enjoyed the act of thinking about my next moves and responding to my opponent’s ideas. Why can’t I take up the game again? I thought when leaving three hours later. I was in the middle of writing a book on the death and funeral rites of Nepal’s Yolmo people, an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist society. This was my second book project in quick succession, and I was tired of writing, tired of the anthropological profession, and tired of thinking about death all the time.

A few days prior to my visit to Manhattan I had pulled my car into a parking space by my home in Bronxville, New York, after running some errands. As I stepped out of the car I’d found myself thinking, That’s a great parking job. If I could have a death like that, as neat and fluid and comfortable as the way my car slipped into that spot, then that would be a good death. The perversity of this logic struck me, and I stood silent in the parking lot, car keys in hand. Time to take a break, I thought, from the seductive aesthetics of death.

Two days after playing chess in Manhattan I drove up north a ways to the national office of the United States Chess Federation, then in New Windsor, New York, and purchased a year’s membership, a chess set, and a handful of books that would reintroduce me to the game. I quickly found that the game, at the highest levels, differed from what it was when I was in my teens. It was more dynamic, more aggressive, with a complex revolution of thought emergent in its recent history. It was rife with energy, imbalances, precision, flush with lines of thought waiting to be gleaned. I was hooked again.

“So you’re making a comeback,” quipped the director of the first tournament I played in, when I told him that these would be my first rated games in twenty years. “Yeah, right,” I replied. Sitting at the board was at first like dusting off old memories.

Gradually I got a finer feel for matters. I continued to pore over chess after returning to teaching in September. I attended chess clubs three nights a week and competed in tournaments. I came home from work each day and immersed myself in the rich, bounded world of chess. My bookshelves were soon lined with twenty, then thirty, then fifty books on diverse aspects of the game. Attending professional anthropology meetings became a chore; I would find ways to sneak back to my hotel room to study Capablanca’s rook endgames. Chess had become infinitely more interesting than keeping up with the scholarly research in my field.

There was much to learn. It was all so new, so exciting and intriguing.
I felt as if I were separating from my spouse of fifteen years, anthropology, and reigniting a passion for my high school sweetheart.

I had gone native. Or, to lift a term from the social sciences, there was a keen shift in the *illusio* that motivated my efforts in life. The concept of *illusio* comes from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. A Latin word, *illusio* involves the interest that a person holds in a particular field in life—be it scholarly work or religion or football—or in life in general. It’s the investment people make in the activities that give meaning to their lives, their commitment to them. Devoted cliff climbers, dog show attendees, Buddhist monks, religious fundamentalists, novelists—each of these engage with their own *illusio*, their own “interests, expectations, demands, hopes, and investments.” Bourdieu draws on the fact that the word *illusio* relates etymologically to the Latin word *ludus*, “game,” in speaking of the ways in which people are invested in a number of social games over the course of their lives. “Illusio,” he suggests, “is the fact of being caught up in and by the game, of believing the game is ‘worth the candle,’ or, more simply, that playing is worth the effort.”

To the outside observer, uninvolved and uninvested in the social game being played, it can appear arbitrary and insignificant. Bourdieu makes this point in commenting on the social airs of early nineteenth-century Paris, where the members of court society were engrossed in a culture of status and propriety. “When you read, in Saint-Simon, about the quarrel of hats (who should bow first), if you were not born in a court society, if you do not possess the habitus of a person of the court, if the structures of the game are not also in your mind, the quarrel will seem futile and ridiculous to you.” For those caught up in the spell of a certain *illusio*, by contrast, the social game they’re playing is an important one; it can give rich meaning to their lives—even to the point of becoming “possessed by the game.” As Bourdieu puts it, “The game presents itself to someone caught up in it, absorbed in it, as a transcendent universe, imposing its own ends and norms unconditionally.”

That’s how I thought of professional anthropology for some twenty years. But by 2002 I had become disillusioned with the academic routines and status rites that came with the profession; I was coming to see it as a shallow game of note-taking and hat-tipping. When I started to play chess again that summer, a new interest took shape for me, with a force and intensity comparable to a religious conversion. Chess emerged as the main *illusio* in my life, much as it has for countless chess buffs. I became absorbed in chess, preoccupied by it, and took it seriously—so much so that I was willing to submit to a social death in the anthropological profession.
Chess remained a priority for me over the next few years. At the same time, what sparked my interest in anthropology in the first place—a desire, chiefly, to understand what people are up to in their lives—led me to reflect on the personal and social dimensions of the game. My efforts in chess came to be motivated by two chief aims. I wanted to learn how to play better, so I could appreciate the game’s depths and compete at a consistently high level of expertise; and I wanted to gain a better sense of the realities of chess in the early twenty-first century. I also sought an angle on why so many chess players are so passionate about the game.

A few years back I attended the graduation at Sarah Lawrence College, where I’ve taught since 1994. After the commencement ceremonies ended, family, friends, and faculty were milling about the main campus lawn, congratulating the new graduates. I ran into a former student of mine as I made my way through the crowd. He had graduated two years before but had returned to campus to see a friend receive his diploma.

“By the way, I’ve kept in touch with Shahnaz since I’ve left here,” he said, referring to another former teacher. “She tells me that you’ve been spending a lot of time playing chess.”

“Yes, that’s true. I’ve been playing seriously for a while now.”

“Why?”

“What’s that?”

“Why?”

Taken aback by his blunt question, I muttered that I found the game fascinating, but my answer was vague and unconvincing. The man soon walked away, no doubt wondering what had become of his former teacher, who a few years before had been expounding on cultural relativism and non-Western medical systems.

The more I gave thought to the question, the more it intrigued me. Why play chess at all? Why take up a game—if game is the best word for it—that can be so exhausting, so demanding, so maddeningly frustrating? Why spend summer weekends holed up in an airless hotel convention center, shoulder to shoulder with similarly single-minded chess enthusiasts, staring for hours on end at an array of wooden pieces on a stretch of cloth? Why devote one’s energies to a time-intensive pursuit that is little valued or understood in one’s own society? How is it that, in a world rife with social inequities, violence, economic upheaval, and fast-paced transformation, people are drawn to chess-playing? The anthropologist in me got to thinking: Why not conduct fieldwork at the chessboard and train an
anthropological lens on the cultures and motives of chess players? Why not hang out with the locals and learn what they’re up to?

“Participant observation” is the main research method that anthropologists rely on when trying to learn about a particular way of life through ethnographic research. They participate in the everyday activities of the people whose lives they are attempting to understand, while making observations about their rhyme and reason. As a participant observer, I did what other chess players do: I frequented chess clubs, played in tournaments and informally with friends, read chess books, analyzed positions with the help of computer programs, took lessons, developed a repertoire of openings, sacrificed rooks and blundered away queens, lost sleep after tough games, and played countless blitz games with friends and on the Internet. I played a lot of chess, but I also gave thought to what it means to focus on the game in a serious, committed way. I also spoke with a number of chess players, at both the amateur and the professional level, about their experiences of the game. My guiding idea was that by undertaking such inquiries, I could put myself in a position to portray the lifeworlds of some chess players accurately—much the way anthropologists have attempted to understand and convey in writing why, say, Illongot people of the Philippines used to go on head-hunting expeditions, or how globalization has shaped the ethnic identities of peoples in Peru. Indeed, only through writing this book did I come to appreciate anew what anthropology can offer the modern world.

Considering chess through an anthropological lens makes good sense. Anthropology has been a holistic discipline from its inception in the nineteenth century, with anthropologists attending to the diverse and interrelated dimensions of humanity, from the biophysical and linguistic to the material and sociocultural. In studying the chess-playing world, adopting such a holistic focus helped me to tease out the interconnecting forces—social, psychological, technological—woven into contemporary chess practice. A popular conception of chess is that it’s purely a mental activity, conducted in a bodiless, wordless domain by solitary thinkers who grapple with each other in a space of pure thought. But the game—like all human affairs—has always been a product of social, cultural, political, biological, and technological arrangements. A chess player is not a lone, heroic actor but is, rather, caught up in complicated webs of meaning and action. Chess is an ever-shifting tangle of neural networks, bodies, social relations, perception, memory, time, spectators, history, narratives, computers, databases. A combinational complexity fixes any human chess scene, not unlike the combinational interplay of pieces on a chessboard. Giving thought to that complexity, making a study of it, an anthropology of chess
can attend to the thickets of forms and forces involved in contemporary chess practice—and, more generally, in life itself.

It makes sense to think of chess players as participating in distinct cultures or subcultures—or, more precisely, in sets of interconnected chess communities—for the social realities of chess players are defined by culturally specific practices, values, languages, and social relations. Backward pawns, weak color complexes, seizing the initiative, en passant, back-rank mates, weak masters: the game involves an arcane set of rules, concepts, and vocabulary that can prove inaccessible to the uninitiated. Stuart Rachels, a philosopher and former U.S. chess champion, deems this “the curse of chess”—the fact that “even a rudimentary understanding of chess takes time to develop, and until it is developed, chess seems utterly dull.”

For seasoned players, in contrast, chess is like some enchanted palace they have stumbled across, its beauty and astonishing intricacy known only to a few. “It’s an amazing game,” one player tells me, “but most people don’t understand anything about it.” While that may be true, it’s possible to convey the complexities of the game to others. The conceptual stance I’ve adopted in portraying the lives of chess players is not very different from the one I employed a few years back while trying to grasp the cultural logic of shamanic healing practices in Nepal, or the felt immediacies of life in a shelter in downtown Boston for people considered homeless and mentally ill. Through an intensive engagement with the forms of life in question, I’ve tried to understand those forms well enough to explain their makeup to others previously unfamiliar with them.

There is no single chess culture, just as there are no singularly bounded “cultures” at work in people’s lives. Any single portrait of an actual chess player entails a specific time, place, and nexus of people. The temporal setting of this book is the first decade of the twenty-first century, an age of weekend tourneys, fading neighborhood chess clubs, globalized networks of chess players, and rapid innovations in computer and media technologies. Global interconnectedness has made the already intense practice of chess even more fast-paced, information-rich, and cyborgian. The regional setting for this study is primarily the Northeast of the United States, where city dwellers and suburbanites find ways to cram in chess around the edges of hectic, cell-phoned lives. The people under consideration are, chiefly, a multinational mix of amateur, semiprofessional, and professional players, ranging in age from seven years old to eighty-two, from both the United States and elsewhere, whom I’ve come to know through my engagements with the game. Considering that those engagements are at a decidedly amateur level, the realm of chess I write about most intimately is that of
people who do not make a living from competitive chess but are intensively involved with the game. Accordingly, I do not privilege professional chess as the most authentic and informed realm of chess experience (though professional chess is clearly at a higher level of mastery than amateur chess), but regard it, rather, as one of several fields of practice involved in a much broader theater of human action and interest.

Call it an anthropology of passion—of the ways that people are enraptured by certain endeavors and activities, and of the vectors of such fervor. Others have written about the passionate engagements of orchid enthusiasts and scrabble players and amateur boxers. I want to chronicle the passions and counterpassions of chess players. My aim is to explore the sinews of their interests and consider when their ardor veers into addiction or obsession. I also want to probe what happens when the zeal for certain endeavors runs dry and people grow ambivalent about their investment in them. Chess lays bare key existential themes in the lives of those touched by its energies. These themes are not unique to chess players; they underpin much of modern life. What delights, struggles, and ambivalences sway people? How do they manage competing interests and passions? What are the rewards and costs of obsessive focus?

With passion comes purpose. Many competitive chess players work hard on their games. They study the game, sharpen their tactical vision, analyze past battles, steel themselves for competitive grinds, and try to promote effective modes of thought while playing. They engage in “self-forming” activities and devise certain “technologies of the self,” to use the words of French historian Michel Foucault. As Foucault deems it, such technologies allow individuals to affect “their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” Chess players employ, often with zealous discipline, a number of technologies of self and subjectivity—some physical and social, others cognitive, emotive, mnemonic. Appropriate to this current age of individualism and self-fashioning, the self becomes an abiding project in the drive toward mastery. Some also draw on chess to improve themselves as persons, to become wiser, more ethically refined beings in the world. Chess offers an education as much moral as intellectual, and that adds to their appreciation for the game.

These pages bid for a phenomenologically inclined, semi-autoethnographic approach to thinking and writing about chess, one that gives priority to the personal and social dimensions of people’s involvements with the game. What are the roles of play, ritual, thought, feeling, imagination,
memory, empathy, creativity, sociality, and technology in the lives of chess players? What are the lines of pleasure, the histories of pain? How, once the variations are played out, might the vagaries of chess add to our hold on what it means to be human? This book offers a “knight’s tour” jaunt into the experiential, social, cultural, and technological expanses of the human play form known as chess.

AMATORY OBSESSION

So what incites the passions of chess players? What do they find in chess, and why do they return to it time and again? While spending time among serious chess players I’ve found that, by and large, they love the game.

Take Joe Guadagno, a Bronx native and computer software engineer now in his early fifties. I met up with Joe and several chess associates one Sunday afternoon at a weekend tourney held in Stamford, Connecticut. We got to talking about the trials of tournament chess, how grueling it can be. “You know, I was just thinking about that when I was in there,” Joe said, gesturing toward the playing hall. “‘Why am I here?’ I asked myself. You’ve got to be a masochist to want to play competitive chess.”

I spoke with Joe ten days later at the Northern Westchester Chess Club in Peekskill, New York. I found Joe more rested, and less masochistically inclined, than when I had seen him last. Joe started playing in his early teens, right after the “Fischer boom” in the early 1970s, using a chess set that he was given when he received his Catholic confirmation. No one else in his Bronx neighborhood knew much about the game, so to play at all he had to hop on a subway heading south to Manhattan, where he played at the Manhattan Chess Club. He developed other interests while in college, but then took up the game again in the late 1990s. “I love the game,” he said, with a slight Bronx accent. “It’s a source of endless enjoyment. . . . It’s more than just a hobby, it’s a passion at a number of levels.” Joe’s also aware of the game’s addictive qualities. “I’ve had a couple of times in the past six or seven years where I’ve had to say, you know, if you don’t cut a little time away from chess, you’re jeopardizing a relationship.”

The aesthetic qualities of chess hold Joe’s interest. “Before I finish,” he said, “I want to play at least a few games that are close enough to mistake-free that I can actually present them and say, ‘Here’s a chess game that’s really worth showing to other people.’ As if it was a minor work of art . . . ‘Here’s a minor work of art, but a work of art nevertheless.’”

“The cliché about the beauty of chess is, to me, not a cliché at all,” Joe added. “It’s an incredibly rich game. Everything that you see written about
chess by its lovers, about how it’s game, art, and science, is absolutely true, as far as I’m concerned. I see the artistic element. . . . So in that sense, the game is attractive to me in so many ways. It’s an art form, and it’s a challenging pursuit. It’s a whole bunch of different things.”

Or take GZA, the master lyricist of the rap group Wu-Tang Clan. Born Gary Grice, GZA learned to play chess in 1975, when he was growing up on Staten Island. Although he did not play much in his youth, its strategies now intoxicate him. “I play at home, in chess shops; I skip meals to play,” he said in 2008. “In the studio, I’ll sit and play for six hours instead of finishing a song. At home, a lot of times I’m playing on Yahoo! [on the online chess server there]. I play, like, thirty games every time I go online.”

GZA and his cousin RZA, another member of Wu-Tang Clan, launched the Hip-Hop Chess Federation in 2007, with the idea of getting more young kids to take up the game. “You are like a sponge when you are young,” GZA explained to the New York Times. “Kids are not being stimulated. Chess is a game of stimulation.”

At the end of his track “Queen’s Gambit,” GZA rhapsodizes,

I be liking chess
Cuz chess is crazy, right there, that’s the ultimate
It’s like a great hobby right there, playing chess
The board, the pieces, the squares, the movement
You know, war, capturing, thinking, strategy
Planning, music, it’s hip-hop, and sports
It’s life, it’s reality.

Most of those who take up the game are and always will be amateurs at it. But it’s important to keep in mind that the word amateur stems from the Latin amator, “lover, one who loves.” For some, chess is a hobby picked up along the way, while for others it’s a cathedral of truth and beauty. There’s a score of interlocking reasons why people stick with the game. The attractions often relate to the drama that each game promises, the competitive challenge in pitting one’s skills against another’s, the intricate complexity that comes with any chess position, the rewarding intellectual conversation that takes place between two minds during a game, how focused concentration can take a person into a domain of pure thought removed from the hassles of everyday life, the way chess enables people to know their mind better, the pleasures of learning and participating in the conceptual history of modern chess, the camaraderie to be found at chess clubs, the thrill of accomplishing something creative at the board, and the way in which truth and beauty—and perhaps a measure of wisdom—can be found in chess. It’s a swirl of deeply felt intensities that cut through the lives of chess players.
AT PLAY

Play is one of those intensities. What are we up to, Khan and I, while playing chess? We’re playing a game, a serious game. We’re involved in a certain cultural form, one that carries a rule-bound structure and a particular pattern of interaction. Brains, eyes, arms, hands, fingers, chess pieces, board, clock, and speech are cued into a “single visual and cognitive focus.”

We’ve brought to the table culturally informed understandings of what play is, what a game is, what competition entails, what it means to win or lose, and how people should relate to their play rivals.

The cadences of play skip through a vast number of situations in everyday life. Play motifs crop up in conversations and legal proceedings, in presidential debates and on stock market exchanges. Children learn about the world through play. Play is evident in moments of dreaming and daydreaming and fantasy, in acts of flirting and foreplay and erotic play, in stretches of recreational drug use. We hear the jest of play in riddles, jokes, puns, gossip, wordplay. We find play at work in beauty contests and white-water rafting, in hobbies and gambling, at parties and in psychotherapy. Play is central to musical performances, theater, film, and television shows. It has an important role in creative and scholarly work, in fiction and poetry. People busy themselves with pretend play and symbolic play, ritual play and sportive play. It was the ubiquity of play forms in human societies that led Dutch historian Johan Huizinga to title his landmark 1938 book Homo ludens, “Playing Man.” While we don’t have to accept Huizinga’s bold thesis that human civilization itself is founded on play, his contention that play “is an important factor in the world’s life and doings” is convincing. Play is as basic to human functioning as eating or dreaming. Indeed, rather than think of play as being bound within certain situations only, it makes sense to conceive of it as an elemental feature of people’s lives. “It’s wrong to think of play as the interruption of ordinary life,” says performance theorist Richard Schechner. “Consider instead playing as the underlying, always there, continuum of experience. . . . Ordinary life is netted out of playing.”

Chess belongs to a larger universe of play; when two people are playing chess, they’re up to something that is fundamental to the human species.

Like most other games, a chess game is circumscribed within limits of space and time. Chess is played on a chessboard, a bounded domain—a “consecrated space”—and there’s a clear beginning and end to a game. The outcome is uncertain, however, and that’s part of the intrigue of playing or watching a game. There has to be some degree of indeterminacy, some
sense of opportunity and contingency in the activity at hand, to make it worthy of being called a game. What will happen, who is going to win, and how? In competitive chess, something is staked on the outcome, be it the players’ chances in a tournament, adjustments in their ratings, a sense of self, or the regard of others. Chess play entails narrative intrigue. Undertaking a chess game trips a sense of adventure, of venturing into surprises and unanticipated situations.

There’s a measure of fantasy and make-believe in games of chess; while the participants are palming wooden figures, they’re proceeding on the shared assumption that those figures stand for much more than their concrete materiality. In the course of playing chess a dual consciousness can take form, in which a participant is at once minding the play of the pieces in a virtual space and conscious that people are the operators of those pieces. At any moment either the chess realm or the human realm can take priority. Those enmeshed in a game can become consumed by it to the point of forgetting their surroundings. What occurs is a “socialized trance” akin to that found when people are engrossed in a conversation, playing sports, or watching a theatrical performance. While being absorbed in this imaginative sphere, players can be transported to another realm, distinct from everyday life. This can entail a kind of ecstasy, that of ex-stasis, to use the ancient Greek term, which means “to be or stand outside oneself, a removal to elsewhere.” Nolan Kordsmeier, a friend of mine, says one reason he likes to play chess is that “the rest of the world disintegrates around you while you are playing chess... There’s a larger amount of concentration, nothing else is important. It’s like escaping into a whole other world.” As Huizinga paints it, the primordial quality of play lies “in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening.”

People play chess. In languages that speak of chess, from English and Russian to Spanish to Hindi, one “plays chess,” as one plays games in general. “Playing is no ‘doing’ in the ordinary sense,” says Huizinga. Playing chess often—but not always—involves an attitude that can rightly be called “playful.” It’s an attitude of frolicsomeness, of mischievousness even, of holding the world “lightly and creatively,” of launching into back-and-forth movements with another or with the world in general. Such movements are central to the phenomenon of play. As German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it,

The movement to-and-fro obviously belongs so essentially to the game that there is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself. In order for there to be a game, there always has to be, not necessarily literally another player, but something else with which the player plays and which automatically
responds to his move with a countermove. Thus the cat at play chooses the ball of wool because it responds to play, and ball games will be with us forever because the ball is freely mobile in every direction, appearing to do surprising things of its own accord.14

There’s a direct back-and-forth movement between two chess players, as they swap moves hand over hand. But there’s also a sense in which you play with the canvas of chess itself. You toy with the different possibilities available to you, much as a boy can spend hours fielding a tennis ball as it rebounds off the side of a house, or a punster frolics in the play of words. British poet W. H. Auden suggested that true poets are those who like “hanging around words listening to what they say.”15 Avid chess players enjoy hanging out with chess pieces, minding how they interact. Tending to these interactions can occasion a sense of pleasure, of jouissance. “This is why I like to play chess!” gushed one man while analyzing a juicy position with friends one afternoon.

Chess can be played in a mood of levity and amiability, as when friends get together to play casual games, or it can occur in a climate of grave seriousness, as when two pros tussle over the world championship. I’ve watched buddies play games with mugs of beer close at hand, with little care for who wins or loses. I’ve seen a child throw pieces against a wall after a tough loss, and I’ve watched a man pound his fist against a hotel door after losing a game. I’ve overheard players accuse their rivals of cheating. I’ve observed friendly games turn combative after perceived slights. Chess is often far from “playful.” Competitive chess is a “serious game,” as anthropologist Sherry Ortner would put it, a politically charged arena of social relations and cultural formations that people grapple with and live through “with (often intense) purpose and intention.”16 One veteran player told me that he thought participating in tournament chess made people less, rather than more, playful: “People take it very seriously. There’s a lot at stake.” There are different possible modes of engagement in the game: serious, studious, reflective, playful, social, solitary.

Chess is primarily a social enterprise. While playing chess you can spend five intense hours with someone you hardly know otherwise—and might never see again. A sense of comity often comes with playing chess at a neighborhood club or a tournament hall, as you’re surrounded by others who endorse what you’re doing and likewise find it to be a meaningful endeavor. Chess is often taken to be a lonesome, semisolitary matter, in which a person is alone with his thoughts for long stretches of time. But playing chess is often a deeply social affair, as opponents, friends, acquaintances, and potential onlookers are often close at hand.
Chess belongs to a larger social game in which we’re invested, with its social circles, tournaments, rating systems, and status hierarchies. Part of the game of competitive chess is to see how far you can climb in that particular “skill culture.” For many, participating in this scene constitutes one of the main purposes of their lives, with their interest and investment in chess waxing and waning as the years pass. For some, competitive chess is the foremost focus of their days on earth. *Chess Is My Life* is the title of two autobiographies of world-class players.

People play chess, it’s true, but it could also be said that the game plays them. As Gadamer puts it, “all playing is a being played.” That’s to say, while playing chess people step into a specific form of activity and engagement, and the formal qualities of the game shape how they think and act. They get caught up in the game. An unwritten script is at hand; chess players know, in general terms, what will happen through the next minutes or hours of their games: they’ll exchange moves until someone wins, or the game is drawn. While playing chess you can be carried along by the formal flow of the game. Being carried along in that way can be comforting or enticing or confining. Social life proceeds in much the same way.

There’s a ritual quality to chess, as there is in many games and domains of play. Chess games are governed by rules, they involve patterned routines and standardized actions, they entail a restricted code of behavior, and they have a set of fixed beginnings and endings. All this speaks to the formal, ritualistic tone of many chess encounters. Rituals often promote a sense of inclusion and belonging. People participating in ritual acts can feel that they are part of a community or shared sensibility. Players can come to understand that they are part of a community—be it a network of “chess buddies,” a nationwide clan of chess players, or a global chess society.

The rituals of chess can also convey a sense of the sacred, of otherness and transcendence. Forms of play have a lot in common with religious rites found around the world, for both play and ritual entail a set structure separated, spatially and temporally, from the happenings of everyday life. As Huizinga sees it, “the arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.” Both play and ritual can offer a sense of transcendence to those who participate in them. “It is possible to speculate,” remarks play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, “that the primordial association of the two, play and
religion, is due to the power of alterity, of otherness, that they both share. They both take their participants beyond their present circumstances, one through prayer, meditation, song, or rapturous transport, the other through ecstatic play in the game.” Play participants step beyond ordinary existence. “I believe chess can bring me closer to the spiritual part of this world in a way that simple material stuff can’t,” observes Irina Krush, an international master from Ukraine.19

“Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer,” claims French philosopher Simone Weil.20 The painstaking observances required of chess players can involve a kind of prayer. Some scholars contend that the origins of chess lie in religious rites. As it is, a chessboard physically resembles an altar upon which sacred rites take place. A board with pieces on it reminds me of Hindu mandalas that I’ve seen in Nepal, or the altars of indigenous healers in Peru, as each includes a bounded domain that contains symbolic icons. Religious designs like these at once represent and summon the forces and energies of the world. Chess does the same, or so it seems at times. While playing I sometimes feel I’m tapping into the forces of the universe and thus sensing its primal matter and physics. “It ever was, and is, and shall be, ever-living Fire,” said Heraclitus, “in measures being kindled and in measures going out.” Chess touches those fires.

“QUICK NOW, HERE, NOW”

Right now I’ve got Khan to contend with, in another fast-paced game. The detritus of our actions, captured pawns and pieces, lies about the table. I’ve got a decent position, something to work with. My pawns are solid; my pieces, active. But Khan has a way of stirring up trouble, setting fires left and right that I have to snuff out before they burn up the board. He’s got a penchant for helter-skelter positions where his imagination can pay off. His energy appears endless. I’m finding good moves and my mind is crisp. We’re matching each other threat for threat, cascading through a succession of possibilities, until we reach an endgame in which I have the edge. Khan resigns just before his clock runs out. The thrilling energy of games like this makes bouts of blitz chess worth the effort.

Blitz is chess at its most playful, especially in informal settings—at chess clubs, in parks or homes, between rounds of tournaments. “I like playing blitz because it’s fun,” Khan tells me. “You can play a lot of chess, and get some games in, and it becomes more psychological, with the time factors involved. It makes it a lot more entertaining as opposed to a slow game.”

Many love blitz. Some steer clear of it. Blitz is one of four major kinds
of chess played these days, each defined by the time controls used. With correspondence chess, players send their moves by mail or e-mail in games that can take years to complete. Classical games, the foci of most tournament and match contests, can take four to six hours. In rapid chess, each player has from twenty to sixty minutes. Then there’s blitz chess, wherein “the slowest game in the world becomes the fastest.” Each form carries its own temporality, its own mood and flow in time; each promotes a different mode of consciousness and social interaction. With blitz you can play five-minute or three-minute games, or, if you’re a true speed freak, revel in one-minute frenzies. If your time runs out, you lose the game, even if you have a winning position. The wins usually go to those who play both accurately and quickly. Many games end in frenetic flourishes of moves and flung pieces. *Blitz*, which means “lightning” in German, is the right word for this kind of chess. “Our nature lies in movement; complete calm is death,” wrote French philosopher Blaise Pascal.

Blitz is poetry in perpetual motion. It’s Bud Powell on jazz piano, Charlie Bird on tenor sax. The tempo is fast and furious, but also blissfully melodic. It’s NHL hockey without the breaks between plays. It’s a pleasure when both sides are playing with precision and imagination. At times while playing blitz I feel I’m at one with the world, flowing with its flow, in synch with its bebop rhythms. At other times, I’ve entered a plane of tense energy. Blitz is the antistructural counterpart to serious chess, its wild, Dionysian energies antic in contrast to the more Apollonian orders of tournament chess. Psychologist Jerome Bruner calls play “that special form of violating fixity.” By this he means that play, chiefly undertaken by the young, disrupts patterns of action that are altogether fixed within a particular animal species. Blitz chess violates fixity: it can take its players out of the set structures of everyday life and those of more classical forms of chess. Often after dallying in a stream of blitz chess I find myself to be looser and lighter in spirit, less constrained, and more open to creative approaches to the world. Richard Schechner says that the looseness common to many play moods—looseness in the sense of “pliability, bending, lability, unfocused attention”—encourages “the discovery of new configurations and twists of ideas and experiences.” Blitz promotes creative looseness.

Blitz chess can provoke a return to childhood glee. It can inspire a meta-ludic tone, a playing with play, in which the players cavort with the play form itself. “It’s just more fun than tournament chess,” Greg Shahade, an American international master from Philadelphia, said one day, during a stretch of years when he’d been opting for blitz chess over rated competitive games. “All I want to do, actually, is play blitz. I think if chess was all blitz,
that would be my dream. It would completely ruin the quality of the game, but it would be fun for me.”

Mikhail Tal, a Latvian player who became world champion in 1960, at the age of twenty-three, was fond of blitz. “That’s enough for today,” he would say at the end of a day’s training in preparation for a match in 1967. He would then signal the next activity: “Blitz, blitz.” Tal was happy to play blitz with fellow grandmasters or with amateurs who spotted him in hotel foyers. At the end of a tournament in Zurich in 1959, he found an avid blitz partner in a kid from Brooklyn. Tal had already packed his bag to leave when he got a call from Bobby Fischer, the famed American player, then sixteen, who had also competed in the tournament and was staying in another room in the hotel. “I’m flying to New York in the hour,” Bobby said. “But if you agree to play some blitz I’ll give up my ticket.”

Not everyone is up for such pleasures. When grandmaster and chess author Genna Sosonko interviewed Soviet grandmaster Mikhail Botvinnik in 1988, he asked the former world champion, “Do you still play for fun sometimes?” to which the chess patriarch, then seventy-seven years old, responded, “I have never played for fun.”

“I suppose that you are not very keen on blitz?”

“The last time I played blitz was in 1929, on a train,” said Botvinnik. “We traveled with a team from Leningrad to Odessa to play a championship match and we had a blitz tournament during the train journey. I came in first.”

The ludic qualities of blitz often occasion an amiable social scene, particularly when “skittles” (casual) games crop up in clubs or among friends. The games are marked by friendly bantering from both players and any kibitzing onlookers. The word *kibitzer* stems via Yiddish from *Kiebitz*, the German word for peewit, a bird that makes a high-pitched call that can be heard as “pee-wit,” or perhaps “kee-bitz.” While kibitzing is taboo during formal games, kibitzers often sound off during informal blitz games, bleating warnings, cooing advice. “Watch out for his rook!” The players themselves also dispense comments on their own positions. “My piece seems to be square deficient,” remarks one player during the course of a game at a neighborhood club upon discovering that one of his knights, attacked by a pawn, had no safe square to land upon. “I can’t believe I just did that,” says another after locking his bishop into a corner.

Or they riff on their opponent’s actions. “That’s very mean, very mean,” wheezes a player whose position is collapsing. “He’s turning to feathers!” chortles a man, intimating that his opponent is chickening out. “Yes. Yes. No. No. Yes. Now we come in like flint. Now we’re coming in like flint,”
said a man while playing blitz chess in the skittles room at the 2009 World Open tournament, held in a hotel in downtown Philadelphia over the Fourth of July weekend. Others voiced rambles of their own or exchanged sallies with varied amounts of attitude as the games, hours, and cash bets capered on. “You’re going to pay. You will pay.” “That don’t look kosher. That does not look kosher.” “Now, that’s cute. That’s cute. That, my friend, is cute.” “That should have been a draw.” “Draw? You couldn’t even draw a picture.”

My favorite line was heard in the southwestern corner of Washington Square in New York City, where chess hustlers convene to win some cash from other hustlers or from unsuspecting passersby. “You can’t dance at two weddings,” said one seasoned player as his opponent was trying to stop two of his pawns from reaching the eighth rank, where they could be promoted into queens. “No, sir. You can’t dance at two weddings.”

Remarks by players can have a strong performative force. Provocative speech can serve as effective action on a par with good moves made on the board, adding to the tactical and psychological impact of the play. They can prod, taunt, tilt, destabilize, sweet-talk, or trash-talk an opponent. As anthropologist Thierry Wendling says of blitz talk in his 2002 ethnography of chess players in France, “Speech is used like a weapon, a ‘verbal joust’ that doubles the purely chess confrontation. . . . It’s remarkable how much the players have a half-intuitive, half-reasoned knowledge of the power of speech. Used in this way, with its psychological, expressive, and performative powers, speech reinforces and doubles the efficacy of moves played on the chessboard.” Words and gestures often converge, with utterances sounding in time with the assertive placement of pieces and the pounding of chess clocks. “Thus,” Wendling writes, “the gesture, the blow on the chessboard or on the clock dramatizes the expressivity of speech; the body serves as a technique of language.”

Such talk, usually good-natured, is part of the game. My friend Nolan tends to deliver a running commentary on his blitz play, painting a stream-of-consciousness canvas of a chess player’s mind. “Why did you do that? Oh, I see. My rook’s attacked. So what can I do about it? . . . It’s just a game.”

Players vary in the velocity of their chess reasoning. To watch expert blitzers is to revel in the speed and accuracy of their thoughts and actions. Hikaru Nakamura, a young American grandmaster and one of the best blitz players in the world, rifles out his moves at exceptional speeds, stunning his devastated opponents. (“It’s amazing,” one youth says of Nakamura. “His mind works so quick. Boom-boom-boom!”) I find that I can’t keep up with strong blitz players; I can’t see as much as they do in split-second intervals.
Moving at lightning speed, they appear to possess a more advanced perceptual consciousness. “How can they see so much, so quickly and so accurately?” I ask myself. One answer lies in the fact that strong players have a vast storehouse of chess patterns from which they draw. This gives them a rich and habituated practical feel for the game; they can size up a game position at a glance and hit on viable ways to proceed after thinking about the situation for only a few seconds. Even so, mistakes happen often in blitz chess, especially in comparison to the precise artistry of grandmaster chess.

Blitz’s fast pace means that one has little time to calculate systematically. The thinking is quick, abrupt, and largely intuitive because the seconds are ticking. Imagine playing a game of Scrabble in which each side has five minutes for the entire contest, or consider writing a poem with a five-minute deadline. That gives some sense of the breakneck thinking involved in blitz chess. You have to be a “spontaneous strategist,” much like boxers in the ring, whose training enables them to act and react reflexively. This helps to explain why, as compared to players who rely on straight-out calculation, so-called “intuitive players” tend to fare well in blitz and other rapid time-controlled games: their feel for chess positions helps them to make snap judgments.

Blitz games often entail a rapid succession of moves, followed by quiet interludes when a player devotes twenty seconds to thinking about his options, and then another flurry of moves, like a boxer’s combination of punches. To do well you have to think quickly and keenly. If players are distracted while playing blitz, even at a subconscious level, they can lose their playing edge, and miss things left and right. The same goes for when they’re tired.

Blitz carries tones of pure immediacy. When playing blitz you’re in the moment of that moment, with little time to think of anything else. It’s a world of spontaneity and presence, of the “quick now, here, now, always,” to use a poet’s words.

Blitz games are often ephemeral. A game is played and finished; then the pieces are primed for another round. Blitz is like unrecorded jazz in a nightclub: you are attending to the beautiful sequences, the lush chords, all the while knowing they’ll be lost to any permanent record. One of my fieldnotes entries speaks to this: “October, 2006. A blitz game against Dale Sharp, at the Friday night club. A Catalan, where I sacrificed my rook to open up lines of attack against his king. A complete onslaught, memorable, breathtaking. We swept the pieces up a few second later, to start a new game. No trace of it afterwards. Not sure if everything was correct, or how the game would play out with exact play on both sides. A thrill and melan-
choly to this.” Usually there is no record of a blitz game, no lasting trace of it, except in the minds of the participants—a kind of phantom chess.

Manhattan hosts several public places where blitz players congregate. Along with the chess shops on Thompson Street there are several parks. Battery Park is one of them, but folks say it hasn’t been the same since 9/11. Some players who worked in the twin towers never returned. The southwestern corner of Washington Square Park fields a semicircle of concrete chess tables where homed and homeless gather. Grandmasters were known to play there regularly in the 1970s and 1980s, but that golden age is long past; now the corner is inhabited mostly by “hustlers, drug dealers, and crazy people,” as a refugee from the place puts it. Bryant Park, next to the New York Public Library on 42nd Street, has a cleaner feel to it, as suits its central location. Many blitzers go there for their speed fixes. Money is wagered, discreetly, in these places: from $5 to $10 a game, but I’ve heard some gamblers have thrown down $10,000 or $20,000 stakes. Many park players rely on offbeat schemes that work best on short notice but are scoffed at by tournament players. “He’s a street player,” one man says of another. “That stuff might work in the parks, but not in tournaments.”

Blitz evokes strong sentiments among chess players. A few take delight in blitz and consider it to be chess in its purest form. Others argue that the quick pace can lead to superficial thought and a reliance on cheap tricks, which can be detrimental to a person’s game. “Blitz and rapid chess involve a lot of smoke and mirrors, while standard chess is a quest for truth,” remarks one player. The sentiment dates back at least to the eighteenth century, when French chess sage André Philidor averred that “skittles are the social glasses of chess—indulged in too freely they lead to inebriation, and weaken the consistent effort necessary to build up a strong game.” More modern language gets at similar ideas. “It’s sad to realize that there are people who think that chess is only a 5-minute game and miss the beauty, creativity, logic, and depth of slow games,” says chess writer Kelly Atkins. “Blitz is fine for those who enjoy it, and it has its place, but it’s the fast food version of our game—McChess in my book.”

If you dally in too much blitz, goes the conventional wisdom, you can slide into bad habits. You can develop a penchant for playing obvious moves quickly, without giving serious thought to the nuances of the position. “Blitz kills ideas,” said Bobby Fischer. A person’s play can get sloppy, pedestrian. I’ve seen this in my own efforts: if I muck around too much with blitz, when I sit down at the board to play a slower game I act hastily, flinging a knight there, slapping a pawn here, in a scattershot of knee-jerk responses.

“It’s dangerous to play too much blitz,” says Sam Shankland, a young
international master from California. “It builds bad habits. I used to move notoriously quickly, which is very bad for one’s practical chances. It’s dangerous to play too much.” Still, Sam executes thirty to eighty blitz games a month. “It keeps my game in form, reminds me of my openings, and keeps my tactics sharp.” Others as well try to modulate between the conflicting pulls of passion and reason, between wanting to bask in the pleasures of blitz and knowing it’s best to go about chess in more purposeful ways.

Most players find that blitz, like a lot of other dangerous substances, can be imbibed in moderation. You don’t want to get hooked on it at the expense of more classical modes of play. But you don’t have to avoid it like the plague, either. “Use fast games to practice openings, or to relax once in a while, not as a steady diet,” Dan Heisman, a chess instructor, advises his students. Many find that it’s a good way to learn new openings, as one can get in a lot of games on short notice, and that playing bout after bout helps one to develop a richer feel for the game. Robert Cousins, an expert-level player, spoke of this one day as we talked about the game. “Yes, I enjoy playing blitz,” he said. “There’s also a different feel to it. It’s like rap music as opposed to opera.”

Robert received confirmation of the value of playing blitz when he started to take lessons a couple of years back from Adnan Kobas, a FIDE master from Bosnia who teaches chess in New York and Connecticut. “When I first started studying with Adnan,” he told me, “he looked at my games and said, ‘Okay, you and I are going to play a lot of blitz, because it improves your tactical vision, it helps you with practicing your openings, it exposes you to new ideas. And it helps with playing in time pressure.’” Robert plays blitz with friends and on the Internet, a handful of games each week. These encounters are balanced by tough, over-the-board competitions.

Then there are those players, less ambitious, who think they’ve seen better days at the board, who end up playing blitz more than anything else, who love its fleeting joys and miseries, who sit down for a few games and are still playing hours later.

I look at my watch. It’s after midnight now.

“A couple more?” Khan asks.

“Sure.”

We’ve lost track of the number of games we’ve played tonight. There’s a world sleeping around us, we’ve got things to do in the morning, but we’re thirsty for a few more combinations. This is chess as friendship.

We set up the pieces. Khan reaches out and starts my clock.
“It’s pretty much the only time I ever feel anything”

“It’s the only thing that doesn’t get boring after a while,” says Elizabeth Vicary, an ebullient woman in her early thirties who has devoted much of her life to playing and teaching chess. “I’m obsessed with it.”

Elizabeth took on a series of unorthodox jobs after graduating from Columbia University. She worked as a personal assistant for a Jordanian princess, wrote encyclopedia articles, and then worked for Chess in the Schools, a nonprofit organization based in New York that provides chess instruction to inner-city kids. That post led to her current job, which is to teach chess at IS 318, a junior high school in Brooklyn. It’s a “dream job” for her, for along with being able to teach chess she gets a lot of support from the school’s administration. She teaches what she wants to, and she has the funds she needs to buy digital chess clocks or sponsor her students’ trips to the scholastic nationals tournament each year.

She has been playing and absorbing the game along the way. It’s the game’s potential for meaning-making more than its competitive side that propels Elizabeth. “Games are very beautiful in the narratives themselves. . . . I don’t have any other activity that I do that I feel like it’s meaningful. Everything else I do I feel like I should be doing something else. . . . You go to a party, and you talk to some people on a roof in Brooklyn, and you feel like, Why am I talking to this drunk jerk? Right? And you feel you are improving as a person, or you’re making progress toward something, or there’s some inherent meaning in it.” Chess assures her life of a moral education and a durable fabric of meaning.

Elizabeth has kept a blog since August 2007, where she posts candid musings on chess-related topics. When I first met her, she had just written an entry, “I Hate Myself,” in which she screamed out her frustration with herself for losing a tournament game that weekend. In the game, she miscalculated the outcome of an overly optimistic rook sacrifice. “And you know what occurred to me last night that I was going to tell you about?” she asks her readers. “I realized that I play chess because it’s pretty much the only time I ever feel anything. The rest of the time, with just a couple exceptions, I am almost completely numb. Somewhere along the way I turned into a zombie.”

I ask her to say more about this.

“Yeah,” she says. “I just don’t feel that much. I don’t feel that invested in anything else, and I guess as an adult your relationships sort of settle down a little bit, so there’s no big drama in my life emotionally. And so every-
thing else I can do on autopilot, and chess is the only time that I actually have to be there, where I have to work hard intellectually. . . . Chess is the only time that I really have to work, that I really have to try, and I’m really on the line in any kind of way. And so, yeah, it’s the only time—it sounds bad—the only time I feel extremes of emotion.”
CHAPTER 2

Notes on a Swindle

Nothing binds two people like a serious challenge on a chessboard, making them counterposed poles of a jointly produced mental creation in which one is annihilated to the other’s advantage. There is no harsher or more implacable defeat. The players bear lifelong scars, neither body nor soul ever recovering fully.

—Paolo Maurensig, The Lüneburg Variations

July 19, 2003. You’re not sure how much English your opponent knows, so when you meet him at the board you nod and smile only, and he does the same. At least he’s not the gruff, unfriendly type. Vladimir Grechikhin is his name. He’s wearing a blue dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar, looks to be in his early sixties, and has the sturdy build of someone who has done manual labor during his life. He’s rated 2200, which is the baseline for a master’s rating. You suspect he has seen better days at the chessboard, that he’s not playing at the level he was once capable of. You wonder where he’s from, when he came to the States, what kind of work he does, and how long he has been playing chess. But there’s no time for that kind of talk. You’re at the Marshall Chess Club in Manhattan, a few blocks north of Washington Square Park, waiting for the first round of a weekend tournament to begin. From the outside, the red brick building at 23 West 10th Street doesn’t stand out in any way. The only feature that distinguishes it from the other townhouses lining this stately residential street is a small plaque by the front door that announces the club’s name. But step inside the place on any weekend and you’ll happen upon a cramped but vital domain of chess praxis.
WEEKEND WARRIORS

You entered that domain today, a few minutes before noon. You climbed the creaky wood stairs to the second floor and encountered a mix of folks waiting for the tournament to begin. Kids were seated at tables too big for them, peddling blitz games with friends they hadn’t seen since the weekend before. The father of one of these prodigies had set up his laptop on a corner table to get ahead on some work while his son competed. Older players were standing about, talking, checking to see who else had shown up that day. Two middle-aged men were hunched over a board, rehashing a game they had played several evenings before. “I should have exchanged rooks when I had the chance,” one of them said. The second nodded. Other players—a girl accompanied by her mother, college students, masters from Russia and Eastern Europe, club regulars, gangling teenagers from Brooklyn—trickled in to the building and climbed the stairs to the second floor, where they lined up outside the club’s office and registered for the day’s event.

Founded in 1915 by Frank J. Marshall, the strongest American player of his time, the club is one of the most renowned in the world. Occupying the first two floors of a brownstone, it has served as a competitive arena for generations of chess players, including Bobby Fischer in his early, less reclusive days. It’s a mecca for serious players in the New York area. “If you want to play the best players, that’s where you go,” said a friend. Some find the place “intense” and “unfriendly” and play elsewhere, but for others the brusque intensity comes with the territory. The club runs a number of tournaments monthly, including weekend Swisses, where people compete for cash prizes and rating points over a two-day stretch.

You’ve been playing in tournaments here off and on since the previous July—when you lost your first game to an eleven-year-old gunning for bigger scalps. On most occasions you’ve played in the Under 2000 section, which comprises players rated 1999 and lower, but this weekend you’re playing in the Open section with the hope of getting in some high-quality games against strong, master-level competition. Your current rating of 1876 puts you in the top 6 percent of all tournament players. In the lofty heights of the Marshall, though, it places you at the bottom of the pool of contenders in the Open section. The top of each pyramid is a pyramid in itself; you’re at the base of that smaller pyramid. Your goal is not to win all your games, but to play well and learn something in the process.

After doling out the thirty-five-dollar entrance fee for nonmembers you walked about, noting the framed photographs of famous players adorning the walls. In one, greats like Alekhine, Capablanca, Nimzowitsch,
and Marshall stand unsmiling around a chessboard. In another, Fischer stares intently at a position. In the hallways, computer printouts posted on bulletin boards announce the results of recently completed tournaments. Toward the front stands Capablanca’s table, where the great Cuban player was fond of playing.

At 12:45 the tournament director posted a sheet of paper that listed the pairings for the first round, and players crowded around it like high school athletes checking to see whether they made the team. You were paired against Mr. Grechikhin, a master-level Russian émigré and regular of the club.

You played him once before, back in June, at another Marshall week­ender. After a long, muddled game, you stepped into time trouble, messed up a tense position, and lost. “The endgame,” you said after resigning, while looking at the remaining pieces on the board. You meant to say something like, “I was doing well enough until the endgame, when, short of time, I made some bad moves.” But given his limited English, you uttered only the shorthand version. “Yes. The endgame,” Grechikhin replied. Later, you wondered if he took your comment to mean that you can’t play the endgame well. Americans have a reputation for that.

OPENINGS AND ENDINGS

The endgame is the third and last stage of a game in its prototypical form. Chess players think of the game as being composed of three phases: opening, middlegame, and endgame. The opening consists of the initial moves, in which players try to develop their pieces in effective ways, create a safe haven for their king, and prepare their forces for the battles to come. The middlegame proceeds from the opening, with the pawn and piece configurations established in the opening stage setting the terms of the contest. If the game is not decided earlier on, then it will come down to an endgame, which is, by definition, when there are only a few pieces left on the board; the other pieces have been exchanged. Since the diminished material makes a direct mating attack less feasible, the play in endgames often revolves around attempts to advance a pawn to the eighth rank, where it can be promoted to a queen or another piece. That additional piece can then help the side possessing it force a win through checkmate.

The three stages of the game require different kinds of know-how. The opening requires a knowledge of effective ways to deploy one’s pieces. Success in the middlegame usually rests on the resourceful employment of one’s experience and understanding of strategic and tactical ideas. Most
endgame positions require a technician’s knowledge, geared toward converting an edge into a winning advantage. Or, as Viennese grandmaster Rudolf Spielmann put it several decades ago, “Play the opening like a book, the middlegame like a magician, and the endgame like a machine.” Since hard work is a prerequisite for acquiring any degree of expertise in any of these areas, players vary in their strengths and weaknesses in each phase of the game.

Players in different chess societies tend to focus on different aspects of the game when learning it. In Russia and eastern Europe, schoolchildren learn chess by studying the endgame first and foremost, then go on to enhance their understanding of the other phases of the game. The focus on the endgame, their teachers understand, gives them a refined feel for the possibilities of each piece and, ultimately, an informed sense of how to steer specific opening or middlegame formations toward advantageous endings. I once asked Predrag Trajkovic, a grandmaster from Serbia, for his opinion on the best way to learn to play chess well. “To start from endgames, while creating a small opening repertoire,” he answered. “If you don’t know endgames, you don’t know the goal. It’s like when you drive somewhere, like through New York City, and you’re not sure which is the best way to go. This is like a chess game. For many players, a chess game is like making a trip without a goal, just driving.” Knowing endgames well gives a player a clear sense of the desired destination and a road map for getting there.

Many Americans, in contrast—especially those who learn the game on their own—are known to devote much of their initial studies of the game to a detailed inculcation in various opening systems. They do so in part because studying “openings” is easier and more exciting than endgame study, and in part because the returns on such an education can be immediately appreciated, since one is able to establish a decent position after the first five or ten moves of a game. The downside is that the same Americans, or so the mythology goes, often neglect to undertake a serious study of the endgame, even later in their chess careers.

“OUT OF BOOK”

Mr. Grechikhin might have come to assume that you are a typical American player after your first game together.

He’s sitting across from you now. You’re soon to embark on that weirdly intimate social encounter known as a tournament chess game. Since Grechikhin did not overwhelm you in your last game, you feel you have a decent shot against him.
You’re positioned elbow-to-elbow alongside other players in the room, which is the size of a small classroom and separated from the adjoining hallway by a red curtain. This ritual space holds several rows of tables, two or three chessboards to a table, with a numbered piece of paper taped next to each one. The highest-rated player is at the first board, playing the highest-rated player from the second tier.

Your opponent is the fifth-highest rated, so you’re seated at Board 5. Ilye Figler, a well-known master and chess coach, sits a few feet away. He’s facing off against Katharine Pelletier, a girl in her high school years. Next to him is Jay Bonin, an international master who plays more tournament games each year than anyone else—a whopping 509 in 2002. A short, stocky man who often looks like he’s one relaxed breath away from dozing off, Bonin works days in the mail room of a Manhattan law firm, sorting letters, making deliveries. He can be found most evenings and weekends at the Marshall or at the Nassau Chess Club, on Long Island. When friends used to ask him why he played so much, he would answer, “I wouldn’t know what else to do.”¹ Today he’s wearing a shirt with a logo on the back that reads, “Slow Smoked Memphis Style.” He’s paired up against an expert-level player who looks a bit nervous.

Bodies and voices settle down in the room. Around you, other games are beginning; you shake hands with Grechikhin, and then start his clock. He’s been assigned the White pieces. You have Black. You each have ninety minutes to make your first thirty moves. After that there’s an additional “sudden death” hour until someone wins, someone’s time expires, or a draw is agreed upon.

The player with White always moves first, so Grechikhin makes his first move. You write down the move on your game score sheet. With your own first move you try to steer the game toward a combative, double-edged defense known as the Sicilian Defense. It’s called a Sicilian because an early seventeenth-century advocate of it was from Sicily.

In chess, recognized sequences of opening moves are known as openings if they are undertaken by White (“Bishop’s Opening”) and as defenses if undertaken by Black (“Alekhine Defense”). Chess is like American football in that there is an assortment of named formations that players can wield in setting up offensively or defensively: while in football we find the West Coast offense and a 3–4 defense, in chess we have the Spanish Game, the French Defense, the Queen’s Gambit Declined. One difference is that in chess, the combatants don’t line up all at once, as play proceeds on a turn-by-turn basis: White posts a pawn here, Black answers with a knight there, as the game builds on a vibrant exchange of motives and maneuvers.
You’d like to lead the game toward the Accelerated Dragon, a variation of the Sicilian you’ve been playing lately. Grechikhin wants nothing to do with that. He steers the game into an offbeat anti-Sicilian variation known as the Wing Gambit, where he proposes the sacrificial gambit of a pawn to gain good control of the center squares and scamper his pieces into play. He wants to mix things up and outplay you in a complicated melee. His game strategy throws you off; you were hoping for a more measured game, in waters you know better.

You flinch. You don’t want to play against this.

You’ve seen this position on chessboards before, and have fought against it in blitz games. You understand that the chess theorists out there consider the gambit dubious, but you don’t rightly know what to do against it, so you’ll have to play by feel. You’re already “out of book,” as they say. You feel your heart pulsing in your chest. You’re looking to survive the opening. You’re reminded of a boxer who steps in for the first round only to be pummeled out of the ring.

Grechikhin’s cavalier approach makes you wonder if he doesn’t think much of his opponent’s chess skills. He probably wouldn’t wield the gambit against a stronger player. Perhaps he’s aiming for a quick win against what he takes to be a patzer, an inexperienced player.

You give your next moves a lot of thought, as your clock ticks off precious minutes. There’s no way you want to get your king caught in a lot of crossfire before it has time to find cover behind a row of pawns. You decide to play cautiously, aiming for a solid defensive setup, and decline Grechikhin’s pawn offer. You figure there’s probably not much established theory covering the positions that will result from your move, so you’re both in uncharted waters. If your game were a theatrical play, it would be an experimental off-off-Broadway production.

Grechikhin makes a move. You think about how you want to parry, and make a move of your own. He does the same after a few minutes, as the two of you become embroiled in the syncopated, back-and-forth dialogue that makes up a tournament game.

At one point, you see what you take to be a way that Grechikhin can launch an attack. You start to worry about him opening up the center before you can hide your king on the kingside. But he doesn’t follow that course, either because he doesn’t notice it himself or because he decides that it’s not worth pursuing. The game proceeds along a less violent path. A sequence of carefully selected moves leads to a position where you’re not badly off.

With your eleventh move, you nudge your queen from its starting posi-
tion to a square that looks promising for it, and then sit back to take stock. You’ve survived the first onslaught. You’ve managed to develop your pieces and get your king castled safely behind a row of pawns, without giving up too much ground. Your heart beats less frantically.

You step out of the room to get some water, and return to the board. You take a look at the game to your right. A man in his fifties (Russian, apparently) is playing a gritty game against a hormonal kid pushing sixteen at best.

