



SKITTLES ROOM



Your Morphy Number Is Up

by Taylor Kingston

In the late 1960s, Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram (1933-1984) conducted experiments indicating that any two randomly selected U.S. citizens were likely to be connected by a series of six acquaintanceships, i.e. A knows B, who knows C, who knows D, who knows E, who knows F, who knows G, even though A and G live far apart and know nothing of each other.

This gave rise to the phrase “six degrees of separation,” which became famous as the title of a play by John Guare and a 1993 film based on it. This in turn gave rise to an amusing and punningly titled board game, *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*, in which the popular actor is set as the center of the cinematic universe, and players try to connect other actors to him by films in which they have appeared, in the shortest possible set of links. For example, *Dracula* star Bela Lugosi has a “Bacon Number” of three:

- Lugosi appeared with Vincent Price in *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948).
- Price appeared with Jack Nicholson in *The Raven* (1963).
- Nicholson appeared with Kevin Bacon in *A Few Good Men* (1992).

By extension, Vincent Price’s Bacon Number is two, and Jack Nicholson’s one. Going in the other direction, someone who had, say, a bit part in *Dracula* but never made another film would be a four, through his connection with Lugosi.

Aside from inspiring plays and trivia games, Milgram’s findings have proven scientifically relevant to such seemingly disparate fields as neurology and electric power grid design. Another person around whom such “small world networks” have been constructed is the prolific Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdős (1913-1996). In his case the relationship is based on co-authorship of research papers — see for example the [web-site](#), which gives Erdős Numbers for hundreds of mathematicians.



Like mathematicians and Hollywood actors, chess enthusiasts constitute an interconnected subculture, with links to a central person. However, for our purposes here the central person, unlike Kevin Bacon, is chosen not just because his name happens to rhyme with “separation.” Rather he is a major, unique figure in the game’s history, the great Paul Morphy (1837-1884).

As is well known to most students of the game, in a period of less than three years, 1857-59, Morphy defeated almost all the top players in the world, and then virtually retired from serious play for the rest of his life. A connection with this legendary figure gives one a sense of being part of chess history itself. And for many chess players, including even average duffers like this writer, one such connection is his **Morphy Number**.

A Morphy Number is based on actual chess play. Anyone who actually played a game of chess with Morphy himself has $MN = 1$. Someone who never played Morphy but played an $MN1$ is a 2, some who played a 2 is a 3, etc. A “strict constructionist” might wish to limit this to serious tournament and match games, but this would exclude most average players. Until he retired, Morphy himself would play almost anyone who asked, so my own preference is for a more liberal interpretation that includes consultation games, skittles, simuls, blindfold exhibitions, odds games, blitz, correspondence, etc. (I must admit my reasons are partly selfish, as otherwise I would have no Morphy Number at all.)

While Milgram found, on average, six degrees of separation, quite a few living chess players, including probably many people reading this, have Morphy Numbers of five or less. To give my own case as an example, in 1965 I played in a simultaneous exhibition against GM Arthur Bisguier. At New York 1948-49 Bisguier played former world champion Max Euwe, who at Pistyan 1922 played German master Siegbert Tarrasch, who at Frankfurt 1887 played Louis Paulsen, who at New York 1857 played Morphy. Thus my MN is 5. Other links, though of the same length, come from playing GMs Pal Benko and William Lombardy. Benko played Botvinnik, who played Emanuel Lasker, who played Henry Bird, who played Morphy. And Benko, Lombardy and Bisguier all played Reshevsky, who played Lasker, etc.

The average player’s link is probably much like that — a game in a simul, or perhaps in a big open tournament, against a prominent master whose tournament career links through older players back to Morphy. To help you figure out your own Morphy Number, I have compiled an informal list of various players and their MNs. To determine your own MN, find one whom you have played, and add one to his MN. If you have played several, use the

player with the lowest MN.

Caveat: the following is not intended as any sort of authoritative, scholarly reference, and of course it is by no means a complete list — just counting the surviving game scores, Morphy is known to have played over a hundred opponents. He played many others in games now lost. Most of them played anywhere from dozens to hundreds of other people, so the total at each MN level increases exponentially and quickly becomes unmanageable. So our list here is limited mostly to prominent masters, especially those with long careers who passed a Morphy connection on to later generations. Members of each MN group are listed in order of their year of birth.

