

DEBATE

Chess as a commodity?

10 Aug 2020

Four and a half months have gone by with hardly any significant classical chess. Elite players have started to behave like hustlers. One of the most hyped chess competitions ever was staged between beginners. *Raj Tischbierek* asks if it is an irreversible development or just a nightmare that will pass.

A dream

One of those hot, sweaty June nights catapults me back to the year 1970. I am in the Yugoslavian town of Herceg Novi reporting for my magazine from the strongest blitz tournament in chess history until then. Bobby Fischer dominates the competition at will. The fight for second place is more exciting, between the four Soviets Mikhail Tal, Viktor Korchnoi, Tigran Petrosian and David Bronstein.

In the last round Tal has gained substantial ground: in an endgame of rook versus rook he flags Petrosian! The Yugoslav commentators discuss with him the subtleties of this tricky endgame, which, I learn, is being played by the young Anatoly Karpov with masterful precision. Tal thus got ahead of Korchnoi, who tried his utmost against the American veteran Samuel Reshevsky. He didn't simply resign what seemed to me a hopeless endgame, but let his clock run down almost to the last seconds. In vain: unlike in some earlier rounds, Sammy did not fall off the table from exhaustion and Korchnoi had to accept a bitter defeat.

Among the lapwings I spot FIDE-President Folke Rogard: "How do you like the tournament?" – "Great! The response is overwhelming! In the next room, a television set is showing a football match between Yugoslavia and Austria. I have hardly seen any spectators there, they are all at the chess! Wouldn't it be great if we could do both combined in future?" Quickly the Swede realizes the brilliance of his thoughts: "Just imagine", Rogard exclaims, "in the next tournament Franz Beckenbauer would participate! What would be better to popularize chess?" – "Can he actually play chess?", I ask, not yet completely convinced. The angry glance I earn makes me immediately regret my amateurish remark. "As if that matters!", I am soundly rebuked. "Better still! A chess tournament without any chess players! Celebrities only! Footballers, actors, politicians! Bobby can comment on the whole thing! That would be incredible! A revolution, in fact!"

Reality

Drenched in sweat I awake, startled. What a nightmare! I try to relax over coffee, and mull over the events of the previous day on the screen. Chessable Masters: Giri beats Grischuk in a match over seven games, **without even winning one of them**. Seven draws are enough since Giri had the black pieces in the last encounter, the Armageddon.

“**In a position with king and rook versus king and rook and nothing else on the board, Grischuk tried for another 32 moves to win on time. Svidler, who commentated, gave a slightly tortured smile but said ... nothing!**”

Okay. But what is this? In Armageddon, a single decision game without time increment, Grischuk had the white pieces in a position with king and rook versus king and rook and nothing else on the board. Yet there were another 32 moves played up to the bare kings. Grischuk had to win the game, which was only possible on time. At the beginning he had good chances with 13 against 11 seconds remaining, but Giri proved to be a faster clicker: it took him only 9 seconds for 31 moves while Grischuk spent 13 seconds on 32.

I had gotten used to see similar things during the uninhibited Online-Corona-times. For example by Gabriel Sargissian in his game against Vincent Keymer at the European Online Championship. Or in lots of my own insignificant encounters with anonymous opponents on Lichess. Every so often, after a declined draw offer, I resign and block my opponent with a feeling of moral superiority. But now: Alexander Grischuk! A world-class player who, at least so they say, belongs to the intellectual chess elite! In front of the eyes of the worldwide chess public and in the online showcase tournament series par excellence!

I never doubted that this sort of behaviour would result in public outrage, so I was curious to hear how the highly respected commentators Peter Svidler and Yasser Seirawan have dealt with these shenanigans on **chess24**. Svidler, who not only shares Grischuk's level of celebrity, but is considered by many to be the best chess commentator, gave a slightly tortured smile but said ... nothing! Next up was Giri. Unscathed from that farce, he explained in an interview with Seirawan that Hikaru Nakamura was the real master of this endgame! Yes, it is still about king plus rook against king plus rook. Nakamura would not give any checks, but instead skillfully sabotage his opponent's premoves (see the box).

Shortly before that, in the same tournament, Ian Nepomniachtchi demonstrated that what was once a shameful trait of anonymous online chess hustlers has now become an acceptable practice for the elite. In a totally lost position against Ding Liren, he let five minutes of his time run down before resigning the game. His hope that the Chinese fellow's internet connection would break down again was not fulfilled. I could not notice any reactions.