The Marshall fields a spectrum of chess players. Eager schoolkids, many with personal trainers, are looking to earn rating points. High school and college players are out for blood. Casual players show up every so often, while grandmasters swing by to earn a bit of cash. Middle-aged regulars play every weekend, because that’s what they do. Among them are some Russian players who know their way around a chessboard. The multicultural mix of the place attests to chess being a medium that transcends languages, generations, cultural sensibilities. The language-free geometries of the game permit people to relate in ways that otherwise would be tough going.

It’s Grechikhin’s turn to move. He’s looking for a way to get a winning edge in the position. He has a wealth of knowledge to draw on: games he has played in his life, or what he remembers of them, as well as ideas he has picked up from studying the games of the great masters; all the tactical motifs he has soaked up over the years; the endgame stratagems he has acquired. Much of this is available to him more through intuition than through overt, conscious cognition. He has a fair sense of chess psychology, of when to stir up complications and when to sit back and wait for his opponent to make the first big mistake. He has a lifetime of experience with which to work. “In Africa, when an old man dies, it’s a library burning,” says Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ. Veteran chess players embody a similar store of perishable knowledge.

But your opponent is also getting older, and knows perhaps better than anyone that his mind is not as sharp as it once was. It’s not only what a person knows that helps him along in a chess game. It’s what he does with what he knows—how he performs at the board that day or hour. You’re both drawing from the cognitive and physical resources available to you in trying to vanquish the other.

‘AGONIA’

Chess pits one player against another. If we follow French thinker Roger Caillois’s classification of games undertaken by human beings—games of
competition (*agon*; football, billiards), of chance and fortune (*alea*; playing dice, lotteries), of simulation and role-playing (*mimicry*; playing pirate or house), and of disorientation and vertigo (*ilinx*; spinning around until one gets dizzy)—then it’s clear that chess is a game of *agon*, of interpersonal contest.2

The word *agon* comes to us from ancient Greece, where it referred both to the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist in a work of literature and to contests, as in athletics and music, in which prizes were awarded. Related to that term are such modern words as antagonist, from the Greek *antagonistas*, “competitor, opponent, rival,” and agony, from the Greek *agonia*, “a (mental) struggle for victory” and “the feelings of exhaustion, or pain, after the event.” As Caillois says of games of *agon*, “The point of the game is for each player to have his superiority in a given area recognized. That is why the practice of agon presupposes sustained attention, appropriate training, assiduous application, and the desire to win. It implies discipline and perseverance.” Much the same could be said of chess and chess players. “I like that in chess, unlike in cards or other games, there’s no such thing as luck,” says Kim Qvistorff, an amateur player from Denmark. “There’s you and your opponent. It’s a me-and-you kind of thing.”

Each kind of game, it is said, has its own proper spirit—its own mood, metaphysics, and ethics. What is the proper spirit of chess? If chess were a universe onto itself, it would be a cosmos founded on the agonistic play between two sets of warring, impersonal forces, what Nietzsche once called “the strife of opposites.”3 It would be a world characterized by interlocking dualities. Chess is relentless antagonism, a dialectics of White and Black pieces, light and dark squares, self and other, winning and losing, play and competition. There’s tense play between opposing forces and a struggle between two embodied consciousnesses. You’re trying to get something done with each move—place a knight on a good square, create weaknesses in the enemy’s camp—while your opponent is trying to accomplish something of his own or to contest what you’re trying to do. It’s like striving to compose a poem while standing next to a naysaying obstructionist. For me, this counterpresence is most at hand when I’m facing strong players. It’s as though I’m fighting against a force field of some sort; against something hard, unyielding.

This spirit of conflict makes the creative efforts in chess more like those found in a high-stakes tennis game than those evident in individual arts like painting or in collaborative arts like dance or jazz ensembles. The *agonia* of chess is such that a player is always trying to create within a field
of resistance, and any attempt to proceed creatively, to sculpt something effective or beautiful, is in tension with the opponent’s own efforts. In the wistful words of Alexander Alekhine, the fourth world champion, which he wrote in the preface to a 1929 book by a composer of chess puzzles, “I would like to be able to create alone, without the necessity, as in games, of adjusting my plans to those of the opponent, in order to create something that will remain. Oh! This opponent, this collaborator against his will, whose notion of Beauty always differs from yours and whose means (strength, imagination, technique) are often too limited to help you effectively! What torment, to have your thinking and your fantasy tied down by another person!” Imagine a master painter whose every brushstroke is countered, stroke by stroke, by the hand of another.

Chess games are tugs-of-war of will and effort. Intentions butt heads with counterintentions. “The opponent is always very annoying!” said Bent Larsen, a Danish grandmaster and one of the world’s best players in the late 1960s. It’s enough to make one detest an opponent’s presence, to wish his form out of existence. Chess is at once playful and cutthroat. There’s a persistent tension between the competitive thrust of the game and the fact that friendly ties can crop up among chess players.

Chess encounters can also bring healthy exposure to otherness and difference. They offer a way of extending and enriching oneself through the frank regard of others. Chess teachers say as much when discussing how playing the game makes clear to children and adolescents that there are other persons in the world, with their own yearnings and active demands. As Leonid Yudasin, a Russian-Jewish grandmaster and trainer from St. Petersburg, tells it, “The main problem for kids is to understand that the other exists. ‘I want!’ That’s all they do in life. . . . With chess, you have to think about what this other person does. It doesn’t help to say, ‘No, I don’t like this!’ And it’s painful; kids need to win. In chess, if you make a wrong move, you’re lost. It’s a very good way to show that it’s important to work seriously, and to understand that this other guy exists.” Chess readily provokes a “traumatism of the other,” as philosopher Emmanuel Levinas might put it. A tough contest can take you out of the bubble of your thoughts and force you to confront the demands of another. Your opponent’s willful differentness disrupts the self-sameness of your own being. Speaking for myself, I’ve come to value the useful traumatism that comes with playing against a tough opponent or with a friend.

It would be a mistake, however, to say that it is all otherness, or conflict and tension only. Chess players participate in a shared activity and can become engaged in a “mutual tuning-in relationship.” Austrian American
social philosopher Alfred Schutz uses that phrase in considering the underpinnings of face-to-face communications in his well-known essay, “Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship,” originally published in 1951. Taking the performance of music as his example, Schutz contends that all communication is founded on a relationship of mutual attunement, “by which the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou’ are experienced by both participants as a ‘We’ in vivid presence.” Schutz says of different kinds of relationships between a musical performer and audience, “In all these circumstances, performer and listener are ‘tuned-in’ to one another, are living together through the same flux, are growing older together while the musical process lasts.”

Much the same happens when two people are immersed in a conversation: there’s a sense of collaborative flow, of swimming in a common stream of consciousness. Chess players often come to be tuned in to each other. Living together through the same flux, they can experience themselves as a “We” in a vivid co-presence. They are “co-performing subjectivities” engaged with one another. Often, while one is playing a game, there’s a palpable sense that one is giving thought to the same chess patterns as one’s opponent. In my fieldnotes I wrote, “Sept. 28, 2008. Playing casual games with Kim, at his house, on a Sunday afternoon. I’m struck by the fact that, while we’re trying to beat each other, there are so many points in the games where our opposing actions work in coordination with one another, in sets of synchronized sequences of force and counter-force.” Chess is a crux of conflict and connection.

DOUBLE TIME

While Grechikhin is sorting out moves, you’re giving thought to the position as well. The digital chess clock stands to your right, with one timer counting down the minutes and the other hovering in a temporary state of quietus. The clock implies a “double temporality,” as Thierry Wendling puts it. Each player’s allotment of time proceeds hand in hand with his opponent’s. This unique binary temporal arrangement does not faze veteran chess players, as they have long gotten used to its methods and rhythms.

Mikhail Botvinnik, world champion in the 1950s and 1960s and the patriarch of the Soviet school of chess, advised that a player should engage in concrete calculations when it is his move, and more general strategic considerations of the game when the opponent’s clock is ticking. You heed that advice now and consider the game in positional terms. You have to
play defensively, it’s clear, as your opponent has more space and you’re responding to his threats more than he is to yours. But you have a decent hold over key center squares with your pawns and pieces, and you’re not losing by any means. Things could be worse, you conclude upon assessing your respective prospects in the complex position at hand, as you progress from the opening to the middlegame.

EXQUISITE VIOLENCE

The arrows in figure 1 denote moves on Black’s part worth considering, or anticipating, in the current position. The lines of force indicated suggest something of the strategic and tactical features of the position. Chess players tend to think of any game as consisting of a complex weave of strategy and tactics. While strategy consists of setting and achieving long-term goals during the game, such as establishing a favorable pawn formation, tactics involve short-term maneuvers, often of a forcing nature. It’s much like military campaigns. While the strategic aim of a campaign might be to gain control of an important hilltop, the tactical procedures that help a battalion achieve that aim consist of specific, and often bloody, sequences of actions: seizing control of a bridge, destroying the enemy’s air support, advancing up the hill. While some contests are highly strategic in form and others involve sharp, tactical battles, in most games a combination of strategic and tactical motifs ripples through the stages of play.

That’s the case in the present position. The main strategic feud is over key squares in the center, with the White player trying to establish control over those squares so that he can launch a successful attack, and his rival trying to undermine any such control, by tactical means if need be. The task before you then is to figure out the best way to proceed, considering the nuances of the position and the interlocking sequences possible with one move or another. All this makes true chess skill—what some call the ability to play “real chess”—a difficult state to achieve. That mistakes occur in the games of even the best players, who have years of battle-tested experience under their belts and a century-plus of championship chess to draw from, attests to the depths and complications of chess. It awes and humbles people, and they are thrilled when they manage to pilot a good game.

The intricate folds of a rose, the distributed workings of the human brain, New York’s Grand Central Station during rush hour: chess offers similarly lush involutions. The combinational interplay appeals to many chess players, even if they haven’t thought about it as such. Commentators
on the game have pointed out that the exponential, fructifying nature of chess moves leads to a vast number of possible positions in a short stretch of time. The total number of distinct board positions after Black’s second move is reportedly 71,852. After four moves each it is more than 315 billion. The calculus continues with each new move, leading mathematicians to conclude that the estimated total number of unique chess games is about $10^{120}$, which is more than the total number of electrons in the universe.

Yet that mathematical feature is not what holds the interest of chess players while playing, perhaps because most of those hypothetical moves are pointless, but also because any possible arrangement of words in a conversation between people, or the various ways that musical notes can be strung together, would involve similarly astronomical numbers, with most of the sequences being nonsensical. What seizes the imagination, rather, is the labyrinth of meaningful possibilities, of interconnecting forms, found in any position.

The intricate arrangements that readily arise from these possibilities are
due, in large part, to the different pieces’ diverse forms of allowed movement: rooks cannonball down files, bishops shoot along diagonals, knights prance over squares and pieces. Unlike a game of checkers, in which all the pieces move the same way, chess entails a heterogeneous mix of different potentialities. What arises out of this variety is not mere chaos, a hodgepodge of movement and form, but a formally patterned complexity. To some, the aesthetic form that comes closest to it is found in certain works of music. Many of Bach’s compositions, such as his cello suites or The Art of the Fugue, with their plurality of motifs interweaving through time, correlate with the harmonics to be found at the chessboard. If architecture is frozen music, then chess is an ever-shifting construct of polyphonic forms.

That ordered complexity can be downright pleasing, fascinating. “Well, at some level I don’t feel I have a choice whether or not I play chess,” said my friend Nolan, when asked why he likes to play. Nolan grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, and moved to New York to attend college. When I first met him, in 2002, Nolan was a senior with long, curly hair and a straggly red beard. His hair is now cropped close to his scalp and he’s clean-shaven. What hasn’t changed is his passion for chess. After graduating from college, Nolan worked for a year as a union organizer in Detroit, Michigan, and Spokane, Washington. He found that his bosses were themselves exploitative, so he quit and returned to New York, where he landed a job teaching chess. All along he has been working on his game. He has been at my home on many occasions, where we’ve worked together analyzing game positions. “At a certain level,” he said, “chess becomes almost like an addiction. Ever since I was in high school I was obsessed with playing chess, learning more about chess, and going to chess clubs and competing. . . . If you’re serious about chess, and you get the bug, it seems like there’s almost nothing else that you want to be doing.” Nolan prefers chess to other board games, such as Parcheesi or checkers. “It’s infinitely more complicated than any other game. I think it’s the sheer complication, the complexity—the multiplicity of choices—and the dynamic factors.”

What’s less clear is why such patterned complexity appeals to humans, whether it be in chess or music or literature. Has the human brain has evolved in a manner that has led it to delight in the “beautiful problems” effected by it? Or is complexity, as such, a high-modern obsession?

That complexity entails a principle of interrelatedness. Just one minor change, such as moving a Black pawn from one square to another, can affect the “fields of force” at hand, much as the introduction of a new species of weed or the demise of a particular kind of insect can alter the ecology of an entire region, often to devastating effect; “every move played
disturbs the balance of time, force, and space.” Chess can promote awareness of systemic relations, and of the principles of interrelatedness, proportion, and balance that regularly accompany such relations.

Is there wisdom to be had in such awareness? Perhaps so. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson was a brilliant thinker and one of the chief engineers of systems theory, in which researchers study the characteristics of complex systems in nature and society, including the many cybernetic feedback loops of information processing that characterize such systems. Bateson liked to think of wisdom as “a word for recognition of and guidance by a knowledge of the total systemic structure.” By this he meant that if we can come to appreciate the systemic relations, the “dance of interfaces,” built into so many life forms, be it a single organism or the ecology of the planet at large, then we’re stepping into a kind of knowledge that can be called wisdom. Bateson found that humans tend to act and think in purposeful, goal-driven ways. These tendencies lead them to neglect the systemic nature of life, the ecosystems they live in, or their own minds, often with destructive consequences. Many farmers faced with corn-eating insects will throw insecticides on their crops without thinking of the larger effects of that poison on the soil, while suburbanites burn carbon fuels to rush to work on time while ignoring the effects of their automobile emissions on the atmosphere. At the same time, Bateson argued, certain domains of human experience, such as art, religion, and dreams, can serve a “corrective function.” They do so by helping people to appreciate the fact that life depends upon “interlocking circuits of contingency.”

Chess can serve a corrective function. It can help us counter a too-purposive and linear view of life, and make our outlooks more holistic and more ethically sound. It can help us to wise up.

It’s tempting to believe that a measure of wisdom can arise out of an awareness of the systemic relations found in chess, especially when such discernment is crucially needed in an age of global warming, greedy financiers, and feuding nation-states. Chess instructors say that learning the game’s procedures can help children enhance their understanding of the relations among different forces in life and add to their regard for the methods of judgment, interdependence, logic, initiative, and patience. This is not always the case among adult players, however, as any appreciation of the systemic relations found in chess does not always translate into an appreciation of relations outside the game. For one thing, many of those who have devoted their lives to playing chess often act in their everyday lives in ways—aggressive, self-interested, short-sighted, arrogant, vainglorious—that are anything but wise. Many become quarrelsome
and antagonistic, and develop an antipathy for human inconsistencies or contradictions. The more occasional players of the game, in contrast, are the ones who appear to be the better “adjusted.” At the same time, to become truly great players, people have to devote themselves to the game in such single-minded, single-purposed ways that they can come to neglect more balanced, interrelational ways of acting in life. “The longer you play chess, the more self-centered you become,” said Aleksander Wojtkiewicz, a recently deceased Polish American grandmaster. “It’s necessary in chess to put yourself first,” Wojtkiewicz told author Paul Hoffman. “It’s easy to forget that anyone else exists. That attitude doesn’t work in the rest of life. That’s why few of us chess players can hold marriages.”

Another complicating factor is the idea that coinciding with the themes of balance, harmony, and interrelatedness in chess are the equally important motifs of aggressiveness and assertiveness. Violence occurs in a high-quality game—central pawn formations are demolished, the shelters of kings assaulted. Even if that violence is beautiful at times, it is violence nonetheless. As Marcel Duchamp put it, “Chess is a sport. A violent sport. This detracts from its most artistic connections.” Some young players learn that the hard way, when they seek in their games to create harmonious arrangements of their pieces, with each piece and pawn in “neat,” mutually protective correspondence with its neighbors. But in their desire to establish an intricate architecture of form, these players often neglect their opponents’ positions, and stronger players hammer their artful tableaux mercilessly. The hard lesson learned from such drubbings is that harmony and balance in themselves do not win chess games. Skilled aggression does. Think of a spider and its web, or a cheetah on the prowl.

Chess involves a tense interplay between relatedness and forceful violence. And since biological life itself appears to proceed along similar lines, from the civilizations of humans to the simplest organisms, perhaps any true wisdom to be cultivated through chess relates to the realization of the fact that all life-forms have a combination of harmony and aggressive intent built into them. Life entails a combination of beauty and violence—an exquisite violence—or so the physics of chess would suggest.

THINK, MOVE, CLOCK, WRITE

A couple of other games have ended, in either bloody assaults or expedient draws. Ilye Figler has a pressing edge in his game against Katharine Pelletier, while Jay Bonin is beating up on his outclassed opponent. Jay sets up a nice mating attack, and then goes in for the kill as his opponent
broods at the board, red-faced in defeat. Upon winning, Jay gets up and walks off with a canary-swallowing smile, score sheet in hand.

The room is quiet. The loudest sounds are the ticking of chess clocks and the hum of the air-conditioner. People have settled into the muted rhythm of tournament games: think, make a move, press the clock, write down the move made. Think, move, clock, write. Think.

You and your opponent are doing the same. Grechikhin is pressing against your position, while you’re trying to hit on moves that give good counterchances. With his sixteenth move Grechikhin makes a decision that surprises you: he moves his queen one square forward, where it’s operating along the same diagonal as your own queen, which stands a few inches away.

One small step by the lady, and the ecology of the game shifts. By posting his queen on a square that is in direct communication with your own queen, Grechikhin is offering to exchange queens. Once these mighty pieces are off the board, the game can boil down to an endgame.

What’s going on here? you ask yourself. Reuben Fine, an American grandmaster and psychoanalyst, once contended that a leading chess player preferred opening variations that involve an early exchange of queens because he unconsciously desired to get “rid of women” in order to deny or regulate his sexual impulses.\textsuperscript{15} You know little about your opponent’s psychodynamics, but your guess is that he wants to eliminate the queens not because of any psychosexual issues but because he thinks he can out-play you in an ending, especially since you collapsed at the end of your previous game. (“Yes. The endgame.”) But in letting you exchange queens, and so getting his most powerful piece off the battlefield, he allows you to relieve some of the pressure against your position.

You do just that. Your pieces breathe easier. Exchanges follow. The position is simplifying into an ending in which you’ll each have a couple pieces and a cluster of pawns. You’re not sure who will be better off.

You play on. You’re both trying to position your pieces on better squares, to try to gain some kind of advantage. As you concentrate, the world fades around you. You’re unaware of anyone or anything else in the room. No sound. No movement. No opponent. You’re conscious only of the possibilities on the board. Think, move, clock, write. Think again. At times you can’t shake the feeling that a grandmaster or computer would make more precise moves, but that’s a feeling you seldom succeed in shaking.

It’s an even game until he lets you grab one of his pawns on the queen-side. To do so, you have to let your knight get boxed into a corner, where it risks getting trapped. You take time to calculate the “variations,” the possible sequences of moves, and see that the knight is safe after all, and
can come back into play if you play the right combination of moves. You take the pawn, press your clock, take a breath.

Moves are made along the lines envisioned. You hear a faint gasp from your opponent. You take this to be his sudden awareness that your knight is safe after all, and he’s down a pawn for nothing. The fact that you calculated all this better than your master-strength opponent injects a dose of confidence into your system. I’m seeing things well today, you tell yourself.

COGNITIVE MAGIC

Chess can provide a modest sense of mastery in the world, even if it’s only for moments at a time. Once players get to a decent skill level, any game they play can field a number of maneuvers—forging a devious bishop pin, setting up a kingside attack—that spark feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment. The sentiment here is much the same as the one that comes with hitting a fastball solidly, crafting an effective sentence, or identifying words in a crossword puzzle. These minor masteries are important for people’s enjoyment of chess. What’s more, the better people are at chess, the more mastery they can claim.

Chess players can find they are acting in the world, initiating lines of thought and action, rather than simply responding to whatever life throws at them. Each turn of a game requires thought and action; with each move, the player acts creatively and imaginatively in the world.

“There is no one game,” said seventeenth-century British writer Richard Brathwaite, “which may seeme to represent the state of mans life to the full so well as the chesse.” Many have found keen and lasting parallels between life and chess. “Chess is life,” said Bobby Fischer. “Life imitates chess,” said Garry Kasparov. In playing chess, an imaginative process is often at work whereby one finds oneself contending with a reduced and simplified version of life. Such microcosms are common to human beings; people around the world work with materials and activities—paintings, altars, drawings, rituals, games, performances—that function as symbolic representations of the world at large. In some societies, the architectural design of houses stands as a microcosm of the universe, as do the sacred altars presided over by religious specialists. Many theatrical performances also explicitly model the world. As religious scholar Catherine Bell relates it, performances “do not attempt to reflect the real world accurately but to reduce and simplify it so as to create more or less coherent systems of categories that can then be projected onto the full spectrum of human experience.”

Why do people so often invoke, and seek out, such models? Lévi-Strauss
suggests an answer in his book *La pensée sauvage*, in commenting on the proclivity for humans to reduce things to small-scale models in play and art. With works of art in mind, Lévi-Strauss asks, “What is the virtue of reduction either of scale or in the number of properties?” As he sees it, by reducing an aspect of life to a simpler, more manageable size, people feel better able to comprehend its nature: “Being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. By being quantitatively diminished, it seems to us qualitatively simplified. More exactly, this quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of the thing, and by means of it the latter can be grasped, assessed and apprehended at a glance.”

That tendency, Lévi-Strauss holds, is evident in all art and in all magic. It’s at work in ritual and healing practices around the world, in which healers make effigies that represent the ghosts, demons, and witches afflicting the living. By crafting small-scale representations and acting on them in magically potent terms, people give concrete form to the forces of the world and attend to them in effective ways.

A similar process is at work in chess, as the game—a tangible micro-world—can promise a safe realm, one that a person can develop some mastery over, or turn to in times of anxiety or bewilderment. Life can seem less formidable and confusing when you’re dealing with the dynamics of action within the frame of a chessboard. Many find in chess a world that is simpler, purer, and more condensed and circumscribed than the world at large. Reducing life to the domain of chess is an act of cognitive magic in the sense that people, through acts of simulation and modeling, remake a challenging world on their own terms. By altering focus, homing in on the task at hand, and gaining a fresh perspective—daydreaming, thinking outside preset frames, stepping into a realm of play—a lifeworld can be altered. Through these sleights of consciousness, people rework the experiential grounds of their lives so that their world becomes different, at least for a spell.

“One reason that I’m playing so much chess these days is that it takes my mind off all my worries,” one man told me after his girlfriend broke up with him. “While playing, I think only about the game. That’s so nice.” Chess enables people to think themselves out of a harsh world. This capacity reminds me of the ways in which residents of a shelter for the homeless mentally ill in Boston (where I conducted fieldwork in the early 1990s) would resort to routines of pacing, reading, small talk, being alone, sleep, drugs, or psychiatric medications in order to “zone out” for a while and keep their suffering at bay. Some trust in chess to do the same.

Forms of play help people to assume control of their lives. Anthropologist
Michael Jackson calls such efforts “mastery play”—play, in other words, that “helps people regain a sense of control in situations that overwhelm, confuse, and diminish them.” In using this term, Jackson is drawing from several psychologists—Freud, Piaget, Winnicott—who have shown how children use play as a way to gain control over the circumstances of their lives. Adults also engage in such mastery play. In the days after my father died in 1992, my mother, deeply grief-stricken, took comfort in a rocking chair that she set up by her kitchen table; she found the rhythmic, repetitive motion soothing. This was a kind of mastery play. Ritualization is a term that anthropologists use in speaking of the repetitive activities people engage in over the course of their everyday lives. Ritualization is often mundane, unspectacular, and not reflected upon. People who go for walks along the same route each day are involved in acts of ritualization, as are people who play solitaire on their computers. Ritualized actions offer a way for people to acquire a sense of order and control over their lives. As Jackson sees it, “inner turmoil or disorder may be managed by ‘ritually’ reorganizing one’s mundane environment—cleaning or redecorating a house, rearranging furniture, weeding a garden, buying new clothes . . . changes in one’s experience are ‘induced’ by working on an aspect of one’s lifeworld that is amenable to manipulation.” Such an action, Jackson suggests, “offers respite, assists focus and induces a sense of being in control of one’s circumstances.” Through such ritual efforts, people often attend to a domain (prayer, gardening, video games) that carries less anxiety or uncertainty than another domain, such as the world at large.

Chess can promote just this sort of ritualization. Often when I play an evening’s worth of games at a local club or spend a few afternoon hours analyzing positions, I find that the ritualistic process at work during those hours helps me to gain a measure of focus and composure in my life. Words I would apply to this process are containment, ordering, making things right. The game frames and sharpens my stance vis-à-vis life. At times, chess offers a domain that is trouble-free and calmer than life in general. “If I feel anxious or uncomfortable,” observed top Soviet grandmaster Efim Geller, “I sit down at the chess board for some five or six hours and gradually come to.” When a family member died a few years back, I traveled to Boston to attend the funeral. The morning of the funeral I had a few spare minutes before we set off to the church. I took out a chess set and worked through some positions.

The cognitive magic, the active play within a microcosm, and the ritualization that come with skilled chess play can make for the kind of “creative living” that the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, for one, considered
crucial to a psychologically healthy life. Winnicott found that such creative living—what he calls “creative apperception”—is first manifested in the play activities of a child. “It is creative apperception itself more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. . . . In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough of creative living to recognize that for most of their times they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine.” Such thoughts remind me of what Elizabeth Vicary said—that chess is the most “meaningful” activity in her life, participating in the game makes her feel that she is improving as a person, and it’s the only time she’s “on the line in any kind of way.” Chess enables her to engage creatively with her life and fashion a moral sensibility for herself.

The danger is that chess play can become the net sum of a person’s life, and a substitute for acting and relating more generally, to the extent that the person ends up retreating from life. The elements of contraction can be gleaned from a 2009 posting by a chess player on his blog, submitted after a woman he was dating broke up with him. “Well now that is all over with and to be honest I think I am actually happy,” this young man reported in an entry called “Back to What’s Important.” “While I was with her,” he continued, “I rarely got to play chess and I should have realized right away that it was not going to work because of that. As happy as she made me, chess made me happier and I felt bad about walking away from it for two months. . . . I really missed chess. The next time I decide to get into a relationship I will be sure to make it clear that chess is my priority and if she can’t handle the fact that chess will sometimes come before other things, then adios senorita. . . . Yea chess is the only thing in my life that I am sure about, the only thing that won’t stop liking me or caring about me. . . . Though it may sound sad, chess is the only thing in my life I can count on to always be there. It is my escape, my desire, and my passion.”

Count on the game, fancy it a reliable passion. Yet when the sacraments of chess trump human relationships, life can lose depth and richness. The game eclipses a person’s real life and relationships, and the pieces on a board become more significant than relationships with family and friends. Some chess zealots find it difficult to manage well in everyday life, or to integrate the world of chess with the world at large.

“SOME PEOPLE FALL DOWN IN THIS WORLD”

Grandmaster Leonid Yudasin spoke of this problem one day. Chess is “a very rich reality,” he said. “But on the other side, it’s a very small reality.
Because it’s such an intense, small reality, you can’t get to the big reality from inside. It’s one of the problems in chess, to relate the small reality to the big reality.”

“And how to do well in both?” I asked.
“Yes, and find balance.”
“And some people don’t do that well?”
“No, not really. It’s one of the difficult experiences in chess, to do that. It’s one of the very difficult experiences.”

Leonid, a thin, linguistically playful man who sports a thick beard, dark clothes, and a yarmulka in accord with the principles of the Torah, offered these thoughts while talking with me and a student of mine in the otherwise unoccupied tournament room of the Marshall Chess Club one wintry December afternoon. The student, Michal Salman, the daughter of Russian immigrants who grew up in Israel before coming to the States a few years back, was helping us to communicate across a gulf of languages and cultures. As we spoke, I tried to keep track of Leonid’s rapid combinations of words while two custodians worked outside the room, cleaning the club’s stairwells and hallways.

For Leonid, “balance” is central to the structural dynamics and experiential requirements of chess and life more generally. Leonid was born in 1959 in St. Petersburg, “one of the greatest chess cities in history.” He learned to play chess when he was five years old, when his father, a strong amateur checkers and chess player, introduced him to the game. He received a rigorous chess education in schools and Young Pioneers associations from skilled instructors who had devised “professional methodologies” for teaching chess. “I was a very strange young gentleman. I didn’t have very good conversational relations with some of the other kids because I liked to be in this world,” Leonid explained, gesturing toward his head and the realm above it. “And chess is a very good place for that. I wasn’t so crazy. I wasn’t crazy enough to be a world champion, but I was crazy enough to be a world champion candidate. I was a bit different from normal—but not very much!”

Leonid was one of the best players in the world in the early 1990s. He won numerous international tournaments, and was joint winner of the USSR Championship in 1990. In 2004, he oversaw the publication of a book to which he devoted six years of research and writing. The six-hundred-page tome, penned in Russian and carrying a title that translates into English as The Millennium Myth in Chess, offers Leonid’s philosophical and psychological musings on the game.22 “It’s generally about the essence of chess.”
He competed twice in the candidate matches for the world championship. On both occasions, circumstances led him to play in less than optimal ways, and he did not reach his goal of becoming world champion. In 1991, Soviet grandmaster Vassily Ivanchuk defeated him in a taxing match. In 1994, Leonid played Vladimir Kramnik, the future world champion, who was then just eighteen years old, in a quarter-final match held in Wijk aan Zee. He lost in seven games, by the score of 2.5–4.5. “I played two candidate matches,” Leonid related, “and with both, I couldn’t completely belong to chess. Immigration, family, everything—I had no time to prepare. During my match with Kramnik, for instance, a close relative of mine was sick, and I was mostly in the clinic. I wasn’t prepared at all.”

Leonid offered some thoughts on this period in his life in a 2004 interview published in *Chess Life*: “There was a time when I wanted to be world champion. When I was the co-winner of the Soviet zonal tournament, I was very serious about chess. But because of some family priorities, some mystical things, some life things, I fell down at chess and it became a small part of my life for a time. Something inside was a little broken. For whatever reason, God decided I wasn’t ready. It took a few years for me to come back to normal conditions and play chess again, and win some tournaments again.”

During one of his games against Kramnik, a “completely crazy” struggle, Leonid found himself contesting an endgame in which he had good winning chances, thanks to a successful strategy suggested by his trainer. “I was calculating,” he told us, while displaying the game position on a chessboard.

“I had half an hour left [on my clock]. He had two minutes, to make a few moves. I calculated that after this move, Black should resign. And here in time pressure, I looked at it very seriously, and here now you can see in chess the Big Hand [the hand of God]. . . . I sat for something like fifteen minutes, and something blocked my mind. I remember it was an easy win, but I couldn’t find it. I made some variation in my mind, and I saw how to win, in my mind. But when I came to the position I saw that I had calculated two moves in a row for myself. The game was a draw, even though I had two extra pawns.”

“Do you think fatigue played a role?” I asked. “Did you get tired when you were playing?”

“I don’t think so. Something blocked out, in my mind. This happens in chess games. Because a chess game is stress. In chess, you concentrate your mind much more than in normal life. It forces you to do the maximum you can with your mind, for hours straight. And there are a lot of surprises, a
lot of unexpected moves, sometimes good, sometimes bad, but every time there’s something new.”

“So how do you deal with the stress?”

“You have to train. One of the important parts of professional chess training is to be a strong personality. You need experience with some special, small psychological tricks. You need to know how to make your mind work under the best conditions. Some use the same pen, some use the same clothes, some use a kind of chocolate. In many cases, these are placebos. Or, for example, in many cases I try to relax between moves. I make a move, and walk around. I learn something from my neighbors [by looking at their ongoing games], or chat briefly with friends. The most important thing is that I just relax my mind. Some people need the opposite—to forget about life.”

These days, chess enables Leonid to deal with stress in a constructive and peaceful way. “Now, today, mostly for me,” he said, “chess is the possibility to use my stress, my problems, in a more peaceable construction—here, not in real life. And chess gives me some direction in the real world.”

Leonid’s philosophy of life intersects with the teachings of the Torah. Chess has a secure place within the moral and instructional teachings of the Torah, in part because Jewish authorities have understood that the game sharpens and enriches the mind. Leonid told us:

There’s a Jewish parable that says that chess was presented to Moses as part of the Oral Torah. And because of that, chess has a lot to offer in terms of skills for human improvement. Related to this is the fact that harmony is the general idea of the Torah. It means you can’t be too greedy, but you can’t be crazy and give everything away either. The idea of balance, moderation, is essential. Chess is the same way. You need the sense of “I want! I want! I am involved, I need to be here!” But if a person wants too much, then he’s not objective. Typically, a grandmaster loses against a weaker player because he tries to win an equal position. He’s pushing, pushing, pushing, and then finally he has pushed himself [into losing]! I’ve done that a number of times myself. This is a typical example of how a chess player needs to find balance here.

“If you play a lot of chess,” I asked, “and you get a sense of balance and harmony, can that make you a wiser person in life?”

“Yes, yes. But you have to have everything balanced around chess as well. Most strong chess players use their wisdom inside chess, and live within it. The chess life is very intense, and sometimes, after a big tournament or match, when you go outside, you see something like a dark color: drab, gray.”

“It’s not as lively?”
“Right. And some people fall down in this world. It’s like the title of one of the chapters in my book, ‘Chess Is Like a Drug.’ It’s like the rush of sky-jumping. . . . If you’re outside the world of chess, it’s more difficult to get this drug. There’s not enough of it. But if you come into it, it’s a different world.”

“So you need to maintain a balance between the two worlds,” I suggested. “That’s where the wisdom ties into it?”

“Well, wisdom is balance,” Leonid said with a smile. “One of its elements is balance.”

Leonid’s words nick at the strains of competitive chess. The intense demands of match and tournament play, of concentrating for hours on end and heeding the surprises and unexpected turns of a sharp struggle, can be taxing. Nervous and cognitive meltdowns happen. Disappointing losses take a toll. Players need to hammer out a strong-willed chess “personality.” They need to develop small psychological tricks, certain technologies of self, to perform optimally. Chess can give direction and purpose to a nervous life. To play at the highest level, a person needs to “belong completely to chess,” to quote Leonid. At the same time, chess can provide a culturally sanctioned removal from everyday life, whereby those left of normal can function effectively in the more ethereal realms of chess.

Chess can offer a lifeworld one step removed from ordinary living. The concept of lifeworld first took form in the thought and writings of Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher who died in 1938 and who is now considered the founder of phenomenology. For Husserl, the lifeworld, or Lebenswelt in German, was the world as lived prior to systematic reflection or analysis. Students of Husserl, expanding on his ideas, explored the ways in which humans collectively create and inhabit a shared world of constituted meaning or experience. Sociologists and anthropologists have since come to use the term lifeworld in reference to “the world of shared social meanings in which actors live and interact,” as one sociology text puts it. An important idea here is that people engage in different “cultural lifeworlds,” in distinct worlds of meaning and experience. Indeed, it can be argued that, as we go about our days, we step from one “small lifeworld” to another, be it the lifeworlds of home and family, stock market trading, religious devotion, or the virtual realities of cyber-space. These worlds can be collective or individual in nature. Recent research in anthropology, for example, has been concerned with the lifeworlds of schizophrenics, street children, the blind, chronically ill persons, undocumented migrant workers, a dying person, scientific researchers, and anthropologists themselves.
Leonid’s depiction of “the world of chess” is in accord with how anthropologists and others think of the different lifeworlds in which humans operate. People can become immersed in the world of chess to the point that it’s the main subuniverse in which they operate. The spellbinding qualities of this play form help to make it so. As Leonid notes, this immersion can carry both benefits and problems. For some, chess offers a secure and meaningful lifeworld. They can experience that world as a more intense and impassioned realm than life in general. Its excitements can be addictive; when chess players leave the playing hall, the lifeworld of ordinary, mundane existence can strike them as “drab” and lifeless. Many professional players find it challenging to strike a balance between the microcosm of their chess lives and the macrocosm of life in general. Some stumble and “fall down” when trying to live beyond the chessboard. In chess, there’s a paradoxical tension between the life of the game and the game of life. Art, ritual, games, and sports are all ways in which we learn to come to terms with the complexities and chaos of life and at the same time they are escapes, diversions, evasions that can lead us away from the world rather than into a more fulfilling engagement with it.  

“A grandmaster,” writes Yudasin, “can be blind and helpless everywhere but on the chessboard.”

**Swindler’s Territory**

You now have five pawns to your opponent’s four. In question is whether you will be able to make something of this material advantage. Having a one-pawn edge can lead to a winning game, as a player can nurture that edge into a pawn that reaches the eighth rank, where it can be promoted to a queen. You’ll try to do just that, while your opponent will try to generate enough counterplay to level the game again. The conventional symbol for “counterplay” in current chess annotation reads as

Two forces counterpose each other.

You both reach the thirty-move time control and add an hour to each of your clocks. Think, move, clock, write. Go to the bathroom. Get some more water on the way back. Think some more.

Soon it’s late afternoon, some four-plus hours after you started out, with both of you having thought through countless variations that coincide
with the sixty-three actual moves made. Only one other game is still under way. The game to your right ended some time ago, when the fifty-year-old Russian missed a crucial tactic, which ensnared his rook in a deadly pin. He moaned when he saw his fate. Faced with a lost position, he quit the game by standing up, flicking his hand in disgust at the board, and walking away, leaving the sixteen-year-old to reset the board and record the result. No handshake there.

Almost everyone else has cleared out of the room. Some have gone upstairs to analyze their games. Others have stopped outside to get lunch or coffee. One man is asleep in a chair in the shaded courtyard at the back of the building. Another is reading a Russian newspaper. The lonesome hum of the air-conditioner can be heard. Someone walks over to check out your game.

You have four minutes left on your clock, your opponent five. You’ve been swapping off pawns and pieces. He now has only a king, a knight, and a bishop left. You have a king, a knight, and a bishop as well, but you also have the one precious pawn. Your only hope for a win lies in advancing that pawn to the last rank and promoting it to a queen. That will give you sufficient forces to mate the White king. But if your opponent captures this pawn, even sacrificing a piece for it, then there’s no chance for you to win either, as there’s no way for you to gain a queen. The game will end in a draw, with best play from both sides.

While pondering this, you see a way to set up a trap. If Grechikhin falls for it, you’ll win the game. With his last move, he transferred his knight to a square where it’s attacking your bishop, which is standing aloof on the far side of the board, apart from the action. You can offer that bishop up as bait. If his knight captures it, you can use your king and knight to set up a shield and hurry your pawn to the finish line. It’s like using a slab of meat to lure a guard dog away from its watch so that you can sneak a lamb past its chops.

A couple of people are standing by the table, watching. You’re aware of this as you consider your options. If you don’t set this trap, the game will end in a draw. You reach out, grab your king, and with a shaky hand move it to a new square. That puts the bait out: a fat, juicy cardinal, ready to be gobbled up. If Grechikhin takes the bishop, he’ll lose after a tricky string of moves. If he doesn’t, it’s a draw.

He picks up his knight, reaches out, snaps up the bishop, and puts his knight on the square where the bishop just stood. Knight takes bishop. The gesture surprises you, since by your calculations the move is bad. Maybe you’ve missed something. There’s no going back now. You move quickly,
following through with your plan. Several bodies peer over the board to chart out moves.

Grechikhin is caught in the trap. It’s simple but effective. Everything works together just right, like a precisely crafted poem. Exquisite violence.

Your opponent jerks his head back two moves later. He’s up a piece, but there’s no way now to keep your pawn from queening, and once you have the queen, you will be able to mate him easily. “The endgame is real swindler’s territory,” someone once noted. One clever ruse can tip the scales dramatically.

The older man sits disenchanted, looking at the last few pieces on the board, hoping for a way out, but there is none. A queen is a queen. His time runs out soon after you promote your pawn to a queen.

“Your clock is down,” you say, pointing. His eyes move from your fingers to the board to the clock, and then back to the board. You hold out your hand. He shakes it softly, looks down.

He has lost by time forfeit, but he was beaten. The onlookers walk away.

Playing a serious game of chess is like walking for hours along a narrow footpath carved into a cliff side. One false step and you plummet to your death. “That’s one of the things that’s very upsetting about a game of chess,” Nolan once said. “You can be doing fine the entire game and then with one little mistake you lose the game. It seems a little absurd, a little cruel.”

Grechikhin gets up from the table as a friend of his tells him, in Russian, how he should have played. They move to the back corner of the room and huddle over a board to retrace the game’s last moves. You walk over to them to see what they’re considering, but it’s clear that this is a private wake.

Exhausted, you go upstairs and tell the director that you’ve had enough for one day and would like a half-point bye in the second round. You leave for home. On the 9:20 train you sink into your chair and take sips from a bottled water. You feel like a warrior returning from a long, hard battle.
“Things are not getting resolved”

“Chess is much more profound than people give it credit for being,” says John Watson, an international master from Nebraska. “It’s much deeper and more complex than they think.”

John, born in 1951, is a renowned author, trainer, and chess theorist who has written landmark books on chess strategy. Along the way he went to graduate school at the University of California, San Diego; worked as an electrical engineer; and ran a small business selling chess books, giving lessons, and running tournaments. John has sustained a profound interest in the game throughout his intellectually peripatetic life. He enjoys thinking and talking about chess, and he has a lot of energy for exploring the nuances of modern play.

John admits to having had a blunt, know-it-all attitude about the game when he was younger, while playing chess in the farmlands of the Midwest. “It was interesting that I was so arrogant as a kid,” he says.

I don’t think I was personally arrogant, nobody ever accused me of that; I was reasonably modest. But inside I was arrogant. I even thought about someone like Fischer: “Well, I can play him and I can beat him.” I wasn’t really aware of differences between playing strengths at that time. . . . So I didn’t understand the depths of chess, that’s what I’m saying. I had no idea how complicated it really was. I just didn’t understand it. And in fact, like a lot of kids, at least at that time, I grew tired of it. And part of the reason I grew tired of it was that I had seen everything. I thought that chess was very limited, that you started seeing the same thing again and again. But of course not only was that not true, but I think that’s also the key to why later on I became completely fascinated with the game, to an extent that I don’t find even in other players. . . . I would say that, in my own life, that’s been a huge change, from actually getting bored with the game to being overwhelmed by it.

John’s inquisitiveness would get him into trouble at the board. His competitive side “faded away, earlier than most people,” in part because the intrigues of chess bewitched him more than winning in itself. “That’s even been a problem for me,” he says. “I was so interested in theory, I would get way too absorbed in positions, for someone who was supposed to be a decent player. Really, I would spend almost an hour on a move—a move either that I was going to make anyway, or it didn’t matter—just because I’d get so absorbed in a position.”

In recent years, John has moved away from tournament chess to focus
on writing. The enigmas of the game keep him at it. “None of it is getting redundant,” he says. “That’s the other thing, that things are not getting resolved! Nothing ever seems to get solved, there are always new things. So after a while you just have to have more and more material to work with. But things never seem to come to an end.”
July 20, 2003. It’s the day after your struggle with Vladimir Grechikhin. You’re making your way back to the Marshall to play your third-round game. You’re driving into Manhattan today, because it’s easier to find parking on a Sunday morning. As you pass by Yankee Stadium and East Harlem and then cruise south alongside the East River, your hands are flushed with excitement. Your body is already tense, primed to anticipate the narrative structure of the game ahead: the dramatic buildup, tension, release, and aftermath.

“A DEFEAT GOES TO YOUR SOUL”

Dramatic is the word for it, for players invest toil and sweat in the struggle and remember the thrills and agonies of an intensely fought game for years afterward, in precise, storylike terms. Recollections of individual chess games can be thought of as what psychologists would term “personal event memories.” As psychologist David Pillemer explains it, such personally situated, experientially detailed memories involve “a circumscribed, one-moment-in-time event rather than an extended time period or series of repeated experiences.” They also tend to retain “a vivid, life-like quality through the years.” ¹ Weddings, national tragedies, significant conversations, and climactic sporting events are the kinds of happenings that make for personal event memories. Chess games as well.

The passions that course through a game help to render the memories
lasting. At the same time, the temporal, ritualistic structure of chess lends itself to the narrative recall of what happened during a game. Chess games have clear beginnings and endings, clear-cut temporal structures, and a tangible, segmental architecture. This built-in narrative design makes it easy for people to develop narrative accounts of what happens during a game. That in fact is what they often do, either by themselves or in the company of others: “I got off to a good start, but then I landed in trouble in the middlegame. . . . ”

For many, the losses linger most, often in vivid, heart-wrenching terms. Friedrich Nietzsche once posited that the main clause of the “oldest psychology on earth” is, “If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: Only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory.” Chess players know this psychological truth well. Painful losses—and most losses are painful—sear themselves into a person. It’s often the case that after tough losses players toil over the course of the game, sometimes passionately or obsessively, like a wounded psyche revisiting a traumatic event, to figure out what went wrong or how they could have played differently. It may be that the insistent rehashing of such events inscribes the memory of the loss within the fissures of the self.

Abram Khasin, a Soviet international master born in 1923, has spoken of how he would be “devastated after a loss” time and again. Khasin played an important tournament game in the early 1950s against Vladimir Alatortsev, a grandmaster from Leningrad. At a crucial point in the game he saw that he could sacrifice a bishop to attain a position that would allow a decisive attack. He decided not to go that route, however, and played something safer. When it was his turn to move again, he no longer had a chance to surrender the bishop in an effective way. “I was so upset that I gradually lost the game,” he told Genna Sosonko. He was still bothered by that missed opportunity decades later:

Recently, there have been times when I’ve lain for hours at night without sleep, thinking. About what? About everything, about life, well, and about chess, of course. I analyze in my head, especially if I played a game at the club the evening before. How I could have played better, I try this and that. And that unlucky move in the game with Alatortsev keeps resurfacing, it won’t get out of my head, but what can you do? Sixty years have passed since then, can you believe it, the position is still right in front of my eyes. If I’d sacrificed the bishop then, perhaps my whole chess career and my life, too, would have turned out differently.

Khasin lost his father to imprisonment and execution in 1932, lost both of his legs to a German aerial bomb outside Stalingrad in 1942, and lost full
use of his hands to frostbite suffered during the war. Still, he rues a chess game lost fifty years before.

Every chess player knows that aching pain. “A defeat goes to your soul,” Yugoslav grandmaster Petar Trifunović once declared. “It’s not the loss that’s dangerous, it’s the depression that follows it,” said Anatoly Karpov, a Soviet world champion. Yet the storied contests have a way of making one feel richly alive, heroic even. In spurring extremes of emotion, the experiences might help some to counter the numbing “waning of affect” that, as cultural theorist Frederick Jameson suggests, shadows much of life in these late-modern times.4

THE CHESS GLADIATOR

You ponder such themes while driving. The roads are relatively clear, and you make it to 10th Street by noon. You find a parking space outside the club, lock the car, walk to the door, press the buzzer.

“Yes?” a scratchy voice sounds through the speaker.

“I’m here for the tournament.”

“What’s your name?”

The door opens seconds later. You walk inside and look at the pairings sheet. As you scored one point from your first round win and received a half-point for the bye you took in the second round, you have one and a half points out of a possible two, and so will be paired against someone with a similar score.

This happens to be Asa Hoffmann, a sixty-year-old regular of the club and FIDE master who can be found at the Marshall several nights a week, as well as most weekends. “Sparring partner of champions,” as his business card notes, Asa is a well-known competitor who has played in some sixteen hundred tournament games over the past fifteen years. His presence even led him to be portrayed in Searching for Bobby Fischer, though that film crudely branded him as a pitiable obsessive and warning incarnate to anyone considering a life spent in chess clubs. Undaunted, Hoffmann plays on. He’s in it for the money, he says. He’ll skip tournaments if he doesn’t have a good chance of taking home decent cash for his efforts.

Asa grew up on Park Avenue, amid a family of lawyers. He learned to play chess at the age of three and showed talent for the game. His father, who “knew the evils of playing too much chess, if you want to put it that way,” Asa says, sent him for piano lessons instead. He understood from experience that the game could be incredibly addictive, and he didn’t want his son to get the fever. “I didn’t get psychological support from my family
[to play chess],” Asa said once. “They didn’t want me to be a chess player.” As he sees it, he could have become a grandmaster if the course of his life had been different. “It takes everything combined, of course, to become a grandmaster—besides talent. Study, practice, strong psychology, good health, financial stability. And I’ve been lacking let’s say some parts of that, or one or the other, through my whole life.”

Asa attended a “fancy prep school” in Manhattan, and entered Columbia University. He became a “chess fanatic” while an undergraduate there: “There were people at Columbia who were better than me, and I was determined to beat them.” Switching from academics to chess, he studied hard for a couple of years. By 1964, at the age of twenty-one, he was ranked twenty-second in the country; “but you have to remember, there were no Russians then.” He got “a bit lazy” after he achieved his master’s title, and did not study the game much. Drafted into the army, he served from 1965 to 1967, which set his chess career back a couple of years. He fell on hard times after getting out of the army. He played little serious chess from 1967 to 1977; there wasn’t much money to be gained from it, and he got involved with other games, such as backgammon, bridge, Scrabble, and betting on thoroughbred racehorses. He started playing competitively again in the late 1970s, and he has stuck with it since. For Asa, chess is “the most creative game, with the greatest history.” He also likes the game because there’s no luck involved: “It’s just you—it’s your own creation. When you win in backgammon, you can’t feel that you’re particularly brilliant. You rolled well.”

Asa is an excellent blitz player, with a blitz career spanning five decades. “I have a fairly quick sight of the board,” he says when asked about his successes in quick games. He’s a “money player” when it comes to blitz; he usually plays only when there’s cash at stake. He’s not a hustler by any means, he’ll tell you, because a hustler tries to deceive his opponents about his true strength, while Asa is up-front about his capabilities. He prefers playing tough opponents, and concedes to battling weak players only when he needs the money. “Even now, when people ask, ‘Can I get a free game?’ I tell them, ‘Only little kids and good-looking girls get free games, and even they don’t get too many.’”

Asa’s gambling ways spill over into his tournament chess. “I have a gambling style: sacrificing, not playing for a draw,” he says. That’s how money is to be won in the open tournaments. He gets by using gumption, a quick eye, and unorthodox chess ideas. “My greatest successes were based on combinations of unusual motifs,” he says. “Usually I just saw it over the board—the Immaculate Conception!” Of the different types of chess players—killers, fighters, sportsmen, scientists, players, artists—he sees
himself as belonging to the latter.5 “The artist,” he says, “is looking for the unusual conception, and for the brilliancy. . . . If I see a queen sacrifice that I see wins, I’m liable to do that even if there was a simpler and more mundane way.”

Asa has played most of the top players in the country over the years, from Fine to Fischer. “I’ve never won a major tournament, because I’m inconsistent,” he says. “But I’ve beaten some fifty grandmasters. And I mostly got them not by your everyday pattern, but by something just a little bit different.” That’s the mark of Asa’s life: not your everyday pattern, something a bit different. He’s a fragile, likably quirky tangle of insights, opinions, regrets, and pride.

A few years back Asa authored an annotated collection of his games, in a book titled Chess Gladiator.6 The text conveys his approach to chess. “A chess Master is a gladiator, fighting for survival,” he explains. “His opponents are armed with nets to entrap him, and sharp tridents to impale him. The gladiator must know all the techniques of his profession, for even one slip can be fatal.”

Asa is currently rated 2341, some four hundred points higher than you. Statistically speaking, you don’t have much of a chance against him. His rating designates him as a master, and a strong one at that, while yours marks you as a Class A player.

“What’s Your Rating?”

The labels come from the rating system used by the United States Chess Federation, a system that implies a class hierarchy founded on a laddered array of ranked “titles” and “classes (see “ratings” in the glossary for a comprehensive list). The average adult rating is about 1500, while beginning scholastic players have ratings between 100 and 900. A bright beginner will soon earn a mark of 1200, whereas decent competitive players are rated from 1700 up. A person who achieves a rating of 2200 or higher is awarded the title of master, and a rating of 2400 brings the title of senior master. At the international level, players are ranked according to the rating system of FIDE, the International Chess Federation, with that scale producing player ratings that are generally about one hundred points lower than their USCF equivalent. Grandmasters have FIDE ratings from 2500 and up, with the world’s elite topping 2800.7

Players are situated along a continuum of value with respect to how they are regarded in terms of their skills, knowledge, and seriousness of intent. The continuum looks something like this, in descending order of impor-
tance: world champions, world champion contenders, elite grandmasters, grandmasters (GMs), international masters (IMs), senior masters, masters, experts, class players (A through E; also known often as “club players”), park and casual players, scholastic players, and beginners. The playing halls of a large chess tournament give spatial form to this social hierarchy, as the turf of the top players is set up farthest from the door, away from foot traffic, with the next-higher section “below” their area, and so on down, until you reach the sections of lowest-ranked players (“down among the peasants”), which are often sequestered in other rooms altogether.

Ratings are the primary determinant in this fluid caste system. Players gain or lose rating points based on their performance in rated games, with the strength of their competition taken into account. Those who play a lot of rated games can see their ratings fluctuate like a politician’s approval ratings. The comparative dimension of it all leads many to fret over their current number, “protect” it by avoiding situations in which they could hazard a loss, or anticipate a bounty of additional rating points. “Nothing is dearer to a chess player’s heart than his rating,” observes Lev Alburt, a Russian grandmaster who has made his home in the United States. “Well, of course everyone knows he’s underrated, but his rating, its ups and downs, however minuscule, are his ego’s stock-market report.” Ratings are an integral part of the social game of chess—accumulating rating points, titles, and championships, being “stronger” or “weaker” than others. It’s telling that, in the words of American master Jennifer Shahade, “many women chess players find the prospect of dating a player weaker than they unpalatable.”

The chess community is like most other societies in that its members situate themselves along a shifting gradient of social importance. “When chess players leave a room,” one saying goes, “they do so in order of their ratings.” It’s often the case that in the realm of a chess club or a tournament site, those with higher ratings carry more clout, and are listened to more intently, than any patzers hanging around. People develop a kind of dual consciousness of other chess players, in which both the broader social identity and the “arithmetic reputation” of a player are taken into account: a twelve-year-old expert; a 1600 poet; an ex–champion of Romania who plays blitz games in Washington Square Park.

The characterizations tend to limit the parameters of how players think of one another. A chess world often resembles a stuffy class-based society in which a person’s pedigree defines who he is or should associate with. As Elizabeth Vicary put it in her blog, a “particular snobbery is endemic to the chess world—just because we can instantly and accurately slot people into
a rating hierarchy, we do. If you’ve ever been accosted by a stranger at a
tournament who demands to know—even before you’re introduced—what
your rating is, then you understand what I’m talking about.” 10 A person’s
rating can appear to index, at times, his or her self-worth. Some with lower
ratings feel, at times, that they don’t measure up to their peers, and they
will strive to augment their number or give up playing competitively alto­
gether. Others don’t worry much about ratings and play with little regard
to such rankings. As might be expected, the sellers of chess books and
videos have tapped into the collective consciousness of rating inferiority
in advertising their wares. “Are you a club player < 1950?” reads the sub­
ject heading of one such advertisement, which appears in e-mail in-boxes
alongside other stuck pitches—but for different products altogether—as
“last chance to supercharge your performance” and “don’t be the little guy
in the club.”