MN = 0: Paul Charles Morphy (1837-1884)

MN = 1:

Adolf Anderssen (1818-1879), German master who lost a match to Morphy $+2 -7 =2$, Paris, 1858. The most famous of Morphy's opponents, winner of London 1851, and considered by many the world's best after Morphy's retirement until the rise of Steinitz.



Rev. John Owen (1827-1901), English vicar and avid chess amateur who lost a match with Morphy at pawn-and-move $+0 -5 =2$ in London, 1858. Not a top-rank master, but he played in many British tournaments circa 1862-1898, and though more were minor than major, he still managed to play many of his era's best.

Henry Edward Bird (1830-1908), English master who played a dozen informal games with Morphy in London, 1858, losing $+1 -10 =1$. By virtue of his long career, which included various high-level matches and tournaments into the 1900s, Bird probably did more than any other prominent player to extend the Morphy connection.

Louis Paulsen (1833-1891), German-American master, played Morphy at New York 1857, losing $+1 -5 =2$. Returning to Europe in 1860, he enjoyed a long and successful tournament and match career. Until about 1880 he was among the world's best, arguably superior to Anderssen.

Many prominent later players can trace their Morphy connection through one or more of the above four. Of course Morphy played other worthy opponents: Saint-Amant, Staunton, Löwenthal, Stanley, Harrwitz, Mongredien, Barnes, Boden, de Rivière, Perrin, Thompson, Schulten, Worrall, to name only a few. But many of them were aging, others less talented, less dedicated, or less well-traveled, and for such reasons their post-Morphy chess careers tended to be of less duration or importance. None appears to have done as much to extend the Morphy connection as our Fab

Four. So, to our next level, concentrating on players connected with them, and their first encounters:

MN = 2:

Wilhelm Steinitz (1836-1900): played Anderssen, Paulsen, and Owen at London 1862. In 1866 he played a match with Bird.

Ignatz Kolisch (1837-1889): first played Anderssen in offhand games and a formal match in 1860; Paulsen in a formal match 1860.

George H. Mackenzie (1837-1891): Offhand games with Paulsen 1862; also played Anderssen, Owen, and Bird.

Szymon Winawer (1838-1919): Anderssen and Paulsen at Baden-Baden 1870.

Joseph Henry Blackburne (1841-1924): Offhand games with Paulsen 1861, Anderssen 1862, formal games with both at London 1862. Also played Owen and Bird.

Johannes Zukertort (1842-1888): Innumerable offhand and serious games with Anderssen from 1864 on; Paulsen, Hamburg 1869.

Amos Burn (1848-1925): Owen, Liverpool CC 1870; Bird, consultation game, Glasgow, 1875; Paulsen, Frankfurt 1887.

James Mason (1849-1905): Bird, Philadelphia 1876; Anderssen, Paris 1878; Paulsen, Wiesbaden 1880; Owen, Hereford 1885.

Mikhail Chigorin (1850-1908): Paulsen, Berlin 1881; Bird, London 1883.

Isidor Gunsberg (1854-1930): Paulsen and Bird, Nuremberg 1883; Owen, Hereford 1885.

Semyon Alapin (1856-1923): Paulsen, Frankfurt 1887; Bird, match 1889; Owen, Manchester 1890.

Jackson Showalter (1860-1935): Bird, New York 1889.

Siegbert Tarrasch (1862-1934): Bird, Hamburg 1885. Also Paulsen and Owen.

S. Lipschütz (1863-1905): Bird, London 1886.

Jacques Mieses (1865-1954): Paulsen, Nuremberg 1888; Bird, Hastings

1895.

Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941): Bird, match, Liverpool 1890.

Richard Teichmann (1868-1925): Bird, London 1894.

David Janowski (1868-1927): de Rivière, Paris 1892; Bird, Hastings 1895.

Geza Maróczy (1870-1951): Owen, Hastings 1895 (amateur section); Bird, London 1899.

Harry N. Pillsbury (1872-1906): Bird, Hastings 1895.

Reginald P. Michell (1873-1938): Owen, Hastings 1895 (amateur section).



Carl Schlechter (1874-1918): Bird, Hastings 1895.

The names and/or events given after each of the above are not necessarily their first or only Morphy connection(s). However, one is all that is required.

