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Steve Lopez



Understanding Time Controls Part Two

In last month's [column](#) we examined two types of time controls for chess games: tournament and blitz (or "sudden death"). This month we'll examine a newer form of time setting, named after former world champion Bobby Fischer.

In 1992, Fischer returned from a two decade self-imposed exile from chess to play a match in Yugoslavia against Boris Spassky. Fischer used the opportunity to advocate an alternative means of keeping time in chess. Although the concept had been "borrowed" from a timekeeping method long used in the Asian strategy game Go, this method became known as the "Fischer clock."

The Fischer time control is very simple in concept, but some players have difficulty understanding it. The core idea remains the same as that used in "sudden death" chess: each player starts the game with x amount of time on his clock. But with the Fischer method, each time a move is made and a player presses the clock button to start his opponent's clock, a small amount of time is added back to that player's total increment. Thus, *in theory*, if a player moves quickly enough, he would never run out of time.

Let's look at a concrete example. Say that a time control is given as 60/20, meaning that each player starts with sixty minutes on his clock, and twenty seconds is added to the clock each time a move is completed. Black opens the game by starting White's clock; White plays 1.e4 two seconds later and hits the clock. He's used two seconds, dropping his time allotment to 59:58 – but remember that twenty seconds is added back to his clock whenever he completes a move. So after he punches the clock button, twenty seconds is added to his total remaining time and his clock now reads 60:18 after the first move.

Jumping ahead to a later point in the game, White's clock reads exactly 35:00 when his move begins, but Black has put him into a sticky tactical situation requiring White to ponder several possibilities. White thinks for four and a half minutes before making his move and pressing the clock. His time has dropped from 35:00 to 30:30 by the time he hits the clock, but the act of pressing that button adds twenty seconds back to his time. So, as Black's move begins, White's clock now reads 30:50.

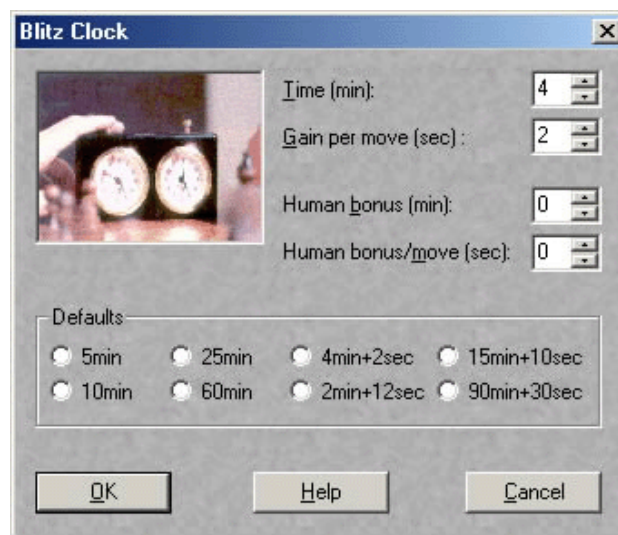
I said earlier that a player need never run out of time if he moves quickly enough. However, Fischer increments (the time added back when a move is completed) are usually so small that it's impossible to move so quickly each and every time. It could be done *in theory*, but it doesn't often happen in practice. In the above example, if a player took less than twenty seconds for each of his moves, he'd actually *gain* time on his clock and have *more* than the initial hour allotment showing on his clock at game's end. In actual play, however, it usually transpires that a player will initially gain time over the first handful of moves (since many players have their favorite openings memorized and can bang them out almost instantaneously), but will lose the time back during the middlegame and endgame.

Fischer's idea in advocating the "added increment" time control was that many otherwise fine games were spoiled by faulty endgame play caused by time pressure. In having time added to the clock with each move, a player could gain time in the opening and at other points in the game where little time was needed (forced moves such as getting out of check, for example), and thus have additional time available for the endgame. Of course, Fischer was mainly referring to top-level tournament play in which he envisioned *minutes* (not seconds) being added to the clock with each completed move. This might be practical for a high-level event in which just one game is played per day, but it is completely impractical for weekend amateur tournaments with the multiple games per day format. So the Fischer concept was adapted to amateur play by adding seconds to each move instead of minutes.

The Fischer clock did create a few problems for weekend tournament organizers. With the old "sudden death" time control of, say, game in sixty, establishing round times was easy: just start a new round every two hours. With the Fischer clock, this became a bit more problematic; a certain measure of mathematical knowledge was required to accurately establish the time for the start of each round. These days it's a bit easier: one

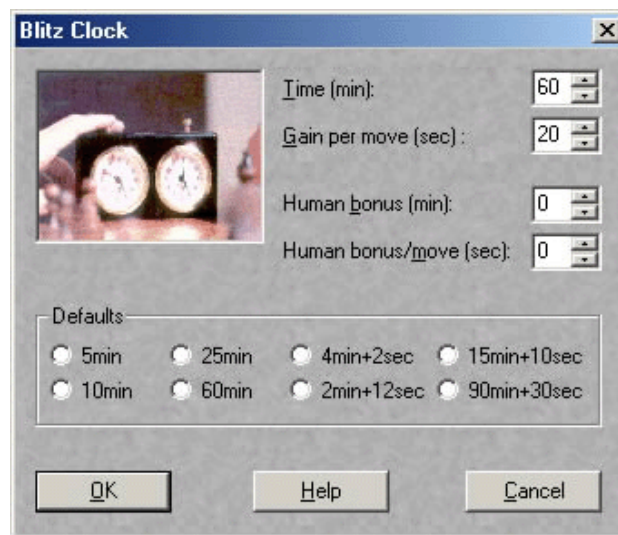
can find charts online that convert Fischer increments to “real time” approximations for the purpose of determining starting times for tournament rounds.

Let’s look at the process of setting Fischer increments in the *Fritz* “family” of playing programs. Launch *Fritz10* (or one of its “sister” programs), go to the Game menu, select “Levels,” and then “Blitz game.” You’ll see the following dialogue appear:



We’ll concern ourselves with two fields in this dialog: “Time (min.)” and “Gain per move (sec.)” The first of these, the “Time” setting is where you’ll set the initial time allotment for each player. Returning to our earlier example, if we wanted a Fischer control of 60/20, we’d set the “Time” to “60.” Remember that the value in this field is always in *minutes*.

The “Gain per move (sec.)” value denotes the number of *seconds* that are added to a player’s clock whenever he completes a move. Using our example of a Fischer control of 60/20, we’d place a “20” in this field and our dialogue would look like this:



Note the “Defaults” box near the bottom of the dialogue; these are various “preset” time controls that you can use as shortcuts. The four presets on the right of the “Defaults” box are Fischer time controls (easily distinguished by the “+” symbol in each).

Please also note that you can still give the human player an additional time handicap in human vs. computer matches (as described in last month’s [ChessBase Café](#)).

After you’ve selected the time increments you desire, click “OK” and begin your game.

As we’ve seen in this and the previous column, the various time controls used in competitive chess really aren’t difficult to understand or use. There are other time controls in chess (such as Rapid Transit or “Countdown” chess), but these are seldom used and aren’t supported in the *Fritz* software. The time controls we’ve covered are the ones that *Fritz* supports and which you’ll most often find in competitive rated games,

both online and off.

Until next month, have fun!

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All the ChessBase software described by Steve in this column, as well as many more ChessBase programs, are available in the [USCFSales Online Catalog](#).

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