The social hierarchies shape ideas about who can speak authoritatively
about chess principles. While amateur players have authored nonfiction
books about the chess scene at large, none has written books that focus
directly on chess thought and strategy. If they did, their books would not
be especially valued by other chess players, since the going assumption is
that amateurs don’t know enough about the game to write insightfully
about it.11 Vicary, again: “If you’re not at least a Master . . . then your expe­
rience is inauthentic and doesn’t really count.” Grandmasters, in turn, are
like ritual specialists in some settings, or medical experts in others, in that
they are collectively recognized as having access to hard-earned, coveted
knowledge that laypersons do not.

One might think that once a player snags the title of grandmaster, he
dwells contentedly on some Mount Olympus of chessdom, looking down
at the mortals below. But the chess food chain gnashes straight to the top,
with professional players keenly aware of how they match up against their
peers.

“I think it doesn’t really stop,” says Jonathan Rowson, a Scottish grand­
master and three-time British champion who has penned two popular
books that address the cognitive and emotional dimensions of playing
competitive chess. “I think people don’t stop that process of comparison.
There is a sense in which people assume that, once you’re a grandmaster,
you’ve sort of made it. But I think our experience is much more one of lack,
of not quite living up to standards we hoped we might achieve.”

“Basically, unless you’re world champion, you feel like an idiot,” says
Greg Shahade, an international master from Philadelphia. “All chess
players feel that they’re horrible, unless they’re among the top ten in the
... The better you are, the more you realize how many mistakes you make.”

Chess is painfully, deliciously hard. No one makes the correct decisions move after move. Total mastery is always deferred, out of reach.

WAITING FOR ASA

To most people at the Marshall you’re a relatively unknown Class A player who shows up every once in a while.

You played Asa once before, in January of this year. You lost feebly to him in twenty moves, after a complicated opening negotiation. Since you’ve been playing and studying a lot over the past few months, you should be able to give him a better game. There’s no reason for him to remember you well, considering how many games he plays each year and your infrequent attendance at the club. When he looks at the pairings, your name means less to him than the rating beside it. As you’re walking away, you hear him say to an acquaintance, “I’ve got another weak player.”

The comment doesn’t offend you, as the term “weak player” is a relative one. This is the Marshall, after all, where strong players refer to players with ratings in the low 2200s as “weak masters,” mere flies to be swatted away. But you wonder if he might take you for granted and think that he’ll have an easy game against another “fish,” or underestimate your playing strength on a good day.

You walk into the playing room and position yourself in front of the White pieces at the board where you’re playing. Your opponent is nowhere to be seen. Others begin their games. You make your first move and start Asa’s clock. You sit back and wait. You notice flecks of dirt fastened on the ridges of some of the pieces, and you begin to inspect them. When you get bored with that, you step outside the playing room into the hallway. You see your opponent down the hall, standing by the pairing lists, a sandwich in his hand. You walk over to him.

“We’re actually playing each other,” you say. “I’m your opponent. I didn’t know if you were here or not, so I’ve made my first move, and started your clock.”

Asa turns, makes eye contact, and says, “Good. That’s what you should do.” He turns to the pairing sheet, bites into his sandwich.

Back you go to the playing room, like a student returning to a classroom. You watch the clock count down. Asa walks into the room a few ticks later, half-eaten sandwich in hand. You expect him to come straight over to your table. Instead, he checks out some of the matches being played,
stepping from board to board as he takes bites from the sandwich. Black glasses, graying dark hair, tall, hunched over. As you watch him, you can’t but wonder if he’s doing this to disturb your thoughts or if he’s taking his time because he thinks he’ll be able to dispense with you quickly. You consider the fact that you’re thinking about such matters, which is a distraction in itself. You tell yourself to focus on the board. But the human observer in you can’t help but watch your opponent as he ambles about. He walks out of the room, returns with a cup of water, steps over to the board, and sits down.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL GAME

“He was trying to psych you out,” someone says later. “Asa knows all the tricks in the book, and he uses them.”

To psych someone out is to do something that undermines that person’s confidence and makes him think twice about his ability to perform. These psychological “tricks” are taken by many to be within the orbit of fair play—unlike, say, distracting an opponent with humming or finger-tapping, or talking unnecessarily during a game.

Psychology courses through a chess game like nerves through flesh. Any game involves more than the cold-blooded calculation of variations. Considering the powerful psychological undercurrents of competitive chess, one of the pleasures of the game is that two human consciousnesses—with their respective expectations, desires, ambitions, fears, creative spirits, and modes of thought—engage with each other in a direct and charged way. That’s one reason why many players are not fond of playing against computers: with those “silicon monsters” there’s no thinking, feeling consciousness, no all-too-human mind, pitted against one’s own.

“Chess is actually a clash of psyches,” observes Jonathan Rowson. As he sees it, psychology touches on all aspects of chess play and training:

It’s not just your intellect, your capacity to work things out. Nor is it just your past experience, or your skill level. Your whole nervous system is also being tested, in terms of how it responds under pressure. And psychology comes in on almost every level. It comes in as soon as you see who you’re playing: you have a kind of natural response of fear, or perhaps one of premature relief. And you have to guard against that, because your mind can play tricks on you. You can suddenly say this game is already won, or that it’s lost. And you have to stop the narrative from running, really.

Rowson’s interest in psychology grew out of his engagements at the chessboard. Born in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1977, he learned to play at
the age of five and was soon succeeding in scholastic events. He was com-
mitt ed from an early age to making something of his life. “For various
reasons,” he related in 2001, “including developing diabetes at the age of
six, I became quite self-aware and self-disciplined at a young age and saw
my life as some sort of project, perhaps even a work of art, with myself as
the artist.” Rowson’s chess skills improved steadily through his teenage
years, and in 1999 he became Scotland’s third grandmaster. The same year
he also completed a degree in philosophy, politics, and education at Oxford
University. With his schooling finished for the time being, he devoted his
efforts to playing chess. That led to serious reflections on what goes into
playing chess well, and that, in turn, led to his writing *The Seven Deadly
Chess Sins*, a book that chronicles the psychological pitfalls—thinking,
blinking, wanting, materialism, egoism, perfectionism, looseness—that
plague the efforts of chess players. In tracing out what he wanted to say in
the book, Rowson read research on the workings of the brain, on cognitive
psychology, and on chess expertise. This inquiry deepened his interest in
the human mind, in how people think and learn.

A chess-playing psychologist—or a psychologically minded chess player—
was thus born. Rowson followed up the *Deadly Sins* book with one called
*Chess for Zebras: Thinking Differently about Black and White*, in which
he further examines the thought patterns that chess players employ. He
also completed a master’s degree in Harvard University’s Program on
Mind, Brain, and Education, and then went on to attain his doctorate in
psychology and education at Bristol University. “Wisdom” is the subject of
his dissertation.

Rowson is a resourceful, analytically precise thinker who has a finely
tuned feel for the assumptions, fears, identities, defense mechanisms, and
explanatory models that vex the minds of chess players. He speaks of
“psycho-logics” and “fabulations,” of “know-how versus knowing that,”
and of “folk psychologies” and “chess narratives.” **Honor** is a word that
means something to him. He says,

It has to do with taking responsibility for your mistakes, and the feeling that
comes up inside when, at first, you’re slightly disgusted with yourself with mak-
ing the mistake, and then you can easily push it to one side, and say it didn’t
happen or deny it or explain it away too easily. But if you actually take it on
board, it forces you to see yourself more deeply. And that’s a lovely feeling, I
find. It’s a learning experience, one of personal growth, where you really have
to look yourself in the eye and say, “Look, I can easily spin a narrative web here,
explaining why I did what I did, and why, if only I had done this, I would have
won the game.”
Rowson’s experiences in playing and teaching chess have taught him that self-deception is a fundamental human trait. This is how the prospect of wisdom comes into the picture, for when people reflect on the ways of the mind, they can become more self-aware and perhaps wiser about life. “Being wise often to some extent requires a degree of what you might call a sense of intrapersonal intelligence, or intrapersonal insight—that is, knowing your own mind and knowing its own machinations, and how it can deceive you, and how easy it can be to tell yourself stories. At that level, if you allow chess to do that, it can be a great teacher.”

Chess can inspire an education at once moral and intellectual. “So in that sense chess is good,” Rowson says, but adds a caveat: “As with anything else, I think it’s a question of how good the learner is. If you’re a good learner, one who is open to experience and wants to make sense of things, then you’ll get a lot from it. If you’re less introspective, and more interested in action and success, with more external motivations, then you may not get much out of it, in that way.” As Aldous Huxley put it back in 1932, “Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.”

TACTICAL MODIFICATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Chess players mind their minds in developing practical, workaday psychologies, which they rely on when competing against others. They devise techniques that serve to shape and reshape how they think, feel, and perceive.

Some players undertake little rituals before their games begin, to get their minds focused on playing well. Some meditate or go for strolls before they sit down at the board. Some place their heads in their hands while playing, or wear earplugs to screen out noises. Some listen to music through earphones; some adjust what they’re hearing to suit the game situation. Many go for brief walks during their games, to clear their heads or to take a break from thinking. Some give themselves pep talks when mired in a tough battle: “Don’t blow it!” Some stand behind their opponents, either to see things from their vantage point or to get a fresh take on the game. Some engage in meditative breathing during a game. Some smoke cigarettes or drink coffee, tea, or Red Bull. One man eats candy during a game to “rearrange” his train of thought. Some get themselves into time trouble to jolt a rush of adrenaline.

Through these tactical modifications of consciousness, players try to prompt specific moods, thoughts, or perceptions in order to proceed in
more optimal ways. Many try as well to upset the composure of their opponents. Since acts of overt distraction (leg shaking, unnecessary coughing) are considered to be unsporting, most rely on psychological tactics within the terrain of the game itself. One man says he intentionally gets himself into time trouble if he’s faced with grim prospects, in the hope of discomposing his opponent into making bad moves. Others say that if they find themselves with a rotten position, they will try to complicate the game, with the idea that their opponents will play hurriedly and lose their way. Others slam pieces down on the board at timely moments, or resort to demonstrative posturing.

Skilled players try to make chess moves that, in their logic and dark energy, have a psychologically disruptive force. “As in tennis,” advises Sergey Makarichev, a Moscow-born grandmaster, “you must return the ball to the opponent’s court in the way that is the most inconvenient for him. You must force the opponent to make mistakes, by setting him such problems that he is unable to cope with them.”

**Agonic Empathy**

Chess players talk about the difference between “playing the opponent” and “playing the board”—between, on the one hand, taking into account an opponent’s potential psychological habits and likes and dislikes while deciding on what moves to make, and, on the other, trying to make the objectively best moves at all times, regardless of whom one is playing. A few profess to stick with the latter approach. Svetozar Gligorić, a top-level Yugoslav grandmaster, titled a collection of his best games *I Play against Pieces*. “The unusual title,” he explains, refers “to chess as an art and a clean struggle of ideas, thereby trying to ignore the less dignified influence of psychology and personal conflicts.” He plays the board, not the man. Bobby Fischer likewise once proclaimed, “I don’t believe in psychology. I believe in good moves” (even though many of his actions, especially during the remarkable matches that led him to become world champion in 1972, suggest he was an astute psychologist). Most people I’ve spoken with say that for them, it’s necessary to combine both approaches. A player has to hit upon the best continuations while also trying to take an opponent out of his apparent comfort zone.

A prime example of the latter idea was the “psychological duel” that took place between Bobby Fischer and Mikhail Tal, both future world champions, at the Candidates Tournament in Bled in 1959. As Tal recounts it, at a crucial stage in their game Fischer wrote down the move that he was
considering playing next, and then “not very deftly pushed” the score sheet toward his opponent. Seeing that the move intended was without doubt the strongest, Tal gave thought as to how to respond:

“He’s asking for an endorsement,” I thought to myself, but how was I to react? To frown was impossible, if I smiled he would suspect “trickery,” and so I did the natural thing. I got up and began to calmly walk up and down the stage. I met Petrosian [another strong Soviet grandmaster], made some joke to him, and he replied. The 15-year-old Fischer, who was essentially only a large child, sat with a confused expression on his face, looking first at the front row of the spectators where his second [his tournament assistant] was sitting, and then at me.18

Fischer wrote down another move, played it, and soon faced a losing position. When Tal later asked Bobby why he hadn’t played the move he initially wrote down, he replied, “Well, you laughed when I wrote it down!”

What makes the idea of “playing the opponent” possible is the notion that certain almost characterological patterns recur in how players approach the game. The folk psychology of the game holds that each player tends to display certain inclinations while playing—a “chess personality,” as it were. That’s how many players think of themselves and other chess players; whether it’s actually the case is a complicated question. At any rate, if you listen to chess players talk about their games, you can pick up on these characterizations.

Some are known to play best while attacking, and abhor defending tough positions. “I can see things quite well when I’m attacking,” says one man, “but when I’m defending, I freeze up, and I can’t find the right continuations.” Some “shut down” once they achieve a winning position, only to see their chances fade. “Winning a won game,” says another man, “is the most difficult thing in chess, or so they say. At least that was the case for me in this tournament. I took it for granted that I was going to win, but then I fell apart.” Some despair as soon as they get stuck with an inferior position, while others play best when faced with imminent disaster: “I only play well when there’s something on the line, when my back is against the wall.” Some thrive in sharp, “wild” positions: “I like funky positions, where things are chaotic and messy. Then I get really into it.” Some play best against strong opposition, but then underperform when facing lower-rated opponents: “He’s got to stop playing against 1600s. It’s ruining his game. He plays to the level of his competition.” Some fall apart if others watch them play: “I can’t play well if others are watching me.” Others thrive on it. “He likes performing onstage.” Some are affected by previous losses: “I lost my first two games, and played poorly after that. I
couldn’t see clearly. I think once you’re affected emotionally, it’s difficult to think well.” Many dislike playing children: “I hate playing kids in tournaments. It’s terrible, because if you lose, it’s obviously humiliating. But if you beat them, you feel kind of bad: you’ve crushed this eight-year-old kid.”

Many are intimidated by exceptionally strong players: “But, to be honest, if I had had to play against Fischer, I would no doubt have felt intimidated,” wrote Soviet grandmaster Alexander Kotov in the 1970s. “That long, fanatical face, perpetually impending over the board, the burning eyes, the remoteness from the outside world. Those long fingers, removing your pawns and pieces from the board. . . . That is how Fischer’s opponents lose control of themselves.”

Many players draw on their sense of an opponent’s predilections in trying to shape the tenor of the game. Julian Hodgson, a top British player known for his explosive attacking style, often strives to create complicated, chaotic positions on the board, especially if he thinks they will unnerve his opponents. “Basically,” he said in 2001, “if I’m playing people that I perceive won’t be comfortable with chaos, I try to create chaos. I’m a great believer in playing to my opponent’s weaknesses.” Nolan, in turn, has hit on an effective way to compete against children. “I discovered recently how to beat children, after teaching them and playing a lot with them,” he explains. “The best way to beat children is to get into a really boring position, and they’re going to go to sleep. Children excel in very exciting tactical struggles, because then they get excited and they get interested and then they can calculate probably better than adults can because their brains are younger and fresher. But if it’s a very boring position, a very quiet position, they’ll lose interest.”

Others find that such efforts are distracting. They strive simply to make good moves. “I play the board,” Elizabeth Vicary tells me. “I don’t look at the opponent. That’s a way to protect myself psychologically.”

Ideas of empathy are central to these negotiations. Chess psychology holds that other minds are largely opaque—it’s often difficult to know what an opponent is truly thinking or feeling—and this mental opacity sets limits on interpersonal empathy. In trying to counter this problem, many chess players strive to drum up acts of agonic empathy: they try to know their opponents better, through a variety of means, in order to triumph over them. While playing, they try to observe their opponent’s eyes, facial expressions, gestures, body posture, and breathing, all in an attempt to gauge what their opponent is thinking and feeling at any moment in a
game. World champion Viswanathan Anand notes that he listens to an opponent’s breathing while engaged in battle with him: “If the breathing is deep or shallow, fast or slow, that reveals a lot about the degree of his agitation.” Some also stand behind their opponents at times to perceive better what they are seeing on the chessboard.

Before matches, many professional players study their opponents’ games to gain a sense of their rivals’ chess inclinations—what continuations they tend to play, what kinds of positions they tend to avoid and where they feel most at home, how they think chesswise. When Bobby Fischer was preparing for his world championship match against Boris Spassky in 1972, he spent months studying Spassky’s previous games, compiled in a “big red book” that he carried around with him, to gain insight into Spassky’s predilections at the chessboard. Spassky, in turn, received support from the Soviet government, which secretly enlisted the country’s leading players to evaluate Fischer’s style, play, and personality.

These days, players often adopt “counterempathy” measures by mixing up their opening strategies and chess-playing styles so that their prospective rivals cannot pin down their inclinations. Some players are concerned about their opponents “reading their minds” while playing, and they try not to let on too much about what they’re thinking. One grandmaster from Russia told me he advises his students that if they discover an effective sequence of moves, they shouldn’t think too hard or long on it, as their opponents might be able to intuit that sequence themselves. These concerns are in line with what anthropologists have gathered through their cross-cultural studies: instead of empathic alignment always being a welcome phenomenon in human societies, it’s often the case that “too accurate an understanding of the inner states of another may actually be experienced as an impingement or violation,” as anthropologist Kevin Groark puts it. Empathic insight can be a dangerous weapon.

The counterempathy guards tend to come down once a game is over. Opponents often meet up after a contest and go over the game just completed, in a collaborative fashion. They do so in part to gain a better sense of what their counterparts were thinking during the game, as well as to share their own thoughts, prompting moments of mutual understanding.

While these efforts at agonie and mutual empathy are an integral part of chess culture, it’s also understood that if a player has too much caring concern for an opponent, to the point of feeling sorry for him if he loses, that feeling can get in the way of being a strong player. “You cannot play chess
if you are kindhearted,” runs a French proverb. Some players take exquisite pleasure in exacting psychological violence upon others. When Fischer was on the Dick Cavett Show in 1971, Cavett asked him what was his greatest pleasure when playing chess. “When you break his ego,” Fischer said with a nervous laugh. “He sees it’s coming, and breaks all up inside.”

In all, different currents of mental opacity, agonie empathy, counter­empathy, and mutual understanding swirl about during a serious chess game. I want to know what you’re thinking, and I’ll try to figure that out, regardless of whether you like it. I don’t want you to know what I’m thinking, at least not until the game is over. Don’t expect me to feel sorry for you if you lose.

Asa Hoffmann plays his opponent as much as the board. A long career of competitive and street chess has made him a keen psychologist. “I guess I’m a fan of Lasker and others, who believe in playing the person, let’s say, and not the board,” he once said. He was referring to Emanuel Lasker, the great German player and second world champion, who is said to have advocated a psychological approach to the game, and who would sometimes play less than optimal moves in order to lure an opponent into a full-blooded chess struggle. “It’s very important to study the opponent’s games, for instance,” Asa added. “I’m just talking about observing the style of the opponent, and you try to get the feeling that, if he likes open positions, you go for closed. If he likes closed positions, you go for open positions. In other words, you have to be a complete player. And you don’t want to stubbornly just play what you always play.”

So what was with Asa’s tardiness at the beginning of the game? You ask him about this months later. “You came to the game a bit late. Would you do that to get inside the person’s head a bit—or are you just coming late to a game?”

“Well, in a slow game,” he says, “I play so fast, even in a serious game ten, fifteen minutes means nothing to me. But I actually do believe that you get a psychological advantage by coming late, because your opponent might get nervous, waiting for you to arrive, wondering, looking at the clock, to see if he can build up a big time advantage, and he doesn’t know if you really are delayed somewhere, like in traffic, and you might be very late. I mean, very often I’m off eating pizza. You know, I could have been hungry.”

“Actually, you were eating a sandwich.”

“Yeah, I was probably hungry,” he says with a laugh. “Not everything I do is so deep.”

A person can psych himself out.
A NAGGING INITIATIVE

Once Asa makes his first move, the next few come quickly. You soon reach the starting position of an opening system known as the Czech Benoni Defense, in which the player with the Black pieces tries to secure a cramped but solid defensive structure in preparation for attacking along the flanks once he is sufficiently developed. Here positional understanding—the understanding of how to achieve and take advantage of strategically important positions—is more important than the ability to calculate through a maze of tactical complications.

The defense is seldom seen at the highest levels of play; it has a reputation for being slightly passive. Asa has been playing it for years. “Well, that’s another odd thing that I’ve studied,” he says when asked about it later. “There’s not too much book information on it.” In his game collection, he devotes an entire chapter to his best games with the defense. “The Czech Benoni,” he explains, “has become a popular choice of those masters who prefer to play positionally. . . . Black’s task is often a defensive one, but potential breaks on both sides of the board give him reasonable chances.”

Asa opts for offbeat chess openings. “I keep getting good games with them. Somehow grandmasters are not as prepared for that as other, mainstream things.” Asa aims for strategically complex positions where his experience and judgment come in handy. When younger, he played in a “swashbuckling style,” sacrificing pieces left and right, going for outright attacks. These days, he aims to get a strategic edge that builds to a winning advantage. “Now I like to get a nagging initiative in the opening, which carries over to the middlegame, so I try to win mostly in the middlegame.”

To “seize the initiative” is to establish a board position from which you can make moves that your opponent has to respond to before he can generate effective threats of his own. In modern chess, having a persistent initiative is highly valued, and professional players will often sacrifice a pawn or two to gain it. The initiative is as much a psychological phenomenon as it is purely a chess one, as the player lacking the initiative has to grapple with his opponent’s threats, move after move, which can require a lot of taxing mental and emotional work.

In your game, Asa has whipped up an initiative that’s nagging at your position, at your very self. You’re making what you take to be logical, sensible moves, getting your pieces out while covering key squares in the center. He’s countering with moves that, in hindsight, appear more sensible and more dynamic. Soon the coordination among your pieces is getting disjointed. Your center is starting to creak under the strain of this pressure.
Asa’s looking for the tactical shot that will break things open. He’s playing fast, flinging moves at blitz speed, confident it will be a short game.

Asa says on another occasion that he’s “restless” and “undisciplined” at the board. “I have a tendency to give my opponent time odds [more time than me] when I’m playing slow chess. I won’t sit there and use my time. I’ll wander around, talk to friends, look at others’ games, look for women to play chess with, think about other things. This isn’t a good excuse, but it’s the truth.” Often during a game, while his opponent is deep in thought, Asa can be found strolling the hallway, checking out the pairings sheet, chatting with a friend, or complaining about a recent decision made by the tournament director. He’s at the board when he needs to be.

That’s what happening today. He’s here, there, or over there, while you’re taking your time with your moves, weighing the different options. As you consider your twenty-fifth move, Asa gets up from the board, walks around, and returns after you’ve made a move and punched the clock.

He makes a move. It looks like a strong one, as he’s putting further pressure on your position. But once you consider the position closely, you see that you can invite a trade of rooks. This would defuse the strain on your position, while giving more active play to your remaining pieces.

While you’re giving thought to this possibility, Asa gets a pained expression. He shakes his head and looks away in disgust. Something is upsetting him. You take it to be the fact that your intended moves will give you an equal position, or more.

You’re trying to figure out the best way to continue. You’re aware of your opponent’s head-shaking, but you’re not sure of the cause.

BLUNT INTERSUBJECTIVITY

What’s he thinking? What’s upsetting him so? What is he trying to do, and what does he think you want to do?

A lot of mental energy goes into—or should go into—trying to figure out what an opponent is attempting to do in the game and, if called for, working to prevent it. “Why did he make the move that he did?” and “What does he want to do?” are the two questions that many chess teachers try to get their students to ask themselves with every move their opponents make. One of the telling limitations of a beginner is that he focuses too much on what he would like to do without sufficiently taking into account his opponent’s aims. At the highest levels, a game can often entail a rich dialogue between two attentive intellects in which, move by move, each acts and thinks carefully about the actions and intentions of the other.
Players tend to fluctuate between these two modes of consciousness—between moments of empathy and self-thought singularity—in terms of both their overall approach to the game and how their thinking transpires while they’re at the board. Bobby Fischer, for one, demonstrated a keen sense for any weakness, hesitancy, or letup on his opponent’s part, and would then try to capitalize on it by investing all of his energies at the board. As Mark Taimanov, one of his victims, put it, “As soon as Bobby senses even the slightest decrease in his opponent’s energy, or uncertainty in his play, he instantly concentrates all his forces and begins playing with a redoubled will to win.”

So intense was Fischer’s concentration, and so single-minded his intent, that he would sometimes become immersed in his own ideas at the board and forget certain possibilities available to his opponent. “Yet possessing a tremendous will to win,” Elie Agur writes of Fischer, “he might have ‘forgotten’ his opponent at times, carrying his plans through as though no obstacle could be put up to counter them.” Or, to quote the man himself: “My opponents make good moves too—sometimes I don’t take these things into consideration.”

It takes two to play a chess game. The contours of these intersubjective engagements are in accord with a “basic insight” hit upon by scholars of human subjectivity, that “the subject is both separate from and fundamentally connected to others,” to quote philosopher and psychoanalytic theorist Roger Frie. People are profoundly related to others in their worlds. The grounds of being and subjectivity for any person arise and proceed through the interplay between self and not-self. As French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty conveys it, a crisscrossing “interworld” emerges when people engage with one another, where “there is woven between us an ‘exchange’, a ‘chiasm between two “destinies”’ . . . in which there are never quite two of us, and yet one is never alone.”

That chess games are deeply intersubjective affairs is evident in people’s narrative accounts of games they’ve played, for time and again such narratives include references to an opponent’s thoughts, actions, and embodied presence. “Basically, he got too aggressive,” begins one example, culled from an amateur player in his mid-twenties:

He was playing someone who was 1900, and he should be killing him, without even thinking, I guess. . . . Basically, he panicked; once he started falling behind he got too aggressive, and kept trying to save himself by just making the position worse, and digging himself deeper into a hole. . . . He kept trying to make it more wild, and that just kept getting the position more and more worse for him. . . . The thing that ended up being memorable is that I just kept
telling myself again and again, “This is such a winning position, this guy is completely—he might be 2380 or whatever, but he’s completely busted.” I ended up checkmating him. . . . Just the whole time I had to keep walking away from the board so many times because I had a totally winning position, but I knew that it was just going to make me feel worse if I ended up somehow managing to blow it and give him a draw or something. . . . I kept telling myself, “Don’t blow it, look at what his weakness is.” . . . I think he was having a pretty rotten tournament. He had already lost to some guy who was rated similar to me.

Narratives of chess games are intertwined with the presence of the other. There’s something real and direct, and potentially unsettling, in the hand-to-hand contest of a chess game. A player is positioned before an agonic countersubject in a cross-cutting, multifaceted situation. Risk is involved because people take chances when competing with others; as with any sportive ventures, a person’s sense of self and social status are on the line. Creative possibility exists in the interplay between two opponents, for something new can come out of that encounter—new understandings, fresh creative efforts, or novel ways of relating to others. Opacity and uncertainty are central to the encounter, since players often do not know what their opponents are thinking, and they usually can’t anticipate fully what the next turns of a game will bring. An opponent might work in duplicitous ways, trying to make the person sitting across from him think one thing while setting up a sneak attack. These intersubjective encounters can be decentering; they can destabilize a person’s sense of self and others. Yet the encounters are also grounded in moments of empathy and tentative understanding. The player also finds he grasps something of another’s life, however precariously or provisionally. There are moments of appropriation and counterappropriation: both players are trying to size up their counterparts, and they draw on repertoires of assessments, understandings, and gut feelings in doing so. Chess encounters are also patterned through and through by social conventions and cultural sensibilities, which shape how people make sense of just these sorts of encounters.

Competitive chess fosters a blunt intersubjectivity; blunt in the sense of direct, brusque, face-to-face. Chess play figures a site of conflicting wills and intentions, of bonds of mutuality at once playful and agonistic. That me-with-you, me-against-you dynamic sets up an array of different involvements through the course of a game, many of which bear resemblance to assorted one-on-one dealings common to everyday life. Different models of interpersonal relations echo, in mute and ghostly ways, through the course of a chess struggle. At times while engaged in a game it’s as though you’re sounding each other out, or waltzing about, or arm
wrestling, or exchanging riddles, or greeting an old friend, or convening in prayer, or mugging an invalid, or making music together, or murdering your brother.

"ALL RIGHT, THAT’S A HEAD-SHAKER"

You both give thought to the position. It’s your move. The clock is ticking. Asa shakes his head and looks with displeasure at the board.

Only after the game does Asa say he was peeved at himself because he missed a move that would have led to a strong advantage. He says much the same months later when shown the game again. “I had a clear advantage, but I missed some stuff,” he explains. “This seems to me to fall under the category that I mentioned before, that I didn’t use my time properly in slow games. In other words, this was a game where I thought that my position was very good, and I did what I thought was the obvious positional plan, and missed a tactic that would have won. So again, I didn’t play my best because of not using my time.”

You decide that a knight move is the best way to counter your opponent’s intentions. You’ve got a decent position after a volley of moves.

You both pass the first time control with your thirtieth moves, and add an hour to each of your clocks. You have a slight advantage. Your knight is posted on a good square, where it covers a lot of key squares; it will be difficult for Asa to dislodge it. Asa has a passed pawn on the queenside—a pawn, in other words, that doesn’t have any enemy pawns blocking its path to its promotion square on the last rank. But that pawn is presently a weak lamb away from its flock, and there’s a good chance your wolves can snap it up.

You step away from the board and go to the small bathroom just outside the playing room. You open the door cautiously. A few weeks back you stumbled upon a nine-year-old boy and his parents, huddled together. The parents were consoling their son, who was teary-eyed and sniffly. He had just lost a game against an international master he had good chances of defeating.

You return to the board. Your opponent doesn’t look pleased with himself. He is taking the game more seriously now. His moves come at a slower clip. There’s no way he wants to lose this game. Even a draw would be a disappointment, perhaps a minor embarrassment, and lessen his chances of winning some money.

Asa shifts a rook from one file to another. As you’re considering whether to take his passed pawn, he shakes his head. You take it that he’s displeased
with the position or his earlier misplay. He looks at the board, shakes his
head, leaves the room.

All this gives you confidence. You think you might be able to beat the
guy after all. You try to calculate how many rating points you’ll gain after
beating two masters in a row. It has to be at least twenty, twenty-five points.

You take the pawn with your queen.

Asa returns with a new cup of water and looks at your queen. He
responds seconds later. You see now that you overlooked an effective com-
bination that he can employ. You look at the pieces for a few seconds,
sensing that your opponent is sensing your dismay, and then record his
last move. You’re forced to go along with the sequence of moves Asa has
initiated: queen takes queen, rook takes queen, rook takes pawn! Once the
dust clears, your advantage has been canceled out.

In chess, a combination is “a forced variation with sacrifice,” to quote a
leading authority. There is real beauty in a lot of combinations. A “beau-
tiful combination puts me in a state of fever,” Akiba Rubinstein, the great
Russian player, once said.

Beauty in chess comes in the exacting precision of a master’s play. Wond-
drous combinations can compare to the elegant beauty of mathematical
proofs—“a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture,” as Bertrand
Russell put it. We see it as well in the harmonious arrangement of forces
on the chessboard, where everything works well together, like the melodic
sounds of a Mozart sonata. We can find it in the skilled execution of
opposing conceptions advanced by two players, in a scintillating attack,
or in a gritty defense. Small moments of beauty can flash in any game,
like autumn light through a canopy of leaves. As I wrote in my fieldnotes,
“Playing a quick casual game against Nolan at Kim’s house the other night.
We were fighting it out in a tough middlegame position, when I spotted
something resplendent and unexpected: I could sacrifice my queen, to open
up a bishop’s influence on his kingside, and then mate his king with a rook.
Everything worked just right. I made the moves, Nolan gasped. Beautiful.
A kind of found art.”

Many appreciate the beauty to be found in chess, both in their games
and in those of others, and they enjoy the myriad acts of creativity that
illuminate the game. Ukrainian grandmaster David Bronstein, for one,
promoted an approach to chess that highlighted its creative, imaginative
qualities—“Chess Art”—an approach in contrast to the rational, scien-
tific methods of his Soviet rival, Mikhail Botvinnik. “Beautiful chess,”
Bronstein remarked toward the end of his life, “was my contribution to
help people recover from the horrors of 1939–45.” Bronstein knew those
horrors firsthand, as his father was imprisoned for several years in a gulag, and his family suffered greatly during the war. “My generation perished and I have felt a vacuum around me all my life,” he said in a 1995 interview. Bronstein’s contemporary, Vasily Smyslov, a Russian grandmaster and world champion, similarly valued an artful, harmonious approach to chess. Trained as an opera singer, and professing “a strong attraction to music,” Smyslov strove for “a sense of harmony” and formal truth in his chess. “From childhood,” he recalled, “I became accustomed to thinking of chess as an art, and have never regarded it as anything else, for all the science and sport involved in it.”

The sentiment of some is that, as Hans Ree puts it, “Chess is beautiful enough to waste your life for.” These words recall some lines from Plato’s Symposium: “What if the man could see Beauty Itself, pure, unalloyed, stripped of mortality and all of its pollution, stains, and vanities, unchanging, divine, . . . the man becoming, in that communion, the friend of God, himself immortal; . . . would that be a life to disregard?”

Chess players sometimes glimpse Beauty Itself, pure and unalloyed. The catch is that you have to know the game well enough to appreciate those moments. The geometric beauty of chess is an ice-pure resplendence that often remains invisible to the uninitiated. By making use of the specific but often hidden features of a position, a player can orchestrate a sequence of moves that pleases the mind as much as a painting or a poem can. Marcel Duchamp might have had this in mind when he wrote, “Beauty in chess is closer to beauty in poetry; the chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chess-board, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem. . . . From my close contacts with artists and chess players, I have come to the personal conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists.”

True enough, but at the moment you don’t appreciate your opponent’s artistry. You’re kicking yourself for missing this tactical sequence and for gobbling up his pawn too quickly. You should have made some preparatory moves first. You start to wonder if his recent bout of head shakes were a way to throw you off your game and instill an undue sense of confidence. If so, it worked. You’re trying to play the board, not the man, but it’s difficult to do so when the man’s actions keep taking you out of any decent focus on the board alone.

You ask about the head-shaking months later. “After the game I wasn’t sure if you were shaking your head to try to psych me out.”

“No, I wouldn’t do that,” says Asa. “Usually I don’t shake my head
at all. I usually don’t make any faces or gestures deliberately, to try and
distract people. But some people would do that. Some people act as if they
had blundered when they’re setting a trap. But most people don’t have
good control of their nerves, and when they jump up they have actually
blundered, or fear that they have.”

You show him the position where he first started to show his displeasure.
“All right, that’s a head-shaker,” he says.

A SLOW DEATH

You’re still peeved at yourself for allowing Asa’s combination. You get
back to work.

The game is balanced, with material even. As a pair of rooks comes
off you enter into an endgame in which neither side has a clear advantage.
A grandmaster would be able to achieve a draw from your position, but
you’re no grandmaster.

Soon forty, then forty-five moves are noted on your score sheets. It’s
after four in the afternoon. Most of the other games have finished. You’re
sweaty, tired, hungry. Your opponent seems alert, though unnerved that
he has been kept at the board for so long. You have a rook, a knight, four
pawns, and a king left, while he has a rook, a bishop, four pawns, and a
king. He has a slight but secure positional advantage. His bishop is fixed
in the center, slicing through your dark squares. There’s no good way to
dislodge it.

It’s your move, but you’re at a loss how to proceed. Your rook is tied to
defending your kingside, while your once-influential knight is out of play,
with little leverage on the main proceedings. You could move it around,
but it doesn’t have many other good squares to resettle on. You begin to
consider advancing a pawn on the kingside.

Your opponent sees you looking there. You know he’s watching you,
glancing from your eyes to the board, tracking where your eyes are look­
ing. You’re not sure how to proceed. More out of fatigue and inertia than
anything else, you’re contemplating moving one of your pawns one square
forward. Part of you thinks this is a bad idea, because pawn moves like this
can be weakening. “Distrust a pawn move—examine carefully its balance
sheet,” Emanuel Lasker once advised.32 Over the years you’ve soaked up
warnings like this, which perhaps explains why you’ve yet to move any of
your kingside pawns in the present game. Don’t do it, you think.

Don’t do it.

You reach out and nudge the pawn forward.
“The mistakes are all there, on the chessboard, waiting to be made,” remarked Polish grandmaster Savielly Tartakower years before. Asa’s eyes light up upon seeing your move. He begins to advance his king toward your position, hoping to exploit the slight weakness you’ve created. He knows how to play this kind of position better than you do. He has a “perceptual advantage” over you: he sees more in the position. He finds a way to bore into your position and forces you to surrender a pawn. You still have chances of drawing the game, so you play on, through fifty, sixty moves. People step close to appraise what’s happening. The high school girl and her mother come over to the board, impatient for the game to end so that the next round can commence.

You try your best to defend your position, and generate enough counterplay to keep Asa from converting his advantage. He may have a fish on the line, but you’re not coming in easily. There’s still a chance you could break away. You set up tricky situations in which he needs to play accurately to sustain an edge. Each time he finds the correct response. The tricks run out and he has created a passed pawn. It’s all but over after another slight but consequential mistake. You can’t stop him from advancing his pawn to his eighth rank and promoting it to a queen. Once he does that, he’ll be able to mate your king.

The last stages of a lost game can resemble the act of dying. You know that the prognosis is bleak, you try your best to fight against death, but it becomes clear that there’s no way out, no way to stave off the inevitable; the clock keeps ticking, and you’re compelled to relinquish your hold on life. Chess players develop a sympathetic relationship with death. A chess death comes, significantly, at the hand of another. Lévi-Strauss notes that in many societies, “to win a game is symbolically to ‘kill’ one’s opponent.” That’s the case in chess: your opponent kills, symbolically. It’s often a public death, as others are looking on. That arrangement can bring its own quarry of shame and embarrassment. “And what follows is a hurt, a confused hurt—not a physical hurt—it’s a hurt combined with anger; it’s a what-will-people-think hurt; it’s an ashamed-of-my-own-ability hurt.” The words belong to Floyd Patterson, the American heavyweight boxing champion, in describing what it’s like to be knocked out during a title fight, as retold by Gay Talese in “The Loser,” his 1960 portrait of Paterson. They also apply to the sentiments of many chess players after a painfully public loss. “If I play badly,” said German grandmaster Robert Hübner, “I have the feeling that I have no right to exist, that everybody should despise me, because I am such a bungler.” Nolan puts it bluntly: “When you lose, you lose all respect.” Few other sportive games include the ritual of resigning,
of admitting defeat outright. That act can itself involve an explicit, humbling submission to an opponent’s will and mastery. Bow down, concede your inferiority; Yes, sir, may I have another?

Yet there’s always a chance to rise from the dead, to redeem yourself even. A new chess adventure could be minutes away. “For me,” said Ukrainian grandmaster Eduard Gufeld, “chess is life, and every game is like a new life. Every chess player gets to live many lives in one lifetime.”

You tip your king over, signaling your resignation—figurative unmanning—and hold out your hand. Asa shakes it and smiles.

It’s a tough loss, one you’ll remember for some time. You gave him a good game.

While collecting your belongings, you ask Asa if he’d like to take a look at the game. He agrees to this. You go upstairs, find a free table, and share your postmortem thoughts on the sequences and unplayed variations that came between you. He says you played at times like a 2100-level player, which is nice to hear. You just need some lessons, he says, to fill in the gaps in knowledge.

Your thought is that he’s trying to hook you into taking some lessons with him.
“What’s better than that?”

“I really liked the game,” said Rusudan Goletiani, a vibrant Georgian American chess player and former U.S. women’s champion. “I really enjoyed studying it, so my family took it very seriously. I remember when I would study chess at home, doing my homework, everybody was so quiet, they would whisper, they would let me concentrate.”

Rusudan, born in 1980, grew up in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, the home of several great female chess players and a strong tradition in women’s chess. Her father, a university professor and “big fan of the game,” taught her chess when she was six. She picked up its principles quickly. She attended a chess school, competed in tournaments, and studied with a private coach. “We sometimes joke about the ‘secret’ of the Soviet school of chess: there is no secret, it’s just hard work—just learning the game well, and putting a lot of time into it.”

By age nine, Rusudan had won the Soviet junior championship for girls. She went on to win two Russian championships and three world junior championships in her teenage years. She left the economic turmoil of post-communist Georgia for the United States in 2000 and settled in New York, where she started teaching the game, married, and gave birth to a daughter. She continues to play competitively when time allows.

“I challenge myself when I play chess,” Rusudan said late one Saturday afternoon while sitting in a classroom at the Westchester Chess Academy, a chess training center.

And if I win, for example, I feel great about myself and about what I have created over the board. It’s almost like being a poet, I guess. If you write a poem and then read it, you’re happy about it, you think it’s great. It’s the same with chess: you create something that you enjoy. So I think that’s why I keep playing chess.

It’s hard for other people to understand. If you don’t play chess, you can’t really appreciate the game. Even if you know the basic moves, you’re not going to get into the depths of the position. But when you play chess it’s like looking at a piece of art. Especially when you create one of those beautiful moves where you sacrifice your queen and checkmate your opponent. What’s better than that?
CHAPTER 4

Sveshnikov Intrigues

To get squares, you gotta give squares.
—Bobby Fischer

September 24, 2003. I’m in the midst of a love affair with the Sveshnikov.

It wasn’t love at first sight. When I first met her I found her awkward, ungainly. Her features clashed with what I thought a good chess defense should look like. I was intimidated by her complexity, by the demands placed on anyone who wanted to engage with her. I steered clear. But the more I thought about her, and the more I saw her in action, my attitude changed. I became intrigued by her dark beauty, the geometry of her moves. I couldn’t help myself. She was just so compelling. I broke up with the Accelerated Dragon. It’s not you, it’s me, I told A.D. I need something different, something more exciting, before I get too old to play this game. So we went our separate ways, and I began to court the Sveshnikov, old school. I booked up on her, nestled up to her ideas and logic, and began to dance with her. We’re now on intimate terms with each other. I miss her when we’re not together. We have a standing date on Friday nights. I’ve gotten to know her history, some of her secrets, the stories of her life. I’m fully smitten.

I speak figuratively, of course. But I do think that one can speak of an erotics of chess. The contours of certain positions possess a sensual, enticing quality. The positions intrigue me. I want to caress them with my thoughts, unravel their mysteries. The delineations of form found with some chess positions are, for me, as beautiful as the curve of a woman’s back or the nape of her neck.
The Sveshnikov, the current object of my affections, is a variation of the Sicilian Defense that was popularized by Latvian grandmaster Evgeny Sveshnikov. A combative, double-edged way to proceed, it offers Black lively piece play at the expense of potentially long-term positional weaknesses. The defense has been popular since the early 1990s, first at the professional level, and later at the club level. It’s now one of the most played variations of the Sicilian. Its main starting position—its signature structure, really—is depicted in figure 2.1

For years, many took the defense to be incorrect, dubious, “antipositional” because of the apparent deficits in the position. In advancing his e-pawn to the e5 square, Black is giving himself a backward pawn on the d-file. A pawn is backward if it’s stranded behind neighboring pawns. With no support from other pawns, it can appear feeble, prone to predators. At the same time, with his c-pawn exchanged away early on and his e-pawn jumping out to the e5 square, Black can no longer use a pawn to exert influence on the important d5 square. He is inviting White to place a piece in this gaping hole with impunity. With its chronic positional weaknesses, the configuration looks downright bad to a classically trained player. As Estonian grandmaster Jaan Ehlvest tells it, “I didn’t like the Sveshnikov because it’s not a classical opening. I’ve had many bad results with White against it. So I’ve actually hated this opening.”

Jaan’s friend Alexander Shabalov, a Latvian American grandmaster, recalls that he did not like what he saw when the Sveshnikov started to become popular, about 1979. He was a young teenager then, living in his native Latvia, and already a strong player. He tells me:

I was looking at these first games, and I was saying, “If there’s one opening that I will never play in my life, this is it. This is it.” When you look at any Sveshnikov position, the first thing you see is the d5 square and this White knight. What’s going on to the left and to the right, you don’t care. So I ignored the Sveshnikov for a very long time. I knew Sveshnikov personally, and every time I saw him he would say, “This is a great opening.” And I would say, “But you know, it’s not the game that I want.”

Eventually the Sveshnikov became Alexander’s main opening. Its dynamic features fitted his game to a T. “It’s still my main defense. I would say it works great, especially in an open tournament. There’s no easy way for White to make a draw. But of course against strong players I’m suffering from time to time. I don’t have the level of control of the game that I would have in a classical opening. But it still is my main opening.”
Peekskill’s Joe Guadagno doesn’t like to play the Sveshnikov when he has the Black pieces. “I remember learning from my early chess that making that hole is just so antipositional,” he told me. “How can you do it? But of course, now the best players are doing it and getting away with it. But it’s really—wow!”

“It’s counterintuitive?”

“It really is. It really is.”

Black seems to be giving away too much in the position. It’s like creating a huge pothole in the middle of a driveway. The formation looks wrong, off-kilter, like a politician campaigning with his fly open, or a model posing with a missing front tooth. How can arrangements like these be effective?

So ran the sentiment through much of the twentieth century. While much the same opening system was played now and then, usually under the name the Lasker-Pelikan Defense, it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s—when Sveshnikov, his friend Gennadi Timoshchenko, and a few other grandmasters began to investigate and play it—that it became
clear that there were trumps in Black’s position. In effect, the player with the Black pieces is saying to his opponent, “Be my guest, place one of your pieces on the d5 square, where it means a lot in the center of the board. And try to put pressure on my pawns. In the meantime, I’m going to be able to develop my own pieces quickly—and to good squares, no less, where they can be quite active. So I’ll be able to work around any knight posted on the d5 square. As Bobby Fischer put it, ‘to get squares, you gotta give squares.’ My setup might look ugly, but looks can be deceptive, no?”

When Sveshnikov and company began to play the defense in international tournaments, other players looked skeptically on their pet system and were eager to refute it. “What sort of variation is that?! Holes, ruins, a weak point at d5 . . .” leading Soviet players teased the twenty-three-year-old Sveshnikov when he employed his system at the USSR Championship in 1973. After Anatoly Karpov “tormented” Sveshnikov and his defense in a game at that same tournament, he said to him, “Why spend so much energy on this difficult variation? Find something easier.” As Timoshchenko relates his own early efforts with it, “I was attracted by the unusual nature of the variation, its boldness, and the fact that it was completely unexplored. In practically every line, masses of new ideas were found, and a player who knew these ideas had a great advantage over an opponent who was playing by the usual concepts. Soon the first tests of the variation took place, and the results exceeded all expectations: even masters did not know how to play with White!”

It wasn’t just that players wielding the Black pieces were better informed about the nuances of the resulting positions. They were playing a new and different kind of chess, one in which the dynamic, “concrete” features of the setup could outweigh its positional drawbacks. “Something was happening here that ran counter to all classical chess sense,” recalls Dutch grandmaster Jan Timman, referring to the revolutionary force of the ideas at work in Sveshnikov positions. The Sveshnikov devotees were like Cubist painters, working with concepts of form, space, and time at odds with those common to more classical modes of art. Only in hindsight do chess theorists today fully appreciate the revolutionary role that the Sveshnikov Variation has played in the development of chess. As Garry Kasparov tells it, the variation is “virtually the main symbol of modern chess. In its ultra-sharp lines the evaluation of the position is extremely concrete and very changeable, since it depends on a great variety of dynamic factors. And largely thanks to the intense development of the [Sveshnikov] Variation, the scrupulous regard for such factors has become an indelible part of overall strategic evaluation.”
“I STILL NEED A GOOD OPENING”

She’s with me now, the Sveshnikov, dynamic factors and all. I’m camped out before a chessboard on this rainy autumn afternoon at the table in our kitchen, the wooden figures set before me. Our building is adjacent to the Metro North train line that snakes down into Manhattan, and every so often the sounds of a passing passenger train enter my awareness. Tonight I have a game at a local chess club.

I’ll be playing the third game of a four-game match with an expert-level player. I won the first game, he the second. There’s one game tonight, and the final contest a week from now. I have the Black pieces tonight.

I opted for a Sicilian Defense in my first game with that color. We soon had a Sveshnikov on the board. It was clear right off that my opponent did not know how to play against it effectively, as he made a couple of second-rate moves. I gained a good position, which led to a winning position, and my opponent resigned before making his twenty-ninth move.

Now that my opponent knows I’m banking on the Sveshnikov, I have to expect him to have studied up on it. I want to be prepared for tonight’s game. My aim this afternoon is to go through key variations and positions associated with the defense, to prime myself. The Black pieces are set up closest to me, on a board next to an open loose-leaf notebook that contains my notes on the variations I’ve been studying for several months. I start to move the pieces on the board and think about what’s going on, the lines of force and counterforce at hand.

I began learning the Sveshnikov in the winter of 2003, about the time the variation was starting to become popular at the club level and in weekend tournaments in the United States. I was growing bored with the Accelerated Dragon, the variation of the Sicilian Defense I’d been playing. It was solid but unexciting. Sometimes a draw was the best that Black could hope for. I had seen the Sveshnikov being played, at the professional level and at weekend tournaments, and I found its formations intriguing. The variation promised something modern, feisty, unusual.

Each chess opening offers different ways to align the pieces. That’s the case with the Sicilian Defense, with many of the systems having names of their own: the Najdorf, the Schevenengin, the Dragon. Each of these defenses hosts a range of specific variations, such as the Yugoslav Attack in the Dragon, or the English Attack in the Najdorf. As games are played over the years, they are circulated, played over, critically examined, and stored in databases, and they become the historical backdrop for ongoing play. Crucial lines, continuations that are thought to be the best ways to play
for each side, are established in time. To keep track of it all, devoted players consult any number of “opening encyclopedias,” which contain terse, train-schedule-dense lists of the main variations, or they draw on computer databases, or page through book-length manuals devoted to specific opening systems or variations.

As with everything else known to humans, these texts and databases have their genealogies. Through the first seven decades of the twentieth century, most opening knowledge was to be found in pamphlets, bulletins, magazines, or opening compendiums, and many professional players used notebooks or index cards, organized by hand, to keep track of opening ideas. But the explosive “information boom” that emerged worldwide in the late 1960s and beyond contributed to a significant revolution in chess thought. In 1966, Šahovski Informator, a publishing company based in Yugoslavia, launched the periodic publication of the Chess Informant (or Informator, as it is known in many countries), a timely digest of important games and opening novelties. The text introduced a new, now-standard classification of openings, and it relied on universal symbols for the transcription and analysis of games, making it accessible to readers around the world. Soon professional and amateur players alike were ordering the hefty periodical and absorbing ideas and opening “novelties” relevant to their own play. The first generation to make full use of the new technologies consisted of players who came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These “Children of the Informant,” as Tigran Petrosian, a Soviet grandmaster and world champion in the mid-1960s, called them, brought to the game in-depth knowledge of opening theory and systematic opening analysis and preparation. Chess Informant also released a five-volume series called The Encyclopedia of Chess Openings, or ECO, which became an invaluable reference source for many players. Through the 1970s to the 1990s and beyond, publishing houses printed books devoted to specific opening systems, with these manuals becoming more detailed and more comprehensive as the years ticked by. The 1990s also saw the development of the first computer chess databases, the successive incarnations of which are now in broad use today. These digital compendiums, recorded on computer disks and stored on computer hard drives, took the Informant’s procedures to a more sophisticated level of information dissemination. Here were data banks of millions of games, with game positions to be summoned at the click of a mouse and “opening reports” electronically prepared in a minute or two. The computerized information also contributed to the playing styles of a new generation of young chess players—mockingly called “database kids” by British grandmaster Tony
Miles—who developed many of their chess skills through the savvy use of such digital data.

New text- and computer-based technologies, in tandem with increased competition at all levels and the extensive professionalization of chess, have molded the shape of chess theory and practice over the past forty years. While individual human actors (Fischer, Kasparov, etc.) have played a crucial role in the evolution of modern chess, the influence of new technological, epistemic, and social arrangements cannot be underestimated. The oodles of information spawned by competitive play have become more codified, systematized, aggregated, globalized, and accelerated in pace. Those who have access to the books and software—and to the computer technology and time necessary to make good use of them—can presumably have a leg up over their competitors.

Immersing oneself in these texts is a daunting enterprise, as there are games upon games, positions upon positions, to be scrutinized. Epistemic anxiety is a chronic condition among many chess players, as they feel that they don’t know enough about opening theory, the collectively established knowledge of opening positions. “I clearly should improve at the openings . . . I’m way behind,” says a professional player. “I still need a good opening,” says an amateur player preparing for an important tournament. The texts and computer images can induce a sense of the “mathematical sublime,” Immanuel Kant’s term for those situations in which people cannot quite wrap their minds around an overwhelming richness of data. You can lose a life in their vast recesses.

The evolution of an opening system like the Sveshnikov reflects these trends in chess technology and knowledge. The defense’s labyrinthine pathways were inscribed and codified in ECO, and many of the battles waged in its name were to be found in computer databases. While I made use of these texts once I adopted the Sveshnikov, I needed a more language-based guide to help me figure out matters. There was one well-received opening manual that had just been published on the subject: *The Complete Sveshnikov* by Russian grandmaster Yuri Yakovich, who had been playing it for years. I bought a copy of this book, with the intent of working through it. For several weeks the book, all 268 pages of it, dozed at a corner of my desk. The text’s thicket of variations and observations was overwhelming at first. I would open it up now and then, read a few pages, and lay the beast down. I waited until I had several free weeks before I delved into it. The book became the bible for my Sveshnikov studies.

The well-trodden variations of alternating White and Black moves that constitute the core of a chess opening can be likened to the branches of
a tree—and chess players do speak of “opening trees.” From the trunk reach thick limbs that splay off into smaller branches, which fork into even smaller branches. If I were to play the Sveshnikov well, I would need to know about its stems and branches, what they were and why they took the form they did. That’s what I set out to do. Using Yakovich’s book as my guide, I began to sort through the different branches of the defense. Wading through the chapters, each devoted to a main continuation and partitioned into precise sections corresponding to a specific variation, I began to get a feel for what was at stake. At first I couldn’t figure out the logic of some moves, why they were played at all. In time I gained a better understanding, especially with the help of Yakovich’s explanations. “Black has played in model fashion for this line,” runs one of his comments. “By sacrificing two pawns he has won the fight for the central squares and obtained a powerful pawn-center. White must solve some difficult problems.” Good to know.