Now, on to the next generation. Most masters with an MN of 3 played many of the MN2 group; what I give is the earliest connection I could find (without going to very much trouble!), taken mostly from Divinsky's *Life Maps of the Great Chess Masters* (ICE, 1994), some from Gaige's *Chess Tournament Crosstables*.

MN = 3:

Frank Marshall (1877-1944): Lipschütz, Grove Spring NY 1898.

Oldrich Duras (1882-1957): Chigorin, Tarrasch, Janowski and Schlechter, Nuremberg 1906.

Akiba Rubinstein (1882-1961): Chigorin, Kiev 1903.

Ossip Bernstein (1882-1962): Chigorin, Kiev 1903.

Rudolf Spielmann (1883-1942): Schlechter, Vienna 1905.

Milan Vidmar (1885-1962): Chigorin, Tarrasch, Janowski and Schlechter, Nuremberg 1906.

Edward Lasker (1885-1981): Mieses and Janowski, Scheveningen 1913.

Aron Nimzovitch (1886-1935): Tarrasch, Nuremberg 1904.

Savielly Tartakower (1887-1956): Maróczy and Schlechter, Vienna 1907.

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968): Mieses, Maróczy.

J.R. Capablanca (1888-1942): Burn, Tarrasch, Janowski, Teichmann, Maróczy and Schlechter, San Sebastian 1911.



Jose Capablanca



Efim Bogolyubov (1889-1952): Tarrasch and Janowski, Mannheim 1914.

Norman T. Whitaker (1890-1975): Showalter, match 1916.

Alexander Alekhine (1892-1946): Tarrasch, Teichmann and Schlechter, Hamburg 1910.



Friedrich Sämisch (1896-1975): Lasker, Moscow 1925.



Max Euwe

Max Euwe (1901-1981): Maróczy, Amsterdam 1920.

George Koltanowski (1903-2000): Michell, London 1922.

Herman Steiner (1905-1955): Maróczy, New York 1926-27.

Philip Stuart Milner-Barry (1906-1995): Maróczy, London 1932.

Salo Flohr (1908-1983): Maróczy, Rogaska Slatina 1929.

Samuel Reshevsky (1911-1992): Janowski, New York 1922.



Mikhail Botvinnik

Mikhail Botvinnik (1911-1993): Michell, Hastings 1934-35.

Erich Eliskases (1913-1997): Em. Lasker, Moscow 1936.

Lodewijk Prins (1913-1999): Mieses, Hastings 1945-46.

Reuben Fine (1914-1993): Maróczy, Zandvoort 1936.

Arnold Denker (1914-2005): Em. Lasker, simul 1938.

Paul Keres (1916-1975): Maróczy, Dresden 1936.

Martin Christoffel (1922-2001): Mieses, Hastings 1945-46.

Among the above players are some of the most important connectors in the MN chain. The young Botvinnik and Reshevsky played older masters such as Lasker and Janowski, then went on to have long careers in which they in turn played many young masters. I have included in the above some lower-tier GMs and IMs (Eliskases, Sämisch, Ed. Lasker, Whitaker, Koltanowski, Denker, Prins, Christoffel) because they continued playing to an advanced age, some of them often among average players, thus increasing readers' chances for a low MN. I have also left off at least two living players with MN = 3. Who are they? Read on.

The MN4 level includes many older but still living players, and several **ChessCafe** columnists:

MN = 4:

Miguel Najdorf (1910-1997): Tartakower, match, 1935.

Alexander Kotov (1913-1981): Botvinnik, Leningrad 1939.

Laszlo Szabó (1917-1998): Spielmann, Sopron 1934.

Isaac Boleslavsky (1919-1977): Bernstein, Vidmar, Tartakower, Botvinnik and Denker, Groningen 1946.

Semyon Furman (1920-1978): Flohr, Moscow 1948.

Vasily Smyslov (1921): Flohr, Reshevsky and Keres, Leningrad-Moscow 1939.

Robert Wade (1921): Milner-Barry, Nottingham 1946.

Yuri Averbakh (1922): Botvinnik, Moscow Championship 1943-44.

Svetozar Gligoric (1923): Vidmar, Ljubljana 1945-46.

David Bronstein (1924): Flohr, Baku 1943.

Efim Geller (1925-1998): Flohr, Moscow 1949.

Abe Yanofsky (1925-2000): Botvinnik, Euwe, Flohr, Bernstein and Denker, Groningen 1946.

Ratmir Kholmov (1925): Botvinnik, Moscow 1947.

