

A Guide to the Wiki

For “The Game of Chess”

By Allan Stewart

DISCLAIMER: I started writing up this guide when I believed there was a writing requirement beyond the wiki. Instead I decided to focus on the wiki. So this short document is very meta. Consider it a guide to the wiki, or if you miss my presentation, a good overview of the ideas I cover.

STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

I chose chess as my topic because it is the premier game of Western culture. Although a game, it is not trivial at all. The evolution of chess has touched so many “human” elements in society. Conversely, the issue of whether chess (or any logic-based mechanism) is human – ie. requiring human intelligence – is of more recent interest.

Regarding the evolution of chess, I see that the course has proceeded in the following way:

1. “Archaic” chess is when chess was in its foundations, before it was solidified
2. “Modern” chess is when mankind decides to place its face on the chess pieces and symbols
3. “Contemporary” chess addresses the motivations of more recent chess players

Although this is a chronological approach, I argue that it produces a building foundation. In my opinion, chess has only gained complexity as humans interact with it and chess interacts with us.

ARCHAIC CHESS

“Chess: Origins and Myth” - plus its appended photo page – covers this extensively. Chess, believed to be quite old for reasons of its widespread distribution, is actually recent. Chess dates to later than Christ's birth and thus it is a game born in between the classical age and medieval times. Chess is prevalent in Western society, but it is actually born from “Oriental” origins in India and

Islamic Asia Minor. Chess is starkly multicultural in scope.

Nevertheless, chess took on various different forms wherever it existed. In India it was a trader's game improvised by amateurs and kings, while in Islam it was a canonized sport and valid pursuit. In Medieval Europe, chess became a glamorous game of the court. While Islam had stripped the game of its logos in search of absolute best play, the medieval court added flair by diversifying the chess pieces and the rules associated with them.

In the medieval incarnation we see societal ways of life implanted in the game. By this I mean that people stepped away from the play of the game to see it as commentary. The status of serfs could be seen through the glimpse of a chess command; furthermore, it could be a justification via the way in which we toss pieces in to the bag and thus scramble the relations between people.

AGAIN, please look at the link to the pictures for enhanced commentary.

MODERN CHESS

Consider both “Chess: We're All Pawns” and “Chess: Liberating the Mind.” In the way I defined modern chess above, it is difficult to classify the exact beginning of a modern attitude towards chess. Perhaps it is in the way that we study the system of obligations that are mapped to rules in the medieval times. Or how gender plays in chess, or even the implications of a pawn?

I argue that the inventor of modern chess is Benjamin Franklin. In a sense, he broke through the rules of the game. No more palpable story exists than his play against the Duchess of Bourbon, where he ignored his checked king. He'd rather give up on the king and try his best with the “common” pieces he had at his disposal! Of course, Franklin contributed much more than that, suggesting that chess teaches introspection and patience. The sum total of his views is that chess was no longer defined after-the-fact in terms of the human condition, but rather that we could interact with chess abstractly. We could even express our opinions on monarchy with it!

This new vision brings a lot of baggage with it, and it must be asked whether chess imprisons the player or opens the key to his mind. The section on Soviet chess – albeit out of chronological order – introduces us to this problem. In Soviet Russia, chess was a decidedly political action taken on behalf of the state. However, its creativity and the freedom associated with the game was far beyond the allowances of greater Soviet society at that time.

Modern chess raises many questions of why a human would approach and play chess. I don't give the answer – at least for the “modern” period. However, the questions are so pertinent that I try to address them for the current time – in contemporary chess.

CONTEMPORARY CHESS

Almost the rest of the wiki addresses these topics: the chess-player character (“Chess: Character Studies”), the psychological mind of chess, and the implications of computer chess.

The fate of chess rests in the balance in this section. After all, the argument could be raised - “Why play chess?” Indeed, we have increased access to games and all sorts of other media these days and have the obligation of choice. Why not choose an alternative to chess? Why does it continue to take hold on our culture?

Some reasons are invariant, unless certain changes in human psychology drastically change. Chess-players tend to be pessimistic individuals. They are very good at pattern recognition and have deeply ingrained study to make them capable of performing at a high level. The chess-player has a “fear of losing” in the chess community that builds around the game. This chess-player can deviate quite greatly from the norm – many optimistic chess-players have approached the game as a therapeutic device – but some essential patterns reinforce the trend.

The question of what it means to be human bears down on chess and subsequently requires humans to interact with chess. Humans interacting with chess are both magnifying their introspection with regards to intelligence and challenging whether chess is a reflection of human abilities. What does it mean if the computer beats us, if we design the computer? Also, what does a computer do that is like or unlike human thought? Is chess even a good game for this analysis?

The answers are “probably little,” “depends,” and “probably no.”

Alright, so that requires some clarification. I delve into the Mechanical Turk because it demonstrates how humans despise confrontation with a “black box” they do not understand. The Mechanical Turk was probably not considered a serious match for “human intelligence.” Nevertheless, it represents how man has a conflicted relationship with machines (even those built and designed by mankind).

I thus justify my opinions based on critical assumptions about chess theory as well as material

culture. Chess will most likely be solved at some time. However, when that is and how complicated the machinery is required reflects greatly on the issue. The critical issue – whether a machine may pass the “Turing test” that judges it indistinguishable from human intelligence – is a question that chess will not answer. Chess does rub some salt in the wound though.

Chess computers must be seen in the light that they solve the problem of chess in a way that we can methodically process (albeit faster). They also solve a problem that we have defined to be important. A chess computer cannot appreciate the cultural import and baggage carried with the moves it makes. In fact, a chess algorithm can only do one thing – PLAY CHESS! We, as the human race, must decide the degree of our intelligence. Chess is perhaps important for being the first problem where computers could visibly defeat humans.

And yes, at this point even home computers can beat a chess master. Thus I suggest that chess might not be the best game for testing the limits of either human or computer intelligence. However, I chose chess and stick by it because the game has the most cultural connections of any common game. Go pieces do not carry as much metaphorical meaning, at least in Western society. So even if chess is solved, it will still be important.

Thank you very much for your presentations and please post to the wiki. I have an extended comments page and you can post pretty much anywhere – except in the body of the main page.