Early in my crash course I used the book in tandem with a chessboard. Holding the text in my left hand, I would use my right hand to make the moves noted, and then think about what was going on: Those pawns over there are cramping Black’s position, but he has a bishop aimed at White’s queenside.

I found each new position I came across as intriguing and fascinating as the ones before it. I began to store the recommended moves and their accompanying ideas in my computer, with the help of a software program called Chessbase. This process helped me to organize the many variations and my thoughts on them. I stored this work in separate computer files, which I could print out and keep in a notebook. The tools that helped me in the work—chessboard, notebook, computer databases, brain, eyes, hands, paper, pen, other chess players—made for a case of “distributed cognition,” to use the term of cognitive scientists. Much as a pilot’s efforts in an airline cockpit rest on coordinated interactions of “internal and external representational structures,” from navigational know-how to flight speed monitors, so a chess player’s practical understanding of an opening system is “distributed,” spread out, among a number of tools, activities, and neural circuits. Distributed cognition involves a complex cognitive system that goes beyond the naked capabilities of any single brain or “mind.”

As the notebook pages started to add up, I came to grasp something of the strategic and tactical ideas involved in the Sveshnikov. I gleaned what to watch out for, how to exploit mistakes and weaknesses, where to post pawns and pieces. I was trying to absorb specific continuations and the concepts motivating those sequences.
I had learned long ago that it is a mistake to focus on sequences of moves alone. You have to know the reasons behind them—why, say, this knight is transferred to that square, right then and there. When I was playing as a young teenager in the late 1970s, I tended, like a lot of untrained kids, to devote my energies to memorizing sequences of opening moves, with the idea of arming myself for over-the-board contests. The problem with this method is that without a keen cognizance of the internal logic of those moves, you can easily lose your way if your opponent veers off a familiar track. It’s like a child who knows only one precise way home from school; if he takes a wrong turn at any point, he’s lost. “As soon as I took the kid out of the variations he knew, he didn’t have a clue as to what to do,” said one man after trouncing a twelve-year-old at a tournament.

As the weeks went by I developed a better feel for matters, for what felt right in a specific position. I also began to employ the Sveshnikov in casual and tournament games at the clubs I attended. It proved fruitful from the start. I would get good middlegame positions, and hit on what Timoshchenko discovered years before: that many players did not know how to play against it. When they resorted to the usual concepts, it was easy to get a good game against them. At stronger levels, where players knew what to do, I couldn’t expect easy games. But still I got decent games out of it, and it was in question then who would better navigate the intricacies of the position.

I kept at it. “You play some weird stuff,” said one man after I wielded the Sveshnikov against him at a club. “That’s a good system,” he said a dozen games later.

I picked up several other books on the Sveshnikov, including a used copy of Sveshnikov’s own treatise on the defense, published in 1989. By reading this and other books, I carved out a deeper sense of the genealogy of ideas inherent in the opening.

Strong players will tell you there’s great value in understanding a chess opening in historical terms. In coming to know how ideas and continuations developed through time—what new brilliant ideas occurred, and when, and which once-fashionable lines and formulations were discarded after being refuted—one can appreciate the precise, decades-rich cognition that has gone into the understanding of certain positions. It’s revealing to trace out the vast collective thought that goes into the development of chess openings. A player introduces a novelty, the product of home preparation, in a key variation one week. The next week another grandmaster comes up with a response that neutralizes it. That sends legions of competitors to their laboratories, and so on through months and years, as opening
theory evolves. An archaeology of an opening reveals layers upon strata of agonistic, experimental effort. The structure and pace of innovation parallel the ways that knowledge proceeds these days in scientific fields such as microbiology or plasma physics, where competing research teams hit on new insights monthly. If the principle of “intelligent design” applies anywhere, it’s with the opening systems devised by chess players.

In playing the Sveshnikov, I felt I was participating in its history, however minutely. The more I played and studied the opening, the more Sveshnikovesque my thoughts became. I was soaking up the formations and energies common to the variation, and all that shaped my perceptual and cognitive faculties regarding chess. I was playing more boldly and energetically. I saw how the dynamic, concrete features of a position could offset certain positional drawbacks. The Sveshnikov was helping me, like others before, see chess in a different light. It offered a world of sharp energies, angular pawn formations, slicing diagonals.

INFINITE STRANGE SHAPES

Different openings possess different qualities. The structures and energies common to a specific opening give it particular features, distinct tones of an almost metaphysical kind. Openings can be quiet or sharp, flexible or formulaic, symmetrical or unbalanced. Some have a formal, classical feel to them. Others are downright crazy. Murky, clear, double-edged, aggressive, boring, worn-out, risky, ancient, dubious, schoolboyish: different motifs and auras apply to different openings. The pawn deposits of the Slave Defense remind me of the stalactites and stalagmites found in icy caves. The endgames of the Grünfeld Defense evoke an arid but fertile desert. The French Defense resembles a labyrinth of forking paths, while the Najdorf Sicilian is a brutal street fight, with a swirl of knives slashing about. Yet another, the Four Knights Variation of the English Opening, is an ornately elegant cathedral. One variation reminds me of an abandoned, water-logged factory I once explored in Fairfield, New Jersey. Then there are those variations whose names speak to their shape or nature: the Hedgehog, the Dragon, the Bayonet Attack, the Knight’s Tour, the Orangutan, the Fried Liver Attack, the Frankenstein-Dracula Variation.

The diversity of opening systems never ceases to engage me. When I visited the New York Botanical Gardens one spring day I was struck by the different forms plants can take. Desert cacti; forest pines; bog mosses; seaweeds and coral reefs; orchids and sycamores and rhododendrons—distinct life-forms have arisen out of possibility and need. It’s much the
same with chess: while the pieces and pawns always move in the same ways, the precise alignments and requirements of different positions lead to vastly dissimilar formations. There’s always something new to attend to, something unfamiliar for one’s eyes to alight upon. That’s the case for me, at least: I love their “infinite strange shapes,” their tonalities and textures.8

To me, the Sveshnikov is a surreal, postmodern building, with sharp angles and a vacant gash in its center, with stairs that lead nowhere, with walls where there should be windows and windows where there should be walls. Yet somehow the design is highly functional, in an obliquely knotty way.

Despite the range of possibilities available to them, players display distinct preferences when it comes to employing openings in their games. Some prefer sharp, complicated affairs where keen-eyed calculation can win out, while others seek placid waters where they can rely on their understanding of the strategic requirements involved. A cultural dimension to opening inclinations is sometimes in evidence. Dutch grandmaster Genna Sosonko contends that it’s no accident many Armenian players savor the French Defense as their main weapon against the move 1. e4: “This Eastern interlacing, these intricate patterns of pawns, especially in systems with a closed center, evoke the architecture of the monasteries and churches hewn out of the Armenian mountains.” It could be argued that many American players have a penchant for direct and open systems, airy plains where their pieces roam freely. In some ways the evolution of a player’s opening choices reflects his development as a chess player. Ari Ziegler, an international master from Sweden, relates that he stopped playing the Sveshnikov Sicilian after he got married and had children, as he did not have the time to keep up with the latest developments on the defense. In turn, he decided to take up the French Defense, which he found to be “more stable” and requiring less preparatory work. The French, he says, is an opening for “old” or “slow” players, whose brains do not work as fast as they once did.9

Openings are often metaphors of selfhood, in that a player’s choice of opening systems is taken to be indicative of that person’s ways of acting, thinking, and yearning. Somerset Maugham once observed that in each shave lies a philosophy. The same holds for chess openings.

Having either the White or the Black pieces in a game can make a big difference. White’s right of the first move gives its player the better chance of securing an edge out of the opening (“Just like in life,” quips a Latino friend). “Dang, I’ve got Black again,” says a tournament player, looking at the pairings for the next round. That understanding is borne out by database statistics, which suggest, by one count, that at higher competitive
levels White wins roughly 37 percent of the time, while Black triumphs 27 percent of the time, with the remainder played to a draw. Indeed, at the top levels players are often content to obtain a draw when they have the Black pieces, whereas they go for the win with the White pieces. The uneven playing field shapes the opening aims and strategies of chess players. When they have the White pieces, skilled players are usually trying either to go for a knockout blow at once or to gain a slight but pressing edge that they can nurture into a winning advantage. When they have Black, they are usually trying either to equalize the game by securing an even position, or to create a complicated, uneven, dynamically charged scene in which the party who plays best wins. The latter strategy underpins the chemistry of many of the more modern openings, such as the Sveshnikov, which were established by players who weren’t content to settle for a draw with the Black pieces. Bobby Fischer once remarked that his revelation while in his teens that Black has dynamic opportunities and need not be satisfied with equality was the “turning point” in his career.10

In their choice of openings, players are trying to shape the character of the resulting play, be it messy and muddled, clear and straightforward, or tactical and memory-dependent. Rusudan Goletiani prefers openings that lead to positions where her tactical skills can reign. “I like openings that lead to exciting positions with a lot of attacking chances, with lots of piece play,” she told me. “I enjoy positions where you can attack the kings more. It’s not easy to get them, especially if you’re playing grandmasters, but . . .” Kim Qvistorff likes airy positions with open lines, savannas where he can stalk for combinations. Closed, cramped positions are his worst nightmare. “I hate positions that are really locked up,” he says. Elizabeth Vicary says she does best in positions that offer clear strategic plans to follow. Yet she, too, has had a liking for the Sveshnikov. “I have sort of a love for the Sveshnikov,” she told me in 2008, “although I do rather badly with it. . . . I love it because it’s so surreal, in some way. You know, the positions are so weird, Black is very active, when you win you win through some great attack. I guess that’s why—it feels like a space where you can be creative.” Months later, Elizabeth announced in her blog that she was abandoning the Sveshnikov. “It’s so depressing,” she wrote. “So, I know I’ve been saying this for a long time now, but I’m going to give up the Sveshnikov. It just doesn’t make me happy. I feel guilty all the time, I lose constantly, even when my opponent does nothing, I still get not very good positions.”

The stark fact is that if you want to play chess at a decent competitive level, you need to develop a robust repertoire of openings. If, for example, you wish to begin a game with the White pieces by moving your e-pawn
to the e4 square, 1. e4, you have to know what to do if Black bids for a Sicilian Defense with 1... c5. But you also have to know what to play if he opts for the French (1... e6), the Pirc (1... d6), the Modern (1... g6), the Alekhine (1... Nf6), the Caro-Kann (1... c6), or the Scandinavian (1... d5). Meanwhile, if your opponent responds with 1... e5, matching your pawn move with a symmetrical response, then you have to decide whether to steer the game toward a King’s Gambit, an Italian Game, a Scotch Game, or a Ruy Lopez. Each of these openings comes with a number of major variations. There’s a lot to give thought to. Much the same goes if you want to open a game by advancing your d-pawn to the d4 square, or by using any other respectable initial move. Alongside all this you also have to have defenses prepared for when you’re sitting in front of the Black pieces. If your opponent starts by pushing his d-pawn two squares forward, do you steer the game toward a Semi-Slav? How about playing the King’s Indian? And if that, what do you do if your rival opts for the Classical Variation or the Bayonet Attack?

All this takes a lot of hard work—exact, mind-crunching labor that deters many from taking up the game seriously. “I used to play chess—when I was in the third grade,” a psychiatrist tells me. “Then I heard that there was something called openings, which you had to learn in order to play well. That’s when I switched to basketball.” Yet once you do have all your King’s Indians and Queen’s Gambits in place, the board can come alive with meaning.

It’s impressive what some players know. Dale Sharp, a master-strength player who lives in Peekskill, New York, tells me of a game that he played some years back, in a variation of the Ruy Lopez known as the Marshall Gambit. He had the Black pieces, and the game fell into a sequence that he had previously worked out in depth through home analysis. After making his nineteenth move, he left the board and took a stroll around the playing hall. He met up with a friend, who asked how his game was going. “Good,” he said. “My opponent has made a mistake, and he’s going to lose a piece on move 27.” His opponent lost a piece on the twenty-seventh move. “That was when I was really studying the opening,” Dale says.

**Pattern Recognition**

A player can come to feel at home with specific opening systems. “I think I have an excellent intuitive sense of most Sicilian structures,” Sam Shankland, a young international master from California, tells me. “In other openings, I feel like I’m almost an idiot. But with the Sicilian I feel
that I’m quite strong. I like Sicilian structures: there’s a lot of positionally complex ideas, and there’s a lot of calculation.”

Through his years of playing with and against Sicilian structures, Sam has built up a fine-grained feel for what’s involved in their most common configurations of pawns and pieces. Pattern recognition is the term chess writers use when talking about this kind of learning and thinking. “Chess is to a considerable extent about pattern recognition,” remarks English grandmaster John Nunn. “The more patterns you have firmly fixed in your memory, the more effective you are likely to be at the chessboard.” Without a large store of patterns, it’s difficult to develop far as a player. Psychologists estimate that a grandmaster has in his grasp anywhere between seventy-five thousand and a hundred thousand patterns—discrete “chunks” of information—that inform what he perceives and knows of chess. This practical know-how points to the way in which the human mind knits its patchy grip on the world through clumps of meaningful form—concepts, diagrams, emblems, lines drawn in the sand.

“If you really think about it, it gets down to patterns at some point,” Rusudan Goletiani told me one day. “Even grandmasters say it’s pattern recognition. They know so much about chess, they don’t have to come up with anything new when they play, the ideas just hit their heads. They’ve seen millions of different games, and they have all these ideas in their heads, and it just comes up, pops up. They rarely come up with something that has never been played before. I mean, once in a while they do—that’s why they’re grandmasters, right?—but mainly it’s pattern recognition.”

“Would you say it’s the same when you’re playing, that you’re looking for tactical patterns, strategic patterns?”

“It’s not like I’m looking for it, it just comes up, because I’ve played chess for long enough. Something tells me it’s there. So I guess you get better intuition when you have a lot of knowledge of the game, and then you try to see how you can work it out. But it comes down to hard work. The more you work, the better you get. There is no secret, really, because this is something you can’t learn overnight.”

Many of the patterns are elemental, such as a doubled pawn formation, a castled king, or a fianchettoed bishop; they’re like the words people use in speaking a language. Along with this panoply of concepts are various thematic, full-board positions that frequently occur in competitive play. These more complicated conceptions are like the oratorical and rhetorical forms an accomplished speaker can draw upon in ways spontaneous and trenchant. To play chess well, a person has to know how to proceed capably and creatively in these situations—how, say, to play with (or against)
an isolated queen’s pawn, or how to launch (or parry) a minority pawn attack on the queenside. Predrag Trajkovic, a Serbian grandmaster who teaches chess online, once told me that there are some 150 key positions that one needs to master in order to play chess at the highest levels—of which he himself knows about seventy or eighty to date. As he and many others understand it, the most effective way to know these positions well is to become familiar with the games of knowledgeable players in which the positions occur: classic, time-tested games by Capablanca, Alekhine, Karpov, and the like, in which exemplary methods of play are apparent in clear, instructive terms. “A grandmaster,” Kasparov once observed, “needs to retain thousands of games in his head, for games are to him what the words of their mother tongue are to ordinary people, or notes or scores to musicians.” Another analogue might be that of a novelist who must read the great works that have preceded her before she is able to mature into a writer of substance herself.

Gleaning the patterns, soaking them up until they’ve saturated one’s mental equipment, enables a player to work with the formations of the game, handle its devices and structures, and intuit those crucial points when prudent decisions must be made. As far as the patterns in a particular chess opening go, it takes at least a year of play and study to begin to know them well, and more than that to master them fully. The process of becoming educated is like coming to know a city. At first everything about the place is new and unfamiliar; only after months of walking its streets do you begin to get a sense of it. Even then, for years after, previously untrodden side ways, taverns, and neighborhoods can reveal themselves. “I’ve been playing the Taimanov Sicilian for twenty years,” said Predrag Trajkovic, “and I’m still not sure I know it very well.”

Some players get by with a minimal knowledge of opening theory, saving their energies for any middlegame or endgame battles that might follow. They are content to get the ball over the net, and then take it from there. Some find the study of openings a tedious chore. “I admit that I was never able to study openings—it really bored me,” Pal Benko, a Hungarian grandmaster, wrote in 2003. “I remember being with a girlfriend who asked me to look over some chess openings with her. I instantly fell asleep. I found that I could take a nap in any situation by just looking at some opening variation—my eyes would shut right away.” Some players say they don’t study openings much because they soon forget the nuances of their investigations. Others are fascinated by openings and devote hours to analyzing their intricacies. It’s similar to the appreciation for Mendelian genetics that some students stumble upon while in high school, when they learn about
genetic “factors” and marvel at their intricate determinations. And along with the sheer pleasure of learning something new, it’s fun to figure things out, while appreciating the intricate knowledge that led to its development.

Working with others in this pursuit carries its own pleasures and benefits. I’ve often studied with friends, at kitchen tables or neighborhood clubs, parsing ideas and variations. Nolan has come over to my place on many occasions, with soda bottle and sandwich in hand. We toil for hours, a chessboard between us: “So that’s why the bishop needs to be there . . .” Talking, comparing, arguing matters out brings home the lessons—better—attesting to American anthropologist Paul Rabinow’s insight that friendship is “a primary site of thinking.” Comparing thoughts is fine for us, but at the professional level, where the stakes are higher and where competitors are trying to hit on something truly new, players have to be careful: some grandmasters are wary of working with others because they are afraid that their collaborators will give away their cherished “novelties.” Secrecy is a professional requirement.

THE PERSISTENCE OF PAWN STRUCTURES

The rise in the number of regional and international tournaments in the 1970s, the increased professionalization of chess, and the expansion of writings on chess openings in the 1970s and 1980s altered the way chess players approached competitive chess, the opening stage of the game in particular. In the age of Capablanca and Alekhine, the opening was chiefly a means to get to the full-blooded battlegrounds of the middlegame and endgame. Now, hand-to-hand combat starts from the first moves. As Igor Zaitsev, a Russian grandmaster and noted opening theorist, recalls the chess in the post-Fischer era, when Zaitsev himself was in his thirties, “Tournament points began to bring money, and to achieve decent results on a regular basis, you had to learn to obtain good results. From the very first moves there was a desperate struggle for an advantage, every tempo counted, and the slightest nuances were exploited. The opening was transformed into a self-contained force, it became a kind of chess megalopolis, growing in both depth and width and devouring all the adjacent territory.”

That information sprawl has continued to this day, with many openings having been worked out some fifteen to twenty-five moves from the starting position—well into the middlegame segment of a chess game. “The middlegame, I repeat, is chess itself; chess with all its possibilities, its attacks, defenses, sacrifices, etc.,” or so said Eugene Znosko-Borovsky, a Russian chess master and writer. Rich is the poetry of its means: bad bish-
.ops, minority attacks, pawn storms, superfluous knights, hanging pawns, dark-square strategies. In some ways, the middlegame is the most difficult part of the game to study directly, as its principles are more diffuse than those apparent in openings or endgames. Players tend to acquire a sense of them through steady practice and, if they know what’s good for them, through the study of frequently recurring positions. Indeed, as a middlegame position often carries vestiges of the structures and dynamics birthed in the opening, like an eroding sand castle, some chess philosophers say that the secret to studying openings is to grasp well the middlegame (and endgame) formations that commonly result from them.

That’s the approach advocated by John Watson, an international master and chess theorist from Nebraska. “I think now kids are overwhelmingly focusing on the opening,” he explains. “And I think that’s okay. Because I think what happens is that that’s the end to learning about the middlegame. In other words, the only way you can learn about middlegames is playing a lot, and the positions that arise tend to be similar structurally. There’s tremendous overlap. And theory itself now goes way into the middlegame. You can argue that it even goes into the endgame. When you’re learning openings, you really are learning middlegames.”

“But basically, I think opening theory is middlegame theory,” John says, when asked about the impulse behind his decades-rich focus on openings. “You just can’t distinguish between the two anymore. Opening study is really the entryway to middlegame study. Its boundaries are just really disappearing quickly.”

“And so, by doing that, you’re really writing about the heart of chess?”

Yes, I think so. It’s really the heart. Which is funny because, when I was growing up, I didn’t think much of opening theory. I thought, Oh, what a bore! You’re just memorizing moves, right? And I think that’s just changed dramatically. The opening has just been pushed so far out, but not only that, but I think also the concepts that we say are part of openings now go up to the endgame. So even if you aren’t memorizing up to move 23, you’re still working with advanced concepts that are connected to the opening, up to the middlegame. There’s just a huge overlap.

I should also say that in terms of my interest in the middlegame—and most people’s, really—the most important thing, or at least the most nontrivial thing, is pawn structure. Pawn structure really has the priority in things like attacking, the initiative, and defense. It’s not like they’re all just a big mix: pawn structure has sort of a lead role . . . what kinds of pawn structures persist, and which ones break down? That’s one reason that opening theory is middlegame theory—because of the persistence of those pawn structures. At least it’s the thing that we can grab on to most easily.
I ask John about the Sveshnikov. “It depends on what level you’re at,” runs the gist of his response. For many players, the defense can lead to positions they find exciting, dynamic. But at the top levels it’s now taken to be an effective “drawing weapon,” as the player with the Black pieces can boil the game down to a situation in which White has to settle for a draw. “In fact, it’s been a real problem [for the White side]. That’s why the top players have consistently been avoiding it—by playing something else.” The romance has disappeared for that crowd.

Again, it’s because that the same sorts of middlegame formations arise game after game that an opening system like the Sveshnikov embodies a certain “character” and acquires a specific reputation.

CHARMS AND FETISHES

John’s take on the value of studying opening and middlegame ideas is a correct and fruitful one. Still, many players study openings more than anything else, and they try compulsively to memorize variation upon variation in anticipation of future battles.

There can be a marked cost to this approach. The danger of focusing too much on the study of openings is that it can come at the expense of other aspects of the game. “Chess players have become slaves of opening theory!” exclaims renowned Russian trainer Mark Dvoretsky. “Instead of perfecting their style, technique and so on, they spend all of their time on the computer, processing information.” Or, as Predrag Trajkovic puts it, “Openings are not chess!”

Reading up on openings can give a person a sense of security and confidence, a firm ground of knowledge to stand upon in the initial stages of a game, so that the epistemic anxiety endemic to modern chess is abated, if only temporarily. That stance can fuel a lust for information, for exploring every crevice, every new wrinkle, of an opening’s ever-developing “theory.” But that mind-set can also promote a false sense of mastery. You can’t anticipate everything that can happen, and what do you do once you step beyond your zone of information? “Openings are easy. Chess is hard,” says Mladen Vucic, an international master from Croatia.

Opening knowledge can be a wonderland of marvelous forces. It can lead to insight about the game. It can also serve as a talisman, a magical charm worn for protection against evil spirits. It can become a fetish to which a chess player is slavishly devoted. In anthropological terms, a fetish is a material object regarded as being the embodiment or habitation of a
potent spirit or as having magical potency. Bones, feathers, and certain
types of plants and wood are common fetishes in societies worldwide, as is
blood. Fetishes often help people to gain control over situations in which
they feel threatened or overwhelmed. They can bestow on their owners a
sense of agency and control, and influence the world in mysteriously effec­
tive ways. Well-studied chess openings can likewise serve as instruments
of existential control. They can be a means of magical resistance against
the threats and challenges of others. They can serve as information-based
security blankets of sorts, with players seeking refuge in the finitude of
documented data. Could it be that mastering specific bodies of information
amounts to one of the supreme fetishes of late-modern societies? Yet the
psychoanalytic take on fetishes—as personalized objects that arouse erotic
desire, excessive attention, or obsessive attachment—applies here as well,
as some players are drawn to, inflamed by, certain chess openings.

POSTSCRIPT

The love affair continued. But after months of study and play I began to
weary of the Sveshnikov’s repeating geometries. I found myself facing the
same middlegame formations, game after game, the same unruly turmoil
or the same pared bones. I yearned for something new and varied, and
became familiar with the French Defense. After a torrid, yearlong romance
in those provinces, my affections hit the skids, and I moved on, wistfully.
The Sicilian Defense welcomed me back. This time, though, I hooked up
with the Taimanov Sicilian, a dependable, shape-shifting mesh of counter-
attacking strategies. The Taimanov’s ways in the world, its sinuous forms
and possibilities, fitted well with my own predilections. We’ve been together
since. And yet the memories of other loves haunt me still. Chess, like life, is
an amorous experience, desirous, bewitching, maddening.
“Chess cannot be my hobby”

Brooklyn-born Jim Santorelli is a walking, talking chess game who converses with friends as though he’s analyzing a complex middlegame. At times, an arsenal of ripostes, counterarguments, and creative commentaries muscle his speech. “For every disadvantage there is an equal and opposite advantage,” he tells his students.

Jim learned to play chess in 1968, when he was nine, at his family’s home in Bay Ridge. His was a “games family,” and chess was one of the games they played. Mostly self-taught, Jim was the best player in his high school. “I actually had problems focusing as a kid,” he says as we talk at his home in Connecticut. “And I believe to this day that I have a learning disability. I was a visual learner, in the days when the idea of visual learners wasn’t there. Most visual learners are drawn to the game of chess.” He gave up the game for stretches of time in his teenage years “because girls didn’t like chess. They liked music. Girls liked musicians at that time. We’re talking about the seventies.”

Jim worked in a corporate job in the mid-1980s, while living in Westchester County. He started to teach chess, and jumped into that profession full-time in 1988. “The corporate world and me did not blend in together,” he says. “I really did not fit into it. And one time I decided at work that I just couldn’t stand the corporate world. If you think there’s something being done wrong, you just have to keep quiet, because you don’t say anything, and that just was not my personality. I would analyze it like a chess player and say, ‘No, it’s the wrong way. This is the way it should be done.’ I got in trouble.”

In 1991 Jim became cofounder of the National Scholastic Chess Foundation, a White Plains–based charitable organization that teaches chess to young children in numerous schools in the tristate area. He proved to be a natural in the classroom. “I love teaching chess,” he says. “I love teaching kids more. Chess is what I teach. I believe in what I teach. It is a phenomenal educational tool. Chess encompasses every aspect of critical thinking skills.”

Jim stopped playing competitively for close to a decade, and then started again in 2003. He stopped competing again two years later, when health concerns led him to stop participating in tournaments. “I have lost the competitiveness in me somewhat, because that’s all I do,” he said in 2007. “I’m teaching chess all the time. The whole rationale is, the last thing Tiger Woods is going to want to do when he’s on vacation is to play a round of golf. My hobby is not chess at the moment. Chess cannot be my hobby.
What I like to do is play the guitar. So if I have a particularly rough day, I’ll take it out on some blues lead, I’ll take it out on my guitar.”

In the fall of 2009, Jim was intent on playing again in tournaments. “On occasion I need to reemerge for a period of time, and play,” he said then. “Being a chess professional, I feel a responsibility to play competitively to bring my game back to form. It’s still not my hobby, but I figure I might as well enjoy it while I’m doing it.”
February 9, 2004. John Riddell plays chess the way a hawk scans the ground for prey. He looks and looks; then swoops down and snatches up a lonely pawn.

This hawk is seated across from you at a table in the far corner of a ground-floor hall of a Presbyterian church in north central Yonkers. It’s just after seven on a wintry Monday. You’ve both just arrived, having navigated icy streets and sidewalks to get here. You’re setting up the last of the pieces on a green and white roll-up chessboard. John looks at his watch and asks, “Do you want to get started?”

Dynamic Potential

On Monday evenings the hall, which is the size of a middle school cafeteria, is the meeting place of the Bronx-Yonkers Chess Club. Banquet tables are situated throughout the room, with some corners of the place serving as storage areas more than anything else. A bookcase sits by the main entrance, displaying used paperbacks for sale. Next to it stand a coat rack and a tall electric fan. Down the hall is a bathroom with a toilet that keeps running unless someone shakes the handle just right. In one corner, among other boxes, lies a chest that holds an assortment of discolored chess pieces, aging vinyl chessboards, and a handful of tournament results from the 1980s and 1990s.

The club has been undergoing a renaissance of sorts over the past year,
with an increasing number of members coming weekly to participate in tournaments. You learned about the club the previous winter and have been frequenting it since. It’s composed of a core of players who have known each other for decades, along with a handful of newer players like Nolan, Khan, and yourself. The Yonkers club has a more relaxed and amiable atmosphere than the Marshall Chess Club in Manhattan, but there’s still a competitive spirit at work. People take their rated games seriously.

John, one of the highest-rated regulars, has been a member of the club for years. John’s an amiable guy with a big laugh, but he’s focused when at the chessboard. A Bronx native who moved to Yonkers in the mid-1980s, he has been playing since he was a boy. Each chess player has his own origin story, of how the game became a significant part of his life. John’s dates back to when he was nine, when his stepfather, a man named Kenneth Blanchard, taught him how to play. “I guess I learned chess like Capablanca did,” he told me. “They say that Capablanca learned by watching his father play, and I learned by watching my father play. I never really knew my real father, and my stepfather raised me, so he was like a father to me. I would watch him play when guests came over. He taught me how to play. He always used to beat me.”

After his father died, John joined the Marshall Chess Club, took a few lessons with legendary chess teacher Jack Collins, and played in his high school chess club. He improved mostly by playing in tournaments, and achieved his master title when he was twenty. “At times I thought I would never make it,” he said. “I hit ceilings, like everyone else does. I wanted to make it in honor of my father. If it wasn’t for him, I probably wouldn’t be playing chess. It was great when I did [become a master].” John’s rating has been as high as 2300, but nowadays, with a family to support, he doesn’t have much time to devote to chess, and it has been bouncing around 2200. He has a quick eye for tactics and a rich, intuitive understanding of positions. His playing style is reminiscent of Bobby Fischer’s—active, direct, precise—and it’s not surprising that he enjoys studying the latter’s games. “I like Fischer’s games,” he said in 2003; then he added, “But he’s dead to us now.” He had in mind Fischer’s comments to a Philippine radio station hours after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, that it was “wonderful news” that the country had been attacked, that “What goes around comes around, even for the United States.”

Like Fischer, John has a natural feel for the game. One evening while at the club, Jim Santorelli and a friend were going over a game that Jim had played the week before, looking for effective moves. John arrived and
joined them. Within seconds, he had sized up the position and suggested specific ways to continue.

“I tell you this,” Jim said later of his good friend. “Whenever John walks into the club, he’s the most talented player here.”

You’re slated to face John tonight, in the penultimate round of a club tournament. This is your first rated game against him. You’ve played a number of blitz games, winning only a few of them. You’re now playing for real. He’s eager to see what you’ve got, how you’ll fare against him.

The games usually start about eight, but since you’re both here there’s little point in waiting. The time control is Game/85; you each have eighty-five minutes to complete all your moves, even if there are a hundred moves or more to be played. With each move you make, there’s also a five-second delay clock that winds down before your main clock starts again.

John has a young daughter and son at home and his job at the Scarsdale Post Office early in the morning. He’s eager to begin the game now so he can get home at a reasonable hour. You’re for that as well, as you also have work in the morning. You start the game at seven-thirty, before any of the other games commence. You’re at one of the better-lit tables at the far end of the room, close to a church piano. John has the White pieces, which adds to the challenge before you.

You shake hands, start his clock. A Modern Benoni is soon on the board.

Benoni is a Hebrew term meaning “son of sorrow,” as in the biblical verse “And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-oni [son of my sorrow]” (Gen. 35:18). In chess circles, the term came to be applied to a number of defensive systems that stem from the opening pawn moves 1. d4 c5 2. d5. Along with the Czech Benoni, there also are setups known as the Schmidt Benoni, the Snake Benoni, and the Old Benoni. The first documented use of the term Benoni Defense was by Aaron Reinganum, in a nineteenth-century manuscript called Ben-Oni oder die Vertheidigungen die Gambitzüg im Schach (Benoni, or the Gambit Defenses in Chess). The author reportedly worked on chess when he was depressed, and found the title an appropriate one. Others soon began to use the same word. It’s also speculated that the phrase “son of sorrow” refers to a Black pawn on d6, which is a signal feature and weakness of Black’s structure.

The Modern Benoni (figure 3), which today is the most common version of all the Benoni setups, yields sharp, dynamic games. Nunn’s Chess Openings declares it “an attempt by Black to unbalance the position at an early stage. He gains winning chances, but at considerable risk.” The defense was popular from the early 1960s through the early 1980s, when Mikhail
Tal, Garry Kasparov, John Nunn, and others won brilliant games with it. In time, players on the White side hit on effective ways to snuff out Black’s most promising continuations, and these days the Modern Benoni is known most as a doubled-edged way to mix things up and play for a win with Black. With the dark-squared “Benoni bishop” ready for battle once it moves to g7, and Black’s other pieces and queenside pawns primed for quick activity, the defense carries a lot of dynamic potential. But some chess theorists have judged Black’s pawn structure unsound because of the weak pawn on d6. Black’s approach implies a trade-off of structural integrity for activity.

Somewhere along the way you’ve come to think of the Modern Benoni as a sleek black motorcycle. At times, when the machinery is working smoothly, it’s a dynamo of force and beauty. At others, it crashes horribly on a rain-slick highway. As FIDE master Carsten Hansen puts it, “This opening can make you look like a genius if your plan works out, or a complete patzer if something goes wrong.”

Your next actions come rapidly, with John making aggressive moves and you trying to counter them with energetic ones of your own. You find...
yourself with the move; there are two main options. One is to play it safe and set up a solid, if passive, defensive position. The other is to go for broke and sacrifice a pawn to gain a lead in development and attacking chances. You begin to calculate what would happen if you sacrifice the pawn.

Let’s see, you say to yourself. Bishop takes knight, queen takes pawn, knight to d7, pawn takes bishop . . . With each move you envision, you’re trying to think of the position as it occurs at that juncture, as you proceed three, four, five moves down the road. You’re not imagining the entire board and pieces in photographic detail so much as you are apprehending piece dynamics that come into play under various arrangements.

LUDIC FABULATIONS

This cognitive process, which chess players regularly engage in, is as intriguing as it is difficult: a person is looking at a specific position on the board, but in his mind’s eye he is giving thought to—constructing, enacting—a series of imaginary riffs on that concrete reality. The further he goes down into the rabbit hole of variations, the vaguer, more ghostly the imagined position becomes, and hence the greater the chance for mistakes in calculation (“long variation, wrong variation” chimed Danish grandmaster Bent Larsen). Some Russian players are known to look up at the ceiling while working out possible continuations to avoid having the actual position cloud their construal of the positions they are trying to visualize and evaluate. Most players tack between reality and fantasy, between perceiving the pieces as they appear on the board and imagining their potential movements. If we watch chess players analyzing positions, working out good moves to play, we can glimpse something of this process in the movements of their eyes: glances dart about the chessboard, tracing hypothetical moves. While chess players speak of this process as one of “visualization,” most of them do not “see” the pieces move about so much as imagine their lines of flight.

The ability to concoct an imagined reality is a signal feature of the human mind. Humans can conjure up imagined scenarios at a moment’s notice, in a form of control that philosopher Edward Casey, in his book Imagining, calls “self-inducement.” They can guide these scenarios by deciding to direct the future course of their imaginings, in acts of “imaginative guidance”; and they can “terminate” them at will. One way to account for this ever-present and seemingly effortless ability is to consider the ways in which the human brain is constantly involved in processes of “neural fabulation.” Brian Sutton-Smith invokes this term in addressing
the idea that “the brain is always creating some kind of ceaseless inner fiction, or is at play within itself.” The brain is forever busy anticipating actions, fantasizing, composing words or actions, guessing at intentions, talking to itself, desiring what it lacks, considering situations from different angles—it’s always at play with possibilities. “Waking consciousness is dreaming,” suggests neurologist Oliver Sacks, “but dreaming constrained by external reality.” Or, as French philosopher Merleau-Ponty grasped it, we “weave dreams round things.”

Chess players cultivate such imaginative-cognitive faculties. In chess, it’s easy to initiate, guide, and terminate the imagining of specific sequences of chess moves. The hard part lies in “guiding” the sequences well. To play chess successfully, you can’t steer your imaginings in any random direction; what you conceptualize has to tie into the concrete situation on the board. You have to hit on effective sequences of moves. Otherwise, you’ll blunder pieces away left and right. A strong temporal dimension underpins this process, as a player is trying to fathom what might happen if certain moves were made. Strong players can anticipate better what they’ll be facing in a position down the road, before they actually get there. “The difference, really, between weak and strong players,” says Dale Sharp, a life master, “is in how they assess the positions they calculate out in their minds. Stronger players are better at assessing the end point of their calculations.” Through years of training and competitive practice, master chess players develop a “professional vision”: they cultivate a way of seeing that enables them to regard, scrutinize, and evaluate chess positions.

Some players are so good at these acts of imagining that they can envision entire games, and the variations that accompany them, without a chessboard in sight. Asa Hoffmann talks of how, in the early sixties, he used to tag along with Bobby Fischer and his friends as they would walk down the streets of Manhattan at night, traveling between chess haunts. “They would be talking about whole games and whole variations in their heads,” Asa recalls, “and I couldn’t follow that so well.” Visualizing chess moves is a cognitive skill that some players have to a greater degree than others. Some are freakishly good at it. In Monte Carlo each year the world’s best players are invited to display their skills in “blindfold” chess at the Melody Amber chess tournament, in which they play entire games without sight of the position of the pieces on the board. Many of these games are spectacular. “All of the top players have of course an absolutely great visualization [of the board],” says American grandmaster Alexander Shabalov. “And you can see it in the quality of their games at the Melody Amber. It’s amazing.” Decades earlier, chess masters would display their talents at blindfold chess by playing multi-
ple games simultaneously, without sight of any of the boards. In Edinburgh in 1937, George Koltanowski, a Belgian-born American player, set what many take to be the world’s blindfold record by playing thirty-four chess games simultaneously while blindfolded, over a period of thirteen hours. Many players regard blindfold chess to be mentally taxing. Concerned that simultaneous blindfold exhibitions were a health hazard, Soviet authorities officially banned them in 1930. Still, some chess trainers advocate thinking about chess positions without sight of a board as an effective way to develop the skill to conceptualize and analyze game variations.

One practice analogous to this imaginative process is the one that Tibetan Buddhists undertake while visualizing the appearance of deities during meditative rituals. Here the religious practitioner imaginatively constructs the appearance of a specific deity, from its facial features to the religious symbols it carries, in order to invoke or embody its qualities. Religious adepts can become skilled at visualizing, in detail, the features of a bodhisattva like Tārā or Avalokiteshvara. In so doing, they can acquire something of that deity’s knowledge or purity or divine grace by identifying with the form imagined.

In my work with Tibetan Buddhist peoples, I found that the visualization skills that develop from those practices carry over into other aspects of life. A Nepalese friend of mine, for instance, makes a living as a designer of patterns for Tibetan carpets. When he goes about designing a new pattern, he never sketches anything out on paper. Rather, he constructs in his mind the pattern he is thinking of, and then mentally tinkers with it, making adjustments, until he has the image just right. He then inputs the coordinates of the lines and colors into a computer program, without drawing or looking at an actual printed image of the pattern, and sends the coded information on to the production side of the company. Chess players engage in a similar process: they imagine a certain constellation of forms, and then fiddle with it, trying out different arrangements, until they find something worth aiming for on the chessboard itself.

Chess players experience a different kind of mental imagery after games. It usually happens at night, when a person is trying to get some sleep or is drifting in and out of dream states. The mind has a will of its own and keeps on visualizing chess positions—knights leaping onto and off squares, pawns negotiating captures with enemy pawns. The images come unsolicited, spontaneously. A hypnagogic mind can’t stop churning out chess imagery. The images play the player long after the game has concluded. One man says much the same happens to him at night on days that he has played golf. He can’t keep his thoughts from ruminating over the golfing
challenges he faced that day, from putting angles to fairway shots. “This usually happens when I’ve lost rounds of golf that day,” he says. A woman says she meets up with similar images after playing Tetris, a popular puzzle game, on her computer.

Oliver Sacks relates that he encounters such “visual afterimages” upon engaging in mindful activities for hours on end.6 Yolmo people with whom I’ve worked in Nepal would call them bhaja, “echoic illusions” of thoughts and actions a person has undertaken earlier on. It’s as though the brain has been primed for such imaginings and wants or needs to keep processing them, or can’t keep from doing so. For chess players, terminating these neural fabulations does not come easily. Nor, when they occur, does a sound sleep.

“NO ONE LIKES DEFENDING”

Seated across from John, you give thought to the position for a few minutes, the one you’re conceptualizing. It dawns on you that you’ve seen this configuration before, in books on the Modern Benoni. You worked through it several months back. But you can’t quite recall the specific variations that are known to generate from it. That’s one of the frustrating things about chess: you can study a position for hours on end, but a year or a month later only the general themes remain intact in your memory, the specifics having eroded into a foggy morass, especially if you haven’t considered the position in a while.

Professional chess players often display an exceptional ability to recall games and positions they’ve come across. “All the grandmasters that I know have a fantastic memory,” says Asa Hoffmann. Bobby Fischer was phenomenal in this regard. Frank Brady relates that after participating in the World Speed Chess championship at Herceg Novi, Yugoslavia, in 1970, Fischer “ rattled off all his twenty-two games from memory.”7 Some say that Fischer was able to remember all of the games he ever played, move by move.

But Bobby’s not here to help you. You can’t recall what you’re supposed to do once you reach the position you have in mind, outside of a few core themes. You’re also starting to doubt that this is the position you had once studied. This leads you to question how well you’ll be able to navigate the complications if you step into them. You’re hesitant to get into a tactical shoot-out with John; playing a sharp, tactics-rich game with him is like dancing with a leopard. You opt for a safer, “prophylactic” route. You move your queen to a square where it protects several squares at once.
Seconds after releasing your fingers from that piece, you don’t like the look of your position. Your approach is too passive. John Nunn, an English grandmaster and chess author, warns about this peril with the Benoni: “Black relies fairly heavily on tactical resources to vindicate his opening play. Usually there will come a moment when Black will have to continue tactically to justify his play, for otherwise his pieces will be pushed back from their active squares and he will be reduced to permanent passivity.”

You needed to mix things up if you were to have any chance of getting a good game. Now you’ll be on the defensive.

Your move gives John a chance to play an effective sequence. He gains the initiative in a few moves. He continues to make imposing threats, while you find ways to parry them—at least for now. You’ve got your work cut out for you. “The Modern Benoni is a lousy opening,” Nolan once complained after trying it out in a couple of games. “It’s so easy to get stuck in a crappy position.” The present position fits that bill. The basic idea of the Modern Benoni is for Black to create dynamic counterplay in exchange for a weak central pawn structure. Because of the backtracking you had to do with your bishop, you have the weak structure but not the counterplay. The genie is stuck in the bottle. You have to sit and defend patiently, hoping for your opponent to overreach. Then you might be able to strike back.

Jim Santorelli walks over and looks at your game. He’s not playing in the tournament, but he came to the club tonight to watch the games. He sits down and scrutinizes your bulwark against John’s offensive.

Moves follow, but you’re still ensnared in a cramped position. You’re on your own. There are no books to help you out, no hugging the shoreline.

“Of course,” Mikhail Botvinnik once noted, “the essence of chess is not to be found in the opening of the game. The basic ingredient of chess is that in a complex, original situation, where no source of help is apparent, a player must find the correct solution or move. Anyone who is able to do this can feel confident at the board.” Your opponent appears more confident than you. He gets up and walks around the room, satisfied with his play so far.

You’re left to huddle over your pieces. They’re tied up, tripping over one another, with little room to maneuver. You’re trying to figure out ways to break free, but you don’t see anything good. You have to be careful and attend to all of John’s threats, tactical as well as positional, through the next few moves. You’re caught up in a conflicting conversation of analyses, with John trying to figure out a precise way to convert his spatial advantage into a material one, and you trying to hit on the precise sequence of moves that will keep him from doing that.
“No one likes defending,” Khan once said. It’s not much fun. Attacking is less taxing, both practically and psychologically. It’s easier to come up with good moves while attacking. Whereas defending often requires finding the one and only move that holds your position together, an attacker often can go in for the kill in several ways. Attacking also gets a player’s creative juices flowing. For many players, defending signals unwelcome themes of submission, passivity, reaction. While defending a tough position, a person can come to feel his very self is being attacked, rather than a few ghostly squares on a cloth board. A player’s chess position can readily become an extension of his self, taken to be part of his ground of being in the world (much the way discarded hair or clothing is understood to be an integral component of the self in some societies). “He was attacking me there, and there,” players will say in talking about their games. In light of this tendency, it’s best to think about the position alone, ego aside, and treat it like a puzzle to be solved.

You try to do that now, to figure out how you might parry John’s assault. Toward that end, you’re seeing well tonight. You can anticipate what John wants to do, and counter with good responses. Some evenings it’s like a dense fog, especially if you’re tired, but for now at least you can calculate.

**Calculation Mode**

With his twenty-third move John pushes one of his pawns into the sinews of your position. It’s questionable how effective that advance will be. You’ve seen this move coming and feel you’ve calculated out a sufficient response. You check things again, to make sure you’ve got them right, and respond with what you take to be the best move.

You’re considering your twenty-fourth move of the game. You’re thinking of advancing a pawn of your own, to try to get some counterplay going on the queenside. It’s a tricky position. You decide to devote some time to calculating out the responses and counterresponses that might result. You slip into a “calculation mode,” telling yourself to think systematically and work out the different variations.

How do chess players calculate? Different positions call for different kinds of calculation, and players go about it in various ways, though several procedures do tend to recur. Experienced players try to think systematically about the position at hand by mapping out their options with each move, and then assessing each one’s consequences. They combine concrete calculation and abstract reasoning in sorting through the ideas involved. They often identify a handful of “candidate moves,” which they evaluate
as to their merit, and then work to assess the positions that arise after a series of anticipated moves; the evaluation gets less precise as the positions grow more distant from the actual one on the board. Players can also draw on their sense of the positional patterns and tactical motifs at hand, often intuitively and subconsciously. They often sense when the features of a position hold a winning tactic, and they will look for the key move or sequence of moves that can unlock it.

This is a creative, active process of imaginative wandering. It’s best for players to proceed practically rather than aim for perfection; they should try to hit on good continuations, with the game and clock situation and their opponents in mind, skirting the desire to figure out everything to the nth degree. They often circle back again to revisit positions and possibilities, informed by their previous searches, to see things with fresh eyes. If time permits, they try to double-check everything, making sure there are no “holes” or oversights in their analyses. Finally, they decide on a specific way to proceed before making a move on the board.

Players often proceed with a certain idea in mind—winning a piece, mating a king—and try different possibilities until they find something that works. It can be like one of those “find a . . . ” puzzles that children like to work through, in which, for instance, a drawing of a tree hides various objects that they have to identify. In chess, the theme often is “find a tactic”: a knight fork, a nasty pin. If nothing appears to work, players will move on to a variation on that idea, or another approach altogether. In effect, players draw on their felt sense of the position to work creatively through a set of ideas. They also tend to engage in a lot of cognitive switching, shifting among different modes of thought—fanciful, calculative, reflexive, evaluative, wishful—while trying to decide what to play next.

What tend to differ most in the “variation processing” central to chess calculation are the accuracy, speed, and imaginative powers of different players. A popular conception is that strong players simply outcalculate their weaker opponents, or calculate further down a string of variations. But it’s actually the speed and the quality of the calculative reasoning employed by skilled players, more than the extent of their thinking, that wins the day. Compared to a top player, an amateur calculates much more slowly, with less accuracy, and not as effectively. He also brings to the calculating process less knowledge and fewer conceptual resources. He misses things. Grandmasters, in contrast, calculate with a strong measure of imagination, precision, and creativity, as well as a refined intuitive sense of the possibilities involved.

In watching Leonid Yudasin play and analyze games, for instance, it’s
easy to conclude that he thinks less in terms of individual moves than in strings of moves, much as an accomplished musician will play melodic lines, not individual notes. A club player noted much the same thing after watching two masters analyze a game just concluded at a tournament in Connecticut. “I was watching Lapshun and Figler go over their game,” he said. “They think in variations, whereas we think in terms of moves.”

Some elite players—from Capablanca and Tal to Fischer and Anand—have been renowned for the lickety-split speed of their calculations. The visualization, memory, and calculation skills evinced by top players make them “cognitive experts” of a specific sort. The best chess players seem to possess a natural, and at times superhuman, talent for visualizing and calculating variations. Yet players do develop their calculating skills to a significant degree. One of the most direct methods is to decipher the answers to tactical “puzzles” or combinations drawn from master play. People set up the positions on a chessboard and try to find the solutions without moving the pieces. Through those exercises they learn to navigate the different variations that come to mind while visualizing the new positions. The practice can improve both players’ calculating skills and their “combinational vision.” As Jim Santorelli puts it, “Doing tactics puzzles is like doing mental pushups.” You get strong that way.

Chess is a labyrinth of possibilities. Thinking about it entails a combination of concrete calculation and what-ifs. Players can see for certain the game position only, and they’re often working in a climate of uncertainty and expectation. They’re toiling in a “subjunctive mode” of imaginative thought, to filch a term from narrative theory. In English grammar, the subjunctive mode is used to express hypothetical or imaginary situations: “If you had a million dollars, you would travel around the world.” People often engage in a mood of subjunctivity as they listen to stories or go about their lives. As psychologist Jerome Bruner puts it, “To be in the subjunctive mode is . . . to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties.” When listening to a story, people are drawn into a world of possibility and uncertainty, where they don’t know what’s around the next narrative corner and where they’re invited to participate in the protagonists’ own indeterminate progress through the story. Much the same happens in chess, as a player often doesn’t know where, precisely, a continuation will lead or how the game will turn out. To begin a chess game is to step into the unknown, to foresee vague possibilities, to encounter formations at once familiar and unexpected. Even when the story of the game reaches its endpoint, there’s much that remains uncertain, as there are all those imagined but unplayed continuations that would have led to
different games altogether. Players can’t help but wonder what would have happened if some of these shadow variations had in fact been played.

The ability to calculate well is an extremely important aspect of chess, so much so that many games are decided because one player calculates better in complicated positions and thus gains a decisive advantage. He sees something his opponent does not notice, or evaluates the outcome of a certain continuation more effectively. When Tigran Petrosian was preparing for his world champion title defense against Boris Spassky in 1966, he noted to his assistants, “You know, all these lofty matters we have been studying — strategy and endless opening subtleties — are not the main thing. The match will be decided, first and foremost, by our calculation reflexes during play, or, as they say, who is better at doing ‘you go there and you go here.’” It often comes down to who is better at doing this kind of analytic work.

In chess circles, being in good form boils down to being able to make good decisions at the board, in quick and efficient ways, and to play creatively and imaginatively without having to rely on pat or routine modes of thought. As Rusudan Goletiani tells it, “If you play a lot, you are in good form. You’re sharp, you can calculate well, you can see things faster.” All this requires having the right assortment of mental and physical equipment over a certain stretch of days: clarity of thought, resourcefulness, acuity, stamina, ease of mind and manner. The technologies of the self hum along. Players often talk about “seeing well” at the board. That effective vision is a mark of being in good form: a person sees how to get an edge in the opening, how to ward off an opponent’s threats, how to weave a mating net and go in for the kill. To be in poor or lousy form, in contrast, is to miss good moves, to think routinely and mundanely, to calculate erratically, vaguely, slowly.

Most players’ engagements suggest that they need to spend at least an hour or so a day analyzing positions to maintain any kind of sharpness in their playing ability. If they don’t, if they skip even a couple of days of practice, they can lose their sharpness. In chess—as in other endeavors, such as dance, music, and boxing—people’s performance skills erode quickly if they aren’t being exercised on a daily basis. Vladimir Kramnik explains, “Chess is like body-building. If you train every day, you stay in top shape. It is the same with your brain—chess is a matter of daily training.”

It’s also easy to fall out of good form if you don’t play competitively for a while. “Chess does not forgive those who are unfaithful to it,” Russian international master Ruslan Kashtanov once observed. “If you stop playing, your skill deteriorates very quickly.” Players can’t just analyze posi-
tions. They have to put themselves in the heat of competitive games, where their thinking is tested with every move. “The more I play, the better form I’ll be in,” a college-age player says. “If I play at the Marshall Chess Club every weekend, then I’ll be in good form.”

The catch is that life often gets in the way—jobs, personal interests, family commitments, and relationships. It’s easy for a person to become so consumed with the matters of life that there’s little time to do the work conducive to being in good form. Listen to former world champion Anatoly Karpov’s explanation, during an interview, of why he backed out of playing in an international tournament in 2004:

“At the very last minute I understood that I cannot play chess right now. I am not in good form, and I do not have the time. There are more important things waiting for me.”

“What more important things?”

“Many different things, business and social commitments that have to be attended to at the end of a long and arduous year. Under such circumstances it is impossible to play games at the very highest level, you just don’t have the necessary concentration.”

Life can get in the way of being in good form, while staying in good form can get in the way of having a decent life. That is the quandary of amateurs, in particular, as they have full-time jobs on the side. “Careers sure get in the way of our chess!” a fervid amateur player once told me.

**FLOW**

Decision made after ten minutes of thought, you reach out and push the pawn two squares forward. You hit your clock, write down the move: 24 . . . b5. John notes it as well, and then considers the position. Jim is back at your table, seated to your left. He’s also studying the game.

You and John play a sequence of precise moves, and a series of pawn and piece exchanges follow. You had imagined this sequence of moves when analyzing earlier. The position is now easier to assess, because it’s on the board. Again there’s an important choice to make. Two moves look good and you have to decide which one is best. Do you move your knight here, or there? You rest your head in your hands, blocking out distractions. You’re immersed in the task. Everything disappears except the chess position itself.

One night I went to bed around midnight after intensely analyzing an opening position for an hour. I fell into an oneiric state in which my mind
kept analyzing on its own, intensely. I woke up from that analytic reverie and for a few seconds, before my neural circuits reconfigured themselves, I had no sense of where or when or who I was. Strange as it might sound, I was the analysis itself, with little awareness of my surroundings in time and space. Pure thought.

While it took an extreme form that night, this kind of concentrated immersion, which can occur during stretches of a game or during the bulk of a weekend tournament, appeals to chess players. It’s an act of cognitive magic in line with the absorption and imaginative intensity that come with people’s involvements in ludic activities. For many chess players, the pockets of immersion offer a way for them to get away from the worries and duties of everyday life. Rusudan Goletiani says,

> “I love doing it,” says Kim Qvistorff. “You wouldn’t say it’s necessarily relaxing, because you get to be completely exhausted, you play two games a day. But it’s a different world, completely apart from the Monday-to-Friday life. And you can completely take your brain out of the normal concept of life.”

One man played a lot of chess as a child and teenager while growing up in a rundown neighborhood in Brooklyn. When asked why he liked to play chess, he said with a tinge of anger, “Because it took me out of that hellhole that was Coney Island!”