Mark Taimanov (1926): Flohr, Moscow 1948.

Pal Benko (1928): Botvinnik, Budapest 1952.

Tigran Petrosian (1929-1984): Keres, Tbilisi 1946.

Arthur Bisguier (1929): Euwe, New York 1948-49.

Donald Byrne (1930-1976): H. Steiner, Pittsburgh 1946.

Viktor Korchnoi (1931): Flohr, Minsk 1952.

Lev Polugaevsky (1934-1995): Keres, Tbilisi 1959.

Bent Larsen (1935): Bernstein, Amsterdam Olympiad 1954.

Mikhail Tal (1936-1992): Keres, Riga-Tallinn 1954.

Boris Spassky (1937): Flohr and Botvinnik, Moscow 1955.

Lajos Portisch (1937): Botvinnik, Leipzig Olympiad 1960.

Robert J. Fischer (1943): Reshevsky, New York 1956-57.

Vlastimil Hort (1944): Flohr, Polanica Zdroj 1967.

Hans Ree (1944): Duchamp, correspondence, 1961.

Mark Dvoretsky (1947): Keres, Moscow 1973.

Bruce Pandolfini (1947): Reshevsky, offhand, 1973.

Hanon Russell (1947): Reshevsky, offhand, mid-1980s.

Robert Hübner (1948): Reshevsky, Palma 1970.

Tim Harding (1948): Botvinnik, simul 1967.

Lubomir Ljubojevic (1950): Reshevsky, Palma 1970.

Jan Timman (1951): Keres, Amsterdam 1971.

Ulf Andersson (1951): Reshevsky, Palma 1971.

Anatoly Karpov (1951): Reshevsky, Skopje 1976.

Rafael Vaganian (1951): Reshevsky, Skopje 1976.

Alexander Beliavsky (1951): Reshevsky, Vilnius 1978.

Tony Miles (1955-2001): Reshevsky, Amsterdam 1977.

Yasser Seirawan (1960): Reshevsky, Lone Pine 1977.

Gary Lane (1964): Botvinnik, simul, London 1981(?).

Nigel Short (1965): Reshevsky, Lugano 1986.

Susan Polgar (1969): Flohr, simul, Budapest 1978.

An interesting MN 4, pointed out to me by Hans Ree, is artist Salvador Dali (1904-1989), who played an exhibition game with fellow artist Marcel Duchamp in 1966. Duchamp, who had a life-long obsession with chess and played both Mieses and Maróczy, was strong enough to make the French Olympic team. Ree describes his own first Morphy connection, a 1961 correspondence game in which he teamed against Duchamp with several other Amsterdam youngsters, in his book *The Human Comedy of Chess*. Ree also connects through Prins and Euwe.

Most of today's top GMs are MN 5. I have taken their links to the MN4s mainly from databases, and therefore I do not have great confidence that these are their earliest. For example it is quite possible, even likely, that some of the Russians have played Botvinnik unofficially (especially his pupil Kasparov), in which case they would be MN4.

MN = 5:

Taylor Kingston (1949): Bisguier, simul, San Diego 1965. Forgive this bit of vanity, but this is probably the only way my name will ever appear above so many great players.

Dan Heisman (1950): D. Byrne, offhand, 1969.

Zoltan Ribli (1951): Szabó, Hungarian Championship 1967.

John Nunn (1955): Bronstein, Taimanov, and Korchnoi, Hastings 1975-76.

Jonathan Speelman (1956): Szabó and Smyslov, Hastings 1981-82.

Mikhail Gurevich (1959): Kholmov, Sverdlovsk 1984.

Artur Yusupov (1960): Karpov, Leningrad 1975.

Predrag Nikolic (1960): Hort, Vrsac 1981.

Nigel Davies (1960): Bisguier, Lone Pine 1981.

Garry Kasparov (1963): Kholmov, 1978.

Valery Salov (1964): Geller, Moscow 1986.

Alexander Khalifman (1966): Kholmov, Minsk 1985.

Boris Gelfand (1968): Miles, Amsterdam 1988.

Viswanathan Anand (1969): Geller, Delhi 1987.

Vasily Ivanchuk (1969): Smyslov, Moscow 1988.

Karsten Müller (1970): Hort, Germany 1994.

Michael Adams (1971): Short, Swansea 1987.

Carsten Hansen (1971): Larsen, simul, Sonderso, 1982.