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In the meantime a lot of attention went to **Chess.com** and its Pogchamps event. 16 super streamers with only limited knowledge of our game, but verbal qualities and huge follower numbers, played a chess tournament, which was obviously about some kind of »chess entertainment«. The whole thing was commented on by Nakamura, who during the pandemic has become the most popular chess player online.

In our magazine's last issue Nick Barton, Chess.com's Director of Business Development, called Pogchamps "a turning point for the cross-genre presentation of the game". Amongst its defenders was also David Llada, chief marketing and communication officer of **FIDE**. In a [pro & contra on ChessTech](#) he vehemently advocated "more Pogchamps", regardless of the chess quality because the event aimed at mass markets and a new customer base.

Economic value

Do you perceive our beloved game, the "royal game", as a commodity? Certainly not. How could you? Up until now it hasn't been. There are more books on chess than on all other sports combined. In film, art and literature chess is an omnipresent topic. If a film character is to be given an intellectual image, a chessboard is placed on the table. Outstanding personalities of intellectual life were depicted playing chess. Banks and insurance companies advertise themselves with chess motives, the image of chess is an excellent one. It radiates seriousness and farsightedness.

Our game is deeply associated with intelligence, human and artificial intelligence. Companies such as IBM and Google have invested heavily "to crack" chess. The challenge has attracted them. Studies show the extent to which children benefit from learning chess, and it is taught in many schools. Or to quote Theophilus Wait (from Lichess) elsewhere in this issue: "I hadn't realized how easy it is to make acquaintances in a foreign country whose language you don't speak very well – through or thanks to chess! I do not think there are many comparable activities – can you think of any other? – that would make this possible to the same extent."

So far so good. But why is it that every veteran chess lover would flinch at the idea of Tal and Petrosian playing the endgame rook against rook for even a second, but fifty years later the same two world-class players doing the same is accepted virtually unopposed? "Armageddon, that's something quite different", I hear the objection. But those layers of society that Llada wants to bring to chess do not know the difference between a classical and a blitz game. Their perception of chess in the current environment is a fundamentally different one. Mere entertainment, as opposed to the cultural heritage described above.

Given that they – and we too – have long been accustomed to the mass appropriation of culture, is it so shocking that chess receives the same treatment? It was the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) who coined the term "culture industry" in 1944. Roughly summarized: all art becomes a commodity and is no longer defined by aesthetic aspects, but by its economic value. What is happening to chess now? Is the pandemic only accelerating a development that could not be stopped in the long run anyway? If this development exists, is it irreversible or what can be done?

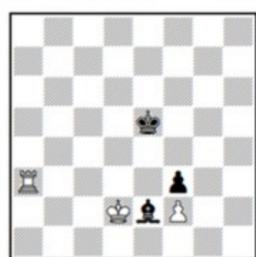
PS: I have to apologise to **Folke Rogard (1899–1973)**, a FIDE-President of the highest integrity. It is only because he did not have a "marketing officer" in 1970 that he was unfairly satirized.

This is a slightly shortened version of "Quo vadis, Schach?" from *Schach magazine*, August 2020.



The cover of Schach magazine always comes with a stunning position. The tradition was broken with a trivial position on the cover of the August edition, where this article was originally published.

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| □ A. Tabatabaei | 2823 |
| ■ H. Nakamura | 3242 |



The final of a top-class online tournament is underway. The outcome will be determined by *Bullet*, in which each player has one minute plus one second increment per move for the entire game. The Iranian, playing with white, has been living on his increment for quite some time, meaning that he had to make his moves within one second. In this case it is advisable to »move up«, i.e. to use the *premove* option. This means that you already enter your move with the

mouse, even though it is the opponent's turn. If it is legal, it will be executed automatically at lightning speed and you will not be in danger of exceeding the time despite having only one second per move. If the entered move is not legal anymore – due to the reaction of the opponent – you lose time because you have to enter a new move. In the present case, White did not want to risk a defeat by exceeding the time limit and entered the *premove* 75. ♖a3:f3. He would then have destroyed the last remaining black pawn and the game would have been drawn. Nakamura anticipated this and played 74... ♗e2-d3. Now ♖a3:f3 is no longer legal, so white would have had to enter a new move. But of course he didn't manage to do so within a second and exceeded the time limit. 0-1 (time)

Nakamura had won the game and the tournament and was celebrated by his fans because of his slyness.

A box explains the "premove".



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