“Everything goes away for a while,” says Tom Mendola, another avid chess player. “But when you lose, reality immediately crashes back in—the bills you have to pay, work. When you win, it’s like a sugar high, you’re let down slowly. But when you lose, it all comes back right away.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a Hungarian-born psychologist, was held with his family in an Italian prison camp at the end of World War II, until it could be determined that they weren’t Fascists. He found solace in chess. There was little the ten-year-old could do in the camp to ease his worries about his family’s fate. But he could play chess against the grown-ups, and he found that during the games he would “forget about everything.”
discovered chess was a miraculous way of entering into a different world where all those things didn’t matter. For hours I’d just focus within a reality that had clear rules and goals. If you knew what to do, you could survive there.”

Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced Chick-sent-me-hig-e) drew from this and other observations of intense, absorbing experiences to develop what he calls “the psychology of optimal experience.” A concept central to this psychology, and of ample relevance to chess players, is what Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow.” An experience of flow usually occurs when a person is engaged in a challenging activity in which thoughts and actions have to be devoted to the task at hand. Rock climbing, painting, sailing, and writing are good examples: one is engaged with the challenge, but also feels in control of one’s actions, master of one’s fate. When that happens, a person can feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment. As Csikszentmihalyi puts it, flow is “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.”

When a person is engaged in such a way, everything else—mortgage payments, where the car is parked—fades from consciousness. “One acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life.” This immersion makes possible the “escape” familiar to chess players, which they learn to seek out when they sit down at the board. Forms of play often entail a transcendent, otherworldly quality, in which the participants are transported to a province of meaning beyond the normal concept of life. Concentrating on chess moves can effect a liberation from speech, syntax, chattiness, and the threadbare thoughts that prattle through our waking hours.

When asked if the idea of “flow” makes sense to her, Elizabeth Vicary says,

Yes absolutely. I mean, it’s funny, chess is in some ways both the most stressful and the most relaxing thing you do. So when you’re there and you have an hour and a half on your clock, and you have a problem to solve, and no one can talk to you, and no one can bother you, and it’s absolutely silent, and you’re just sitting there and there’s nothing but you and this problem to solve, it’s the most relaxing feeling in the world. Because there’s not the chatter in the brain. . . . I think flow is a very applicable concept.

It’s easy to consider such flow experiences as being singularly subjective incidences, occurring by happenstance. Yet Elizabeth’s words point to the
ways in which such immersion is promoted by the lived dimensions and the situated social practices of chess play. The conditions have to be right. The bounded spatial and temporal frame assigned to a serious chess game, the climate of silence and solitude that contestants and spectators agree upon, the rhythmic, trance-inducing temporality of the game, and the joys and challenges of focusing directly on the task at hand are conducive to a state of flow. Csikszentmihalyi himself noted as much. “The rules, equipment, and organization of the game provide a clear-cut separation between ‘normal life’ and the activity. Therefore, a player can easily shut out irrelevant stimuli and concentrate on the limited world of the game.” Drawing on interviews his research team conducted among club players in the Chicago area in the early 1970s, Csikszentmihalyi describes the ways in which chess players often tap into a flow experience in both casual and competitive play. “Concentration on the game excludes thoughts that are irrelevant, and perceptions of events outside the board are held in abeyance. The sense of time is suspended.” For many, the intensity of concentration required while playing chess, the sense of being in control at the chess board, and the fact that one gets clear feedback on every move help to make the activity of chess play absorbing for them. As one player explained it to Csikszentmihalyi’s research team, “The best things about chess are being in control of a situation and having all the evidence right there. . . . In chess everything is in front of you to see. No other variables . . . can control it.”

Players sometimes find that there’s more involved in their chess thoughts than their own conscious efforts, that they are not the sole or primary agents of their efforts. “I think people from all competitive events say sort of the same thing,” Dale Sharp told me, “but I feel sometimes when you’re really playing well, you’re just sort of watching. Your fingers are playing, and you’re sort of watching and moves just sort of appear. . . . It’s like you’re channeling from some great source of chess moves somewhere. They’re flowing through you and you’re watching them.”

Chess as flow and escape and mastery, as a way to forget one’s worries for a spell, as an alternative state of consciousness. An effacement of time and self comes about in an arena of competing selves. Yet there’s a price to pay for such flow experiences, as Csikszentmihalyi points out. “In chess, as in other flow activities,” he remarks, “the need to be always ready to act to meet challenges produces mental and physical strain. Tournament play is especially debilitating. People emerge from a series of games exhausted, and the demands of the body rush into awareness.”

A chess player can get a “flow high,” as it were. Yet once that sweet feeling burns off, the world can come crashing down.
“DRAW?”

Enveloped in your thoughts, you sort through the variations. You use some twelve minutes to trace out the lines of play that could follow each move, as best you can envision them. You decide that exchanging knights is the way to go. As soon as you make this move, Jim lifts his head in a gesture of surprise. You take it that he’s thrown off by your decision, that he thought the other knight move was better. John doesn’t flinch. Jim gets up, walks away, and steps outside the building to smoke a cigarette.

The next few moves come quickly. “Do you want a draw?” you ask John.

At first glance it’s a fair offer, as you’re up a pawn and have two passed pawns on the queenside. But the pawns are both feebly protected, easy prey to White’s rooks. John’s pieces are more mobile than yours, and his king is more secure. You’re stuck with a bishop that has little room to move about, whereas John has a bishop that is cramping your king’s lifestyle. All this adds up to a slight but significant edge for White. John declines your offer with a brisk no.

You expected this response, but there was no harm in asking.

John makes a series of precise, hawkish moves and snaps up both of your queenside pawns before you have a chance to defend them effectively.

It’s after ten. Most of the other games have finished now. You’ve been rooted to your chair, trying to stay in the game. You don’t feel tired, you’re burning on adrenaline. John is pressing against your position, while you’re fending him off. He’s down to less than five minutes on his clock. The rule is that one doesn’t have to keep score of the moves if either opponent has less than five minutes remaining, so John stops writing down any moves made and you do the same.

You have eight minutes left, while John has less than two minutes; then less than one; then his clock runs down to two seconds.

John makes good use of the five-second time delay he gets with each move before his main clock starts ticking; he plays each of his moves now without losing any time. You’ve seen him play this way before. He’s good at it, and cool enough to maintain his composure. But the position is a devilish one, and as he advances his pawns they become less secure. You pick off one; then another.

You have three minutes left on your own clock. With each move you have the luxury of thinking more methodically than John does. Rushed with each move, he’s getting frustrated. He’s losing his advantage and the
win is slipping away (“I was mad,” he says later. “I had a clear win, but I kept losing pawns.”) A crowd of onlookers is gathered around your table.

John makes a move, hits his clock. “Draw?” he asks.

You look at your clock, see you have two and a half minutes left, and consider the position. You’re slightly better right now. You have a pawn more than he does. You could win with perfect play. “Not now,” you say, and make a move.

John makes another move, capturing one of your pawns with a pawn. You take back with your king, and toss John’s pawn to the side. His next move slices through your consciousness. He attacks your king with his bishop, forcing you to move your king. Once you move it, his bishop will win your rook, which is on the same diagonal as his bishop, on the back rank, undefended, the victim of a deadly skewer.

You’re lost now. You know, he knows it, the onlookers know it. Someone groans.

You move your king. John snaps up the rook, hits his clock. You make more moves at blitz speed, forcing him to do the same, in the hope that under the time pressure he’ll slip up or run out of time. But he does neither, and soon there’s no point in continuing. You still have a pawn more than he does, but your king and bishop are no match for his king, rook, and bishop. He’ll be able to checkmate you soon. You tip your king over, shake his hand, look at the board. You’re frustrated with yourself. Within seconds, a sure draw has turned into a loss.

Checkmate. The term derives from the Persian phrase shāh māt, which can be translated as “the king is ambushed, made powerless, arrested, thwarted, or countered completely.” While other pieces can be captured or killed, the king is made powerless and paralyzed without being hit by anybody, once escape is impossible. That sums up your mood right now. You’re broken, dumbfounded.

POSTMORTEMS

It’s not the end of the world, of course, and within minutes you and John reset the pieces and begin to work through the game, sharing thoughts on the decisions made. Jim joins you in this postgame analysis. You talk about how the game might have gone had you made different moves, and you try to figure out how White might have converted his advantage earlier on. “You should have been able to bash through,” Jim tells John. He suggests a way of doing so.
Analyzing games is a frequent component in the ritualistic structure of serious chess games. During both large tournaments and club competitions, players often scamper off to a free table to begin to work out, either with their opponents or with friends or anyone who happens to take an interest in the proceedings, what they should or should not have played in the games they’ve just finished. Through these colloquies, the mute, agonic encounter of the game can transform into a collaborative exchange of ideas, intentions, expectations.

This is one of the great pleasures of the game. “These days I often like going over games more than playing them, actually,” my friend Kim Qvistorff tells me. There’s often an air of commensality to the proceedings, with the participants partaking in the delights of chess. Going over games in a collaborative fashion is a way for people to make sense of what happened in them and sound out their understandings among others. “It’s a way to bounce off ideas,” says Nolan. You can learn what your opponent was thinking, or what others deduce, and so add to your comprehension of the game’s nuances. Shards of one overheard postgame colloquium: “What did you play here? . . . I was actually very worried about that. . . . I don’t know if it’s good, it just looks fun. . . . I wanted to bring the knight over here, but then my rook gets blocked in. . . . I thought it was your only move, and I didn’t see anything else. . . . I thought this would be a more dynamic move. . . . The way you played it was good. . . . I wanted to do this, but it looked ugly to me. . . . I was thinking about that, you have to watch out for this, though. . . . I thought that knight takes pawn is actually your last chance . . . Did you see my face after this? I was worried . . . I thought you played a good game until queen to c7. It was a tough game. My hands were all clammy and such . . . So where are you from in Philly?”

Readings and counterreadings emerge. As with acts of storytelling, the analysis sessions entail a cooperative “workshop of meaning-making” that helps people make sense of the events and actions they happen upon in life. These efforts at meaning, of making sense of different possibilities, can work to decrease the mood of subjunctivity that persists while the game is under way. Many of the half-knowns and tentative assessments that prevail then can be rendered more knowable afterward, especially because in the postmortems you can move the pieces around to check out ideas as you work through a string of moves. Opacity is diminished in two ways: players can better understand what their opponents were thinking, and they can get a better grip on the infinity of variations. Working together, participants in postmortems engage in acts of “collaborative imagining,” where they use chess pieces, speech, gestures, and vision to jointly imagine,
talk about, and evaluate lines of play, and so create imaginary realities that linger long after the pieces have been put away.21

Mapping out sequences of moves can be a way to regain psychic composure after a tough loss. Losing a game can yield a minor trauma. Going over that game can help a player soothe the wounds, gain some perspective, diminish the shame of losing, and recover a sense of integrity that was momentarily lost. It’s a talking cure of sorts. Postgame analyses can reconstitute a sense of self and meaning—in ways similar to those found with acts of mourning, or with the healing rites that communities around the world draw on when trying to rebuild the lifeworld of a person afflicted by illness or malevolent harm. Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka, for example, often employ an elaborate rite known as Suniyama that works to reconstitute the consciousness of those who have been devastated by sorcery. As anthropologist Bruce Kapferer explains it, the rite, which is “reconstitutive and harmonizing,” is centrally concerned with the practices through which human beings form and reform themselves within the lifeworld.” Among Nepal’s Yolmo people, those suffering from “spirit loss,” a dysphoric, fuguelike malaise of de-spiritedness, seek the aid of local healers, who strive to rejuvenate their clients by ritually prompting a renewed sense of sensory “presence” and spiritual-personal integrity.22 The ritual of a postgame analysis can involve a re-formation of selfhood among those afflicted by a crushing loss.

Yet tension can crop up here as well, for players will often disagree or try to demonstrate their superiority of understanding. Players often try to show how they were winning in different variations, even if they lost the actual game, and they take pains to note that they saw deeply and extensively into the position, or at least in ways more perceptive than their opponents’. This is called “winning the analysis,” as in: “He lost the game, but won the analysis.” Elizabeth Vicary told me, “There is something about chess culture that’s hypercompetitive after the game. If you have ever watched people going over their games, it’s ridiculous, it’s ridiculous.” Egos are at stake. “Man, that guy’s conceited!” said one player to another after a third walked away from a postmortem analysis that took place between rounds of a weekend tournament in upstate New York. Postgame analyses can stir up anything from new friendships to gripes and interpersonal strife.
“I have tried to quit twenty-five times”

“It’s a real love-hate relationship,” said Sunil Weeramantry as we talked one summer morning in the White Plains office of the National Scholastic Chess Foundation, of which he is the executive director. He has tried to leave the game on many occasions. He keeps coming back to it.

Sunil is an affable, tousle-haired vortex of cerebral energy, with an entrepreneur’s touch that has served him well in the free-for-all world of scholastic chess. He is widely regarded as one of the best and most influential chess teachers in the country. Born in Sri Lanka in 1951, the son of an attorney who later worked for the United Nations, he learned to play chess in 1958, when he was going on seven. “At the time there were serious race riots in Colombo, and there was a curfew, and we basically had to stay indoors.” Confined to his family’s building, he picked up the rules of the game by watching his parents play. Days later his grandfather, a serious amateur player, started contesting games with him. “This became a great way for us to spend time, and so he chose to spend his time with me playing chess,” Sunil recalled. “We played just about every day.” When Sunil won a game against his grandfather a year later, his elder said, “Well, I think you’re ready to go to a chess club.”

Sunil started playing at a local club off and on, and in local tournaments. He kept with the game when his family moved to Switzerland in 1962. By the time he was sixteen, and the winner of the Absolute Championship of the Canton of Geneva, he was playing at the strong master level, despite never having had a formal teacher. He shied away from chess for several years, while preparing for and attending law school in England in the early 1970s. He gradually became uninterested in his legal studies, and came to spend hours playing chess. He moved to the United States in 1973 and started competing in tournaments after settling in New York.

Sunil was “an extreme time pressure addict” in those days, aroused by the adrenaline rush that comes with having to win a game with only minutes left on the clock. “I was at my sharpest, most focused, most intense then, and I saw things the clearest. That feeling was for me not duplicated in anything else, but at the end of it I would be totally deflated and exhausted.”

Sunil’s “breakthrough” came in 1975, when he won the New York State championship. He started giving private lessons soon after to a budding chess player, when the boy’s parents implored him to do so. Finding that he and his student were successful at their mutual endeavors, he launched a career as a chess teacher. “I brought my first student to 2200 from scratch,”
he related. “That’s what got me into it. I realized I could do this, and I enjoyed it.”

Despite having dedicated much of his life to the cause of chess, Sunil’s kinship with the game is conflicted. “I really do enjoy the game,” he said, and I think I appreciate the aesthetics of the game. A game well played has a lot to sustain me emotionally—even though I can get very frustrated and really upset and pull my hair out. You can go through a number of losses and then have one really well-played game. That attraction just keeps reeling me back in. At times, I never would have thought that I would play another game. I’ve had games that I’ve played in my career that have been published all over the world. And that’s the attraction to me. I guess in a sense a well-played game has the sense of perfection. I mean nothing is perfect, but it’s a work of art. It’s a great feeling of satisfaction. . . . This is my way of being able to create something. . . .

I have tried to quit twenty-five times. I feel that there can be a destructive side to it. That’s when things are just not going right, not necessarily because you made a mistake or you miscalculated, but because something you were trying to play just didn’t exist in the position. And it could be easy to take that sort of negativity and turn it against yourself. So you have to be very careful of that, and clearly it’s the case that you lose more games than that beautiful game that you won. There’s a real danger. Some might use that to better their outlook on life, and grow from it. But if we are so involved in the game, then we can become bitter.

As the years pass, Sunil has come to accept that the works of chess art are coming at a slower clip for him. “I suppose that a number of times I’ve thought maybe I would quit because there is this feeling that you can’t go beyond a certain point. I suppose, to be honest, that you have to accept the fact that, if you cannot make the masterpiece, then you can get enjoyment from participating in someone else’s. Of course, in terms of your ego, that’s a difficult step to get to, and to accept. But I think that’s really the answer.”
June 27, 2004. I’m swimming in waters tepid and chlorinated on this late Sunday afternoon, at a hotel on the outskirts of Philadelphia. It’s an outdoor pool adjacent to the hotel’s gym, bounded by an array of concrete walls. I say “swimming,” but my actions can better be described as floating, drifting, sinking, with an occasional leg kick to restore buoyancy. Two boys occupy the shallow end, splashing, jumping. Their mother watches from the vantage point of a deck chair. Shadows hit the ripples on the water.

In distant caverns in the hotel, scores of men, women, and children are hunched over chessboards, clawing their way through their second game of the day. They are competing in various sections of the thirty-second annual World Open, held each summer in Philadelphia. I could be playing right now as well, eyeing chess pieces, as I’m also enrolled in the tournament. But I decided to sit out the last round of the weekend by taking a half-point bye. I just finished a grueling, five-hour game, which began at ten in the morning, and I have neither the energy to play again today nor the interest. After my first game I felt drained, back-sore, in need of movement. A swim seemed the better option. I’ll be driving back to New York soon, but I’m in no hurry to get going. It has been a scorching weekend, and I’m waiting for the heat and the Sunday traffic to die down. I also have some thinking to do. The thing is, I’m smack in the middle of an existential crisis.

Chapter 6

Ambivalence

He spoke of the fact that all around them was a bright, free world, that chess was a cold amusement that dries up and corrupts the brain, and that the passionate chess player is just as ridiculous as the madman inventing a perpetuum mobile or counting pebbles on a deserted ocean shore. . . . “Horror, suffering, despair,” said the doctor quietly, “those are what this exhausting game gives rise to.”

—Vladimir Nabokov, The Defense
That's the phrase that came to me three weeks ago—half joking, but also half seriously—at the end of a weekend tournament that I participated in outside of Hartford, Connecticut. I had played in thirty-three tournaments since my return to chess in 2002, with my energies devoted to learning how to play better. But something was different now. Malaise encroached when I sat down at the board. I was playing well enough, but I wasn't enjoying the trials of tournament play. Trapped in a hotel for two days, sleeping poorly at night, toiling through unending variations in crowded, windowless rooms, I began to ask myself whether I was into playing chess competitively. But if I stopped participating in tournaments, would I still be interested in chess, in studying the game and playing casually? And if I weren’t, what meaning would my life have? Where would I find passion in life? My crisis was one of purpose and meaning: where would I find them if I were no longer interested in playing chess competitively?

I came to realize it was a question of having a valid *illusio* in my life, to invoke again that social-science term. What kind of dedicated “interest and investment” in life would inspirit my efforts, now or in the coming years? *Illusio* is forward-looking, as it’s tied into a person’s ideas of future endeavors and commitments. When they are invested in particular life projects, or in the game of life more generally, people come to anticipate and hope for certain situations, be it getting a job promotion, watching one’s children grow up, or migrating to another country. While driving back home in the Sunday evening summer traffic from the tournament in Hartford, I had ruminated over the thought that, if I weren’t going to be competing in tournaments any longer, I would be left without a clear and concretely forthcoming future. Life without *illusio* is bleak.

**A Festival of Chess**

This was on my mind when I followed through on playing at the World Open three weeks later. I had already doled out the $225 entrance fee, and I wanted to see how I would fare in the competition. Perhaps the malaise I had felt in Connecticut was a fluke, and events would be different. Perhaps I would have such terrific success that it would become clear I was destined to play tournament chess.

The World Open is one of the largest, most prize-laden open tournaments in the world. Players from around the world make the pilgrimage to Philadelphia each summer to compete for cash prizes and the glory of victory. More than a thousand players participate, in different sections: the Open section, where grandmasters and masters wrangle, followed by
the divisions Under 2200, Under 2000, Under 1800, and so forth. At the event, monklike contemplation jostles against real-world commotion. The affair is part chess carnival, part blood sport. Most of the playing sections convene in huge meeting rooms, which to the uninitiated might look like massive sweatshops with rows of laborers seated at workstations, slaving away on some bizarre product. While playing, competitors sit at long banquet tables, twenty-four to a table, set up row after row. The contestants, ranging in age from six to eighty-five and at least 95 percent of them male, are either caught up in their games or checking out other battles or walking about searching for food or coffee, talking with friends. During the tournament rounds a constant traffic of players streams to and from the bathrooms like a trail of ants dutifully proceeding from nest to food source then back again. Parents of younger players find corner nooks to wait out the day. Tournament managers, wearing yellow shirts proclaiming director, roam the aisles. Computer images of the top six games glow on a large screen, so that spectators can watch the games in real time. While the top grandmaster games take place at tables separate from the general playing area, other grandmasters have to fight it out like the rest of the players at tables pressed closely together, observed by an endless stream of peering onlookers.

Pleas for quiet—“Sssshhh!”—sound out when the rush gets too noisy. Now and then people crowd around a specific game, bent on following a compelling position or a young prodigy’s play. Outside the playing halls, down the hallways a bit, you can find food vendors, chess vendors, book displays, analysis rooms, a press center, lectures conducted by expert grandmasters, and broods of players and kibitzers discussing games just finished or dabbling in pickup blitz games, the antistructural counterpoints to the structured ceremony of tournament chess. Players crowd around the standings sheets to see how they and others are faring. Exchanges are voiced in Spanish or Hindi or Russian or Mandarin or English. Most of the talk revolves around the battles at hand. “Who are you paired against?” “I better get back to my game.” “I felt sorry for my opponent.” In the lulls between rounds, players inhabit the hotel’s hallways, bars, and restaurants, with chessboards set up on any available table beside abandoned pizza boxes and water bottles. Blitz games scurry on late into the night, many of them plied by street players looking to earn some cash.

“The World Open is a zoo,” an older player tells me. For many it’s also a lot of fun. “I love playing in a big room,” Elizabeth Vicary says of participating in the World Open. “I feel like there’s a certain beauty to five hundred people being in a room, and all just sort of meditatively thinking.
That’s awesome. You don’t get that very much in the modern world.” What takes shape is a sense of *communitas*, a spirit of solidarity and togetherness, an “irrefragable genuineness of mutuality,” where the chess community shares a common experience outside the rote of everyday life.¹

Large tournaments have much in common with other festivals held around the world, in which participants find themselves part of a dense collective meld of bodies and consciousnesses and are immersed in a “time out of time,” to quote the title of a book on festivals. Here’s folklorist Dorothy Noyes’s account of *La Patum*, a traditional festival that takes place each year in Catalonia, Spain: “As the five days of the festival progress, as the dances are repeated over and over, as the great drum keeps beating ‘Pa-tum’ into your head and the band and your neighbors force your feet to dance, as you drink more and more and sleep less and less, as the smoke of the firecrackers blackens face and the crush of bodies takes you from the control of your own movements. . . . You lose your everyday name and position: no longer distinguished by them, you are a part of the sweating dark mass.”² Over the five days of the World Open, as games are contested one after another, as the clocks tick off in your head and the tournament schedule forces you to calculate, as you drink more and more coffee and sleep less and less, as the crush of bodies takes you out of your own life and you lose your everyday identity and status, becoming a rating number and tournament score only, you are part of the gritty, sweating mass.

Curious about that mass ritual, I decided to play in the tournament for the first time. Because my rating has crept over 2000, I am playing in the Under 2200 section, composed mostly of players rated between 2199 and 2000, but with a few ambitious players rated below 2000 in the mix. Ten thousand dollars will go to the first-place winner, five thousand to the second-place winner, and on down the line. With prizes like these, a few sandbaggers are probably at work—devious players who have artificially lowered their ratings in order to compete in a section below their true playing strength and improve their chances of winning. “Sandbaggers are everywhere,” Asa Hoffmann warns me.

Contenders can participate in one of several schedules, all of them converging for the final rounds, held on the holiday Monday of the Fourth of July weekend. This year participants can also opt for a two-weekend schedule, in which four games are played one weekend and five the next. I signed up for that schedule in part because I thought that, by breaking up my games into two clusters, I could better handle the grind.

Nine intense games in just a few days makes the World Open a test of
stamina as much as of skill. The pace is characteristic of American tournaments these days, where a kind of manic, “supersize” mentality reigns, with organizers and participants trying to cram in as many games as possible over a long weekend. American grandmaster Jesse Kraai, for one, is not fond of such arrangements. “I generally avoid the big American tournaments,” he says. “I would say that what you’ve called the circuit is different in the U.S. than in Europe. Generally the tournaments like the World Open and Foxwoods are going to be two rounds a day, and they’re going to be pretty stressful to play, and kind of cutthroat. You don’t have that much energy for the later round.” Professional players who have migrated from Russia and Europe, where most tournaments proceed at a one-game-a-day clip, often find that a two-games-a-day pace has an “enormous negative impact” on the quality of the games, as one grandmaster puts it.³

It’s easy to get tired, especially during a day’s second game or toward the end of a tournament. “Twelve hours of chess is too much at any age,” notes grandmaster Vadim Milov. Physical conditioning counts for a lot. And as a player has to conserve energy for upcoming matches, games are more often arenas of down-and-dirty survival than canvases of richly contested ideas. It’s tournaments like these and a general trend toward faster time controls that led David Bronstein, a former world champion contender, to posit that “chess has changed from a philosophical play to a sporting game.”⁴

More philosopher than athlete myself, I was doubtful from the start about my chances. I arrived in Philadelphia late Friday afternoon and checked into a hotel room with air-conditioning and synthetic carpeting. I didn’t fall soundly asleep until 2:00 A.M. or so, owing to nerves, anticipation, and the distant sounds of an elevator.

In the morning I carted a groggy brain to the playing hall minutes before the first round. Walking past rows and rows of banquet tables, I made my way to the back of the hall. I was playing on Board 12, one of twenty boards set up for those participating in the Under 2200 section. We were seated in long rows, like infantrymen in an army mess hall. Next to our platoon was the Open section, where the tables hosting the top grandmaster games were cordoned off from the other contests and any spectators by a droopy red rope.

I sat down, opened my bag, and produced a clock, a chess set, and a thermos of tea. Other players soon arrived, positioned elbow-to-elbow with their neighbors.

My opponent was a man in his fifties named Vladimir Polyakin. I had noticed him on occasion at the Marshall Chess Club, but had never talked with him. He sat down and we shook hands; no words exchanged and little
eye contact. That’s the mood among competitors. Serious, somber. Not hostile in any way, but by no means friendly. At large tournaments, the ardor of competition can cut into any sense of *communitas*.

I had the White pieces. My opponent, without a clear plan to his moves, started to drift in the early middlegame. I gained an edge and was pressuring his formation, but he managed to craft counterplay against my king. After a few imperfect moves I was in trouble, and he ended up weaving a mating net around my king. I had to resign in the fifth hour of play. I tipped over my king: 0–1.

“Well,” Polyakin said as he shook my hand and looked at the position. He knew he had almost lost the game. “Yeah,” I said.

End of conversation. We packed up and went our separate ways.

It was now just before four o’clock, with the next round to begin in an hour’s time. Tired, discouraged, I decided to take a bye. This would allow me to rest up for the next day’s games. Like many others, I’d prefer a one-game-a-day schedule. I went for a swim in the hotel pool, took a nap, and then dropped by the tournament hall to check out the ongoing games. I walked over to the skittles room, where some players were looking at games just completed and others were playing blitz chess. I caught some of the patter that followed one game between friends.

“Well, you always trying to hurt me? Why? Why?”

“You were dancing too smoothly . . . ”

“I can’t help it if you can’t do the two-step.”

I watched blitz wizards play a couple of games for money, and reintroduced myself to a young man I had met once before. We sat down at a board of our own and played a series of five-minute blitz games. *Now, this is fun,* I thought. *Pure flow.*

I ate alone and soldiered back to my room. I slept poorly again, my mind revved up from the game and the tough loss. I woke up sluggish, underrested. That showed in my next game, against a man in his forties named Igor Dayen.

The round began at 10:00 A.M. We were again aligned in two tight rows. Three boards down, a player managed to get his queen trapped by the twelfth move of the game. He knocked his king over and stormed off, growling at his opponent, “Your clock is too loud!”

I glanced at the contest to my left now and then. A teen with a sandwich wrapped in aluminum foil by his side was trying to outplay his older opponent in a Closed Sicilian. His elder would put on a pair of reading glasses when he had to write down a move, and then take them off again when he retrained his eyes on the board. The teen was playing with an air of patient,
cautious confidence, and was slowly gaining an edge. The older man sighed now and then.

I was not enjoying myself during my own game. Sitting tensely, sifting through queen and bishop moves for hours on end, I concluded that there had to be a better way to spend one’s time. At one point, while it was my opponent’s move, I set out for the bathroom. Along the way I ran into Daniel Pomerantz, a player in his late teens from White Plains. Playing in the Under 2000 section, he was fighting over key squares with a thirteen-year-old girl. We got to talking just outside the playing hall, and I told him I wasn’t finding pleasure at the board.

“I wouldn’t want this as a job, even if I was getting paid to do it,” I said, as others walked by. “Sitting for hours on end, that is, having to calculate variations upon variations. Then doing that again for another four or five hours straight.”

“I know what you mean,” said Daniel. “But see, for me, playing in tournaments like this is a way to get some good games in, which I can then go back to later on and analyze. It’s a way to get some data that I can use later on, and hopefully improve my chess. It’s like creating an archaeological record that I can look back on afterwards.”

Daniel said he also valued the social aspects of tournaments. “I like the fact that you play your opponent, you compete with him for four hours, and I kind of enjoy that, after the game, you can go out and grab a bite to eat and look at the game together.”

BEASTLY MONKS

Talking with Daniel got me thinking: Why, in fact, do chess players like to sweat out formal tournaments? Why go through the bother of paying to travel to a distant city, stay in bland hotel rooms, and apply free time on weekends and holidays to such an enterprise? Surely it’s not the promise of prize monies alone, especially at the amateur level, since only a few earn enough each tournament to cover even the costs of participating. So what do players get out of it?

Since I wasn’t the best authority on the subject, considering my own ambivalence, trying to grasp why people like to compete in tournaments became an interpretive endeavor in its own right. And so for several months I asked friends and associates to explain what motivates them. What I came to learn was that chess players grind through tournaments for a number of reasons. Some see the formal competition as a way to test themselves, to measure their chess skills or progress. Some like the thrill of
the hunt. Some take it as a competition of egos: may the smartest person in the room win. For some it’s an exercise in domination; they want to crush their opponents. Some are bent on winning cash. Some consider it a vacation from the everyday, where they can elope from their workaday lives for a while. Some enjoy seeing old friends or being an integral part of a community of chess players. Some appreciate the drama of the struggle, the heady rush that comes with striving for mate while the clock is ticking; it can make them feel more intensely alive. “The true man wants two things: danger and play,” wrote Nietzsche.5

For most players—like Dale Sharp, a pharmacologist and life master who lives in Peekskill, New York—combinations of these reasons get them to the playing hall. Now in his mid-fifties, Dale grew up in rural Pennsylvania and started playing chess in college. He was, by his own admission, a “very erratic” player for many years, and broke 2100 only when he was in his mid-twenties, the same year he earned his doctorate in chemistry at Ohio State University. He went on to achieve a master-level rating in 1987, with his rating peaking at 2298 a few years later; he won several championships along the way while living in Wisconsin. Dale is a tough, battle-seasoned competitor who excels in sharp positions and complicated middlegame struggles. He’s proud of what he has achieved at the board, and accepting of the fact that, now that he’s older, his greatest triumphs are behind him. “Realistically,” he told me over dinner once, with the trace of a Wisconsin accent rounding his words, “I have achieved far more than I ever expected to achieve in chess. Realistically, I am not liable to exceed my previous heights.” In all, Dale has played more than three thousand rated games, in tournaments in Green Bay and Gibraltar, in Boston and Bermuda. These days he plays in weekend competitions in the Northeast and in cities along the East Coast. When asked if he liked the competitive aspect of tournaments, he said, “Oh, yes. It validates that you’re good at something. And the community of chess players is a lot of fun,” he added. “I find the camaraderie between chess players is very good. You can go to a tournament anywhere, you don’t even know a soul in this tournament, you usually end up talking to your fellow players and having a good time.”

When playing in tournaments, Dale’s main aim is to win. “I’m there to win. I’m willing to win ugly,” he says. That’s the pragmatic, time-tested attitude of many.

For a few others, winning outright is less important overall than striving to create something beautiful with the chess pieces. This rather artistic sensibility is more evident among older players who have lost their fervor for
the competitive aspects of the game alone and are looking to create at the board. One autumn day I visited Joe Demauro, one of the country’s best correspondence chess players, at his home in Mount Kisco, New York. An international grandmaster in correspondence chess and recently retired as a vice president of Verizon Communications, Joe has participated successfully in a number of correspondence championships over the years, including several Olympiad events. When I asked Joe why he likes to play chess, he said that his motives have “changed” over the years. “I used to enjoy it because it was competitive and I was good at it, and I was winning a lot,” he said. “But over the course of time I lost the competitive motivation.”

“That didn’t matter much to you?” I asked.

“I didn’t like it, coming home at vacation and beating my brother. I didn’t like beating my brother, I didn’t enjoy that part of it. I could enjoy playing against opponents that I didn’t know, especially if I could create something really creative. But over time the competitive aspect faded. It’s not enough to win a game. I’m trying to bring something of beauty into it.”

Since beauty alone doesn’t pay the phone bill, strong players—those who truly have the capacity to create at the board—find themselves facing an uneasy tension between competitive needs and the quest for beauty. As Vasily Smyslov put it, “A chess game is a work of art between minds, which need to balance two, sometimes disparate goals: to win, and to produce beauty.” But it’s by no means a dichotomy, as Jesse Kraai made clear to me: “I think in order to win the game against a strong opponent,” he said, “you have to at least stretch toward the beautiful.” For most players, in most situations, there’s strain between the two goals. Creating a masterpiece in any particular game is terrific, but ultimately players are trying, by the time the hotel charges are totaled, to have more notches on the tournament charts than their rivals. For the clear majority of those playing in down-and-dirty tournaments like the World Open, winning—even if it means winning ugly—takes priority over creating works of art. “You aren’t playing in a tournament to paint pictures, but to win points,” chess author C. J. S. Purdy reminds his readers.6

A determined, intrepid approach to the game—what players call the will to win—helps them to grab those precious points. Seasoned players speak of such determination as an integral piece of a chess player’s success. As British grandmaster Jonathan Levitt remarks, “It is not only intelligence, talent for the game, knowledge and understanding or physical fitness that count; will to win, pure unadulterated motivation, can also count for enormous variation in the levels that different players reach.” To underscore that fact, Levitt proposes the equation “Performance = knowledge + motivation.”7
Dale Sharp spoke of the significance of such motivation the night we talked over dinner about the competitive aspects of chess. “The will to win is probably one of the most important things,” he said as he nibbled on a leafy salad. “I have sat in games, when I was at the peak of my game—I was rated around 2300—where I was playing players rated 2400 to 2500, and the position was completely even, and I’d offer a draw. I’d figure the position was completely even, which it was, and the 2400 to 2500 player would go into a thirty-minute think because he didn’t want to yield a draw to this 2300 player. He would just dig in and try to find a way.

“And you know, I don’t have that. I want to win, but I don’t want to win as much as they do. And I want to win a lot. But you hit a level where that’s one of the things that separates you. That’s what it takes to hit the very highest level.”

Alexander Shabalov, who teaches chess to kids when he’s not playing in tournaments, speaks in similar terms. “When I’m assessing a young player,” he says, “first I see how much of a killer he is. You can see it in his eyes. . . . If the guy doesn’t look to kill his opponent, he’s not going to be a good player.”

You can see that in some players: the grim look, the fierce hatred of losing or of settling for a draw, the digging-in when need be, the disgust after losing. Fischer had it. Kasparov and Karpov had it. Among the younger generation of chess stars, Magnus Carlsen and Hikaru Nakamura have it. I saw that mien on a twelve-year-old boy I played at a chess club in Tarrytown, New York. I managed to get a winning position against him, which he didn’t like at all; he was determined to drudge through his options before giving up.

One motivating device that some players employ is to drum up an antipathy toward their opponents. They make themselves despise their opponents, generating “hatred” for them. That way, they want nothing more than to demolish them and exert their superiority. Some hate; some cultivate hatred—what Soviet players used to call “competitive malice.” In his championship days, Botvinnik is said to have kept in his apartment photographs of his chief rivals—Bronstein, Smyslov—to “build up a hatred” of them. Icelandic grandmaster Friðrik Ólafsson tells a story about meeting a fifteen-year-old Fischer at an international chess championship in Slovenia in 1958. At breakfast one morning Fischer took his knife and started slicing up wasps crawling across the table, saying, “That’s how I’m going to squeeze my opponents.”

“Some people use negative energy against their opponent,” says Mladen Vucic, an international master from Croatia. “Such a person will hate who
he plays. He sees you, he doesn’t like you, and he uses that energy. It’s very difficult to play against people like that.”

Not everyone takes that approach, of course. Mladen, for instance, says that he himself is “very gentle” at the board. “I like to play nice people when I play chess. You know, nice and quiet, decent. We just play a chess game.” David Bronstein likewise wrote, with his rival Botvinnik likely in mind, “I can never agree with the idea of fostering a hostile attitude to your opponent on the grounds that this will help you beat him. . . . Of course, I, like any other player, strive to win, and I am very happy if I succeed in overcoming my opponent by logic, fantasy, ingenuity, knowledge or deep calculation. But to make yourself hate the opponent, to sacrifice peace of mind for the sake of a point in the tournament table, this is an impoverishment of chess.”

And yet the fact that the hatred-summoners exist, and that their strategy is effective, especially at the higher levels, points to the fact that a component of aggressiveness is at work in the dynamics of competitive chess. Some players are highly aggressive. “Chess is a game for thugs,” or so says Russian American grandmaster Boris Gulko. Indeed, at the professional level there is an understanding that if you’re too nice a guy, then you can’t make it to the top of the heap. For some time this psychology was used to explain why Viswanathan Anand, the Indian grandmaster with immense talents for the game, was never able to vanquish his chief competitors, the likes of Kasparov and Kramnik: he was too “peaceful” a person, too pleasant and amiable a guy, ever to become world champion.

Nice guys, it seemed, came in second. In a 2004 interview, Howard Goldowsky asked Hikaru Nakamura, a young American grandmaster who is a fierce fighter at the board, if he thought that “being a nice guy, having too much empathy, is a handicap for being a good chess player.”

“That’s a difficult question,” Nakamura replied. “If you look at Anand, he’s the nicest guy around as far as grandmasters go. You probably won’t find someone nicer. But it has hurt him. It seems that the nice guy is never really the top player. . . . It probably is a handicap because if you have all this empathy towards people, you probably aren’t as aggressive in the way you play.”

When Anand won a world championship tournament in 2007, and then beat Vladimir Kramnik in a world championship match in 2008, the consensus was that his talents and work ethos were so great that they had finally canceled out his personal decency. He was the exception that proved the rule. When asked in 2008 if he lacked “the killer instinct,” Anand remarked, “Normally I avoid conflict, and I am indeed not a killer like
Kasparov. That is not my style. I am used to moving around in peaceful surroundings. I grew up in a family where values were very important.”

The competitive spirit is pervasive, even in casual settings. Chess players are constantly sizing up others. “Who is the better player?” is a question that recurs in the minds of many. A hierarchy of dominance exists, not unlike that which can be found at a posh country club or among a troop of baboons. Competitiveness and camaraderie form a double-helix structure of social relations in chess.

The scene at many chess tournaments is reminiscent of the “ritualized violence” that ethologists have noted among highly social animals, in which two rivals of the same species grapple in a restrained and conventionalized way, with diminished risk of injury for both winner and loser. The battles are usually over territory, access to mates, or social rank. While no lasting physical damage is suffered by either party during such a battle, the vanquished individual does remember the defeat. As Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz remarked, that individual “is as effectively and as permanently subdued as if it had suffered serious wounds . . . one is again and again surprised to observe how completely the loser of a ritualized fight is intimidated and how long he retains the memory of the victor’s superiority.” In the ceremonial fights of competitive chess, battles over turf, prestige, and social rank likewise take place. No blood is shed, but the losers long remember their defeats. That raises the difficult question of whether the parallels between the ritualized battles of chess players and those of other animals are just chance, or the competitive rages of chess (and other sports) stem, at least in part, from our biogenetic heritage.

A steady diet of competition and comparison can get to be constraining in its interpersonal features. “I’m slightly reluctant to say this, but I think there’s a kind of immaturity among top players,” Jonathan Rowson told me.

It doesn’t apply to everybody, at all. But as a rule, playing a game all of your life, no matter how sophisticated the game is, does make you, well, a bit basic in some ways. It’s quite a simple way of living your life, of living your life in this constant tempo of winning and losing, of comparing yourself to others. It’s a very status-driven kind of world. Often people, to get that good, haven’t done much else. You do get some very rounded grandmasters who can speak to you about almost anything. . . . But there are others who clearly struggle to function in the everyday world, and I think they’re maybe slightly more the norm, although it’s difficult to say—the generalities don’t get us very far.

I think that this immaturity can be like a stockbroker culture, or cultures where people are trying to make a lot of money just straight out of college. I think there’s a similar kind of atmosphere, where people don’t really grow up,
where they don’t necessarily have the kind of rich relationships that they need to come out of themselves. Instead, they have really base feelings of winning and losing, and of being better or worse than somebody else. So it remains quite a simplistic developmental track.

Jonathan also related to me that if he spends more than two weeks straight around chess players, he starts to feel a bit uncomfortable. “And that’s because somehow it always comes back to the game, it always comes back to people basically competing about who’s the better player. That can be hidden in all sorts of ways, but it’s still there.”

The ethos of competitiveness often reveals itself in the language that chess players use. If a linguistic anthropologist were to listen in on chess players talking, she would find that a number of “speech genres” stream through their utterances, from everyday talk (“Where did you park your car?”) to random shop talk (“the Nimzo-Indian is a good opening”) to locutions of praise and awe (“He played a terrific game”). One way of talking that stands out is a kind of low language in which players draw on metaphors of sexualized physical abuse and violence in talking about their skirmishes with others. “I tore him a new one!” “He screwed me over,” and “The game was a draw, but I did f6 [pawn to f6] on his ass!” are some of the milder remarks. Often it’s said to be “all in fun,” in a playfully aggressive tone, but that doesn’t make the imagery less harsh or pointed. Elizabeth Vicary has often asked men to stop using sexually violent language when analyzing games with her. “I don’t need to hear that they’re tearing me a new one while we’re going over a game,” she told me.

Images of anal assaults recur. That’s perhaps unsurprising, as it’s usually man-on-man violence that is schematically involved. “That was a deep-ass sac!” said one man while watching a blitz game. “It’s going to get deeper than that before the game is over,” replied the player who made the sacrifice. In recounting a game he played against former world champion Anatoly Karpov during a 1992 match, British grandmaster Nigel Short said to writer Paul Hoffman, “I stuck it to him real good, way up him. The guy was getting raped.” Anal defilement might well be one of the most shame-inducing, feared acts imaginable to American and European men. To convey that one player has breached another in that fashion is to show that the loser not only lost, but was also humiliated in the process. The imagery echoes the violent homoerotic themes that folklorist Alan Dundes finds in American football, which he describes as a “ritual form of homosexual rape. The winners feminize the losers by getting into their end zone.” “Spiking” the ball after a touchdown, Dundes argues, “confirms to
all assembled that the enemy’s end zone has been penetrated.” Chess has its own form of spiking, when a player slams a piece deep into the enemy’s territory.

It can be a macho world, the competitive chess scene. It spawns masculine values of strength and assertiveness, of toughness and staying power, of yearned-for dominance over others, and, for some, a confidence bordering on cockiness. It’s not always like this, and many players are gentle souls. But macho aggressiveness is a potent refrain in the down-and-dirty opera of competitive chess. That combativeness can make for a scene that is “slightly toxic,” as one player, jaded in its ways, put it. It can spill over into other fields of life, with players acting antagonistically toward others. In his 2007 book *King’s Gambit*, author Paul Hoffman writes of how, during a dinner he shared with Garry Kasparov at a Manhattan restaurant, he became unnerved by the champ’s “absurd competitiveness,” both during the dinner and at an exhibition of simultaneous games that the champ had conducted earlier that day. Kasparov himself has confided, “The loss of my childhood was the price of becoming the youngest world champion in history. When you have to fight every day from a young age, your soul could become contaminated. I lost my childhood. I never really had it. Today I have to be careful not to become cruel, because I became a soldier too early.”

Scholars of play contend that games and sporting endeavors are a way for children and adults to frame, bracket, and manage aggression. Competitive chess does this as well; but it just as readily incites aggression. “One of the negative elements in chess,” Leonid Yudasin tells me, “is the spirit of competition. It’s a very serious problem. People need this, but they also need balance. It’s not so easy. That’s one of the main problems in chess. But the positives are a thousand times more.”

Alexander Alekhine was once quoted as saying, in summing up the situation, that the successful tournament player “must combine the chief characteristics of a research scientist, an ascetic monk and a beast of prey.”

**Gender and Obsession**

The studious fanaticism required of the game might help to explain why men stick with the game more than women do. “We lose most of them by middle school,” says Mike Amori of the girls who attend the Westchester Chess Academy, where he and Rusudan teach. The girls turn to other interests—friends and activities with more opportunity for social interaction. “Chess is a weird thing to do if you’re a girl in high school,” says Elizabeth
Vicary. “I think there’s enormous pressure on girls when they reach high school to be popular. It’s how you are judged, how popular you are. Playing a four- or five-hour game, when you can’t talk to anybody, is so completely antisocial. And the study time required as well—it means you can’t hang out with friends.”

Many boys burrow into hours of study, tournament play, or blitz games. Rusudan herself grew up in a chess-rich society where almost every girl plays the game. But she has found that, both in the Republic of Georgia and in the United States, girls go about it differently than boys do:

I think girls are not willing to put as much work into it as boys are. If I compare myself to the boys that I grew up with, they would study so much more. They were more obsessed with it than I was. I wanted to hang out, go shopping, take care of myself, look in the mirror however long—boys don’t do those things, not as much at least! They wouldn’t care. They would study six, seven, eight hours a day, which is not something I would do. And once I wanted to get married, it got harder, because I have a family and everything else. So I think that’s mainly why men do better overall in chess, because they become more obsessed with the game. I believe women can achieve the same as men. There are not that many women grandmasters in the world, but the ones that really work hard are on the top.

Judit Polgár comes to mind. The strongest female player in history, Polgár achieved the title of grandmaster at the age of fifteen years and four months—at the time, the youngest ever. She has been ranked as high as eighth in the world. While living in Budapest, Hungary, Judit and her two older sisters, Susan and Sofía, received a rigorous, systematic education from their father, László Polgár. László believed in the adage, “Geniuses are made, not born,” which he sought to prove through his experimental educational techniques. Chess was the centerpiece of the girls’ studies, and each of them made remarkable progress in their abilities. Judit in particular was recognized as a prodigy from an early age, but it was only through hours of hard work that she was able to best world-class players thrice her age. “My attitude toward the game, especially in my youth, could be called obsessive,” she later recalled.16

For others, Judit Polgár is the exception that proves the rule that men have been more successful at chess than women. Much has been made of this disparity. Some statements reveal the ignorance of their authors. “A woman world champion would be against nature,” said Hungarian grandmaster Lajos Portisch in the 1980s. “They’re all weak, all women,” said Bobby Fischer. “They’re stupid compared to men. They shouldn’t play chess, you know. They’re like beginners. They lose every single game
against a man.”17 Beyond the diatribes, chess players and others have ventured a number of explanations for the differential in the success of men and women. Some of these are biological in nature: women are constitutionally weaker, less aggressive than men, and hindered by their biological rhythms (read: menstruation). Other theories pin the difference on cognitive capabilities, contending that women cannot concentrate as well as men, or that women are not as good at spatial reasoning and abstract thought. Some interpretations invoke psychological tendencies: that women focus on families and social relations; that they are easily distracted; that they have no patience; that they are too docile; that they are, at times, overly aggressive in their chess thinking; that they are not as competitive as men; or that young women are more boy-crazed than chess-crazed. Some theories turn to the cultural: that social norms disincline women from playing chess, or from getting netted by the game; that the game, like other efforts that require mathematical and quasi-mathematical modes of reasoning, has historically been associated with men.

All of this is conjecture. Yet the fact that chess has historically been less popular among women must count for a lot. If male players outnumber female players nine to one, it stands to reason that more male players are going to rise to the top. At the same time, Rusudan’s observation—that women do not become as addicted to the game as men do—is an important one. Here as well it’s difficult to know the precise reasons. Is the intensity of focus displayed by men a product of social upbringing or cultural expectations, or is biology also involved?

Elizabeth Vicary favors the latter idea. As she sees it, some male chess players exhibit an orientation to the game—scrutinizing pawn endings late into the night, fretting over side variations in Petroff’s Defense, competing for days on end, parsing minute differences in middlegame continuations, often to the disregard of social ties or life more generally—that smacks of “autistic obsessiveness.” “I think there’s a connection here: the fact that men more readily display autistic tendencies than women, and the fact that men are more obsessive about chess than women are.”

Among the tendencies Elizabeth has in mind are the “restrictive and repetitive behaviors and interests” that are a core feature of autistic behavior. Some researchers argue that such behaviors and interests contribute, in important ways, to the savantlike capabilities displayed by some people with autism. Psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen contends, for instance, that the secret to becoming a savant is “hyper-systemizing and hyper-attention to detail.”18 While few top chess players would be diagnosed with autism, being able to restrict one’s interests, focus repetitively, study and practice
obsessively, systematize well, and attend excellently to details are qualities that contribute to being a good chess player. It’s part of the “cognitive style” of many skilled chess players. Is it the case that, much as there are three to four times as many males as females with autism, so differences in brain functioning lead more men than women to study and play chess in terrifically focused ways?

Then again, the intense efforts of those men are encouraged in ways that they are not for women who might otherwise be similarly inclined. As Jennifer Shahade, two-time American women’s chess champion, points out, while people might consider it weird for a boy to be obsessed with chess, it’s usually tolerated, sometimes encouraged. “Now, if a girl does that, it’s not just weird, it’s downright unacceptable to most parents. Women are usually discouraged from pursuing chess and other intellectual activities that require time-consuming devotion.”

Another reason that men more than women might be inclined to devote themselves fully to chess is that the game can provide an arena of linear knowledge and action more certain and unambiguous than the play of life. Much the same holds for other sorts of “hard-edged” fields of intellectual effort, such as computer programming, video gaming, physics, and mathematics: men are not only culturally associated with them, they are drawn to them more than women. As science scholar Paul Edwards puts it, “Many writers have suggested that ‘hard’ modes of thought, such as highly developed procedural planning, mathematical logic, and formal gaming, seem more familiar and friendly to most men than to most women. They fit well with a culturally defined ‘masculine’ conception of knowledge as an objective, achieved state rather than an ongoing, intersubjective process, and with a ‘masculine’ morality built on abstract principles rather than shifting, contextually specific, emotionally complex relationships.” In writing of computer programmers and the riveting “holding power” their computers have over them, Edwards reports that the programmers find great appeal in the surrogate, simulated “microworlds” that can be created within the machine.

The microworlds of computers hold a particular appeal for men. “For men,” Edwards writes, “for whom power is an icon of identity and an index of success, a microworld can become a challenging arena for an adult quest for power and control. Human relationships can be vague, shifting, irrational, emotional, and difficult to control. With a ‘hard’ formalized system of known rules, operating within the separate reality of a microworld, one can have complexity and security at once: the score can always be calculated; sudden changes of emotional origin do not occur. Things make
sense in a way human intersubjectivity cannot.” Chess likewise promises an “experience of the closed world of a rule-based game,” to use Edwards’s language. Its clear-cut parameters can promote an aesthetic of “hard mastery,” in which a person triumphs by mastering, through abstract, linear thought, the principles of a contained and structured field of play. Given that the overwhelming majority of chess players is male, it appears that men more than women appear to seek out that kind of mastery.

DISILLUSIONED

I made my way back to the playing area. As I walked through the hall I took note of the many contenders. Some were pacing about. A man in his late twenties wore a black T-shirt inscribed with sharp white letters on the back: “Chess is war over the board. The object is to crush the opponent’s mind (Bobby Fischer).” He was playing a bearded man draped in a colorful Hawaiian-style shirt. A chaperoning father sat at a vacant table, catching up on office work. Nearby a mother was reading The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying. A few spectators hovered near grandmaster games. The place was as quiet as a church parish in solemn prayer, with sporadic coughing and the pressing of chess clocks the loudest sounds. A crowd gathered about a game between two masters, and then dispersed when one player’s impending demise became clear.

As I sat down at my own game, I took a quick look at the contest to my left. The younger player was suffocating his rival’s pieces in a king-and-pawn endgame position in which the older player had little room to maneuver his remaining forces. They soon reached a position of Zugzwang—German for “compulsion to move”—wherein it was the older player’s turn to move, but all the moves available to him would worsen his position terribly. He would have preferred not to act, but had to; the game’s structure left him no choice. The man examined the position, hoping for a way out, but there was none and he knew it. He sighed, knocked his king over with a flick of his finger, and glanced at his opponent. The two shook hands, collected their possessions, and walked off in separate directions.

Against Mr. Dayen I made a series of ineffective, middling moves, and found myself down two pawns in a rook-and-pawn ending. It became a question of whether I would be able to pull out a draw. By three o’clock, ours was one of the few games still going. I tried to hold off my opponent, but it was a doomed effort. I resigned on my seventy-sixth move. Another five-hour effort with little to show for it. For the tournament, I was 0 for 2.

I shook hands with Dayen, no words exchanged.
The game ended just before four o’clock, with the next round set to begin in an hour’s time. I was in no shape to play another game just then, let alone a good one. I felt strung out; my flesh yearned for physical activity. My eyes were tired. The pool beckoned. I decided to take another half-point bye, with the sad realization that I had little competitive fire just then. That itself was a disturbing thought. Where was my will to win?

I give thought to those and other questions while drifting in the pool. Do I drive back down here next weekend for the final five games and pay for several more hotel nights and restaurant meals, or do I quit while I’m behind? Do I want to keep going to tournaments, even if I’m not enjoying them? And if not, will I still find meaning and pleasure in chess?

Disillusioned is what I am. Passion can easily mutate into anxiety.

A SMALL WORLD

Players sometimes get mired in a muck of ambivalence. They come to think that chess isn’t worth the effort, that other things in life should be privileged. Nolan is usually enthusiastic about chess, but one winter he fell into a funk and didn’t want to have anything to do with it. “Chess is dumb, pointless,” he said in declining my invitation to join me in trekking to a chess club one evening. “It’s an overrated intellectual exercise.”

A sentiment develops that chess is of limited relevance to life at large. As a skeptic once put it, chess holds a “mysterious quality of ‘trivial depth,’ of a form of mental life ultimately insignificant—though enormously meaningful—and trapped in a world of mirrors.” Chess can be a small and limited world. It’s a thin domain confined to its own concepts, language, and history, signifying nothing but itself. As Stefan Zweig expresses it in his 1942 novella The Royal Game, chess is “thought that leads nowhere, mathematics that add up to nothing, art without an end product, architecture without substance.”