Alexei Shirov (1972): Kholmov, Budapest 1989.

Joel Lautier (1973): Andersson, Cannes 1989.

Gata Kamsky (1974): Smyslov, Manila 1990.

Vladimir Kramnik (1975): Miles, Moscow 1989.

Veselin Topalov (1975): Larsen, Spain 1992.

Judit Polgar (1976): Bronstein, Hungary 1988.

Peter Svidler (1976): Smyslov, Moscow 1992.

Peter Leko (1979): Karpov, Spain 1993.

Rustam Kasimdzhanov (1979): Hübner, Bad Wiessee 1997.

Ruslan Ponomariov (1983): Gligoric, Cannes 1998.

The above is of course only a very partial list — there are probably many thousands of MN4s alive today, and probably millions of MN5s. But MN3s are a vanishing breed. I could find only two living players with a Morphy number of three at the time of this writing (March 2005). Both came by this rare distinction by playing an aging MN2 as young men. They are:

Andor Lilienthal (1911): Michell, Hastings 1934-35.

Arturo Pomar (1931): Mieses, match, London 1946.

Until very recently we had another MN3, GM Arnold Denker, who passed away this year. Denker's long involvement with young chess players has probably bestowed a low MN of 4 on a whole generation of American youngsters.

An outside possibility is an Austrian, Ernst Ludwig Klein, born 1910, who played Mieses at Margate 1935 and Bournemouth 1939. I could not ascertain whether he is still living. As far as I could determine, Mieses' last tournament was the Premier Reserves section at Hastings 1949-50, but I do not know whom he played there. Mieses, who loved and enjoyed chess as much as anyone who ever lived, probably continued to play informally until near his death in 1954. It seems very likely that there are still others living today who played him, perhaps in a café or coffee house, and thus have a Morphy Number of 3.

I had hoped that another possibility might be Hungarian-American GM Pal Benko, who knew Maróczy in his last years, in Budapest circa 1948-51. However, in a recent e-mail Benko informed me that while he had analyzed with Maróczy, they never actually played a game.

I pondered whether Viktor Korchnoi ought to be considered a 3, on the basis of the game he played some years ago, with a medium who claimed to be channeling the spirit of Maróczy. At this time I consider it best to limit things to flesh-and-blood opponents, lest everyone with a Ouija board should claim to have played Morphy himself in order to gain a phony MN1.

I plan to use the research done for this article to become fabulously rich, by marketing a Morphy Number board game similar to *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*. Players will draw chess master names from a card deck, and will have, say, 30 seconds to guess his MN. Bonus points will be given for naming all his links and the events involved, and for correcting opponents' errors.

Imagine the excitement at your next party: your guests all gathered around the board, you pull a card with, say, the name "Eugene Znosko-Borovsky," and you immediately announce "Three! Starting with Schiffers at St. Petersburg 1902, who played Paulsen at Frankfurt 1887, who played

Morphy at New York 1857.” You receive universal applause and the admiring stares of beautiful women. Or imagine your delight in this exchange, when another player draws the name “I.A. Horowitz”:

First know-it-all: “Oh, that’s easy. He’s a four, starting with Denker at New York 1933.”

Second know-it-all: “Ha! Denker didn’t play Emanuel Lasker until 1938, so he wasn’t a three yet. And you’re overlooking an earlier link — Capablanca, New York 1931.”

You: “Wait, you’re both wrong! Even earlier there’s *Edward* Lasker at Bradley Beach 1928, and more importantly, Horowitz is a *three*, starting with Maróczy, Manhattan CC Championship, New York 1925-26!”

Your opponents’ jaws drop, the women swoon and the men say “You da *man!*”

On second thought, the above scenarios are perhaps a bit far-fetched, at least until chess trivia becomes as popular as the TV show *Jeopardy*. But even if Morphy Number research won’t make one rich, it can be a lot fun for us chess history buffs. Why not give it a try, and figure out your own Morphy Number? And if you happen to be a 3, please contact this site — we’d like to hear your story.

The author extends special thanks to Anders Thulin, whose name index for Gaige’s *Chess Tournament Crosstables* was an invaluable aid in this research. It can be downloaded from [here](#).

Information on Stanley Milgram and his “small world” experiment came from this [site](#).

Information on *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon* came from [wikipedia.org](#); innumerable other relevant sites can be found by Internet search.



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