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From the Archives

Hosted by
Mark Donlan



Chess Mazes
by Bruce Alberston

From the Archives...

Since it came online over eight years ago, ChessCafe.com has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the [ChessCafe](#) home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

Perspectives by Burt Hochberg

The Chess of the Future: Part Two

Last [month](#) I mentioned a few of the evolutionary changes that chess has undergone, and showed that further changes are being suggested even today by players of the highest rank. The persistence of suggestions to “improve” chess and the preeminence of the gentlemen who have made them (including no fewer than three of the greatest world champions of the century: Lasker, Capablanca, and Fischer) indicate an enduring and widespread – though hardly unanimous – disaffection with the game that has been handed down to us.

Taking the long historical view, we may say that modern chess is a game in transition. We know what it was and what it is, but we can't yet know what it will be. I'd like to hazard a guess anyway, based on a quite perceptible trend.

In November 1978, as editor of *Chess Life*, I published a controversial article by GM Pal Benko, entitled “Pre-Chess: Time for a Change,” and an accompanying article by GM Arthur Bisguier. Benko described a chess variant in which the pawns are set up on the second and seventh ranks as usual but the first and eighth ranks are vacant. To begin each game, players place their pieces, alternately one at a time, anywhere on their first rank (with bishops on opposite colors). No piece or pawn may be moved until all the pieces are in place. In

preparation for the articles, I had organized a short Pre-Chess match between Benko and Bisguier in the Manhattan Chess Club (a few patrons of the Manhattan and Marshall clubs provided a small prize fund) to demonstrate that, despite the unorthodox opening array, all the principles of chess still applied.

“The continual refinement of technique and assimilation of knowledge, particularly in the openings,” Benko wrote, “will gradually lead to the extinction of the game – it will be solved, played out... Most of the blame – if that is the word – must fall on the vast store of opening information that is available to every player (and every computer). The amount of study a master has to do to remain up to date in the openings would suffice for a college education. If he neglects his studies his score suffers. I think this corrupts the essential nature of chess, which is a fight between the creative ideas of two individuals. The vast array of predetermined opening variations and theories is, in my view, so much dead weight that should be discarded to save the true values of chess... The task, then, is to find a minimal change in the rules that would retain as much of the present game as possible and yet eliminate its worst feature, the overanalyzed starting position.”

Benko’s solution was Pre-Chess. Although he credited the idea to David Bronstein, I learned later that it dates back, in somewhat different form, to the early 19th-century chess writer Aaron Alexandre (who, ironically, was the compiler of one of the first systematic collections of chess openings, the forerunner of such compendiums as *Modern Chess Openings*). Benko had shown the variant to former world champion Max Euwe, who thought it was “an interesting idea,” “very good,” and “worth considering.” Benko had also played some games of Pre-Chess with the teenaged Joel Benjamin, a future GM and U.S. Champion, who in 1979 won a Pre-Chess tournament.

More recently, Bobby Fischer, no less, proposed a different form of the idea that he called Fischer Random Chess. David Pritchard, in *The Encyclopedia of Chess Variants*, reports that in 1994 Anatoly Karpov challenged Fischer to a Random Chess match “on the argument that the American would not be disadvantaged through lack of modern opening analysis.” In 1995 and 1996 Fischer tried unsuccessfully to organize various Random Chess events in Argentina involving himself, GMs Manuel Illescas, Eugenio Torre, and Pablo Ricardi.

In 1995, Illescas gave a simultaneous exhibition on 30 boards, of which 11 were Random Chess games. Significantly, his Random Chess result of 6 wins, 1 loss, and 4 draws (8-3) was much worse than his orthodox chess result of 17 wins and 2 draws (18-1). Can it be that his superior knowledge of the openings, which undoubtedly served him well in the orthodox games, was useless in Random Chess? If so, the result validates Benko’s assertion that “the impossibility of opening preparation is probably advantageous for the less knowledgeable or less experienced player.”

Pre-Chess, like Random Chess, Baseline Chess, Shuffle Chess, and other methods of establishing a variable opening array, negates virtually all opening

theory (not opening “principles,” an altogether different animal). There are other ways of doing this, of course, such as switching the positions of the kings and queens or the bishops and knights (a category of chess variants known as Displacement Chess). But this merely substitutes a new opening position for the traditional one and doesn’t solve the essential problem.

Pre-Chess and Fischer Random Chess attempt to solve the problem of the unvarying opening position in significantly different ways.

Fischer proposes using a computer to decide where the pieces are placed. Placement is the same for both White and Black, the bishops are on opposite colors, and the king goes between the rooks to permit castling, which is done by moving the king to either c1/c8 or g1/g8 and the rook to the other side of the king. Calculations show that this procedure can produce 960 different opening positions. The choice is random and completely without the intervention of either player.

In Pre-Chess the players alternate placing their pieces anywhere they like on their first rank. The positions for the two sides can be – and almost certainly will be – different. Bishops must still go on opposite colors, but the king need not be placed between the rooks. Castling is allowed only if the king is on e1/e8 and a rook is on a1/a8 or h1/h8. Euwe, a professor of mathematics in addition to being a world champion and the president of FIDE, calculated that the number of possible positions in Pre-Chess exceeds four million!

Far be it from me to take issue with Bobby Fischer, but I see no reason why players should not be thinking strategically even during the placement phase instead of obeying the whim of random chance. It is quite possible – even likely – that some of the randomly generated positions in Fischer Random Chess are strongly disadvantageous for the first or second player. In Pre-Chess, the fate of the players is in their own hands. Of course, players are free to place their pieces in their traditional positions.

“The placing of the pieces has a strategy all its own,” Benko wrote. “It is clear that neither player, if he is alert, can get a serious disadvantage in this phase... Although White still has the first move, this gives Black the potentially important first clue as to how to place his own forces. It seems to me that for this reason the chances of the two sides are more nearly equal in pre-chess than in the standard game and that this will have the effect of producing not more draws but more exciting chess.”

This issue will become clearer after much experimentation and experience with different systems. But considering all the heavy hitters who have in recent years proposed or at least endorsed some kind of variable opening array (Fischer, Karpov, and Euwe, to mention only the world champions), and mindful of the theoretical and practical advantages of breaking our addiction to the current unchanging opening position, I think the variable opening array could well be the chess of the future.



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