Genna Sosonko tells the heartbreaking story of Jan Hein Donner, a Dutch grandmaster and columnist who suffered a brain hemorrhage in his late fifties that deprived him of the ability to speak or walk. Partial speech slowly came back to him, and while convalescing in a home for the disabled he learned to type with one finger, beginning with simple exercises that demanded incredible effort from him: “house house house window window window . . . ” “My world has become very small now,” Donner typed out in composing his first column after suffering the hemorrhage, “but a chess player is used to that.”

One ex-player, a master in his mid-thirties, told me that he stopped playing chess after he started a business. He found that attending to his busi-
ness affairs was “more interesting than what happens on a chessboard.” There was more variety to it, more creativity required. With those changes, he now has friends with whom “there’s something more to talk about than some opening.”

The consequences of chess are slight, domain-specific. While that boundedness can be enlivening and restorative, it can also come to feel redundant, anemic. Professional players occasionally admit to sentiments of discontent with the career they’ve chosen. “Actually, I have a certain feeling of dissatisfaction,” said Russian grandmaster Alexey Korotylev when an interviewer asked him if he was satisfied with his chess career in general. “It seems like I can achieve more, but the dissatisfaction accumulates, and somehow the result is that I work less on chess. . . . Sometimes when I look at the board, 64 squares, 32 pieces, I ask myself: what did the game give to me? I feel that I have invested more than I received in return.” “You will spend the next 30 years of your life living out of suitcases and fighting for control of the d5 square,” British grandmaster Nigel Davies once cautioned a student of his who expressed an interest in becoming a chess professional. “These days it’s no profession,” says Rafael Vaganian, an Armenian grandmaster, when asked if he would like to see his son play chess professionally. “In most cases it’s just hard work, badly paid, and to spend your whole life doing it.”

Greg Shahade, an international master from Philadelphia, was several years into an extended leave from competitive chess when I met him one August afternoon. An energetic and welcoming man just past thirty, Greg learned chess as a boy while growing up in a chess-playing household in 1980s Philadelphia; both his father and his sister are master-strength players. Greg has been making a comfortable living the past few years playing poker online. Along with requiring less esoteric know-how than chess, poker generates a better income for him. “It’s not remotely close,” he said. That vocation, combined with his distaste for two-games-a-day chess tournaments, has kept him from the playing halls. He told me,

It’s brutal to play in these tournaments sometimes. It’s just so unpleasant. They make it such hard work. I don’t know why people can enjoy a game that can last six hours, followed by another game that can last six hours in one day. It’s not fun. . . . You just don’t want to play again after a long game.

So I feel like I live a comfortable, good life, and to go play in a chess tournament, it’s unbelievable torture. Why would I want to do something if it makes me feel unpleasant? But it could be pleasant. If you played one game a day, in nice conditions, it could be really nice. In Europe, it’s usually just one game a day in these tournaments, it’s more luxurious. Here people want to cram in as many games as possible.
“Chess is a great game,” Sam Shankland told me, when he was on the verge of becoming a grandmaster. “It’s also a lot of fun. You meet people from all over the world. You get to express creativity. But there’s also a lot of pain and misery in it.” As one man explained to me, “But I do like chess. I also don’t like it.”

Some grandmasters say that while they still enjoy playing chess, they’ve become discouraged by the penury that chess professionals face in the United States. There’s also the apprehension that a life devoted to chess can cheat you out of a life in general. “I think that’s the only downfall of this game,” Khan once told me. “To be great at it, you have to spend a large portion of your life on it, and that takes time away from other things.” Khan went on to say that when Lajos Portisch, a hardworking Hungarian grandmaster, was in his late sixties, he was asked if there was anything he didn’t like about the game. “You know,” he answered, “I spent my entire life being good at this game, but I missed so much.”

Chess, or life—it often appears to come down to a choice between the two. “The light has dimmed,” reads a 2009 entry in a blog called Hardcore Pawnography. “Chess,” the author laments, “was a burning flame in my soul, an all-encompassing passion, a torrid love affair, a reckless addiction, a compelling need. Lately, though, the bright sun that is chess has seem to gone [sic] supernova, burned out to a black hole. . . . Part of me is sad, it’s like losing my religion. But for now, I’m gonna go do other stuff.”

Some quit altogether. Some tire of the exhausting, elbow-butting competition. Some lose interest when they plateau and hover for years at the same rating level, or they get into a rut and feel they’re losing more than they are winning. Some find it’s not worth the effort required to get truly good at the game.

Two of the game’s greatest players, Paul Morphy and Bobby Fischer, quit while at the height of their powers. Born in New Orleans in 1837 to a wealthy family of Creole descent, Morphy learned to play chess when he was ten; his remarkable talents quickly became clear to others. He traveled to Europe at the age of twenty-one and triumphed over the best players. Along with being a brilliant tactician, he was the first truly modern player, in that he combined positional acuity with sharp attacking skills. He did not consider chess a proper profession, however, in accord with the consensus of the time, and when he returned to New Orleans in 1859 to practice law, he declared his career as a chess player closed. His law practice never succeeded, in part because his fame as a chess player was so overshadowing that people were disinclined to regard him as a lawyer. “People think
I am nothing but a chess player, and that I know nothing about law,” he said years later. Financially secure thanks to his family’s fortune, he spent the rest of his life in idleness. Despite suffering from what he called “chess fever,” he played only a few casual games with friends during the ten years following his return from Europe in 1859, and none at all after 1869. As the years progressed Morphy became increasingly solitary and morbid, prone to bouts of paranoia. He suspected his brother-in-law of trying to rob him of his inheritance. He died on July 10, 1884, at the age of forty-seven, after returning from a midday walk.26

Fischer’s endgame took a similar path. After wresting the world championship from Boris Spassky in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1972, at the age of twenty-nine, this now most mythic of chess players did not play for another twenty years. He was slated to defend his title against Soviet player Anatoly Karpov in 1975, but agreement could not be reached over the terms of the match, and Karpov was awarded the title of world champion. Some think that Fischer had come to hold himself to too high an ideal, in which he could not entertain the idea of losing a match or even any games, and so avoided playing altogether. Others contend that he was becoming increasingly debilitated by mental illness and was not composed enough to play chess at the highest levels. After Fischer refused to play in 1975, he became increasingly reclusive, living an itinerant’s life in hotels and the homes of friends, suspicious of others and fearful for his safety. He had his dental fillings removed to prevent radio signals from influencing his thoughts and actions. He resurfaced in 1992, when he played a second match against Spassky in Yugoslavia. Playing for what was dubbed the “world chess championship,” Fischer beat Spassky again, while showing only traces of his former brilliance. He played no competitive games after that. In his later years he lived in Hungary, the Philippines, Japan, and Iceland, periodically issuing anti-Semitic and anti-American diatribes that soiled his reputation. He died of renal failure on January 17, 2008, in his apartment in Reykjavik. His last words reportedly were, “Nothing soothes pain like the touch of a person.”

Much has been made of the signs of mental illness in the lives of Morphy, Fischer, and other chess players. One explanation is that the exacting demands of the game and the anguish of its methods can cause severe and lasting mental distress. As George Steiner put it, “A chess genius is a human being who focuses vast, little understood mental gifts and labors on an ultimately trivial human enterprise. Almost inevitably, this focus produces pathological symptoms of nervous stress and unreality.” My own
sense is that it’s simplistic to contend that chess induces mental illness. It’s more likely that the game’s formal qualities and intricate patterns attract people, men in particular, who are prone to obsessive or singular modes of thought. These ways of thinking can in themselves be conducive to superior chess playing, but they can also come under strain if life becomes too taxing. At the same time, the game itself, and the culture of chess players, can support narrow modes of existence. Anyone who has spent time at chess clubs or tournaments will tell you that at least some of its participants are a bit “odd” in their manners of thought or engagements with others. But they will also tell you that chess is largely a haven for, not the cause of, this oddness. As former British champion Bill Hartston put it, “Chess is not something that drives people mad; chess is something that keeps mad people sane.” The pared-down requirements of social interaction found in chess clubs and tournaments make it possible for asocial players to be present in those settings in ways that are not overly taxing. The vast majority of players, from the top levels down, are wholly sane, if distraught and nerve-wracked at times. In demeanor, they are more like bankers or software engineers than the stereotype of mad artists.

What interests me more are those instances in which players withdraw from an activity they were once devoted to. The stories have a way of assuming mythic proportions in the minds of chess players. “Fischer disappeared. . . . ” The temptation is there to leave the game, cold. Some do just that—only to return to it once again. A month after Nolan exclaimed how “pointless” chess was, he was back at it, contemplating the intrigues of rook and pawn endings. Chess is a fever that’s hard to shake. Its fascinations pull a person back.

**DISCORD**

The sun is fading now behind the concrete wall. The pool is drenched in shadows. A slight breeze passes through. It’s time to get going. Compelled to move, I kick my way to the side of the pool and climb out, water dripping behind me.

Later, before heading out to my car, I walk through the tournament area. I step past the tournament directors’ office, where two men are keeping track of results reported and complaints lodged, past the display of chess books, past the food vendors selling soggy hot dogs and crisp burgers. I stumble around three kids seated on the carpeted floor, placing pieces on a board, and I overhear two men discussing a game. “That’s a nasty pin,” mutters one of them. I stick my head into the skittles room and see
pairs of players jousting over rooks and knights, and then walk into the playing hall, where all is quiet and somber and deadly serious, as though a world is at stake. I feel I should be seated at a board as well, fighting it out. But I don’t care to be here. Playing now would be like counting pebbles in the sand. I feel discordant, antiheroic.

Moments later I’m on the road, heading for home.
“I walked in there, and I caught the bug”

Mike Amori, a soft-spoken man in his mid-forties, is a stock trader turned chess player turned chess teacher. “I kind of back-doored my way into it,” he says of his profession as a chess instructor.

Mike grew up in New Rochelle, New York. While still young he secured a job as a trader on the American Stock Exchange, in lower Manhattan. “I was a kid, I was in my twenties when I started,” he says. “But I had no idea what was going on around me. You’re on the floor of the stock exchange, and it’s madness sometimes. I had the opportunity to make some real money had I stuck it out. But there’s a picture of me at my mother’s house, before I got out of there, I guess I was probably twenty-nine or thirty then, and you would think that I was forty-five or fifty. My cheeks were drawn, I was going to bed at night at about eight o’clock, eight-thirty, up at six in the morning, on the train down, trading, coming back, miserable.”

While working on Wall Street, Mike would dabble in beginner’s games of chess with other traders when the selling slowed. He noticed that another trader, a man named Ron Henley, would come by and watch their games. Henley was an American grandmaster turned stock trader. His presence tripped Mike’s interest in competitive chess. “On a whim I went to the Manhattan Chess Club, which at the time was above Carnegie Hall. It was like this little backwater chess place, and I just loved the scene. I fell in love with the whole idea of hanging out in the middle of the day with guys playing chess. I was working on Wall Street, it was the complete opposite of what I was used to. I was working a million hours a week. So I walked in there, and I caught the bug.”

Mike began studying chess and playing in tournaments. “I got absolutely hooked with tournament chess. I just loved it. I played all the time. I think I’ve played to date about 560 events, which is a fair amount, and I did most of that in that period, in a very short period of time.” He left his finance job to teach chess in public and private schools in Westchester. “I saw these kids kind of wide-eyed. I fell in love with it. . . . The money is probably a tenth of what I could have made if I stayed on Wall Street. I’m not in this for the money. But let me tell you, it’s a rewarding field. . . . I do this for a living because I really love chess.”

Mike partnered with Rusudan Goletiani several years back in launching the Westchester Chess Academy. The two host classes and private sessions at the academy for serious chess players, young and old. Mike draws on metaphors and analogies to get his ideas across. He teaches children that the pawns in front of the king are all family: “You would never have a fam-
ily member make a move without considering how it would affect the rest of the clan.” With one girl, who was studying gymnastics, he removed all the pieces from the board and used his finger and middle finger like little legs and pretended to do tumbling exercises on the empty board. He then asked her to do the same, so that she could better understand the tumbles of space and movement in chess.

“I’ve spent fourteen years of my life face-to-face with five- to seventy-year-olds talking about life, and about chess,” Mike said one day while in the academy’s anteroom. “The more I do it, the more I find the well is almost endless. It’s almost like a Taoist kind of thing, not to sound that I’m going out too far on the Zen carpet, so to speak. But I feel that, when I have a conversation with a kid about chess, I’m really talking to this kid. I feel I can reach them through chess. That’s the kind of teacher I want the kids to have, that’s the experience I want them to have.”
August 12, 2005. He’s intimidating. He never makes a blunder. He knows his openings like a book. He sometimes plays weird, irregular moves, which can lead to his downfall against the best players. But against your ordinary grandmaster he’s close to unbeatable. He’s hard-wired for speed. Built on raw computational power, he processes millions of moves a second. He’s ruthless in victory, unfeeling in defeat. He never tires. Despite his cold, wordless demeanor, he makes for a great consultant. He’s willing to look at your games whenever you like, or analyze any position you throw at him and suggest inspired ways to play.

INFINITE ANALYSIS

He’s doing that just now, on a humid Thursday afternoon, as I sit at my desk. The air-conditioner drones a steady song. The shades are drawn. I’m looking at my computer screen, working with Fritz, a computer chess program developed by German computer scientists and published by the German company Chessbase. The first editions came out in the early 1990s, with new and improved versions released since. I now have Fritz 8 on the hard drive of my computer, ready to be summoned at a moment’s notice. One can play games against Fritz, but most competitive players use the program to help them analyze positions. You can put any position into Fritz, set its engine to “infinite analysis” (figure 4), and watch it calculate the strength of different moves. That’s precisely what I’m doing. I have a
Figure 4. Working with Fritz 8 in “infinite analysis” mode; © www.chessbase.com
middlegame position set up, and I’m undertaking an analysis of it with Fritz’s help. My motive is practical. The computer is a brain prosthesis that adds to my cognitive and perceptual abilities.

I have a rated game tomorrow night against an expert-level player at a local chess club. I’ll have the Black pieces. My opponent is a tough combatant with a good sense of the game, so I have my work cut out for me. Throughout the past week I’ve been hammering out what defense to play against him. I’ve been using Fritz to analyze positions that I might see on the board tomorrow night. I’ve been trying out different moves to see how the computer responds, what it proposes as good sequences, where I could go wrong. Some of its moves are surprising, counterintuitive even, until I trace out the logic of its actions. As I watch Fritz do its thing, lighting up the screen with clever tactics, I feel as though its silicon processors are patterning the synapses of my brain.

Today I’m looking at a position that might arise in the game tomorrow night. It’s from a defense that I’ve been playing lately, known as the Benko Gambit. This time, Fritz is by my side, helping me to find smart ways to proceed.

I began this work on Monday. I set up a position I’m expecting in my game and let Fritz analyze it for a good ten minutes, to give it time to refine its analysis. In the program’s main engine window, a window box in the lower right-hand corner of the screen that shows Fritz’s evaluations on specific lines, I saw something like the following:

1. + = (0.31) 12 . . . Qxb6. . . .
2. + = (0.34) 12 . . . Bb7. . . .
3. + = (0.37) 12 . . . Rxb6. . . .
4. + = (0.53) 12 . . . Nb4. . . .

The best move for Black, according to Fritz, is 12 . . . Qxb6 (the queen takes a pawn on the b6 square). After that move the position is close to equal, with White having a 0.31 pawn advantage. The second-best move is 12 . . . Bb7 (moving the bishop on c8 to the b7 square), giving White a slight advantage (+ = ); specifically, a 0.34 pawn advantage. 12 . . . Rxb6 (the rook on b8 takes the pawn on b6) is the third-best move.

While there wasn’t a great difference in the value of the top three moves, I became intrigued that Fritz liked “12 . . . Qxb6” best. I began to work through the most plausible variations after this queen move, shifting pieces around the virtual board and monitoring Fritz’s evaluation of the different
Figure 5. An analysis of the Benko Gambit positions (in the upper right-hand box); © www.chessbase.com
positions. I liked what I saw, and decided to employ the queen move in my game that week.

That afternoon I began to work through the variations that followed from the queen move, trying to understand what was going on with each move Fritz had proposed. As I made moves on the board, the record followed suit on the computer screen. I typed out observations here and there in that emergent record, including warnings to myself to avoid particular paths (figure 5). To the uninitiated, the resulting lines of analysis might look like a surreal plate of digital spaghetti. For me, they served as a hyper-textual map that could help me navigate a dense thicket of ideas.

There was no way I could remember all the variations involved, but that wasn’t the point: by working through the different continuations and gaining a sense of the nuances associated with each one, I would be comfortable at the board. Indeed, the time I had spent analyzing the positions would be to my benefit, especially if it was all new to my opponent and he or she stepped unknowingly into my home preparation.

I had found a defense, a good defense. I only needed to work on it, to get a feel for its nuances. The computer comes in handy for that.

**A BRAND-NEW GAME**

Others have found as much. Through the same stretch of days that I’ve been working with Fritz, chess players around the world, from St. Petersburg to Brooklyn to Beijing, have been using their PCs and laptops in similar ways. Camped before their monitors, they’ve been sifting through databases and computer analyses in an effort to come up with new and effective moves that they can employ in their games. Club players are hashing out the best moves to play in the Najdorf Sicilian, while elite grandmasters are at work in hotel rooms, concocting hitherto unplayed moves to spring on Viswanathan Anand the next time he ventures the Semi-Slav Defense against them.

Computers are changing how chess is played. They are altering how players prepare for and analyze games, how they think during a contest, and what they make of chess. “It’s a brand new game, a new world,” Garry Kasparov has said of this trend. Some professional players no longer have chessboards in their homes; they conduct all of their chess on a computer screen. “The computer becomes your coach, your second, your everything,” says Alexander Shabalov, a top American player. “Sometimes I think I’m spending too much time with the computer, that I should look at a book, do some other kind of training, not computer-related. But it looks so lame
to me to look at the book. And if there’s some complicated variation in
the book that goes on, my first reaction is, ‘I must check this with the
computer. How can I trust it?’"

What happens when you apply sophisticated computational devices to
a computation-based play form like chess? Things get intense, quickly, as
assemblages of human and nonhuman technologies create new forms of
chess play and know-how. The impact of computers on the game is striking.
In the early spring of 1953, Svetozar Gligorić, a Serbian grandmaster, beat
Polish-born Argentine grandmaster Miguel Najdorf in an international
tournament in Mar del Plata, Argentina, by employing a new sequence
of moves, “a fresh and powerful weapon for Black,” in a King’s Indian
Defense. Najdorf, learning from the defeat, used the same idea several
months later in a game against an unsuspecting Mark Taimanov in a can-
didates tournament in Zurich, Switzerland. Information traveled slowly in
those days, and Taimanov wasn’t aware of the Najdorf-Gligorić game when
he met up with Najdorf in Zurich. Najdorf beat Taimanov soundly.

That would not happen today. Many grandmaster games are relayed
simultaneously over the Internet, so that anyone in the world can wit-
ness the day’s events at a moment’s glance. There are also weekly reports,
such as The Week in Chess, that list the moves of important games. These
games are added to databases, which players can purchase and store on the
hard drives of their computers. The most recent version of Mega Database,
for instance, contains more than four million games.

The technological-cultural backdrop to these emergent and ever-evolv-
ing chess practices and sensibilities is the vast change in media, scientific,
and information-sharing practices that are shaping and reshaping the lives
of so many these days. Circulating media images, text-based communiques,
and linked data banks set the pace and nature of new information flows
around the world, with people and institutions finding themselves faced
with “overwhelming flows of data,” in anthropologist Michael Fischer’s
words. Transformations in market, media, migration, and telecommunications
arrangements have led to the deterritorialization of peoples, labor,
commodities, knowledge, and cultural practices. All this has led to the
construction of “emergent forms of life,” new forms of human subjectivity,
new kinds of social relations, and new means of representation and knowl-
edge. With chess, as well, contemporary technologies of information and
communication are contributing to the way players think and act, and the
way forms of consciousness, bodiliness, subjectivity, and sociality proceed
for chess players.

When it comes to analyzing positions, computer chess programs these
days rely on a brute force approach, examining every possible position in a “game tree” for a fixed number of moves. The method is much more systematic and comprehensive than the ones of which human chess players are capable. As a chess program’s designers are the ones who decide how it evaluates options, the assessment approaches of various programs differ. This leads to different playing styles in the various programs: some are known as aggressive attackers, while others are more positionally inclined. Overall, chess computers to date have excelled the most in assessments of “open,” tactics-rich positions, where their computational powers can calculate a vast number of lines in which moves on each side are more or less forced. As Kasparov put it in 2002, “When the computer sees forced lines, it plays like God.”

It took the programmers several decades to hone their creations to their current godlike incarnations. The first portable chess-playing computers appeared on the scene when I was playing chess as a teenager in the late 1970s. At a local club one evening, a member showed us a portable computer that he had just purchased. It was an all-in-one kind of deal, with the computer engine snug within a box beneath a chessboard. We made the moves on the board, and the computer responded with a move of its own by lighting up the squares from and to which it wanted to move a piece. The machine played poorly, and we found it laughable that it would make simple blunders by the seventh move of a game.

No one is laughing now. By the late 1980s computer programs were playing grandmasters evenly in international tournaments, to the point that computers stopped being invited. In 1995, Deep Blue, a sophisticated computer put together by researchers at IBM, beat then-world champion Garry Kasparov in the first game of a six-game match; Kasparov went on to win three and draw two of the remaining five. A year later an updated version of Deep Blue, which could evaluate 200 million positions per second, triumphed over Kasparov in another six-game match. After losing the second game to remarkable, humanlike play by the computer, a frazzled Kasparov ignited a firestorm by raising suspicions that Deep Blue’s programmers were having an illicit say in its decisions. In matches played in 2002 and 2003, world champions Garry Kasparov and Vladimir Kramnik sweated out even scores against Deep Fritz, Deep Junior, and X3D Fritz. “It is extremely difficult to play against a machine with this playing ability,” Kramnik said of his match against Deep Fritz. “From the very beginning you wander along a very narrow ridge and you know that you will be topped for any inadvertency.”

In 2005, Hydra thrashed elite British grandmaster Michael Adams in a
six-game match, winning five games and drawing one. The match was so one-sided that Hydra’s programmer, Chrilly Doninger, admits that he has lost interest in man-versus-machine matches. “I see the same pattern in each game,” he told journalist Tom Mueller. “I call it Chrilly’s Law: Every ten moves, at the most, in complicated positions, even the strongest player will commit a slight inaccuracy—the second-best move when only the best will do. He doesn’t even notice it, but Hydra does. . . . By the time the grandmaster realizes the problem, it’s already Game Over.” Many of the most recent computer-human matches have given the computer a handicap of some sort, but the machine has prevailed nonetheless. In March 2007, Jaan Ehlvest played an eight-game match against Rybka, a potent new program that established its superiority over other programs after its release in 2005. Rybka started each game with the White pieces, but with a different pawn missing. The match ended in its favor, with four wins for Rybka, one win for Ehlvest, and three draws. “Rybka is already too good for any human to play on totally even terms,” says Larry Kaufman, one of Rybka’s programmers. “We keep raising the handicap because Rybka keeps getting better. We’re past the point of playing on fully even terms.”

Most competitive players do not play games against their computer programs. It can be depressing to do so. Consider hitting your head against a laptop for sixty minutes straight. That comes close to the brute sensation of losing time and again to Fritz or Rybka at their optimal strength. You run into a mating attack in one game, hang a piece in the next, mess things up altogether by the eighth move in the game after that. The computer is just so precise, so smart, that it’s not worth playing against it. As Nolan put it, “I don’t like getting crushed.”

Another reason Nolan does not like to play computers is that he’s not keen on their playing style. “I don’t like the way they play,” he told me,

and I don’t want to learn how to play like them. They’re just calculating, they play tactically. I don’t think they understand the position, and I don’t feel like I’m going to understand how to play humans better by playing computers. If I play computers, I’ll learn how to play computers, but that’s not a human being, it’s not how human beings play. The computers find funky, weird moves which work, because the computer found them. But they’re not natural moves that human beings would be able to find. . . . I don’t want to think like a computer. I want to think like a human being. . . . I use the computer to analyze. I work with the computer. I use it as a tool, instead of as a playing partner.

This is how most experienced players relate to computers: they use them to organize information drawn from existing games and to analyze specific chess positions.
Devising opening “novelties” and then introducing them in crucial games has been an integral part of chess for a good century now. Alekhine, Botvinnik, and Fischer would draw on home preparation in hatching dynamic new moves against their rivals. What makes the current era distinct is that players are relying on computer chess programs in unprecedented ways to help them with this work. To give just one example: in 2003, while preparing for a match against the computer program Deep Junior, Garry Kasparov and his assistant Yury Dokhoian were working with their version of the program while analyzing a continuation in a middlegame position that they thought they could expect to see during the match. They reached a position after White’s seventeenth move, and then saw that the program was proposing a move that at first looked problematic, as it meant that Black would soon be forced to give up a rook for one of White’s knights. Because a rook is usually worth more than a knight, Kasparov and Dokhoian at first thought they had found a glitch in the computer program, which they might be able to exploit during the match. But then they noticed that the computer program was finding that, despite its material deficit, Black had the better game. “Then Yury pointed at Junior’s evaluation,” recounts Kasparov, “which was showing a plus for Black! This caused us to look at the position with fresh eyes. The more we looked at it, the more we found dynamic possibilities for Black in just about every line. White’s pieces are limited and he must find a plan quickly.”

Kasparov took note of Junior’s “idea” and stored his analysis on the hard drive of his computer. The position didn’t arise in the match itself, in part because Kasparov wanted to stay clear of that line with the White pieces. But to handle the Black side of the position, and play the move that Junior proposed, was another matter. Kasparov kept the idea to himself until he could employ it at an opportune moment. He had his chance two years later: in a top-flight international tournament in Linares, Spain, he had the position on the board in his game against Rustam Kasimdzhanoz, a talented grandmaster from Uzbekistan. He introduced the “strong novelty” with his seventeenth move, the move that Junior deemed the best.

Kasimdzhanoz hesitated when he saw Kasparov’s move, and took his time in coming up with a response. Faced with the task of having to analyze a complicated position over the board, Kasimdzhanoz made a couple of less-than-optimal moves. Kasparov, who had scrutinized the resulting positions at home, went on to win the game in spectacular fashion.

Kasparov suggested after the game that Deep Junior deserved “coauthorship” for the novelty. As chess programs have a reputation for mate-
rialism—often preferring material gains (such as the advantage of a pawn or two) over positional considerations—the program’s preference for an “exchange sacrifice” of rook for knight pointed to a sophisticated evaluation process—“in other words, something that was until recently considered to be beyond the machine’s abilities,” as Slovakian grandmaster Igor Stohl put it. Computers have begun to “think” about chess more the way humans do.

Kasparov has had no qualms about incorporating the use of computers into his analytic work. “The existence of computers is good for me,” he said back in the 1990s. “I can improve my chess with such a perfect mechanism.” Word is that he has a massive database on his computer hard drive, which contains hundreds of files with his analyses of various opening variations, with countless innovations he could wield against unsuspecting opponents. His laptop alone carries “roughly 10.3 gigabytes of analysis.” This massive archive of data is the product of computer-informed analyses he has conducted in preparation for matches and tournaments over the past three decades. Kasparov’s databases are the product of a symbiotic merger of human intellect and computational force, a powerful, cyborgian organization of knowledge. When he retired from competitive chess in 2005, there was joking talk about what he would do with these thousands of ideas. Would he share them with friends, pass them on to the next generation of players, or sell them to the highest bidder on eBay?

The instantaneous, never-ending, ever-accumulating flow of information has several consequences. For one, professional players must work continually if they want to keep up with new ways of playing opening and middlegame positions, lest they fall victim to novelties themselves. Because so many games are to be found in databases and online, a player can prepare for games against a specific opponent by looking over what that person has played in the past, which of course can have its advantages. The catch, however, is that it works both ways: if your games are in databases, it’s a safe bet that your opponents will take a look at them, trying to anticipate what openings you might wield against them. FIDE master Sunil Weeramantray told me that when he played on the Sri Lanka Team in the 2006 Chess Olympiad in Turin, Italy, he was startled to find that one of his opponents knew about a game he had played back in the 1978 Olympiad, and had devised a response to Sunil’s approach in that game. “I couldn’t believe that someone would take the time or effort to prepare for me,” he told me. “But it’s now become routine. It doesn’t matter who you’re playing, they still access the information. So you have to be constantly ahead on this. . . . Your preparation for a particular opponent has changed
completely. You have to be constantly shifting. The players with a wider repertoire of openings are going to be better off because it will be more difficult to prepare against them.” This has the effect of making competitive players moving targets, shape-shifting pragmatists of chess inclinations.

Since many potential opponents have the same information stored on databases on their own computers, a few clicks away, grandmasters are compelled to undertake the labor-intensive task of analyzing and memorizing thickets of critical lines that they might encounter during their games, to avoid walking into an opponent’s computer-assisted home preparation. Vladimir Kramnik explained to an interviewer,

You have to be much more precise when you analyze positions than before. In the era before computers you had certain interesting lines, moves that looked good, and that was enough. Your preparation was done, you just went out and played the move. Basically your preparation took two hours. Now the same thing will take five hours or more. You have to check all the games of your opponent, then you check everything that happened in the line you are planning to play. Then you find out what Fritz says about the ideas you have come up with, and try to remember this all. So you are working much harder.10

The pace of information has only sped up in the past ten years. “If you do not work with a computer, you don’t have a chance,” Levon Aronian, a top-notch Armenian grandmaster, explained to German interviewers in the fall of 2008. “It has become much harder for everybody. It is really absurd…. Sometimes you feel you are in a spy thriller. Not long ago it was important to have the best databases of archive games. Then it becomes important to have GM games that were played the day before. Today we are trying to find games that were played minutes ago in some backyard somewhere in the world. Madness. All this frightens me. It is like war: who has the best weapons, the best missiles, and atomic bomb.”11

Within the “epistemic culture” of professional chess, speed wins out.12 The accelerated pace of information reflects an arms race of technological know-how and gaming innovation. Up-to-the-hour cognizance is now the working aim. Trying to keep up with it all makes for an anxious scene.

Because of the workload, professional players who can afford it—which is to say the few elite grandmasters who make a good living from chess alone—hire assistants to labor full- or part-time for them sorting through the information and proposing effective ways to play. “Definitely Leko and the other top players have these kind of teams,” Jaan Ehlvest told me when I spoke with him and Alexander Shabalov. He was referring to Peter Leko, a strong Hungarian grandmaster who is one of the best players of his generation. Jaan doesn’t have the means to afford the same kind of
preparation, which makes it tough going for him against the top players. “Because I can’t invest in this, I am not a professional player when we’re talking about this kind of preparation.” Alexander added, “We’re really like amateurs compared to them.”

Alexander went on to note that some chess teams, such as the Chinese and Ukrainian state-sponsored teams, use multiple computers, with a computer specialist on hand. “Altogether they are studying a position for five to six hours,” he explained; “then when they have the analysis, the computer specialist sets up a round-robin tournament between the different programs, which they hold overnight.” In the morning, the team assesses the variations played and divines the most effective ways to play.

But that’s just part of the task involved, as the players then have to soak up the advice and learn the material themselves, often by memorizing complicated variations. This helps to explain why older professional players—those thirty and up—speak nostalgically about the good old days, when the workload wasn’t as heavy. Kramnik laments, “Still, as a chess player I sometimes have a bit of nostalgia for the good old times when you could prepare for just one or two hours, and then rest and read books. You came to your games feeling fresh, because you did not have to memorize tomes of variations. This is just the nostalgia of an older chess player—I think young players don’t know this feeling and may not understand what I am talking about. But I can still remember that time, and it was very nice, in its own way.” 13

At the highest levels, so much has been studied to the nth degree, and so many variations have been worked out already, that it’s not uncommon for a novelty to occur in the twentieth or twenty-fifth move of a game, if one occurs at all. This situation has led many to conclude that chess is getting “played out,” or that professional games are being dominated by pregame analysis, with little freshness or creativity occurring during the game itself. Veselin Topalov made this foreboding comment on a 2007 game between Kramnik and Anand, in which the two stars negotiated a much-explored middlegame constellation: “Chess theory has reached a point where words like ‘understanding’ and ‘talent’ will soon be replaced by ‘perfect analysis’ and ‘good memory.’ This game is a good example of what a high-level chess game will more and more look like in the future.” At the top levels, it’s often the case, as Mark Dvoretsky figures it, that “the contestants simply present their ‘documents’ to one another and then disperse.” 14

Nolan said to me, “I don’t think computers are a bad thing for chess. But it certainly changes the game. Even in top grandmaster play you notice
that people are going to the board, and when the game is over, they haven’t played a move that they haven’t analyzed at home already.” His thoughts are characteristic of the view that many amateurs have of top-level chess these days: that all too many games lack freshness or spontaneity. “The old chess is dead. It’s played out,” Fischer told a Reykjavik radio station in 2002.¹⁵ That sentiment has led Fischer and others to propose variants of chess, such as “Fischer random chess” (also known as Chess 960), in which the starting position of the first-row pieces is randomly set up at the onset of a game, subject to certain rules. The principal idea is that, with a new starting position occurring with each new game, a player’s creativity and talent at the board count for more than the memorization of chess openings. While the variants can make for interesting chess, and a bit of fun on a slow night at a chess club, they have not yet fully caught on.

COMPUTERESQUE

The instant accessibility of games and the powerful analytic engines mean that a player can learn a new opening or analyze a middlegame formation in much more efficient ways than in the precomputer era. “It was difficult to perceive chess and enrich your chess knowledge quickly,” Alexei Shirov has said of the way he and others learned chess when he was a youth. “And now you can basically do in a few days or in one month what, when we were young, we needed years for.”¹⁶ When chess players want to learn about a particular opening or middlegame position, for instance, they can conjure up Mega Database on their computers at home and in a minute’s time have on their screens an organized list of games in which that position has occurred. Many of those games include commentaries and analysis by grandmasters. They can then sift through the games to learn about effective ways to play, for both Black and White, and use a computer chess engine to analyze specific variations that stem from the positions in question. What they learn through this work would have taken much longer without the aid of a computer.

The information is there, waiting to be studied. Because of this, it’s easier to learn the game well at a younger age. There are in fact a lot more teenage grandmasters on the scene than there were twenty or even ten years ago. “The grandmasters are getting younger because of the computer,” notes Sergey Karjakin, a Ukrainian prodigy who in 2001 became the youngest grandmaster in history at the age of twelve years and seven months. “[It] will certainly teach you a lot.”¹⁷ With such easy access to the relevant information and analytical tools, anyone can gather the necessary
knowledge at a faster clip. “Chess is getting younger and younger,” is a refrain from professional players of late.

Online play factors in as well, as a person can vie on chess servers for hours on end, day after day. “They are just growing up differently from our time,” noted Viswanathan Anand, who was born in 1969, when asked in an interview about the “kids” he was encountering in chess tournaments. “When I grew up we didn’t have the ICC [Internet Chess Club]. They become very strong, they gain a lot of experience very fast.” And since these “database kids” have a lot of time on their hands and are free of many of the responsibilities that press on adults, they can get good quickly. All they need is some talent and the proper motivation. “You see some of these kids, and it’s just scary how fast they learn the game,” said Joe Guadagno when we were talking about this phenomenon.

The younger generations of chess players aren’t just learning the game more quickly; many of them are playing a different kind of chess from their elders. Computers are spawning a new breed of chess players. Many of them have learned a lot about chess by playing against or analyzing positions with computer analysis engines, and that cybernetic education is having an influence on how they play. “I usually just analyze positions with Fritz,” one teen who competes regularly and successfully at the Marshall Chess Club told me when I asked him if he studied chess at all, outside of playing. He’ll set up positions on Fritz that he can expect to play during tournament games, and use the program to try out different ideas and variations, all the while learning from Fritz’s methodology. Some would find this routine misguided. “You can only learn so much by working with computers that way,” a friend said when I mentioned this to him. The young man’s method seems to be working, however, as he has been steadily climbing the rating charts.

Others have been doing much the same. American grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura is one of the leading exemplars of a computer-based learning regimen. Hikaru began playing chess at the age of seven. He achieved the title of chess master in 1997, at age ten, becoming the youngest American ever to earn the title. Nakamura soon grew into the muscular build of a high school linebacker, with a confident swagger. He earned the grandmaster title in 2003, and went on to win the 2005 and 2009 U.S. chess championships. Hikaru is also active on Internet chess servers; he has held a number of rating records in one-minute bullet chess and three-minute blitz chess. He attracts a legion of fans who watch “Naka” and his spectacularly creative play when he logs on using his handle “Smallville.” Nakamura’s approach to the game is uncompromising, fearless, relentless: he rarely
accepts draws, and fights for every full point. He tends to aim for complicated positions in which his tactical acumen and “ruthlessly sharp style” can win out, and he mixes up how he starts off his games.19

Nakamura’s education in chess has been decidedly nonclassical. Much of what he absorbed about chess early on came not from studying the instructional games of the great masters, but from spending hours upon hours analyzing and contesting positions on a computer. In 2001, an interviewer asked him which chess books had helped him to become an international master at the age of thirteen. “I don’t look at books too often,” Hikaru replied. “I usually study a couple of hours a day on the computer.” When the interviewer next asked if he didn’t go over the classic games, he answered, “Not really, I think that’s a waste of time.”20 In 2004, during another interview, Hikaru was asked if he had any favorite chess books that he had read over the years. “I think when I was younger,” he replied, “around 2000 [USCF rating], I looked at Fischer’s 60 Memorable Games. I think I read a Tarrasch book once, but I can’t remember. Lately, I really have not looked at chess books at all. Now I just use my computer.”21

Nakamura got some flak for his dismissal of the traditional chess classics, even though his playing style has increasingly demonstrated a well-rounded grasp of all aspects of the game. “The way I play is very unique,” he said once. “It’s more or less that fearlessness. I’ll play some of these really crazy moves that people are not going to be expecting. The way I play is not like most people. The moves are very computeresque. They’re not the moves that most humans are going to play.”22

“Hikaru? He’s a monster. Seriously,” said Mladen Vucic, the international master from Bosnia, when I asked him what he thought of Nakamura’s games. “When I see his chess games I don’t want to play chess anymore. It’s terrifying. It’s just sheer calculation.”

“So would you say that Hikaru’s chess is different?”

“It’s different. It’s great. It’s just, you know, modern chess. There’s nothing you can do about it. . . . See, I follow his games on the Internet. He’s just practicing, he doesn’t care. He’s capable of losing thirty games in a row. He plays against a strong computer. He’s losing games, and he’s learning. Now when he sits and plays against a human, you don’t have a chance. . . . Hikaru is playing these positions where you don’t even know where you are. . . . He’s the best chess player in the world, in my opinion. He’s unbelievable. In my opinion, it’s awful.”

When I spoke with Hikaru’s stepfather, Sunil Weeramantry, I asked him if he thought computers were changing the way chess players are thinking. “I think so,” Sunil replied. “The computer will play more random struc-
tures and more strange-looking formations if it doesn’t detect anything terribly wrong with the variation. And it goes so much against the conventions of classical play.”

“It’s counterintuitive in a way,” I suggested.

“Yes. Placing pieces on strange squares, and so on, but it figures that it can’t really be taken advantage of. And I’ve seen influence of that sometimes in Hikaru’s play. Because you get used to it. That’s why people often say that he plays like a computer. . . . It’s just that he’s seeing so much, he understands so much. So the computer will change chess,” Sunil said. “There’s no question.”

Alongside such wunderkinder as Denmark’s Magnus Carlsen, Ukraine’s Sergey Karjakin, and Azerbaijan’s Teimour Radjabov, Nakamura is an iconic representative of a new paradigm of chess. Call it cyberchess. Modern play is not as preoccupied with basic strategic principles as the game once was and is more focused on the concrete analysis of specific positions. As John Watson outlines it in his 2003 book *Chess Strategy in Action*, “Players on all levels are able to try out seemingly risky, paradoxical, and ‘unprincipled’ moves and strategies on a computer in order to confirm whether they are unsound, playable, or strong. Contemporary play has thus been marked by much greater openness towards both positional and attacking strategies that were previously considered anti-positional and/or unsound.”

“People think that more and more positions are playable,” says Watson when I ask him about this claim. “And that’s because of the computers. Because that’s the way they’re studying, they’re used to the fact that you simply don’t dismiss as much—you look at everything. So I guess in general you could say that pragmatism has just taken over chess, to a large degree. If it works, you play it.”

Catalyzed by new technological advances, chess is becoming more concrete and freer of conventional thought. It is becoming radically empirical. “The game itself has changed,” noted Anatoly Bykhovsky, a Russian international master and renowned chess trainer in his seventies, in a recent interview with Misha Savinov. “It has become more concrete and tough, and contains fewer abstract ideas. Suspicious-looking but deeply analyzed positions are played, and we see that there’s something wrong with our perception, because they are completely playable. You know, when you play against a computer, it often seems that its pieces are badly coordinated and lacking protection, but then it turns out that they interact splendidly, only at some higher level of perception. And young players are learning this kind of chess.”

*Only at some higher level of perception.* One gets the sense that the top
young players, who grew up analyzing with computers, are often seeing things on the board—ways to position their pieces, tactical maneuvers that give them an edge—in a way that their elders are not. These perceptual habits have the effect of making them tactical wizards who can outplay grandmasters twice their age. “The problem is that for my generation it’s absolutely impossible nowadays to use any kind of experience now,” said Alexei Shirov, a Latvian grandmaster in his mid-thirties, when asked in 2007 about the new breed of chess players. “It’s youngsters who have to teach us chess, not the other way around.”

Those youngsters and the schooling they can extend to players twice their age were on people’s minds in 2007 and 2008, when Norway’s Magnus Carlsen began to beat the world’s best players in a string of elite tournaments, after having achieved the grandmaster title in 2004 at the age of thirteen. Students of the game are still trying to grasp the precocity displayed by Carlsen and other players of his generation. “Everything is speeding up,” Jonathan Rowson told me in 2008,

so a lot of our models of what used to be a great chess player, or what chess culture is, are in a time-lag. Things are moving faster than our scripts and our language are catching up with them. We don’t really have the language to make sense of a player like Magnus Carlsen—what he’s doing, and how he got to be so good so fast. Because he’s not the only one. He’s the most shining, stellar star in a generation. . . . So, how are computers affecting chess? We’re just catching up with that now, we don’t quite know yet, but “a lot” is the answer.

Computers are inspiring new modes of chess thought and perception, much as the invention of the movable-type printing press in the fifteenth century generated new ways of thinking about language and communication. In play is a kind of “paradigm shift,” to use a term from the social sciences, in which new ways of conceptualizing, attending to, and asking questions about the dynamics of chess are taking form—and in some respects, replacing—an earlier worldview. Unusual moves that were once considered “ugly” or “ghastly” are increasingly being appreciated for the specific chess work they do. Indeed, it may be that in twenty or thirty years the older, more classical ways of playing will be seen as obsolete, simplistic.

Some players are not happy about this shift. A recurrent concern is that the knowledge of the game that many computer-informed players are bringing to the board is, at the amateur level at least, not very deep or comprehensive, because it rests on an understanding of a few positions that those players have analyzed in depth at home, allowing them to outplay their opponents once those positions or ones similar to them occur in
their games. They’ve mastered certain bundles of information, rather than developing a rich and comprehensive understanding of and appreciation for chess. “These days people play better, and understand less,” Leonid Yudasin tells me. “This is because most of the young players learn from the computer analyses. In many cases, you don’t have to analyze deeply some tactical variation. You just have to ask Mr. Fritz, or some other computer, and it shows you how to play that particular variation. . . . But people understand less about the logic and philosophy of chess—say, a general way of harmony between pieces, combinations—major subjects like these, they understand less.”

“It’s not real chess,” Predrag Trajkovic, a Serbian grandmaster and chess trainer, told me during one online conversation. “It’s turbochess.”

“What’s turbochess?” I asked.

“Turbochess is where the players have booked up on a lot of theory, where they’ve investigated a lot of forced lines. And once they know these well, it’s possible to beat much stronger players. I hate this.”

Predrag went on to say that with turbochess, a person needed only to “study hard” and memorize a lot to obtain good results in tournament play, whereas in an earlier era chess was “an art.” The qualms that many have about the future of chess is reminiscent of the anxiety people feel when faced with new technological and cultural formations. “Technology is not just objects plus social organization,” reports American anthropologist Michael Fischer. “It is also powerfully invested with fantasies, aspirations, hopes, anxieties, and fears.”26 The shock of the new, and the loss of the familiar, can be unnerving.

Others are more accepting of the new technologies. They find that chess has become a more advanced and exciting enterprise, and players are allowed “to do incredibly creative things,” as Viswanathan Anand put it. A few I’ve spoken with say that those who decry the advent of computer-informed chess are engaged in little more than “whining,” that they need to buck up and face the new cyberchess realities. An alternative reading is that some are mournful for the end of a certain kind of humanity—a modern, classical humanism—and anticipating the emergence of a post-human species. There’s also the presentiment that there will come a day when, once everything is calculated out by computer programs and little contingency and indeterminacy remain, the game will no longer be chess as we know it. Once the game truly becomes “played out,” at least at the highest levels, the play element will be exhausted, and chess will take on a postchess, postplay formation. Some take that date to be in the foreseeable future. “Chess programs are our enemies, they destroy the romance of
chess,” laments Levon Aronian. “They take away the beauty of the game. Everything can be calculated. But we still have twenty years, at least.”

Modern chess: 1858–2030.

OF COMPUTERS AND HUMANS

The air-conditioner hums along as I work through the positions. I use Fritz to help me evaluate the value of different moves. I make a move, see what Fritz recommends, make another move, and again watch the evaluation window to see what he “thinks” about it. One line in particular is a brilliant rivulet of striking moves and countermoves. As I cascade along it, my brain lights up.

But then the thought comes to me: What if my opponent is working through these same lines? What if he’s also using a computer program in preparing for our match? I question my decision to play something that he’ll be expecting. I decide to stick with my plans, come what may. I’ll try to prepare well and learn something in the process.

Computers have cast a long shadow over the consciousnesses of chess players. The reasoning of some has become increasingly computeresque. Take Larry Kaufman, a grandmaster and chess author with expertise in computer chess programs. Born in 1947, Larry arguably has had the longest involvement with computer chess programs of anybody in the world, dating back to 1967, when he was a student at MIT. Most recently he has been an integral member of the programming team for Rybka, the engine created by Vasik Rajlich, a Czech American international master who now lives in Hungary. By 2007 Larry had become responsible for the entire evaluation function of Rybka’s program; that is to say, he’s the arbiter and general architect of how Rybka evaluates chess positions. In talking with Larry by phone one day, I asked him if his work with computers has changed how he thinks about chess. “I think it has,” he said.

I think I find myself evaluating a little bit more like a computer would, and I try, as much as practical, to emulate the computer when I play. I know I can’t, but I do that much more than I would have a long time ago. . . . In other words, when I’m trying to judge a position, maybe some years ago I would have just sort of thought to myself, Well, this feels like it’s probably good for White. Whereas now I’ll actually try to enumerate the pros and cons, and maybe even think a little bit about the numbers involved in my work. It’s much more concrete than it used to be, and less intuitive.

That kind of thinking had paid dividends, as Larry had been playing well lately, including clinching clear first in the 2008 U.S. Senior Open.
“Actually, it’s a bit strange, because I’m not a youngster,” he said in 2008. “But my rating at the moment is at a five-year high.”

While Larry’s deep familiarity with computer evaluations has rendered his chess thinking exceptionally concrete and computationally inclined, other players also exhibit a similar, if less precise, numerical sensibility. “The way I think about the game is very idea-based,” Jesse Kraai, an American grandmaster born in 1972, told Chess Life recently. “I think a lot of kids see a Fritz pop-up box when they look at a position. They don’t think in words.”

“That position is at least +0.40 in White’s favor,” I said to Nolan once as we were analyzing a position, with no computer in sight. “At least +0.40, I tell you, maybe more.” I’ve heard others draw on a similar code of digital exactitude.

At times, a program stands in a player’s subconscious like an imposing father figure, ready to jump on the slightest infraction of its values. “I could hear Fritz screaming as I picked up the pawn,” writes Rusudan Goletiani in annotating a game that was instrumental in her winning the 2005 U.S. women’s chess championship.

Sometimes it’s as though the machines have a will and consciousness of their own. Chess analysis engines are commonly depicted as either silicon monsters or entities resembling deities that know more and can think faster than humans ever could. A godhead, not humankind, is now the measure of the ultimate capabilities of computer chess programs, in the sense that perfect play is now the theoretically attainable goal to be aimed for. In a discussion in 2008 with John Watson on his Webcast program Chess Talk, Vasik Rajlich had this to say about the future of chess programs: “And so at some point we’re going to start hitting the limits of what can be done, of what’s perfect play. So, I don’t know, what kind of rating would God have? Would he be rated 4000 points or 4500? I mean, there’s going to be some point where that’s it.”

God created man in his image. Man, responding in kind, is creating machines that play chess like God.

The cybernetic forces seem actually more like a pantheon these days, with the different deities—Junior, Rybka, Fritz, Shredder, Hiarcs—possessing distinct personalities and relative strengths and foibles. It’s difficult not to want to summon one of these superhuman forces and have it help in one’s worldly affairs. Lately players have faced knotty positions in their games and found themselves thinking, What would Rybka or Fritz do here? What would they see that I’m not seeing? The oracle can provide us with the truth. In societies around the world, people resort to certain divinatory practices, such as reading tea leaves, scrutinizing the fissures of
a sheep’s thigh bone, and parsing CAT scans, in their efforts to ward off suffering and misfortune. The practices enable them to “see” more into current circumstances than their human faculties allow, thus making it possible for them to get along in life in more assured ways. Chess players are no different. Computer chess programs are a means of perceptual enhancement. They are visualization-cognition machines that enhance the visual and analytical capacities of chess players. They do so in ways that are altogether unprecedented for humans.

Players at the top as well are increasingly relying on computer chess programs to lead them to the truth. Jonathan Rowson tells me,

> Even at the very highest levels, people are deferring to the computer on a systematic basis. It used to be that we would have our own ideas, and get the computer to check the more concrete details. But now in all kinds of positions we’re looking at the computer’s assessment, and wondering what we’ve missed. It’s no longer, “We’re the boss and we use this as a tool to help us get more judgment.” The first port of call is what the computer thinks. And that’s a little sad, because something is being lost in the process. But I think it’s happening.

Just a few years back, a computer chess engine was a court philosopher, giving advice to the king. Now it is the king.

At the same time, players usually keep in mind that they cannot, and should not, operate the way the machines do when they’re embroiled in their games. While a computer program will grab a pawn or enter massive complications if it deems those continuations to be the best ones, humans will pull up short; they know there can be a price to pay for putting everything on the line when one is a flesh-and-blood being with limited reserves of energy. As Jonathan explains it, “I think we’ve sort of realized that we’re not computers, and so even though we know it’s all about what works, rather than what’s logical or rational or can be justified on general principles, we’ve sort of realized that we can’t really operate in the way that a machine does. I mean, we often go into the analysis of a position and say, ‘Well, this is very computerlike, it might work, but I wouldn’t do it.’ ”

The upshot is that players are coming to sense that there are two dominant ways of thinking about chess: the schematic mentality common to humans, in which concepts, patterns, and narratives dominate; and the computational mentality figured by computers. Accordingly, players often wield a dual consciousness in their chess efforts, thinking conceptually one moment, and then shifting to more concrete methods the next. One popular book published in 2008, Charles Hertan’s *Forcing Chess Moves*, encourages players to improve their abilities at “brute-force calculation” by
developing “computer eyes” when examining concrete tactical positions. “Your computer eyes must learn to shed human bias,” Hertan counsels. Modify your consciousness, in other words, so that it does not proceed the way a human consciousness typically does. Professional players are also starting to conclude that the concrete, digital procedures of thought are often more correct. Jonathan tells me,

It’s almost like we’re becoming divided in that way, because we sort of realize that the reality of chess—the digital nuts and bolts of the variations—doesn’t correspond to our human heuristics and narratives. There’s a kind of schism there, because now when we play, we’re no longer likely to believe our narratives. We might say that we do, we might say while we’re analyzing, “Oh, I think you have to do this here, this is a critical moment, and it seemed a bit illogical to play in the center when you weakened your queenside,” or whatever we might say. But there’s also a part of us that knows, “Hang on, you know I’m going to go home in half an hour and put this into a computer, and it might just knock down everything I believe.”

Players have begun to doubt their altogether human ways of making sense of the configurations to be found on the chessboard. They’ve come to intuit that their very humanness is their failing.

Through their work with computers, chess players are coming to know and experience themselves in a certain fashion. In chess circles, at least, computers are casting into bold relief what it means to be human. Much as Judeo-Christian peoples in different historical epochs have come to understand the nature of humankind in relation to what they have taken the divine to be, so chess players are finding that their work with computers is shaping what they take themselves to consist of and be capable of. When matched up against computers, humans are taken to be creatures who are at once flexible, creative, playful, resourceful, fallible, tool-using, relatively intelligent, information-processing, meaning-seeking, pattern recognizing, aesthetically inclined, experience-informed, psychologically complex, socially responsive, intuitive, emotive, biology-based, fatigue-prone, self-doubting, self-questioning, and faced with limitations—perhaps necessarily so, because of what they can remember—all the while operating at different levels of consciousness. Computers, in contrast, are exceptionally good at organizing information and analyzing forced sequences of moves. But they do not “think” in the way that humans do. They do not recognize patterns in intuitive terms, and they do not draw creatively from their circumstances. Nor do they learn from past experience. They also do not feel happy when they win or anguished when they lose. They do not blink when their opponents try to psych them out. They are indifferent to the
alter-presence of their opponents and to what their caretakers think of them. They have no sense of self, no appreciation for beauty. “Computers don’t have plans, they don’t have ideas, philosophy, aesthetic feelings,” says Levon Aronian. “Unlike humans they don’t have an inkling of how rooks, knights and pawns should be moved around the board.” Computers do not play chess per se, for they do not operate within a phenomenal life-world of play, at least as humans know of it.

All this is to suggest that chess players, through their work with computers, have come to define themselves and their computers through a set of interlocking images. There’s a binary drift to these definitions, as befits a species (as structuralist thinkers have documented) that tends to think in oppositional categories, especially when faced with something new, other, or threatening. These imageries tie into broader cultural phantasmagorias that evolve around notions of man and machine, flesh and matter, consciousness and computation. Yet viewed from another perspective, it can be said that computer technologies have once and always been the product of human engineering, that there is no strict divide between people and their machines, and that the computational devices are forever part of extensive matrices of thinking and acting, in which the human cannot easily be cleaved from the technological.

**Cyborgs, Cheating, and Cheating Paranoia**

Indeed, it’s when we put the two forces together that we get a new cybernetic system altogether. Much has been made in the past thirty years of the concept of cyborgs, in science fiction literature and in cultural studies. A cyborg (a contraction of cybernetic organism) is a self-regulating integration of artificial and natural systems. Cyborgs are often depicted as intricate mergers of flesh and machine—as is the case with the *Terminator* films or the Borg of *Star Trek* fame—and in contemporary life one does find some effective body and apparatus couplings along these lines, such as cochlear implants, artificial pacemakers, and prosthetic limbs. In recent years, however, scholars have come to realize that to think of cyborgs as entailing only combinations of organic and synthetic parts nestled within a body would be overly simplistic. Many twenty-first-century humans are already wired into complex cybernetic systems, such as the Internet, computer processors, cell phones, and GPS-navigated automobiles. Understood in this light, it becomes clear that people are drawing upon technologies as humans have always done: to enhance their actions in and engagements with the world. As cognitive scientist Andy Clark puts it, we
are “natural-born cyborgs” who draw on an “openness to information-processing mergers” in creative and productive ways. “It is because we are natural-born cyborgs,” Clark suggests, “forever ready to merge our mental activities with the operations of pen, paper, and electronics, that we are able to understand the world as we do.” Put that way, it’s clear that many chess players today are “human-technology symbionts” who draw on the “mind-expanding technologies” available to them to play the game in more informed ways. Think of a human being as a complex, ever-dynamic integration of mind, matter, and technology engaged in multivalent tasks of computational assessment and practical interpretation, and you have the chess player down the street from you, hammering out his opening repertoire on his laptop computer.

Even so, once that player is away from the computer and at the board himself, there are moments when he can get to feeling that compared to the supposed accuracy and truth-seeking potential of the computer programs, he doesn’t measure up, that his own neural microprocessors could use an upgrade and he could profit from trading in his current form for Homo sapiens 2.0. Computers can make a person feel deficient: “If only I could think at times like a computer, if I only I had a database lodged directly in my brain. If only I had more energy, and didn’t get tired so quickly.” Such thoughts come easily these days, for chess players and others alike. We yearn for cognitive enhancements, be it through designer drugs, genetic modifications, or neurocognitive rewiring.

Some competitive players faced with these sentiments have in fact drawn on cyborg technologies in problematic ways. That is, they’ve cheated. In recent years a handful of contestants in tournaments offering big cash prizes to the winners of different class sections have been found sporting devices that apparently connect them either to a computer directly or to an accomplice who communicates wirelessly the moves that a chess engine is recommending. This is chess on cognitive steroids. At the 2006 World Open in Philadelphia, a player in the Under 2000 section ran up a score of seven wins and one draw, putting him in contention for the $25,000 prize for first place. In that player’s last game, the tournament director became suspicious of a device he had in one of his ears. When asked about it, the player said that it was a hearing aid. When the director examined it, he found that it had an antenna. On it was written “Phonito” along with a Web address. The director researched the device on the Internet and discovered that it was not a hearing aid but, rather, a “wireless miniature communication receiver.” He forfeited the player and removed him from the tournament.
At the same World Open another player named Eugene Varshavsky, a “low master” competing in the Open section, aroused suspicions when he defeated the highest-rated grandmaster in the tournament, Ilya Smirin, in a wild, unconventional game. “I felt like I was playing against a machine,” a dazed Smirin told a director after the game. Up to this point Varshavsky had been wearing a big blue bucket hat that drooped low around his ears during each of his games, and had racked up an impressive score of 4 points out of 6. When he beat Smirin, people grew suspicious that he might be wearing under the hat an electronic device that was signaling good moves to play. The tournament directors searched Varshavsky and his hat, but did not find anything. They did tell him, however, that his hat would have to remain in their office until his next game was over. Varshavsky played his last two games against grandmaster opponents without his headpiece, and lost badly both times. After the tournament, grandmaster Larry Christiansen took the last twenty-five moves of the Varshavsky-Smirin game and ran them through the chess engine called Shredder. He reportedly found that Shredder’s moves matched those made by Varshavsky.34

Players in a number of countries have recently been accused of using devices to receive help during their games, from handheld “Pocket Fritzes” consulted in bathroom stalls to cell phones that relay moves. The accusations are justified at times. In April 2008, an untitled chess player from Iran named M. Sadatnajafi was deemed to have cheated at a tournament in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. While playing against Li Chao, a Chinese grandmaster, Sadatnajafi allegedly used his mobile phone to receive text messages containing instructions on his game. The messages were thought to have been sent from friends of his in Iran. They were following the game on the Internet as it was taking place, and sent him wireless guidance. Sadatnajafi had made only ten moves when someone noticed that he was looking into his mobile handset. On examining the handset, the tournament directors determined that he had received instructions in Farsi. This was a case of distributed cognition on a global, illicit scale.35

At other times, the accusations remain only accusations. After Bulgarian grandmaster Veselin Topalov’s impressive victory at the World Championship Tournament in San Luis, Argentina, 2005, a couple of news articles reported that an “unnamed participant” in the tournament had accused him of receiving computer-prompted moves from one of his assistants. In July 2006, Sergey Dolmatov, a Russian grandmaster and coach of the Russian men’s chess team, said in an interview with a Russian newspaper, “What Topalov is doing on the board these days, is beyond human abilities. And I am sure that an interference from outside is taking place.”36 A
story soon spread that Topalov had managed to have a computer chip implanted in his brain. “It’s true,” an acquaintance told me when asked about this. “I’ve heard from people in Bulgaria who know about this.” That rumor ties into a broader social imaginary, conveyed in fiction and films, wherein humans have cybernetic technologies lodged in their flesh. In William Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, the narrative speaks of a socket, implanted behind the ear, that accepts computer chips, allowing direct neural access to computer memory. Rumor follows fiction.

When Topalov faced Kramnik in a match for the world chess championship in the fall of 2006, Topalov’s manager, Silvio Danailov, complained to the match organizers and the press after the fourth game that, while playing, Kramnik was making repeated visits to the bathroom in his private rest area, the only place that was not under audio or video surveillance. Danailov called the frequency of the breaks “strange, if not suspicious.” The insinuation was that Kramnik might be drawing upon computer technologies when in the bathroom. A brouhaha erupted when the Appeals Committee decided to close the private bathrooms of both players, and Kramnik, awaiting a reversal of the Appeals Committee’s decision, refused to play the fifth game of the match. Both sides eventually agreed to continue with the match, which Kramnik went on to win. Midway through the match, Danailov issued a press release identifying what it called “coincidence statistics,” showing the high percentage of times that Kramnik played a move that would be recommended by Fritz 9.37

Most grandmasters and chess fans supported Kramnik in the dispute, finding Danailov’s accusations unjustified and slanderous. (Some think that the insinuations might have been payback for the denouncements of Topalov the year before.) A fair conclusion is that Kramnik did not cheat during the match, nor did Topalov in San Luis. Their play in both situations was altogether human in character. The accusations can be chalked up to jealousy at another’s success, strong-armed match tactics, or the human need to explain the potent abilities of another, which indeed can appear superhuman at times.

During the Cold War era, strong players were sometimes suspected of using devious techniques to gain an edge. Some of Mikhail Tal’s opponents thought he was able to conjure up a hypnotic effect over them at the board. During his match with Fischer in 1972, Boris Spassky’s assistants expressed concern about a possible “influence” on Spassky “with the help of electronics and chemical substances.” Fischer’s chair was X-rayed and taken apart. Nothing unusual was found but a small screwdriver and two dead flies. In the 1978 world championship match between Anatoly Karpov and Viktor
Korchnoi in Baguio City, in the Philippines, both sides accused the other camp of engaging in actions geared toward helping their player triumph, from messages delivered in yogurt cups to parapsychologists sitting in the audience. Korchnoi challenged Karpov again for the world championship in 1981, this time in Merano, Italy. Korchnoi, who lost badly, insisted that “strange forces” were at work and had “no doubt” that servings of yogurt eaten by Karpov during the game were drugged. “This match was a great achievement of Soviet chemistry,” he said.  

A new era brings new suspicions. Players are not worried about parapsychological techniques or mind-confusing electronic gadgets these days so much as they fear that their opponents might be resorting to computer assistance (or, in the case of Kasparov’s loss to Deep Blue in 2007, that humans were coming to the aid of his computer opponent). What surfaces at times is a kind of cheating paranoia in which any player with remarkable results in a match or tournament risks being called a cheater. “Has it come to this, that a player who has a remarkably good result in a tournament is immediately suspected of cheating?” asks the *New York Times*’s Dylan Loeb McClain in reporting the news from a tournament in France in December 2007. During the tournament, Anna Rudolf, a twenty-year-old master from Hungary, was accused by three Latvian players of receiving transmissions to her lip balm tube from somebody with a computer. Rudolf, who was playing stellar chess, was getting up from her games frequently and wandering in and out of the playing hall. This raised the suspicion of some. In her ninth-round game, Rudolf met up with one of her accusers, who refused to shake her hand. When she asked him why he would not do so, he replied, “You don’t play fair.” The game came to an end when a flustered Rudolf blundered in an equal position. “I ended up in tears and not because of the result itself, but the way they did it,” she told an interviewer. When asked about the concerns expressed over her “lip-balm technology,” Rudolf had this to say: “I usually went away from the board when it wasn’t my turn to move: I like to go out to the fresh air and also to wash my face. Moreover, I played most of my games on the stage, broadcasted, so I didn’t have to sit at the board to see my position. And yes, the lip balm was always with me. Kids, beware, Rybka is in it!”  

These days, the act of walking around often during one’s game can induce suspicion. A friend of mine told me that he was accused of cheating at the 2007 Foxwoods Open, a prize-rich tournament held at the Foxwoods Resort Casino in Ledyard, Connecticut, while playing his first-round game. “I was playing this guy rated around 1500, not very strong,” he said.
He sacrificed a piece, and it was an interesting game. I always get up from the board a lot during the game, partly because of nerves. And I smoke cigarettes. I like to walk around and look at the other games. I kept getting up, every time after I made my move. Sometimes I would go to the far end of a lobby, and [stay] out of the way there, because I didn’t want [my employer] to see that I had started smoking again. And when I was going outside to smoke, a couple of times I saw my opponent standing there, watching me. And I thought, Okay, that’s kind of funny. Halfway through the game one of the tournament directors, who I happen to know, came up to me, and said, “Have you been getting up from your game a lot?” “Yeah, of course,” I said. “I always get up and walk around.” “Well, your opponent accused you of cheating. He said that you’re acting very suspicious, getting up a lot.” I said, “So? I’m allowed to do that.” And he said, “Well, I just want to let you know.” I said, “Okay.” So the rest of the game I stayed at the board. But it really threw me off. I was really angry, and determined to destroy him [my opponent]. Eventually I beat him. He came over to look at my games a couple of times later in the tournament. But because I was staying at the board more, it was pretty clear that I wasn’t cheating.”

Still, the accusations unnerved him. “It’s like being called a murderer. Your reputation is at stake.”

One plot is predictable: Player A gets up a lot during a tournament game and walks around, ostensibly to think or smoke cigarettes or chat with friends, while Player B remains at the board; A defeats B with strong play; after the game, B accuses A of using computer technologies while away from the chessboard. Player B, or supporters of Player B, venture to support their accusations by claiming that Player A’s moves during the game match up, in suspiciously accurate ways, with the moves recommended by the best computer analysis engines. That’s what happened at the 2009 Aeroflot Open, held in Moscow in late February. In the sixth round, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, a grandmaster from Azerbaijan and the tournament’s top seed, lost to Igor Kurnosov, a lower-rated Russian grandmaster, in twenty-one sharp moves. Mamedyarov filed an official complaint after the game, insinuating that his opponent had profited from computer guidance, and withdrew from the event. “During the game,” Mamedyarov wrote in his protest, “my opponent went out of the playing hall after each move, took his coat and withdrew himself on the toilet. After suspicion of unfair play on move 14 I offered a draw, he refused. We quickly played 11 moves, on the 12th move I played a move which confused my opponent. The next moves from him were given as first choice by Rybka, which quickly allowed him to win the game.”

In responding to these charges, Kurnosov admitted to leaving the board and playing hall on several occasions, but only to go to the smoking area
or to wash his face with cold water, all the while contemplating the game position without looking at the board. Once news of the accusation tore around the Internet, most commentators came to Kurnosov’s defense, suggesting that Mamedyarov’s claims were unfounded and pointing out that computer programs regularly agree with the moves of the winning side in sharp games. Yet such strife adds to the anxiety that nettles professional players these days. Jonathan Rowson exchanged e-mail messages with me a few weeks after the controversy broke, writing in one,

The recent Mamedyarov cheating controversy is particularly striking because the accusation feels almost completely groundless to me, and this sort of thing could have a very corrosive impact on chess culture at all levels. I think it is a particularly sad affliction for chess players, because we are partly built to think of how our opponents are trying to cheat us, and therefore to find their activities suspicious more generally. Alas, there are now correlations (i.e., when several good moves correspond to the first choice of engines) to provide spurious “evidence” for such dark imaginings. To humanize the point, if Fischer were a young player today, I doubt he would have scaled the heights, because he would probably have been too preoccupied with such fears.

It’s easy to think that something is afoot, that strange forces are at work. “At some point I even imagined that my opponent was receiving outside help,” writes Ukrainian grandmaster Pavel Eljanov in commenting candidly on a 2007 tournament game of his, in which his opponent was playing quickly and strongly. “I think that many players will have had games when similar irrational thoughts came into their head!”

“The notion of witchcraft explains unfortunate events,” runs an anthropological axiom. In some societies, every death is attributed by the surviving family members to acts of witchcraft committed by someone in another clan or village. I can imagine a future society of chess players in which each impressive victory is attributed, by at least some others, to technological sorcery.

PRE-POSTHUMAN, STILL

It’s late in the afternoon. The shades are still down. I continue to work through the lines I’ve been tracing out with Fritz’s help. I consider the position on the screen and try out some moves. A knight jump to the b4 square gives Black a -0.25 edge in the position. A queen transfer to the kingside, a -0.42 advantage. It’s a game of numerical values.

Fritz could keep going, but I need a break. Enough cyberchess for now,
enough eyeballing a computer screen. Time for a walk. I turn off the air-
conditioner, roll up the window shades, head downstairs. As I step out-
side the building and stroll down a sidewalk, I’m struck by the brisk and
vivid world to be encountered. There are people and trees, shadows and
sunlight. Around me is a world of depth and vitality, all of it in three
dimensions.
**The fatigue factor**

Kim Qvistorff, a tall, fair-haired man with a neatly trimmed mustache, is a skilled player who delights in attacking hampered kingsides. Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1959, Kim learned to play chess when he was three years old, and began playing in tournaments at the age of four. Because his arms had trouble reaching the far side of the chessboard, he had to have two telephone books placed on top of his chair to bring him closer to the pieces. As he had not yet learned how to read or write, an adult had to record his moves for him. He recalls, “I couldn’t understand why there was a guy next to me all the time, because no one else had that.”

Kim played successfully in tournaments in Denmark through his youth and early twenties, propelled by strong calculation skills, a fierce competitiveness, and confidence born of experience. “I think up until I was twenty-five years old I never sat in front of a chessboard without playing to win, without thinking I was going to win,” he says. “And it didn’t matter who I sat in front of. I always assumed I was going to win.” One of his triumphs, a scintillating kingside attack, was published in a Danish newspaper, annotated by the great Bent Larsen. Kim stopped playing competitively in his mid-twenties to focus on his studies and his work. He married, moved to the States, settled in New York, built a career as a financial planner, and had a son. When his son Steven was old enough to learn the game, Kim started attending clubs and competing in tournaments again. “I still love playing chess,” he says.

Kim is resourceful at the board. Once he gets control of a position, he’s determined to win it. When he was younger, endgame play and calculation were the strongest parts of his game.

I could always calculate further than most people. And I think it’s one of those things that you develop very early, so if you start very early, your sense of combinations and how far you can calculate [can be quite strong]. I could really calculate far when I was a kid. I know that now because I can’t do it anymore.

It’s a combination of two things, I think. First of all, when you get older, you realize that you can’t calculate six, seven moves out from the actual position. It’s frustrating of course when you know you were able to do it at one point, but that’s just the way it is.

The fatigue factor also becomes an issue when you get older, and it’s very frustrating to deal with. When you’re young, you don’t understand that there is such a thing. But when you get older, you get physically tired. Once that happens, then the combinations especially, they simply go away, you can’t calculate that far.

Like others his age and older, Kim has learned to make adjustments. He tries to avoid stepping into hair-raising complications that require the
precise and imaginative calculation of multiple variations. “You know you have these complicated open positions, where there’s so many possibilities of moves? Once you’ve done that two, three times—thinking that you can still do what you used to be able to do—you realize that it just doesn’t work. You lower your expectation level. It’s a matter of getting wiser in the way you play.”
24/7 on the ICC

He’d operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck.
—William Gibson, Neuromancer

March 19, 2007. Twenty minutes before midnight, and if I know what’s good for me, I’ll be heading to bed soon, after a long, blustery Saturday. I go into my study to shut down the computer, which has been idling on standby. Like an alcoholic, I can’t resist the liquor in the cabinet. I log on to the ICC, the Internet Chess Club, an online chess server where members play games with each other, terminal to terminal. Just a couple of quick games, and then I’ll go to sleep.

Shoeless, clad in sweatpants and a pullover sweater, I settle into the leather mesh-back swivel chair in front of the desk and reach for the mouse pad to my right. After a couple of clicks, the server appears on my computer screen, along with a melodic bell-tone that signals my entry. I bring up the “Seek Graph” window, where the icons of players or computers looking for a game are arranged on a grid; the time control proposed and the rating of the player are the two coordinates. I check out the handles of some of the lower-rated players—knightmover, swansong, FrankS, neurofuzz, ProfessorChaos, deathzoom—but their names don’t call out to me, and I don’t see anyone with a higher rating who is looking for the kind of game I want. I use the “Seek a Game” command. A circle signaling my request pops up on the upper left side of the Seek Graph window. I move the cursor over the circle, making these words appear: “tabiya 2179 seeks Blitz 3 0
unrated 1800–2300.” I (Tabiya), rated 2179, am seeking to play an unrated, three-minute blitz game with no additional time increments against someone rated between 1800 and 2300. Once again I’m cruising cyberspace, looking for a faceless mate.

Ten seconds later a small box pops up with a “bloop” sound in the upper left-hand corner of the screen, with these server-generated words:

You have been challenged . . .
Okiedoke (2236) challenges you to a game
unrated Blitz time’3 inc’o
Accept   Decline

A player named Okiedoke, who is rated 2236, wants to take me up on my offer. I faintly recall playing him a couple of weeks back. After a bunch of games, I sent the instant message, “Thanks for the games,” and Okiedoke replied, “Thanks for kicking my butt.” But that could have been someone else.

I accept Okiedoke’s challenge. A virtual chessboard pops up on the screen, to the left of two clocks and an electronic score sheet. We each have three minutes to play all of our moves. If either of our clocks runs down to zero, that person loses, even if he’s set to checkmate his opponent on the next move. Three-minute games are usually the fastest time controls I go for. The true speed freaks delight in bullet chess, in which each side has one minute to make all of its moves. I’ve tried it, but I’ve found that frenzied pace to be ridiculous: I end up tossing pieces around or running out of time by the twenty-seventh move. Three minutes means a hurried pace as well, but it’s enough time to play a minimally meaningful game.

Okiedoke has White and makes his first move. My own clock starts automatically. I counter with a move of my own, using my mouse to point, click, drag, release. Once I set the piece on its new square, my clock stops and my opponent’s starts again. Each move we make appears on the ever-lengthening score sheet to the right of the chessboard. I don’t see my opponent or hear or sense his presence. The interface at hand is primarily one between man and machine, unlike the face-to-face contact that comes with over-the-board play. At work is a cybernetic interplay of neural nets, eye movements, hand gestures, machine technologies, and pixel-based images. “Thus technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training,” German Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin wrote in the late 1930s in speaking of pedestrians navigating the city streets and traffic signals of
urban modernity. An analogous kind of sensory training holds for gamers piloting the intersections of virtual chess.

I make my initial moves in less than a second each. We get into the position; Okiedoke knows his stuff, he’s got a slight edge. He’s playing better than in our previous encounter. We exchange bishops, but I respond the wrong way, leaving me vulnerable to an attack. Sure enough, Okiedoke employs a neat bishop sacrifice that opens up my kingside. He soon has a mating net lined up, and I’m done in fourteen moves. I surrender by clicking on the “resign” button. Below the board appear these words:

Game 1920. (okiedoke vs. tabiya) tabiya resigns} 1–0.
Black resigns
Game was not rated. No rating adjustment.

I’m dead, but I reincarnate instantly—much like the protagonists in video games who, once killed, promptly regenerate and continue to combat onslaughts of terrorists or alien invaders. Virtual deaths and lives are easy to come by.

I click “Rematch.” Okiedoke accepts and we’re back at it, with colors reversed. The techno-ritual repeats. I make a move, the electronic signal of which darts from my computer through a phone extension cord to a DSL modem and then out of the apartment and beyond the building through broadband wires into the vast ether of cyberspace to wherever Okiedoke sits, be it Tokyo, Texas, or Tallahassee. Okiedoke sees the move transpire on the graphical interface program established on his own computer screen ninety milliseconds after my index finger clicked on the mouse nestled under my right hand. Okiedoke’s move flits back to me. The rapidity of our moves suits the speed of the technology.

I hear my partner, Tracy, moving about, getting ready for bed. She’s not keen on my playing late at night. She knows the effects: wired thoughts, restless nights. She stands by the door, sees the digitalized play. I sense her presence but don’t acknowledge it. My guess is that she wants to ask me about something, but she knows that meaningful talk is futile while I’m entrenched in battle; I don’t like to be interrupted when a game is on the line. “Do you need the car tomorrow morning?” she’ll ask. Yet since “tomorrow” entails a realm of time foreign to the one in which I’m enveloped and any words cramp my chess thoughts, I wave her off soundlessly. She’s not fond of such gestures.

She drifts away. This is chess as reclusive cyber-frenzy, a sticky knot of neurology, musculature, and technology.
Okiedoke maintains my attention. We’re exchanging pawns and pieces. The game is even as we enter an endgame, but then he wins a pawn. Seconds remain. I move fast, Okiedoke’s extra pawn giving him an edge. I try to shift the cursor as quickly as I can, but my arm, wrist, and finger don’t cooperate and I lose precious microseconds. My time runs out, 0.00.0, as I attempt my sixty-sixth move. Okiedoke has only 0:00.3 showing on his clock—three tenths of a second left before my own time expired—yet he would have won the game. I often lose points in the final frantic seconds of these arms races, outdrawn by mouse-slinging opponents.

I sit back. We’ve just completed a six-minute clash, with 131 moves combined—an average of one every 2.73 seconds. Playing at this pace requires a quick eye, a deft hand. No lengthy analyses here, no deep thinks. Just intuition and on-the-spot calculations. Two seconds is usually enough to size up a position and act upon it.

One more with Okiedoke. This time I handle the opening correctly. It’s anyone’s game. We’re navigating complex tactical sequences with brisk moves. Suddenly his knight is trapped—there’s no way to defend it—and he resigns. He doesn’t ask for a rematch.

“Thanks for the games,” I type.

A response appears in the chat box below the chessboard: “Okiedoke says: ggs.” Good games.

Tabiya says: hope to catch you again sometime
Okiedoke says: yup

End of conversation. So it goes on the ICC.

LUDIC LOOPS

The Internet Chess Club, or ICC, is one of several popular Internet chess servers where players can log in and play games, catch a recorded lecture, or watch in real time the real-world tournament games of the top players. The club has 30,000 members, with 1,500 to 2,600 of them logged on at any moment. A million games a week are played on the server, by players who reside in towns and cities around the world. “Hello entire planet of chess players! Ain’t the ICC something else!” gushes one member on his bio page.

The popularity of this and other servers illustrates the ways in which the Internet has become an integral part of players’ excursions in chess. Originally known as the Internet Chess Server, the ICC took on its current
name in 1995, when its head programmer decided to transform it into a commercial site and charge yearly membership fees. It’s no accident that the development of the server has occurred in an age of rapid globalization, with the “speeding up of the flows of capital, people, goods, images and ideas across the world,” as one anthropology text puts it. It’s not a fluke that its modes and qualities mirror the Internet’s emphasis on “immediacy, simultaneity, contingency, subjectivity, disposability, and, above all, speed.” And it’s not by chance that its development echoes the evolution of the World Wide Web in general, in which the “delocalizing and interconnective” properties of both the Internet and online chess have a great deal to offer a Bulgarian grandmaster who wants to challenge his friends, an astrophysicist who works out of a science lab in Mexico City and plays chess during his lunch break, or a thirteen-year-old girl in Pasadena who logs in after she gets out of school for the day. “These days a lot of kids play on the Internet 24/7,” a friend tells me.

“ICC, how did we exist without it?” Elizabeth Vicary exclaims with a laugh when asked about the server one day. “It’s great for multiple reasons,” she continues. “It’s great because you can play chess in your underwear at three in the morning—you know, if you wake up and you can’t sleep. It’s great because everyone is on ICC. So if you need to contact anyone, you can find them on ICC, you can ask someone who knows who they are... So I think it’s important to the chess community as a chess community. And it’s a very convenient way to play chess.”

Internet chess is made for the likes of Daniel Pomerantz, the young man I spoke with while playing at the World Open. Daniel lived for several years in Montreal, where he was studying in a master’s program in computer science at McGill University. An amiable guy who enjoys playing chess and analyzing his games, Daniel found himself in a city with only one serious chess club to speak of and few tournaments during the year. He was able to keep his game sharp by playing on the ICC. “Given where I am now, that’s pretty much where I play exclusively,” he told me one day. “I don’t get a chance to play much in person, so online is the best way to play.” Daniel usually plays what are known as “standard games” on ICC. “They’re, like, fifteen or twenty minutes, so they’re not classic, but they’re often pretty reasonable games,” he explained. “And also the computer keeps track of what moves you play, so in the end you can look back and go over it, if it was an interesting, tactical game, and see what was going on.”

Most of those who log on to the ICC do not have the patience and seriousness of intent that Daniel has, and end up playing blitz games more than anything else. I joined the ICC one frosty Sunday morning. I had
planned to visit the Marshall Chess Club that day and participate in a
daylong tournament, but I woke up feeling lazy. As I lay in bed, trying to
decide whether to make a wintry trek down to the city, I happened upon
the idea of joining the ICC and playing serious games online instead. “Of
course! Why didn’t I think of that earlier?” I said to myself. “I can get some
good games in, gain experience from the comfort of my home, and all for
very little money.” I signed up an hour later, after breakfast, paid the sixty­
dollar yearly fee, chose a handle, and joined in a couple of thirty­minute
games. I played a dozen three­minute blitz games, had some lunch, and
then felt compelled to play more quick games. Each bout was a nugget of
pleasure. I soon picked up the gist of the cyberculture terms bandied about
and the etiquette of online play. That play required renegotiations of the
bodily arrangements of over­the­board chess, new uses of eyes and hands,
brain and body, making for a new corporeal subjectivity. By the end of the
afternoon, my pupils had grown tired of monitoring the rapid skirmishes
on the computer screen and I was light­headed, my thoughts pixilated. I
had to go for a walk to clear my mind.

Since that fateful day I’ve played some thirty “slow” games on the ICC,
and thousands of blitz games. My tendencies are typical. A quick look at
some statistics on the server suggest that games with time controls of five
minutes or less outnumber “standard” games, fifteen minutes or more, by
a count of eighteen to one. Most of those standard, “slow” games proceed
with time controls of fifteen or twenty minutes per player. The computa­
tional ease of the server and the velocity of its transmissions make the
mouse­and­eye play so crisp, so snappy, and so much fun that the setup
calls for, demands even, quick play. If you own a Maserati, it’s hard not to
be seduced by its covenant of pure speed. I’ve also come to wonder if the
rush to blitz chess reflects the slant in many societies today toward the con­
sumption of expedient, ultrastimulating experiences. Fast food, express
highways, fast­saged music videos, instant messaging, speed dating, speed
dialing, and blitz chess are elements of a cultural theme. “Speed is the form
of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man,” opines novelist
Milan Kundera.4

Many tear through game after game. One person I played had logged
180,000 games since joining. Another, 150,000. “I can never play enough
chess,” asserts one player with 25,000 contests under his belt. “Yes, it can
be addictive,” Daniel told me. “One thing I try to avoid doing is once I
start losing, I try not to be, like, ‘Okay, I lost a couple, I have to win,’ and
before I know it I’ve lost four more. . . . Definitely you can be prone to go
into a slump and then get a little addicted, to where you’re just moving
your mouse in different ways. Because then you’re not really moving pieces, you’re just moving something on the screen.”

“The more speed increases, the faster freedom decreases,” suggests French theorist Paul Virilio. American grandmaster Jesse Kraai tells me that when the chess servers first appeared in the 1990s, they kept a running count of how often members were logged on to them, and each member could see his own stats on his profile page. “They would tell you what percentage of your life you had spent [on the server], since you started—‘Oh, man, I’ve given 30 percent of my life to this!’—and it was just obscene. Because when it first started, chess players were losing their minds. I guess ’97 was when I first discovered it, and that was a big thing—I think I lost a year of my life playing blitz chess. . . . It was the first time you could play kind of famous, interesting people, and you could do it all day long.” These days Jesse doesn’t play on the Internet at all. He finds it pointless, wasteful. In his work for the Web site chesslecture.com, where he posts video lectures on diverse chess subjects, he has received e-mails from subscribers asking him to prepare a lecture on how to stop playing blitz chess. “It’s very strange that they’re asking me for something like therapy, like an anti-addiction course,” he says. “They’re recognizing the problem of its superficiality, if you like, and they’re not able to overcome it themselves. And I’ll basically do a lecture on anything—I just don’t know where to start on that. What am I supposed to say: ‘Don’t do it! It’s bad?’

The compulsion to play game after game resembles the devotion video game players have for their shoot-em-up-or-be-shot-dead-yourself pastimes. The impulse is similar to that familiar to enthusiasts of the online version of Scrabble, which, “like amphetamines or video games, seems to induce a state of fiendish hyperfocus in susceptible subjects,” as literary critic Judith Thurman discovered when facing her own “ruination” at the hands of late-night wordplay. Even more analogous are the deranging thrills of blitz Scrabble, four-minute-a-player jousts that netted author Nora Ephron for a season: “I was becoming more and more scattered, more distracted, more unfocused; I was exhibiting all the symptoms of terminal attention deficit disorder.” Kindred as well are the sublime fixations of casino digital gambling, in which, as anthropologist Natasha Dow Schull details, gamblers who can play up to nine hundred hands an hour at push-button slot machines relish “extreme states of subjective absorption in play.” The cleverly designed technology of the machines enables these bettors to enter into what they call “the zone,” a dissociated subjective state in which they proceed alone, uninterrupted, swiftly, in control of their efforts, and in sync with their instrument of chance. “Zombies” is what
the gambling industry has dubbed those gamblers who sit for hours on end before casino slot machines, mindlessly plunking coins into the slots, with little or no regard for how they’re faring cashwise. “Playing is quick and easy. It is the sound of the coins falling, the music and the hubbub,” says one recovering player, a man from France who in 2004 sued his local casino for contributing to his addiction. “When you are in front of the machine you are like a zombie. There is no skill or logic to it. You are kept in this constant state of expectation that you might win.” Give modern subjects who desire play realms and dissociation from their worldly lives speedy, mesmerizing technologies, and you get gamers enmeshed in repetitive, hypnotic fugues.

Online chess promotes recursive loops of fixed alertness. The repetitive movements, the focused attentiveness, the easy slide into game after game can induce trancelike states that compare to those found among the participants of ritual ceremonies around the world. In Nepal, shamans provoke trances for themselves and others by sustaining a driving, incessant drumbeat and intoning sacred chants through nightlong ritual healing work. Their purposes are different from those who spend their nights tracking chess icons around a virtual chessboard, but the psychophysiological effects are similar: a state of consciousness distinct from normal, waking life, zoned in to the demands at hand. If we had a neurophenomenology up to the task, we could map out the biochemical substrates of the processes in play here, from the plateaus of revved-up alertness to the pulsing drive to rip through game after game. The playing can galvanize a form of spirit possession in which a mortal soul gets overcome by a goblin of ludic quickness.

Addictive it can be. In writing on the phenomenology of drug addiction, pharmacographer David Lenson notes that “the word’s etymology points to addictus—the past participle of the Latin verb addicere (to say or pronounce, to decree or bind)—which suggests that the user has lost active control of language and thus of consciousness itself, that she or he is already ‘spoken for,’ bound and decreed. Instead of saying, one is said. The addict is changed from a subject to an object; at least one aspect of the user’s consciousness becomes passive.” Much the same dictation ropes in online blitz players. While playing they become spoken for, bound and devoted to the activity at hand. It can be hard to stop, to disconnect from the ludic loops. Once a person manages to cut things off, it still can be difficult to resist logging on to the site again and mainlining another fix of games. Passion piqued, the player is played by the game. It toys with him, owns him. “Playing blitz on the Internet is incredibly addictive,” writes
English grandmaster Danny Gormally in a *New in Chess* essay called “Diary of an ICC Addict.” Gormally speaks of being hooked on daylong infusions of bullet chess. “I would describe the typical ICC addict’s experience as follows: after downloading the software and commencing play, the user experiences a serotonin cascade in the pre-frontal lobe of his brain similar to a drug which could be described as psychotropic. This leads to more and more use, as the addict chases this high which he finds increasingly difficult to replicate in his humdrum everyday existence.”

Narcotics are the metaphor of choice. It seems such a natural fit: the clammy need for a quick fix, the high that bites back, the shame of it all. Biologists would deem such conduct a “behavioral addiction” akin to those of compulsive gambling, shopping, or overeating. As they see it, each of these addictions involves a habit that “hijacks” the brain circuits evolved to reward survival-enhancing behavior such as eating and sex. The habits release dopamine into the brain, giving the habitué a high not unlike the plateaus of pleasure and arousal tripped by cocaine or morphine. In time, the efforts can derange the brain reward circuits, making it difficult for a person to stop things cold.

For most, online chess is mildly addictive. It’s not a hitting-bottom, lose-your-job-and-family addiction. It’s situationally addictive. *Akrasia*, Greek for “incontinence of the will,” a state of acting against one’s better judgment, is often involved. I can go weeks without having the urge to play. Some days and nights I’m not into it at all. It’s too fast and furious a possibility. But once I’m on, if the conditions are right and blitz lust takes hold, I can be on for hours, chasing three-minute games, bound and spoken for. Many face similar temptations. Nolan has a friend who grew fond of playing one-minute games on the ICC and racked up 12,600 of them over a two-year stretch, all in an effort to reach a 2200 rating. Once he did that, he gave it up cold, in part because Nolan talked him into doing so. When he and Nolan dropped by for a visit one day a year after he quit, I asked him if he wanted to play a couple of games online. Nolan cut me off, saying, “That’s like offering a drug addict heroin! ‘You want some?’”

Nolan himself is ambivalent about playing on ICC. “Yeah, I like playing online,” he tells me. “It’s a different form of addiction, because if you want to play, you can sit there for hours. Play and play and play and play. And if you lose you can get a new game immediately. . . . All the games are like candy, they’re fast food. You play one game, you play the next, you play one game, you play the next. They’re all fast games, even though there’s no reason for that.”
Others speak of their “love-hate” relationship with online play. Some quit, only to return months later. Others try to curtail the time they spend online. Evan Rabin, a college student and expert-level chess player from Greenwich Village, has been playing on the ICC for years. Evan plays in a lot of tournaments at the Marshall Chess Club, and in bigger tournaments in the Northeast. He also logs on to the ICC to play blitz games and chat with friends. “I can go on for a minute and be on for two hours,” he told me. “I try to limit it, but I used to actually play a lot more. Now I play maybe a few hours a week. It takes up a lot of time, and I don’t think it’s actually good for your chess. . . . When I play on ICC I can’t really sit for standard games. I just play three- and five-minute games, which is not so good. When I play on ICC I just want to get a lot of games in. I use it a lot now to chat with friends.”

It’s when they lose that many want most to keep playing. “While taking a break from work, I went online to play a couple of blitz games in preparation for tonight’s event,” recounts James Stripes in his chess blog, Chess Skills, in a 2009 post called “Blitz Addiction.” “I lost the first, badly. The second was worse. After three losses in a row, I knew I was in trouble. That’s how the addiction works: losses mean more play. The game plays second fiddle to the struggle for rating, for pride, for something.”

For me, the danger lies most in logging on at night, before I go to bed, when going to shut down the computer. “That’s a dangerous thing to do,” said one player when I mentioned this to him. “Logging on at night, that is, before going to sleep. A dangerous thing to do.”

In November 2007 I wrote, “Me, playing late last night; tired to begin with. Playing poorly, hanging queens in two straight games. But wanting to play more, to win a few well played games, before I logged off. I finished, finally, at 1:30 am. Mind revved up until 3 am. This is my brain on blitz. Took some melatonin, then fell asleep. Tired and worn out the next day. Angry at myself for ruining my sleep pattern.”

I could have jotted that on twenty different occasions. The late-night play wreaks havoc with my neurons, disturbs my sleep. Yet such miseries are balanced out by more promising engagements. “Played a few games last night, before I went to bed. Lost the first one, then won the next four. I was crafting something. It’s like picking up a violin and playing a few sweet sounds before falling asleep.” “Played a couple of quick games early in the afternoon, after reading for several hours. It struck me as a kind of re-centering, when I can take a break, and re-set my thoughts, before moving on to something else.”
VIRTUAL PLAY

What happens when chess play moves away from face-to-face engagements into connections more remote and “virtual”? You can get more games in, day or night, but the social and sensory dimensions of playing are distinct.

One aspect of online chess that vexes many is its faceless, disembodied quality. “I don’t want to play against someone when I can’t see his face,” says one man in explaining why he declines to play online. When asked why this is, he answers, “Computer chess is missing, I don’t know, a corporeal connection?” Polly Wright, a veteran player who competes in several over-the-board tournaments a week, tells me she prefers the texture and feel of pieces made of wood. She says,

I like having the pieces in my hand. It’s a tactile thing, along with the three dimensions, and you just don’t get that on the Internet. Playing with a computer doesn’t appeal to me because the pieces are just drawings, just diagrams. . . . And I constantly hang pieces when I play on ICC, because I’m not seeing things the same way. So it’s a spatial thing for me. But also, when you’re playing on the Internet, you don’t know who you’re playing. There’s a whole psychology of being face-to-face that you lose on the Internet. There’s something about moving the pieces, there’s something very satisfying about putting a piece on a square, and going, “This is killing.” And you don’t get to relish their facial expression, if they have one. And then it’s interesting if they don’t react. Because I love watching people, and you can’t do that on the Internet.

For Polly and others, Internet chess lacks the bodily engagements with one’s opponent and the chessboard and pieces that a person can count on with over-the-board play. The vital aura of that flesh-and-blood encounter is lost when the game goes tele-electronic. Jean-Paul Sartre once suggested that human imagination possesses an “essential poverty,” in part because the “flesh” or “intimate texture” of mental images is not as rich and as meaningful as the objects we perceive in the world. Some chess players find a similar impoverishment inherent in online play, as moving screen-bound pieces with a cursor does not carry the same fleshly sensateness that touching and grasping chess pieces in their hands does. Others are not fazed by that intangibility at all, perhaps because any chessboard is, from the get-go, a virtual play-form of shifting signifiers. Whatever one’s sensory preferences, an air of artifice and insubstantiality is at work. Although a person is engaged in a game with a living opponent, the virtual technologies involved can promote the sense that the game is a simulacrum of an actual chess game. There’s not the same “fullness of being” (Sartre, again) that comes with over-the-board play. For many, it comes down to a play
between presence and absence, two themes that have dominated philosophical thought in the Western tradition for more than two millennia now.

While the direct action of a chess game takes place within the magic circle of the chessboard, and while players often find themselves transported away from their immediate environments while playing, the experiential aspects of specific gaming encounters count for a lot. All play is virtual, in that all play forms involve “make-believe” arrangements founded on imaginative processes, but some forms of play are more virtual than others. With online chess, you can’t see your opponent or talk with him directly. You usually know nothing about him, where he lives or what he’s about, or if he is a he, she, or ze. Often there are few or no words exchanged during or after games. Impersonal is a word people use to describe the encounters. There’s little of the shared meaning-making, none of the quiet but significant interaction rituals that come with over-the-board chess games. You interact more with the computer than with your opponent, in a jazzy techno-ritual. There’s no embodied, intersubjective co-presence; no voice, gestures, or eye contact. No verbal exchanges help to defuse the pain of a tough loss. The healthy alterity that comes from contending with another person face-to-face is morphed into a pale and vague encounter with a faint other.

Internet chess does not lend itself to rich narrative experiences in the way that over-the-board play does so readily. Dale Sharp, the master-level player who lives in Peekskill, New York, once spoke to me of the dramas of competitive chess. “You don’t get that while playing on the Net,” he added. “You don’t get that flesh-and-blood person sitting right across from you.” For many, playing online is not a richly social, communicative experience, as is often the case when they’re playing with friends at clubs or at home. As I wrote in my fieldnotes, “Nolan came over this afternoon, to analyze some positions. We then played some blitz games, for an hour or so. A lot of fun. Afterward, I felt richer, more engaged, as is often the case when I hang out with friends I enjoy spending time with. How different from when I play on-line on my own, when there’s often a lingering sense of loneliness, isolation.” Unless you’re playing against friends, your online opponents remain phantasmic. Often nothing is said after a game is finished. You move on to the next game, or the next opponent.

When I mentioned these sentiments to Jonathan Rowson, the Scottish grandmaster and psychologist, he agreed with them. “And the reason is . . .” he said, and then proffered an answer:

I think we like talking about chess. There are interesting things to talk about—seeing what happened in the game, and what your opponent thinks happened,
and then having that little argy-bargy about who did what to whom, and why. And without that, something is lost. Just the simple silent change in rating [while playing on the Internet], and the next game starting, doesn’t give you the meaning that you get from a game where you have a script about what happened. And I think it’s simply that, as a rule, we’re happier around other people. Also, we’re made to feel that what we’re doing makes sense, and we’re part of a community that endorses it somehow.

It’s not just a game. What we value about the game is that it’s sort of a way of connecting with other people as well. You don’t really get that online. You get some of it. It’s not really the same. You don’t see the smile when you suggest a creative move, or that kind of thing.

Upon hearing all this, a twenty-one-year-old student of mine tells me that the scene depicted reminds her of the amorous rites of “hooking up” practiced by men and women of her generation, whereby individuals will not date or have girlfriends or boyfriends so much as conjoin for an evening at a time before going their separate ways. “Relationships for us are blitz relationships,” she tells me. “They’re so devoid of meaning and feeling. And the technology is a big part of it. People just text-message one another, to say whether or not they’re going to show up, so there’s no sense of commitment on anyone’s part.” Hooking up is to going steady as online blitz chess is to classical over-the-board play.

All this speaks to the indirect and distal forms of communication common to contemporary American society. “Communication is increasingly ‘virtualized’ and in asynchronous time,” remarks Bradd Shore, an anthropologist who studies American culture. “Much of the coordination of activity in everyday life is no longer face-to-face but, rather, is negotiated through forms of indirect communication such as calendars, pagers, telephones, voicemail, cell phones, e-mail messages, and the like.” While remote communication can facilitate interpersonal connections, it can also bring distanced and fragmentary ties. Virtual classrooms, virtual dating, virtual gaming, and virtual gambling entail mechanics of digital correspondence that “connect” people who are, more often than not, sitting in rooms by themselves. The social changes afoot are at once technological, demographic, and architectural in nature. New media and computer technologies are rendering matters more simulative. Privatized spaces have come to supplant public places, and people are spending more time by themselves. Such an impoverished social scene is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s 1935 essay on the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction, and his account of how direct experience becomes devalued when technological mediations dominate social relations.

With chess in an age of electro-digital transmission, the fact that some
cyberpunks send nasty messages after losing a game, or while playing, can add to the sense of distance. Instant messages—or tells, as they are called—appear out of the cyberblue in the chat box below the virtual game board. They usually come in the form of stock phrases like “Thanks for the game,” “Thx,” “Gracias,” or “Hi from Buffalo, NY.” But they can also be insulting. Some of the more vitriolic comments I’ve received through the years include these missives:

You know absolutely nothing about chess.
You’re not as good as you think you are.
Moron.
Lucky Bitch!!!!!!!
I am the boss here!
Thanks for the game, kid. Your play is uninspired.
Just a lucky blitztricker.
Just another ICC cheater.

Everyone gets “smack talk” like this now and again, and, worse, warranted or not. “You should see the comments I’ve gotten!” says Elizabeth Vicary after reading the preceding inventory. Her handle identifies her as female, and she has received a disturbing number of comments that reek of blatant sexual abuse: “XXXXing Bitch!!” The number of miscreants whom she has “censored” and so summarily prevented from communicating with her again is extensive. The taunts can leave a sour taste for hours afterward. “It’s crazy how rude some players are online!” Daniel tells me. When I asked Evan Rabin about such messages, he said people did this with him “once in a while.” “I’ve learned not to care,” he said. “I mean, sometimes if people are annoying I won’t play them, or I’ll censor them. It doesn’t really matter to me.”

“Keep cool. It’s only a game,” says one member on his ICC bio page. Yet it’s easy to get peeved at an unknown opponent. Fabiano Caruana, a young grandmaster who moved from New York to Italy, spoke of this in a 2008 interview in Chess Life. “But when you play chess and your opponent wins,” he said, “it’s like, ‘Is he smarter than me?’ Because it’s a mind game and it gets—you start to hate your opponent—it can be very dangerous, I can easily hate my opponents, especially if I don’t see them. That’s why ICC . . . I don’t even see them, and I want to kill them.”12 For many, playing on the ICC is like cruising down an interstate: from the safe anonymity of one’s computer it’s easy to flip someone off. Members regularly put others
on their “censor” and “no play” lists after deciding they don’t want to have anything more to do with them.

The electronic feel of the interface shapes the competitive dynamics. “You’re playing on a two-dimensional board,” says Nolan; “you can’t see the person, so there’s a detachment from the immediate competitive element.” A majority of players uses online chess servers as a training ground or playroom in which to try out new ideas, work on openings, and get in some practice games. The real chess takes place in the “real” world. For that reason, few fret about their online ratings. Also, while playing online, many are often doing other things as well—checking e-mail, surfing the Web, chatting on the phone. “People don’t take it so seriously,” an acquaintance says of online play. “So it’s difficult to take it seriously oneself.” All this, combined with the technologies involved and the anonymity of the contests, can promote an air of artifice and simulation, making online play the chess equivalent of cybersex.

The advent of online chess servers is also coinciding with the decline of neighborhood chess clubs. “The Internet sucks!” cried Polly Wright in a posting on her Internet blog, Castling Queenside, in November 2007. “Not really,” she continued. “I love the Internet, but at the same time I hate what has happened to chess clubs that have lost players to Internet chess.” Polly wrote that entry, “Small Chess Club Blues,” in the wake of a dismal turnout for a club tournament she was directing at the Bob Peretz Chess Club in White Plains, New York, despite a thousand-dollar bounty in cash prizes. Who wants to go out on a cold winter’s night when you can get in some games from the comfort of your home computer? But with that change something is lost, as chess servers cannot replace the sense of community that local chess clubs offer. Cyberforums like the ICC might serve certain functions of a community, but any such community is at best an atomized one, with its detached participants facing off against phantasms of virtual presence.

Like others, I find myself both appreciative of and disenchanted with the possibilities offered by online play. Some days I’m jacked into playing for hours. But I also understand well those who caution us to avoid the “unreal, lonely, and meaningless world” that the Internet seductively offers (as American philosopher Hubert Dreyfus casts it). I would not want online chess to be my sole means of engaging with other chess players. It’s good for a quick fix, and like others I value being able to log on at any time of the day, play some decent games, and try out new strategies. I have to agree with Dale Sharp, who has ventured into online play from his home in Peekskill, New York. “You know,” he told me, “the world with Internet
chess is better than the world without Internet chess. It hasn’t diminished it.” And yet his next words made sense as well. “It has diminished it in the sense that people don’t go as much to live tournaments, and that’s bad. And it’s bad that few people play slow games. I know a lot of people who wouldn’t even think of playing—I mean, a slow game on the Internet is a fifteen-minute game.”

Internet chess playrooms are at once highly expedient and socially anemic. Their technologies contribute to a paradoxical mix of connectivity and isolation. Years from now, however, the rhetoric of lack and difference invoked here in speaking of online chess play might strike some as reactionary and historically situated, signaling a nostalgic longing for an earlier age of pure presence and nonvirtual connection.

JUST A COUPLE MORE GAMES

It’s quiet now. The wind snaps against the brick edges of the building. Tracy must have gone to bed.

I’ll be there soon as well, after a couple more games. Having parted ways with Okiedoke, I look for another blitz partner. I lean back in the chair, drape my feet on the desk, sip from a glass of water.

A new circle appears. KennethT, rated 2161, is looking to play a three-minute unrated game. I respond, a board appears. KennethT aims for a Modern defense; then a Hippopotamus, a rare, deep-in-the-mud creature that possesses surprising agility. I take my feet off the desk and sit upright to focus better. KennethT’s queenside is decomposing. Soon I’m chasing his king, which is running away, check, check, check, until the king runs out of retreat squares. I mate him with ten seconds left on my clock.

If death in this modern era can be defined as “electro-cerebral silence,” then rapid chess is a far cry from that.15

I play, one after another, Fleshface, BrucieW, KeyboardSam, Garbage­man, and en passant. I notice the time: 12:47 A.M. I know I should stop. Just a couple more games. I post another seek. Next I’m paired with Pragueplayer, rated 2189. We play five games. We split the first four, while in the fifth Pragueplayer gets a winning position as he runs out of time. And so have I; sleep beckons.

Pragueplayer asks for a rematch, but I decline. It’s good to end with a win. “Thanks for the games,” I type out.

“Thank you.”

“Hope to catch you again sometime.”

“U too.”
I take a look at my history. A column of pluses and minuses, wins and losses, is stacked up twenty games deep, though I have only faint memories of what happened during those games. Alone in my room, I’ve whizzed through six hundred moves against fellow blitz zealots during the past two hours, with little conversation between us and with no sense of who or where they are. I feel at once connected and apart.

It’s 1:43 in the morning. I log off the server, shut down the computer, throw on my sleeping clothes, step into darkness. As I lie in bed, blankets pulled around me, my brain is revved, neurons all ablaze, endorphins and testosterone presumably tripped. Sleep is just a dream now.

Why, I ask myself, did I spend the last two hours playing meaningless blitz? Then again, at least I’m not wired into playing online until two-thirty or three in the morning, which I’ve done some nights, only to wake up drowsy and strung out the next day.

My senses are utterly alert, which is not what I want. As I stare into the dark, my pulse is in tune with the moves I’ve been making. I think about why I’m smitten with blitz chess. I give thought to whether I’m being seduced by speed, if my life is revved to a blistering pace, and the ways in which so many lives and engagements these days are speeding up. I think about an article I came across, in which a journalist was talking about how some television commercials show a new image every 1.5 seconds on average. I compare those rapid slide shows to the pace of blitz games. I wonder how similar playing chess online is to the computerized simulations of warfare used by the military to train soldiers, and I consider how modern chess, like the electronic battlefields of modern warfare, is becoming increasingly removed from flesh-and-blood encounters. I think about a book I read on the psychology of the Internet, and the terms mentioned in it, like “Internet addiction” and “compulsive Internet use”; I wonder if these labels apply to people I know. I think about the positions that Pragueplayer and I were contesting, what the right moves are.

At some point, about 2:30, I fall asleep.
“You have to be there in the moment”

“I don’t really tell people I’m a chess player,” says Abby Marshall, a women’s FIDE master, of her life in a Virginia high school where she is soon to enter the eleventh grade, “because it wouldn’t make sense to them. It’s hard to understand. To them, chess is like monopoly or checkers.” It’s just a game. “Yeah. Like going to tournaments—it wouldn’t make sense. So I prefer not to talk about it that much.”

Abby has a jaunty, optimistic air about her that has served her well at the chessboard. She has successfully competed in local and national tournaments since she was a young girl. She took up the game in her kindergarten years, before she was big enough to sit at the board, and she became an increasingly dangerous player while at Indianola Alternative Elementary School in Columbus, Ohio. The school encouraged its students to play chess, and the team traveled to many competitions. It was cool to be on the chess team, one reason being that the school didn’t have a sports program. Mark Morss, the school’s master-level coach, sensed Abby’s potential early on and began giving her free lessons three times a week. “I guess I was lucky to grow up in a chess-tolerant environment,” Abby says of her time in Columbus.

In 2005, Abby moved with her family to Warwick, Virginia, where she began attending a school in a community where there is little chess to speak of. Having no schoolmates to share or study the game with, she has had to become more independent in her endeavors. The nearest chess club is forty miles from her home, making the payoff of attending minimal. “And there are no girls.”

“It’s a really skewed ratio,” says Abby of the proportion of males to females in scholastic chess and competitive chess more widely. “There’s not really many girls that play.” While it’s not always easy to feel comfortable in a male-dominated sport, Abby takes it in stride. One benefit to being outnumbered is that it’s a cinch to befriend other female players. “I like it because it’s easy to meet the other girls,” she explains. “Because if you’re part of a small minority, instantly you have ten friends. A lot of my friends in the chess world are girls.” Some of them are the schoolmates she knew while living in Ohio.

“I’ve never had any hostility just because I’m a girl, so that’s been good,” Abby says. She has picked up on some stereotypic assumptions, however. “I guess what I don’t like is that people always assume that the girl’s the weaker player. Even when I was in Ohio, and I was one of the top players, at the state championships or whatever, people always assumed I was the
underdog. And I don’t like that. It’s kind of annoying. If it’s Round 1 and I’m on Board 3 and I’m playing someone much weaker than me, people always assume that because I’m a girl, I’m the weaker player. . . . People say things that are kind of condescending.”

Abby has competed in state and national championships, as well as international tourneys in Turkey and China. In August 2009 she won the Denker Tournament of High School Champions—the first female to do so. Two months later she was ranked twelfth among all American women. She hopes to become an international master, and would welcome the opportunity to play on a U.S. Women’s Olympiad team. Being a professional player doesn’t interest her. “I don’t like chess that much to spend my whole life doing it. I might like to teach chess, though.”

Abby is known to have the poised calm of a seasoned competitor. “I usually don’t go crazy, or self-destruct,” she says when asked about this. “Because if I lose, it sucks, but I’m not going to get really depressed.” She’s at her best in tactics-rich, attacking positions. “I like to play wide-open positions, with a lot of tactics. It’s kind of the way I learned how to play.”

She likes the “intensity” of chess. “Unlike in basketball or whatever, when you get stressed out, you can keep moving and playing. But here, you have to learn to deal with that kind of pressure. . . . It’s also an escape from normal life.”

“I like winning,” she says. “You get a lot of attention, and you get satisfaction from playing a good game.”

Abby plays blitz chess with friends and on the ICC, though she doesn’t play online for longer than ten minutes at a stretch. “It just gets boring. There’s something about having someone sitting across from you [with an over-the-board game]. When you lose to someone in a national tournament game, you have to shake that person’s hand, you have to be there in the moment. But if you lose online, you can turn off the computer and go do something else.”
Endgame

Nothing by which all human passion and hope and folly can be mirrored and then proved, ever was just a game. Move.
—William Faulkner, “Knight’s Gambit”

Summer 2009. Jakob Stockel is a kindly man with a slim, athletic build and silver-gray hair whose passion for chess defies the fact that he’s now in his eighth decade.

Jakob can be found most Fridays at the Max Pavey Chess Club in Briarcliff Manor, New York. He’s usually the first to arrive and the last to leave. While playing casual games he sustains a running commentary: “The man says ‘check.’ . . . The man says ‘check.’ . . .”

I drove Jakob home from the club late one summer Friday. A wave of thunderstorms had hit the area. He had just finished playing a radiant game in a club championship against Dale Sharp, a master. He lost the game after missing the correct continuation in the fifth hour of play, just before midnight. To have beaten Dale, who outranked him by five hundred rating points, would have been the upset of the year. To have come close to doing so but failed in the end was crushing. I asked him why he liked to play chess. “Ah, I love it. I just love it,” he answered.

Jakob told me, as we passed through rain-soaked streets, that he learned to play as a boy in Yugoslavia, while he and his family were interned in a Serbian labor camp at the end of World War II. He continued to play after his family escaped to Austria two years later, and then immigrated to the United States in 1950. Jakob settled in New York, where he married and had children and grandchildren and has run a liquor store in Pleasantville for decades.

In hearing Jakob talk, I realized that chess had been, for more than sixty
years, an integral part of his life. The game had been balm and refuge to him during terrible times.

I met Jakob at the club the following Friday. “Remember when you asked me why I like to play chess?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“It’s because it’s such a challenge! When you get such a good position against a strong player, like I did in my game last week, you feel really good.”

A GREAT GOOD PLACE

I see Jakob most Fridays at the club, along with other members. Most of us arrive by seven-thirty. We set up aluminum banquet tables and chairs in the middle of an open, rectangular room with hardwood floors and dig out from a storage chest the club’s plastic chess sets, weathered vinyl boards, and clocks. We’re content most weeks to play casual, “skittles” games against each other, with or without clocks, or blitz games. Winning or losing doesn’t matter much. Most of us are in our forties or older, and we don’t have a lot to prove at the board. When we’ve had enough, which is usually around midnight, we return the clocks and chess sets to the chest, lock up the place, and drive off in separate directions.

The Max Pavey Chess Club, founded in 1954, convenes on Friday nights at a recreation center in Briarcliff Manor, a well-heeled town close to the Hudson River. The town of Ossining, with its namesake maximum-security prison, Sing Sing Correctional Facility, is a few miles to the west. The club is named after American master and medical doctor Max Pavey, who lived in Westchester County in the later years of his life, before he died in 1957 of leukemia. The illness apparently resulted from radiation poisoning that Pavey suffered working with radioactive materials while employed by the United States government. Generations of players have attended the club since its inception.

A core group of adult players who live in neighboring towns comes to the club each week. I’ve been attending for seven years now. Like others, I’ve had the pleasure of carving friendships out of my visits there. It’s worth the forty-mile round-trip drive.

I’ve come to think of the Max Pavey club as a “great good place.” Sociologist Ray Oldenburg uses this term in writing about those locales in American society—cafés, coffee shops, bars, community centers—“third places” where people can gather outside the home or the workplace and mingle in relaxed ways with others. Alongside such places are the site-specific activities that enable people to gather for purposes formal or infor-
mal: bowling leagues, fantasy football associations, book clubs. Visit any chess club and you’ll meet firemen and lawyers, bakers and nursery school teachers, and you’ll end up conversing with folks from Belarus, Boston, or Trinidad. The interactions are direct, face-to-face, and not “virtual.” That’s significant, in light of the gradual demise of public gathering places in the United States and elsewhere. As political scientist Robert Putnam contends in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, over the past few decades Americans have come to spend less time involved in collective leisure activities and in civic engagement more generally. Leisure time has become a more private affair for a number of reasons, from pressures of time and money to generational changes to the rise of electronic entertainment such as television and the Internet. People “schmooze” less and observe activities more than they engage in them directly, making for fewer face-to-face interactions all around. Chess clubs in the New York area are not immune from these trends; anecdotal evidence suggests that participation in them has weakened over the years. But regulars still attend week after week.

We come for the chess, and we come for the company of others. The tempered sociability appears especially suited for American men, many of whom can be reserved around other men when it comes to revealing aspects of their personal lives. The chessboard gives us something to talk about, to laugh or anguish over, besides ourselves directly. The mood usually is light, relaxed, and far from workish. Club members may be either chatty or taciturn, but we are there with others, engaging in our passion for the game. The intellectual engagement is appreciated. We’re like amateur jazz musicians who get together on weekends to jam. The ritualistic quality of chess makes it easy to engage with other chess players: we set up the pieces and get going, no small talk required. Even the optical dimensions play a part; most club-goers train their eyes on the boards in front of them, with only occasional, modest glances into the eyes of others. Many casual games end with a few friendly words exchanged; then the pieces are set up anew and silence returns until the game ends, exciting another rally of words and glances. An evening’s participation consists of a chain of “interaction rituals” centered on casual chess games. Lifelong friendships can grow out of these encounters. Chess, like music or cigarettes, is a tool of sociality.

**DYNAMIC EQUILIBRIUM**

In Ingmar Bergman’s film *Fanny and Alexander*, a theater manager gives his annual Christmastime speech to those involved in the theater. He says to those gathered around him,
My only talent, if you can call it that in my case, is that I love this little world inside the thick walls of this playhouse. And I’m fond of the people who work in this little world. Outside is the big world, and sometimes the little world succeeds in reflecting the big one, so that we understand it better. Or perhaps we give the people who come here a chance to forget for a while, for a few short moments . . . for a few short moments the harsh world outside. Our theater is a little room of orderliness, routine, care, and love.

It sounds a lot like chess.

Yet while a person doesn’t need a lot of expert knowledge to delight in theater or music, that’s not the case when it comes to chess. You don’t need to be an expert in harmonic changes to treasure a jazz masterpiece like Coleman Hawkins’s *Body and Soul*, but you do need to know more than how the pieces move to appreciate what’s going on in a high-quality chess game. It takes a while before you can start to hear the music of chess, and longer still before you can play a few decent notes of it yourself. As Nolan puts it, “It’s really hard to understand what’s going on in chess until you become good at it.” But once you do, the board lights up with meaning and history and clever queen moves that can make your head spin. The more you immerse yourself in the game, the more you get out of it.

Since so much of this is lost on the casual observer, the game’s intrigues go unnoticed by the general public. Certain myths recur, as writers and filmmakers alike recycle stock images. Chess players are cast as brainy nerds, as idiot savants teetering on the edge of madness, or as social misfits whose only solace in life comes through pushing plastic pieces around. The lived realities, though, are more subtle and robust than the stereotypes might suggest, and the motives for engaging them varied.

No person I’ve spoken with has given a single, all-consuming motive for wanting to play chess, and no two spelled out precisely the same reasons. Bundles of diverse forces get different players to the board. There are many reasons to play or think or be passionately devoted to chess—from the sweet agony of competitive play to the game’s rich history—or to find that it matters in the world today.

But there’s more to the story than that, as many chess players also express a nagging ambivalence. Chess spawns both passion and anxiety. Some tire of the game’s competitive culture, or they grow wary of the pain of losing, particularly as they age, and find that they cannot put together combinations of moves as well as they once did. Others come to lament the fact that the time, energy, and resources they’ve devoted to it are never matched by any significant material gains or social rewards. Professional players quit competing to look for greener incomes in other endeavors, be it poker,
hedge funds, or teaching chess. Amateurs turn to hobbies less taxing or find that chess is too much of a “time sink.” Some conclude that there’s more to life than just chess. Chess, or life: it often comes down to a tense interplay between these two realms.

In a short film about Marcel Duchamp by avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter, Richter asks the artist turned chess player, “Why chess, Mr. Duchamp?”

“Why not, Mr. Richter?” Duchamp answers. “Do you think that life is so important and chess is not?”

Pose Duchamp’s defiant question to any chess player, and his answer will say a lot about how his involvements with the game tie into his life in general. Some players dabble in chess an evening or so each week, and live rich lives beyond that. Others are like modern-day monks whose ascetic regimens of dedication, humility, and mindful practices mark them as different from their more worldly neighbors. Yet the monks know that it’s those regimens that elevate their lives above the mundane. Others struggle to strike a balance between the life of the game and the game of life. A few lose their way and blunder away relationships while charting the complications of life beyond the chessboard. Many players oscillate between seasons of competitive chess and hard-edged study of the game, and stretches of time in which the game is a hobby they indulge in now and then. These strains and oscillations parallel the concerns of modern subjects more generally, for we are, by and large, an uncertain, manifold, self-conscious, passion-vexed lot. Many are searching for meaning and connection in our lives, for efforts to feel passionately about, while knowing that we ourselves are the makers of those meanings and the architects of those passions.

Those who stick with the game do so because they find that its pleasures and benefits keep them riveted. In giving thought to this matter, I’m reminded of an observation that Siegbert Tarrasch, a renowned German player, made in the early 1930s, a few years before he died in 1934 at the age of seventy-one. “I have always a slight feeling of pity for the man who has no knowledge of chess,” the doctor wrote in The Game of Chess, “just as I would pity the man who has remained ignorant of love. Chess, like love, like music, has the power to make men happy.” I too have found that chess can make women and men happy—at least while they’re at the chessboard.

That was the case for me, for several heady years; so much so that even after I had decided to write a book on the game and told friends and colleagues of my plan, I delayed getting started with the actual writing. Chess was so utterly interesting that I continued to prefer playing and studying it
than writing about it. At the same time, the more chess defined my ways of
thinking, both at and beyond the chessboard, the more suspicious I became
of language. Compared to the precision and accuracy to be found on the
chessboard, words—which had once been trusted intimates of mine—had
become all too vague, all too unreliable and inaccurate. How could anyone
rely on such a poor vehicle to get at the truth and beauty of chess? Try to
portray through words any single moment of chess, of players battling it
out at a sweaty chess club, or of a deft positional middlegame strategy, and
we’re left with a swirl of interpretations, a sheen of emblems. But parse
what’s going on at the board itself, in actual chess terms, and we can reach
clear and lasting truths. Or so I thought then. Language had become for
me the antithesis of chess, paralyzing any thoughts I had of writing about
the game.

Something shifted in July 2007, and the words started to come. An
enchantment faded once I started to write out my thoughts on the game.
I swung out of the five-year reverie in which I had been immersed and
looked around to see that there was a world beyond the chessboard. The
play of life, language, and people became more interesting to me than the
maneuvers of chess pieces.

My friend Khan stopped by my place the other day, a few days before he
was to compete in the Foxwoods Open, held each April at the Foxwoods
Resort Casino in Connecticut. Khan himself had just started playing com­
petitively again after a yearlong break from the game, and he was hoping
to win some tournament cash (he won $2,400). We scrimmaged through a
couple of blitz games, and then examined some game positions we thought
he might encounter that weekend. From a bookshelf I grabbed a manual
on the Grünfeld Defense, and we began to trace out the lines of battle in
one tactics-rich variation. I was struck by how intricately twisted the many
continuations were, and the hours of thought that could be put into their
analysis. I would have leaped into that task a few years back. That after­
noon, I wasn’t much into it. Chess does not quicken my pulse as it once did.
The sublime involutions of the game remain, but the deep, soulful music I
once heard is fading.

These days I hesitate to pour time into chess. The tug of life is stron­
ger. Its rumpled richness offers muddy streets and a friend’s laughter and
Spanish songs played on conga drums in Tompkins Square Park. I feel I
would be missing out if I were to spend long weekends in clubs or tourna­
ment halls, minding the geometry of knights and bishops. Chess doesn’t
seem beautiful enough to waste my life on. My wariness of the maddening
seductions of the game, my unwillingness to put in the hard work required
to advance my playing skills, the fact that as I age it becomes more difficult to play as well as I might otherwise, and my lack of enthusiasm for the competitive furies keep me from joining Khan and others at tournaments like Foxwoods. *Dynamic equilibrium* is a term chess writers use in speaking of a game position in which the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each side’s configuration of pieces are altogether equal, in a charged way, to those of the opposing forces. I’m trying to hit on a dynamic equilibrium between chess and life, between a love for the game and a craving for life. That’s the current oscillation, at least: I think a lot about chess, but those thoughts relate less to the game itself than to the lives of chess players.

And so these days I play casual games at local chess clubs and in homes with friends on the occasional weekend, as well as blitz games against anonymous opponents online, but I rarely compete in tournaments and I seldom pick up a chess book or analyze positions. I’m like a lot of middle-aged amateur players, that is. While the game was an all-consuming affection for me a few years back, it’s now a side variation in the broader repertory of my life. Passion has a life course of its own. I’ve since shifted my focus to life more generally, to my life and those of others, to my life in relation to others, trying to delve deeper into the intricacies of the world, and I think that’s the right move for me right now. Still, I miss the way the game once enthralled me, how it inspired my efforts in life. I miss the thrill of thinking through positions, figuring things out. At times, I find myself mourning for a mood that has been lost, for that gleaming world of knights and bishops—safe, pure, joyous, intense. I’m not sure I could get that back, even if I wanted to. “The true paradises are paradises we have lost,” said Marcel Proust.

Yet who can say what the next year or three will bring? “Fortunately,” John Watson said recently, “chess players are so addicted that they always predict they’re going to stay further away from the game than they do.”

**Mirrored and then proved**

Something intensely human shapes people’s involvements with the game. “Chess is life,” many have proposed. This is usually said in reference to the idea that the play of the pieces on the board reflects the play of forces and actors in the world, “mirrored and then proved,” as Faulkner wrote. For me, the observation holds the most truth in terms of the human dramas that surround the game. Chess reflects how people long for meaning and purpose in their lives, how we want to live intensely, craft something of beauty, test ourselves against others, and achieve a sense of mastery in our endeav-
ors. Chess speaks to the place of ritual and cultural forms in our lives, and how we seek rites, devices, or magical charms to keep anxiety at bay. It illustrates the ways that people act creatively and agentively, and how we try to rework the grounds of our lives through practical efforts that can be magical in effect. Chess play shows how we are indeed a genus of *Homo ludens*, for children and adults delight in play (as do many other animals) and welcome the chance to immerse themselves in an imaginative realm that transcends the everyday. It reveals the ways that such immersions can be both enriching and troubling; while they offer people alternative modes of being and consciousness, they also lead some to find more intensity and clarity in those ways of being than in their everyday lives and relationships, to such a degree that they end up venturing into ludic flights from life. Our attraction to the game shows how we want to share something of interest together, and to situate ourselves in a greater history of human effort. It reveals how many try to fashion themselves into better, wiser beings in the world. It attests to the social dimensions of people’s lives, from the need to connect with others to the competitive impulses and status wrangling that emerge whenever people gather in a room. Chess practice points to the ways people are embedded in complex systems of thought and action, and the ways we draw from new technologies to enhance our efforts in the world, while those same technologies are forever shaping how we think, act, play, feel, perceive, and relate to others. Indeed, while there might be something quintessentially human in people’s engagements with chess, we need to keep in mind that humankind is itself endlessly changing, and as the elements of humanness change, so do the energies and import of a play form like chess.

What does the future hold for chess? What modalities of play, ritual, time, narrative, consciousness, and sociality will be involved? The game is ever-changing. It’s becoming quicker, more intense, more demanding. Kids these days teethe on cyberchess, and the deitest of them lap up grandmaster titles in their early teens. The databases are getting bulkier by the day. The pace of the game is speeding up. Ever-faster time controls tick away. Information flits from one country to another on an electronic impulse. It’s a question how total, and how intense, the total intensification of the game can get, and how cyborgian the next generations of chess players will be. Computer technologies are radically altering the dynamics of the game. They are shaping how chess players configure the human, and they have made cybercheating and cheating paranoia scary realities. They are also pointing to a possible future in which chess becomes “played out” and so evolves into a postplay, postchess formation wherein chess is no
longer chess, at least as we moderns have known it. Neighborhood chess clubs are losing members to the convenience of online play, while Internet chess forums are making chess more virtual than ever and reconfiguring what it means to play with others. Chess has also become more global and diasporic, with the top talents scattered about the world.

Still, chess remains just a blip on the collective consciousness of many societies. We’re smack in an era of video games and television fluff, where the most sought-after activities are not necessarily deep thinks and patient strategizing. As David Letterman once quipped, “There just isn’t enough televised chess.” In North America, at least, chess will never be as popular as football or films or even yoga. But many are turning to chess, perhaps because it offers something that video games and the Internet do not. Hip-hop artists rap on the game, and each year schools add its study to their curricula. With chess we play with form, abide in complexity, encounter others, craft a world.

“Chess is fascinating,” says Boris Salman, a software developer and chess enthusiast from Moscow who lives with his family in Seattle, Washington. “My wife doesn’t understand. With chess, you’re creating something, making something. It’s a world.”
A lesson in nonattachment, if ever there was one

One Saturday, while watching two young boys play at a chess club, I noticed that one boy’s queen was threatened by his opponent’s bishop. The boy ignored the threat in making his next move.

“Aren’t you worried that he can take your queen?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

“Why is that?”

“Because if he takes it, then I won’t have to worry about it anymore.”
The standard way to record chess moves is with algebraic notation. To the uninitiated this can read like an obscure code, but it’s actually quite easy to follow once one gets the hang of it.

Each square on the chessboard is identified with a unique pair of a letter and a number, such as c4, d5, e7, and f5. The letters, from a to h, correspond to the eight different vertical files found on the chessboard, as viewed from the White side of the board. The numbers, from 1 to 8, relate to the eight horizontal ranks (figure 6). For example, the c-file includes all the squares from c1 to c8. The first rank includes all the squares from a1 to h1, the second rank all the squares from a2 to h2, and so on.

In figure 7, the c4, d5, e7, and f5 squares are marked, while the a-file and the third rank are identified by arrows.

To record a move, one writes a symbol for which piece moves: K for king, Q for queen, B for bishop, R for rook, and N for knight. Then one notes the square to which that piece has moved. For example, if at the start of a game the player with the White pieces brings his kingside knight to the f3 square, the move would be annotated as 1. Nf3. If the player with the Black pieces now moves his queenside knight to the c6 square, the annotation of the game to this point would be 1. Nf3 Nc6 (figure 8). In that case Black’s move is written after White’s. But when only Black’s move is noted, an ellipsis is used, for instance, 1 . . . Nc6 (as in “Black played 1 . . . Nc6 after White played 1. Nf3”).

When a pawn moves, one does not write any symbol for it, just the
Figure 6. The files (a–h) and ranks (1–8) of a chessboard

Figure 7. The chessboard with the c4, d5, e7, and f5 squares marked and arrows indicating the a-file and the third rank
Figure 8. The board after 1. Nf3 Nc6

Figure 9. The board after 1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. d4
square it moves to. Thus a game that begins with 1. e4 c5 means that White has moved his e-pawn to the e4 square on his first move and Black has countered by moving his c-pawn to the c5 square. Now play might continue with

2. Nf3 e6
3. d4
—resulting in the position shown in figure 9.

Black could now capture White’s pawn on d4 with his own pawn on c5. The annotation for that move in the current game would be 3 \ldots cxd4. The \textit{x} means “captures” or “takes.” White could in turn capture Black’s pawn on d4 by moving his knight from f3 to d4, which would be annotated


The record for this game so far would thus be,

1. e4 c5
2. Nf3 e6
3. d4 cxd4
4. Nxd4

Three further procedures round off the methods of notation. First, the annotation for castling on the kingside is 0–0, while for queenside castling it is 0–0–0. Second, if a move puts the opponent’s king into check, the annotation of the move is accompanied with a plus sign, such as 32. Bxf7+. If the move mates the opponent’s king, a number symbol accompanies the move, such as 27 \ldots Rc1#. Third, if two pieces of the same kind (knight, bishop, rook) can move to the same square, then the file from which the piece is moving is added to the annotation. For example, if Black had a knight on the b8 square and one on the f6 square, and moved the knight on b8 to d7, then the notation for that would be \ldots Nd7 (because \ldots Nd7 alone would be unclear).
What, precisely, comes of chess play, outside of learning and mastering the
game itself? What skills or sensibilities transfer from the realm of chess
to life in general? It’s difficult to say for sure, as any such transference
is diffuse and inexact at best, and we’re still in need of good, in-depth,
longitudinal research that conclusively examines if and how chess informs
people’s ways of thinking, perceiving, and being more generally. The most
trenchant data are to be found in the observations of veteran chess instruc-
tors. While these educators admittedly have a vested interest in talking
up the benefits of chess among children, what they have to say is worth
noting.

As their teachers and coaches believe, chess offers a great deal to young
people who are serious about learning the game. Chess helps children and
adolescents to think logically, to evaluate information, to “plot,” and to
plan. “What you’re teaching is systematic thinking,” Jim Santorelli told
me. Chess also helps a person to focus and concentrate better, to be “on
task,” to learn how to define a problem and address it. “In chess, in con-
trast to math,” explained Jim’s coworker Sunil Weeramantry, who teaches
at Hunter Elementary School in Manhattan, among other places, “you
have to create and phrase and define the problem first, and that comes
from an understanding of the different elements in a position.” The geom-
etry of the game helps young children develop their visual-spatial abilities,
perceive relations in space, and think in visual terms. “If you’re teaching
the game of chess,” Jim observed, “then what you’re doing is introducing a
visually intensive game to children long before their visual-spatial ability is fully developed, and in that sense it accelerates that maturation process.”

Chess teaches children to slow down, to take their time in thinking through angles, in a world that increasingly zips along at video-image speed. “Chess is very good for kids,” said Leonid Yudasin, who gives lessons in schools and chess clubs in Brooklyn and Manhattan, “because one of the problems with kids today is that they’re very smart with computers, and with very fast video games, and because of that, kids see the world much faster, generally, but much less deep. It goes so fast! Look at all the modern television in America. You don’t have time to think. . . . But chess gives people a good chance to be smarter, to think well and quietly—to meditate mentally.”

Rusudan Goletiani finds much the same with her students at the Westchester Chess Academy in Rye, New York, where she and Mike Amori instruct children from both affluent and lower-income neighborhoods in the ways of tournament chess. They show them the etiquette of sitting down and shaking hands with opponents, and they teach them how to endure the stress of playing a tournament game, with the clock ticking and people watching. “We have so many different kinds of kids,” Rusa told me. Some kids have attention problems, some can’t sit still. But that’s why it’s great to play chess, because it disciplines them so much. They are forced for ninety minutes to sit down. They try to go somewhere else, but we bring them back. We push them a little, but I think it helps them, and they do better in school because chess teaches you so many good things. You concentrate better, your attention gets better, your thinking gets better overall. You get discipline . . . especially the kids that have trouble concentrating, especially those kids. When they come here it’s not easy, but after eight weeks even we can see the progress. They slow down and they get better. It’s hard work, but it pays off.

Chess induces calm, patience, focus.

The game adds to a person’s sense of responsibility in life. It can build character and instill a sense of “honor,” to use Jonathan Rowson’s term. “Life is touch-move” is the motto of the Westchester Chess Academy, printed on T-shirts and given out to members. “Isn’t that a cool motto?” Mike Amori asked me. “Basically, if you ask me in a nutshell, life is touch-move.” (If you touch a piece, you have to follow through with that action and move it. You can’t take it back. So take care in how you act in chess, and in life.) Mike continued,

And there is the fact that most of the kids around here have enough money where there aren’t money issues at home, there’s not a poverty issue, so that the level of resistance in their lives—they’re overloaded, don’t get me wrong,
they’re working their tails off—but when they hit a wall with something, there’s a lot of other choices and they can kind of go around it. And you’ve found that when you stick it out and play chess, especially tournament chess, those kinds of lessons of teaching yourself to be resilient and living by the consequences of your actions, in chess it comes to you in a hurry and it’s ruthless. I mean, as a chess player, when you make a mistake, you are going to get punished for it. And there is basically no excuse . . . And I like the fact that there’s a certain coldness to that—and I consider myself to be a warm person, especially with kids—but I like the fact that they get exposed to this idea that it’s your work. You know, no one is interfering with your work here, but it’s touch-move. And for whatever reason, you didn’t find the right move here and you end up losing the game because. They see the connection.

It is a way for a kid to stand up, work hard, and see the results of that work in black and white, right in front of them. And almost every life lesson a parent wants to throw at their kid, the game is going to throw them the same ones.

The benefits of an education in chess thinking are palpably evident at Intermediate School 318, a junior high school in Brooklyn. That’s where Elizabeth Vicary teaches chess to children ages eleven to fifteen years old, in sixth to eighth grade. IS 318 is in the federal Title 1 program, which provides money for schools that have many students from low-income families. The student poverty rate is more than 70 percent, and more than 90 percent of the students are of Latino, black, or Asian/Pacific descent. The school stands one block from the elevated M line in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, across the street from a school-run public garden. Security personnel stand watch by the building’s entrance. Chess trophies line the main hallway of the school’s first floor, next to victory banners and posters of enlarged newspaper articles about its chess teams. These icons celebrate the chess program’s successes and the school’s pride in that program. “It reaches kids that are not always easy to reach at times,” says Elizabeth. The program provides “a community of learning.”

Elizabeth runs her classes much the way any of the other classes taught in the building are run, except that her subject is not math or English, but chess. The curriculum includes lessons on chess openings, middlegame strategy, and endgame knowledge; reviews of homework assigned on tactical puzzles; training games; and sessions of Chess Jeopardy. The classes take place in room 319, a sunlit classroom that houses sixteen two-person desks with chessboards fastened to their surfaces; four computers for student use; a bookcase library of chess books; a file box holding all of the students’ work; digital chess clocks (often suspected of being explosive devices by airport security personnel); drawings of all the chess world champions (this pantheon replaced a lineup of the U.S. presidents posted by a previous
instructor); a computer printout, updated weekly, of the IS 318 top-rated players; and a multitude of posters remarking on select chess matters, from explanations of chess terms (“Initiative,” “Zugzwang”) to quotations (“I failed to make the chess team because of my height” —Woody Allen). A chess club convenes at the end of each school day, with twenty-plus students playing rated games and blitz tournaments.

Most of Elizabeth’s students are boys. Usually only one or two girls are in a class, suggesting that most of the school’s girls gravitate toward other subjects. Among the chess students each year are a number of well-informed, tournament-seasoned players. Many of the students in the advanced class put in an average of twenty hours a week on chess. Some work twenty-five hours a week on their game. They study chess during their lunch periods and at home in the evenings and on weekends. Their efforts have been paying off, individually and collectively, with the school’s teams notching impressive victories in national championships over the past ten years. Coached by Elizabeth and John Galvin, a chess-playing assistant principal and the school’s chess coordinator, the teams have defeated some of the more prestigious chess teams in the country, including Manhattan’s Hunter Elementary School and Brooklyn’s Edward R. Murrow High School.

The gains of the school’s chess program go far beyond the trophies and accolades. Elizabeth finds that chess demonstrates to her students the value of thinking. “The idea that thinking gets you something is not obvious to all kids,” especially children in underprivileged communities, who tend to get less attention paid to them in early childhood. “If you’re in a class of thirty and you do a really good job on your English paper, what are the chances that the teacher even notices? Not much. With chess, the kids want to win, because everyone wants to win. You have to think, and if you make a mistake, you lose. And so there is just such an obvious, immediate emotional reward to thinking, and I think that’s absent in almost every other way in those kids’ lives.” Chess boosts the confidence of many students, especially those who are not good readers or might not have done well in other subjects but come to excel at the chessboard. “You have to be a good reader to be good at school,” says Elizabeth. “If you’re not a good reader, you’re bad at everything. But with chess you don’t have to read at all. And so it’s especially useful for the academic self-confidence of ESL kids, and kids who for whatever reason aren’t superb readers in junior high school—they haven’t been read to, they don’t like reading, there aren’t books in the house, whatever it is.” Elizabeth adds,

And for a lot of the kids, they’ve never been smart before. And they’re like, “Wow. That’s awesome!” . . . It’s about confidence, and it’s about making aca-
demia or making intellectualism seem relevant. I also think it’s very nice that kids learn early on that you can be friends around an intellectual interest. . . . For some kids it’s a social network, it’s good socially. Junior high school is a rough place socially, and it’s very emotional. Kids are very emotional at that age. And if you don’t have friends it’s really, really hard, especially for girls—but for everybody, I’m sure. And because we go on so many trips, and because they see so much of each other at my school, and because chess meets so often, for a lot of them it provides a social environment where they’re accepted.

As Elizabeth understands it, there’s a window of opportunity for children, a developmental interval in which they can “develop the ability to think through very difficult problems, or to think very deeply or to think in abstract ways—to think quickly and imaginatively or diffusely or in different ways.” While students in junior high schools are at “the very end” of that window, the public school system doesn’t address the development of those cognitive skills well. “This isn’t a general smashing of the school system,” Elizabeth says. “I believe in the public school system, which is why I work here. But there’s some things that are just not possible in a class of thirty kids. And chess does present them with problems of a difficulty they don’t get elsewhere.” The chess program is helping its students to gain cultural and intellectual capital by giving them social and cognitive skills that can aid them appreciably once they step into other educational settings and, beyond that, into any life and work environments that come their way.

Serious chess play offers “equipment for living,” much the way great imaginative writing does (as literary theorist Kenneth Burke argued in the 1940s). The game provides tools for thinking, sense-making, relating. A double education is in force: while children are learning how to play the game, they’re also gathering how to carry on in life. This is especially the case when their chess instructors try, through their pedagogy, to instantiate a “transfer” of skills acquired through chess to domains of life more generally. If this happens, children can learn about the consequences of actions in the world, the value of hard work and personal responsibility, and the benefits of patient thought. They learn how to deal better with conflict and defeat, and they can come to appreciate better the existential presence and demands of the other. The tutelage can be at once cognitive, perceptual, and moral in scope. And the fact that chess is a game makes the inculcation of these lessons go relatively smoothly and playfully. Chess, someone realized years ago, is a “gymnasium of the mind.”

Chess can facilitate an intuitive, gut-based understanding by experience. It can instill a measure of phronesis, to draw on a word that Jesse
Kraai, an American grandmaster in his mid-thirties, likes to use in speaking of the methods of decision-making in chess and in life.

Jesse grew up in New Mexico and started playing chess seriously “late,” when he was in the seventh grade. He played through high school, college, and graduate school, and became an increasingly strong player during those years, without coaches showing him the way. “Jesse has dominated the New Mexico chess scene for some time now,” another New Mexican player tells me. In 2001, he received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Heidelberg. He taught philosophy at St. John’s College in Santa Fe for several years, but then left the academic world in 2002. He has devoted much of his time and energy to chess since. In 2007 he achieved the title of grandmaster, the first American-born player to do so in a decade. Jesse currently lives in California, with few expenses chewing into his modest income as a chess player and instructor. One reason he left academia to focus on chess full-time is that he finds that the chess world offers more objective criteria for evaluating a person’s performance. He explains, “Perhaps the biggest thing is that my experience with chess, even though it’s not economically viable, is . . . something in which one’s performance is rather objectively gauged, and it’s not based on factors that seem superfluous, as might be found, say, in the academic world, such as your reputation, or how you dress, or who you know . . . . To my mind, that’s the key advantage that chess has over other areas. There isn’t any room for fooling oneself.” No one can bullshit for long at the chessboard.

Jesse’s training as a philosopher informs his approach to chess and how he thinks about the game. He speaks in clear and measured terms about the conceptual and cognitive features of the game. He has discerned that chess shares many of the same “mathetic” elements, the same quantitative ways of thinking, that music and math embody, and he has been trying to get a conceptual handle on those shared elements, despite the fact that “it’s very hard to talk about what that mathetic is.” Jesse works hard outside the tournament hall, carefully dissecting the games he has played in order to examine the motivations and thought processes that inform how he makes decisions while at the board. That’s where, for him, the concept of _phronesis_ comes into play.

_Phronesis_ is an ancient Greek word, employed by Aristotle, among other Greek thinkers. It’s usually translated into English as “practical wisdom” or “prudence.” But Jesse draws from the writings of Thucydides, a Greek historian who lived in the fifth century B.C., in using the word in ways that go far beyond what we normally think about as “prudence.” _Phronesis_ is a knowledge that is derived from experiences in various situ-
ations. In particular, it’s an awareness of the factors that shape how decisions are made. “Phronesis is a term that Thucydides uses in his account of the Peloponnesian War,” Jesse explains to me.

To his mind, it’s this word that means a kind of understanding by experience, an experience which isn’t necessarily intellectual, but which is more gut-based, or something in your breast. In particular, in chess, and I think in life, you can talk about certain situations where someone who has reflected on how he acts in certain situations, and has reflected on what his gut reaction is, and where he made mistakes, and if he’s becoming sensitive to where the mistakes happen, then that’s a kind of phronesis. To my mind, you can achieve that through chess, and you can think about that in life. But really, I think, there’s a lot of players who don’t accomplish that, because they don’t go over their games. I don’t think it’s just playing chess. You have to have some experience in thinking about how you come to decisions.

Here again, experience is what you do with what happens to you.

Much the same holds for life. Many make decisions on the fly, without carefully considering their consequences, and once those decisions are made, those same people tend not to examine the thought processes that went into them. But if a person does in fact just that, if she reflects patiently and critically on how her thoughts proceed, then in time a certain experience-based practical wisdom can emerge—a phronetic sensibility, if you will. Chess offers a lucid example of this process.

“There’s an analogy you might find helpful,” Jesse says:

You can think of the person’s mind as like a well, and you can drop something into this well. Some people’s minds, in fact most people’s minds, whatever you toss into the well, it doesn’t actually have much time before it hits the bottom, because the reaction is so fast, and the judgment is formed before this thing has time to drop to the bottom and gather some thoughts about it.

One thing that chess definitely does is create a deeper well, where if you are to become better, you have to realize that you can’t form a fast judgment about the position, that you have to let the stone drop, and reflect on that stone from various perspectives before you start establishing quick judgments about what’s going on.

Everyday life is more unpredictable and variable than a chess game, as Jesse knows, but practical wisdom is deeply in demand there as well. “You know,” he says, “I would like to ascribe decisions I’ve made in life to chess, but to do that in some kind of clear-cut way is difficult. But there’s certain times where I see people around me making very strange decisions, which have a lot to do with not being able to foresee the consequences of their actions and the interrelatedness of their decisions.”

Life is touch-move.
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Notes

ONE. BLITZKRIEG BOP


2. Fischer quoted in Frank Brady, Bobby Fischer: Profile of a Prodigy (Dover, 1989), p. 15.


TWO. NOTES ON A SWINDLE


10. “Beautiful problems” is a phrase of Marcel Duchamp’s.

11. George Steiner, Fields of Force (Viking, 1974). Internet sources attribute the phrase “every move played” to Bruce A. Moon.


18. My thinking and language here echo those of Tilottama Rajan, who notes, “magic is the term Sartre uses to describe emotion as a short-circuit in which the subject, by a form of simulation, reconstitutes a difficult world on its own terms”; *Deconstruction and the Remainders of Phenomenology* (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 278.


26. Thanks go to Michael Jackson for this sentence.


**THREE. PSYCH-OUT**


5. In speaking of these different kinds of players, Hoffmann was referring to terms established by Russian grandmaster Yuri Averbakh. Averbakh spoke of these categories at a lecture at the Marshall Chess Club in June 2008; see Joseph Calisi, “Averbakh Speaks at the Marshall,” USCF.org, June 5, 2008, http://main.uschess.org/content/view/8481/463/.


7. The titles of grandmaster, international master, and FIDE master are awarded by the world chess organization FIDE, based on ratings achieved and favorable results in tournaments.


11. Indeed, in light of this attitude, as I write this book I find myself anticipating at least some of its readers saying something like, “This guy’s rated only 2000, on a good day. What does he know about chess?” It will happen.


20. Julian Hodgson’s comments are quoted in Summerscale and Summerscale, *Interview with a Grandmaster*, p. 93.


FOUR. SVESHNIKOV INTRIGUES
Epigraph: Fischer quoted in Andrew Soltis, Bobby Fischer Rediscovered (Batsford, 2003), p. 11.

1. The Sveshnikov Sicilian, also known as the Chelyabinsk Variation in Russia and Europe, usually arises on the board after the opening moves 1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 e5. In the diagrammed position, White has responded with the main continuation, 6. Ndb5.
4. Gennadi Timoshchenko quoted in Kasparov, Garry Kasparov on Modern Chess, part 1: Revolution in the 70s, p. 44.

FIVE. SON OF SORROW


1. The club, now the Bob Peretz Chess Club, has since moved on to a location in White Plains, New York.
15. The information on Csikszentmihalyi’s internment in the prison camp comes from two sources: a 2003 entry on him in the *UXL Encyclopedia of World


19. Csikszentmihalyi, Beyond Boredom and Anxiety, p. 68.


SIX. AMBIVALENCE


23. Stefan Zweig, The Royal Game and Other Stories (Harmony Books, 1981), p. 8. It’s worth noting, however, the continuation of this passage: “... and nevertheless demonstrably more durable in its true nature and existence than any books or creative works? Isn’t it the only game that belongs to all peoples and all times? And who knows whether God put it on earth to kill boredom, to sharpen the wits or to lift the spirits? Where is its beginning and where its end?”


SEVEN. CYBERCHESS


13. Vladimir Kramnik quote in Friedel, “Kramnik on Health.”


18. Viswanathan Anand, in an interview posted by Mig Greengard, *The Daily*
“Database kids” is what British grandmaster Tony Miles used to call representatives of the younger generation, as noted in Genna Sosonko, *The Reliable Past* (New in Chess, 2003), p. 19.


27. Levon Aronian quoted in Schwager and Lotter, “Ich habe so viel Blut.”


32. Levon Aronian quoted in Schwager and Lotter, “Ich habe so viel Blut.”


EIGHT. 24/7 ON THE ICC

1. The “handle” names given for all players on the Internet are pseudonyms.


5. Paul Virilio, Speed and Politics (Semiotext(e), 1986), p. 142.


ENDGAME


2. This exchange is quoted in Hans Ree, The Human Comedy of Chess (Rus­sell Enterprises, 1999), p. 318.


APPENDIX TWO. “LIFE IS TOUCH-MOVE”


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Glossary

**Attack** A sustained assault on an opponent’s king or some other target.

**Bishop** A piece that is moved on diagonals of one color. A light-squared bishop operates on the lighter squares, while a dark-squared bishop moves on the darker squares.

**Black** The player who moves the darker-colored pieces.

**Blindfold Chess** Chess played without sight of the board.

**Blitz** Chess played under very fast time constraints, usually five minutes or less per player.

**Blunder** A very poor move, often leading to the loss of material or to a disadvantageous position.

**Bullet Chess** A form of blitz chess in which each player has one minute per game.

**Bye** A bye is a tournament round in which a player does not have a game. Usually it is required by the presence of an odd number of players, so that not everyone can play in a round. A bye is normally scored as a win (1 point). In many Swiss system tournaments, however, a player can request a bye for any round, and it is scored as a ½-point draw.

**Calculation** The concrete analysis and evaluation of specific sequences of moves.

**Castling** A combined move of the king and one of the rooks: the king is moved two squares along the first rank toward the rook, which is then placed on the square just crossed by the king. Castling can be conducted on either the kingside or the queenside. Players usually castle early in the game, to provide shelter for their king and to bring their rook to the center files.

**Center Pawns** The pawns stationed on the two central files; the d- and e-pawns, for both White and Black.

**Check** A position in which a king can be captured with the opponent’s next move.

**Checkmate** Or “mate,” a position in which the king cannot be moved out of check; to make a move that brings about such a position. The object of the game is to checkmate one’s opponent. Once a player is checkmated, he has lost the game.
CHESS CLOCK A double push-button clock that keeps track of the time each player spends on a game. After making a move, a player stops his clock. This action automatically starts his opponent’s clock.

CLOSED POSITION A type of position in which few pawns or pieces have been removed from the board, making for a “closed” pawn formation (limiting one’s opponent’s access to the other pieces). Closed positions, which are often distinguished from open positions, often require strategic finesse to play effectively.

COMBINATION A tactical sequence of forcing moves with a specific goal. Combinations often involve the sacrifice of a piece.

COUNTERATTACK An attack mounted by a player in a defensive position.

COUNTERPLAY Active maneuvering by a player who is defending or under attack.

DIAGONAL A diagonal row of squares. The diagonals from the squares a1 to h8, and from h1 to a8, are known as the long diagonals.

DOUBLE ATTACK A simultaneous attack against two separate targets: these may be enemy pieces, or squares an opponent needs to defend.

DOUBLED PAWNS Two pawns of the same color on the same file.

DRAW A result in which neither player is expected to win. A draw may come about by agreement between the players, by stalemate, or by repetition of moves. In tournaments, draws are usually awarded ½ points, as compared to 1 point for a win and 0 for a loss.

EIGHTH RANK The rank at the far end of the board, as seen from each player’s point of view. The eighth rank is the rank on which the opponent’s pieces stand at the start of a game. It is also the rank where a pawn must land if it is to be promoted to a piece.

ENDGAME Or ending. The last phase of the game, when there are few pieces left on the board.

EXCHANGE SACRIFICE A sacrifice in which a player surrenders a rook while the opposing player loses a knight or a bishop.

EXPERT A player with a USCF rating between 2000 and 2199; the category just below master.

FIANCHE TTO The placement of a White bishop at g2 or b2, or a Black bishop at g7 or b7. The word is a diminutive of the Italian, fianco, “a flank.”

FIDE The Fédération Internationale des Échecs, an international organization that connects national chess federations around the world and acts as the governing body of international chess competition.

FIDE MASTER The title of FIDE master is awarded by FIDE, the International Federation of Chess. FIDE masters usually have a FIDE rating between 2300 and 2400.

FILE A vertical row of eight squares running from White’s end of the board to Black’s. There are eight files on a chessboard, identified by means of the file symbol; the first file from White’s left is the a-file, followed by the b-file. The last file on White’s right is the h-file.

FISH Slang for a weak chess player.

FORK A direct and simultaneous attack on two or more of an opponent’s pieces by one piece.

Fritz A popular computer chess program published by Chessbase.

GAMBIT An opening in which one player offers to give up a pawn or a piece in the
expectation of gaining a compensatory positional advantage for the material relinquished.

**Grandmaster (GM)** An exceptionally strong player. The title of grandmaster is awarded by FIDE, the International Federation of Chess. Grandmasters usually have a FIDE rating of 2500 or higher.

**ICC** The Internet Chess Club, an online chess server.

**Indian defenses** Defenses against White’s first move of 1. d4 that are characterized by the move 1... Nf6. Popular Indian defenses include the King’s Indian Defense, the Nimzo-Indian Defense, and the Queen’s Indian Defense.

**Initiative** The power to make threats against one’s opponent’s position or pieces.

**International Master (IM)** A very strong player. The title of international master is awarded by FIDE, the International Federation of Chess. International masters usually have a FIDE rating of 2400 or higher.

**Kibitz** To offer informal comments or advice, usually unsolicited, on an ongoing game. The word *kibitzer*, one who kibitzes, stems via Yiddish from *kiebitz* (German), a peewit.

**King** The king can be moved to any adjoining square that is not attacked by an enemy piece or pawn. As the goal of a game is to checkmate the opponent’s king, the king is the most important piece. But because of its limited mobility, it is not the strongest piece.

**Kingside** The half of the board where the king starts the game (from the e-file to the h-file). From the White player’s point of view, it is to the right. From Black’s point of view, it is to the left.

**Knight** A piece that moves in an L shape. The knight is the only piece that can jump over pawns or other pieces. A knight is usually fashioned in the shape of a horse’s head.

**Knight’s tour** A series of moves of a chess knight that visits all squares on an empty board and, moving according to the rules of chess, must visit each square exactly once.

**Marshall Chess Club** A long-established chess club in Manhattan, named after American player Frank Marshall.

**Master** A strong player. In the United States, a player who achieves a rating over 2200 is awarded the title of master. A life master is a player who competes in more than three hundred games while maintaining a rating over 2200. A senior master is a player with a USCF rating over 2400.

**Match** A contest between two individuals, or else a team match.

**Mate** See checkmate.

**Material** All the pieces and pawns on the board except the kings. To have a material advantage is to have the greater total value of pieces.

**Mating net** An arrangement of pawns and pieces around a king in such a way that checkmate is threatened.

**Middlegame** The phase of the game that follows the opening.

**Opening** The first phase of the game. An opening often refers to specific sequences of opening moves.

**Open position** A position in which there are many open files and diagonals, resulting from the trade-off of several pawns, especially those on the four cen-
tral files. Open positions, which are often distinguished from closed positions, usually lead to games with a lot of tactical play because the open lines allow for more options in possible piece moves.

**OPEN TOURNAMENT** A tournament in which anyone can participate, provided they have paid the appropriate entrance fees.

**PASSED PAWN** A pawn that has no enemy pawns on the same or an adjoining file standing on the ranks ahead. As its path toward its promotion square on the eighth rank is free of other pawns, a passed pawn is often an important asset.

**PAWN** The chessman of the smallest size and value. Each player has eight pawns at the beginning of the game, all of them positioned on the second rank.

**PAWN PROMOTION** The exchange of a pawn that has reached the eighth rank for a queen, rook, bishop, or knight of the same color.

**PAWN STRUCTURE** An arrangement of pawns, often arising out of the opening.

**PIECE** Specifically, a queen, rook, bishop, knight, or king; a pawn is not technically a piece. *Pieces* also refers to the chessmen in general.

**PIN** A situation in which a bishop, rook, or queen holds down an opponent’s piece. The piece that is pinned cannot move without producing an attack on another piece or square.

**POSITION** The disposition of pieces and pawns, of one or both colors, at any stage of a game.

**POSITIONAL PLAY** Maneuvers made with the aim of improving a player’s position, as distinct from tactical play leading to mate or gain of material. A positional error is a mistake that can lead to a disadvantageous position.

**POSTMORTEM** The analysis and discussion of a game after it has been concluded.

**QUEEN** A major piece that may be moved along the ranks and files like the rook and along the diagonals like the bishop. The queen is the most powerful piece.

**QUEENSIDE** The half of the board where the queen starts the game (from the a-file to the d-file). From the White player’s point of view, it is to the left. From Black’s point of view, it is to the right.

**RANK** A horizontal row of eight adjoining squares running from one side of the board to the other. There are eight rows on a chessboard. A rank is customarily defined in relation to the player. From the perspective of the player with the White pieces, the rank closest to him is the first rank, followed by the second rank, and so on, up to the eighth rank.

**RATING(S)** Numerical values used to rank chess players. The rating system of the United States Chess Federation is as follows:

- 2400 and above, Senior Master
- 2200–2399, Master
- 2000–2199, Expert
- 1800–1999, Class A
- 1600–1799, Class B
- 1400–1599, Class C
- 1200–1399, Class D
- 1000–1199, Class E
- ...
- 199 and below, Class J
resign  To concede defeat without playing on to checkmate.

rook  A piece that is moved in straight lines, along ranks and files. The rook is the most powerful piece after the queen. It is usually shaped like a tower or castle.

rook endgame  An endgame with king, rooks (or a rook), and sometimes pawns. A double-rook endgame is one in which both sides have two rooks.

round-robin  A tournament system in which each player plays every other player participating in the tournament, usually either once or twice.

rybka  A computer chess program, first released in 2005.

sacrifice  A move that gives up material (a pawn or a piece) to gain a tactical or positional advantage.

score sheet  A printed form on which the moves of a game are written.

sicilian defense  A popular defense to White’s first move of 1. e4, characterized by the response 1 . . . c5, in which Black’s c-pawn is advanced two squares forward.

skewer  An attack by one piece against two enemy pieces in a line, in which the more valuable piece is in front of the piece of lesser value. The opponent is compelled to move the more valuable piece to avoid its capture, thereby exposing the less valuable piece, which can then be captured.

skittles  Casual or friendly games, often played quickly, with or without a clock.

soviet school of chess  An orientation to chess play, study, and training developed in the Soviet Union from the 1930s through the 1980s.

stalemate  A position in which a player whose turn it is to move is neither in check nor able to make a move. Stalemate ends the game, which is then drawn.

strategy  The planning and conduct of long-term objectives during a game.

swiss system  A frequently used system to organize pairings for a tournament. In the first round of a Swiss System, players are ranked by rating, and then the top player is paired with the player just under the halfway mark. The second player is paired against the next player under the halfway mark, and so forth. Players who win their games receive 1 point, those who draw receive ½ point, and losers receive no points. All players then proceed to the next and subsequent rounds, with players being paired in each round against opponents with the same or similar scores.

tactics  Short-term maneuvers, often of a forcing nature.

theory  The consensual understanding, often noted in chess literature, of effective ways to play opening systems. Often referred to as well as “opening theory.”

time-delay clock  A chess clock that gives both players a main thinking time—eighty-five minutes per game, for instance—plus a fixed time for every move, usually five seconds. The countdown of the main time starts only after the fixed time has been used. When it becomes a player’s turn to move, the clock waits for the delay period before starting to subtract from the player’s remaining time. For example, if the delay is five seconds, the clock waits for five seconds before counting down. If the player moves within the delay period, no time is subtracted from his remaining time. The main reason that time-delay clocks are used in tournament games is that, with a sudden-death time limit, all moves must be completed in the specified time or the player loses. With a five-second delay added at each move, the player always has at least that much time to make a move.
TOUCH-MOVE A rule in force in serious chess games in which a player who intentionally touches a piece while it is his turn must move that piece, if there is a legal move to be made. Likewise, if a player touches one of his opponent’s pieces, he must capture it if the piece can be captured.

USCF The United States Chess Federation. The USCF assigns national titles, organizes national tournaments, and awards titles to players.

VARIATION Any alternative line of play, especially one that could occur in the opening phase of the game.

VISUALIZATION The process of mentally picturing sequences of potential chess moves.

WHITE The player who moves the lighter-colored pieces. White always makes the first move in a game. In a tournament, the colors are usually assigned by the tournament director.

WORLD CHAMPION Official title given to the top player in the world, as decided by match or tournament play. The official world championship is generally regarded to have begun in 1886, when the two leading players in the world, William Steinitz and Johannes Zukertort, played a match that Steinitz won. (Paul Morphy is considered the unofficial world champion before Steinitz.) From Steinitz on the world champions were

- William Steinitz 1886–1894, Austria
- Emanuel Lasker 1894–1921, Germany
- José Raúl Capablanca 1921–1927, Cuba
- Alexander Alekhine 1927–1935, 1937–1946, Russia/France
- Max Euwe 1935–1937, Netherlands
- Vasily Smyslov 1957–1958, USSR (Russia)
- Mikhail Tal 1960–1961, USSR (Latvia)
- Tigran Petrosian 1963–1969, USSR (Armenia)
- Boris Spassky 1969–1972, USSR (Russia)
- Robert J. Fischer 1972–1975, United States
- Anatoly Karpov 1975–1985, USSR (Russia)
- Garry Kasparov 1985–1993, USSR (Russia)

Since 1993 the world championship has been clouded by disagreements. It began with a conflict between FIDE and a newly formed organization, the Professional Chess Association, founded by Garry Kasparov. Kasparov continued to defend his title in matches, while FIDE set up its own schedule of matches and tournaments. Many consider Vladimir Kramnik of Russia to have been the true world champion from 2000, when he defeated Garry Kasparov in a match, until 2008, when he lost a match to Viswanathan Anand. Anand, who was also the FIDE world champion, then became the undisputed world champion.

WORLD OPEN A large open tournament held each year in Philadelphia, around the Fourth of July Weekend.
This book draws from ethnographic research I conducted in the United States and abroad from 2002 to 2009. As suits the multimedia, interconnected age in which we live, it draws upon a number of resources, including conversations in person, by phone, and via the Internet; interviews and games posted on the Internet; chess books and DVDs; online newspapers and journals; and blogs and Web sites. Several of these blogs and sites have been of great use, including chessbase.com, chesscafe.com, chessclub.com, iccchess.fm, chesshistory.com, chessvibes.com, uschess.org, and lizknowsall.blogspot.com. The research and writing of the book were supported by Sarah Lawrence College, most notably through the Alice Stone Blackman Chair in Comparative and International Studies, the Ziesing Fund for Research in the Social Sciences, and the Faculty Publication Fund.

I also thank the many people who helped with this project. A number of chess players, authors, and teachers were kind enough to talk to me about their engagements with the game, most notably Michael Amori, Robert Cousins, Joseph DeMauro, Jaan Ehlvest, Rusudan Goletiani, Joseph Guadagno, Asa Hoffmann, Larry Kaufman, Jesse Kraai, Stanley Kravitz, Ronald Krenski, Abby Marshall, Tim Pointon, Daniel Pomerantz, Steven Qvistorff, Evan Rabin, John Riddell, Boris Salman, Jim Santorelli, Alexander Shabalov, Greg Shahade, Dale Sharp, Fiori Sireci, Jakob Stockel, Predrag Trajkovic, Mladen Vucic, John Watson, Sunil Weeramantry, Edward Winter, Polly Wright, and Leonid Yudasin. Thanks as well to the members of the Max Pavey Chess Club, the Bob Peretz Chess Club, the Westchester Chess

Acknowledgments

At Sarah Lawrence College, Carl Barenboim, Michael Davis, Sha Fagan, Chris Garces, David Hollander, Elizabeth Johnston, Nicholas Mills, Mary Morris, Leah Olson, Barbara Schechter, and Sam Siegel offered advice and knowledge at crucial times, and the college library’s staff helped in many ways. Sonia De Laforcade, Molly Jaffa, Sarah Pulitzer, and Michal Salman aided me with significant aspects of the research and writing. Laurie Mittelmann helped me to find the right words. Aidan Seale-Feldman lent her keen anthropological sensibilities to many dimensions of this project.

At the University of California Press, Stan Holwitz, Jacqueline Volin, Nick Arrivo, Kalicia Pivirotto, and Reed Malcolm worked skillfully to guide the book through the publication process.

Friends and colleagues have helped in the development of the ideas advanced in these pages. Helen Desjarlais, Luther Elliot, Stefan Helmreich, Jose Antonio Lucero, Todd Myers, and Sarah Willen read portions of the book in its earlier incarnations and helped me to take things further. Portions of the text were presented at Harvard University in 2009; I thank Michael Fischer, Byron Good, and Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good, among others, for their thoughtful comments. C. Jason Throop’s rich reading of the text was a boon. Jonathan Rowson and Elizabeth Vicary contributed critical readings of my ideas and prose, and enabled me to understand better the lives and concerns of chess players. Michael Jackson offered wise thoughts at just the right time, while showing the way to a more expansive anthropology. Lynne Carmickle offered her family’s home in Long Island as a writing retreat. Susan McGarry provided helpful resources. Maria Elena Garcia and Deanna Barenboim have been true compañeras. Tracy McGarry contributed to this project in continuously loving and generous ways.
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