

Random Access Misery

Chess is many different things to many different people and it can also be enjoyed in many different ways. The number of forms of chess is pretty impressive, starting with casual, unrated chess (played with or without clocks), tournament chess played with any number of time controls, blitz and 'rapid transit' chess, correspondence chess, blindfold chess, and kriegspiel, as well as countless other variants, both ancient and modern. I feel it is important for every chess player, no matter how much they like their favorite form(s) of the royal game, to not become a 'chess snob' and speak unkindly of the many other ways to enjoy chess. Just as some may find blitz chess to be exciting and correspondence chess to be dull, others may liken blitz to trying to gobble down a large steak dinner in 5 minutes and praise correspondence chess as being the ultimate 'cerebral' game. As that old saying goes, "Different strokes for different folks!"

Having said this, and also having acknowledged that my own chess activity tends mostly to OTB tournament chess, I feel I must make some negative comments about a form of chess I have never played and have no intention of ever playing; Fischer Random Chess. Let me begin by saying that I have nothing against the game, per se. If people want to make up their own forms of chess, go for it. Frankly, I don't care if they want to put a few Lego's or Lincoln Logs on the board while they're at it. Maybe they have an old Darth Vader figure laying around somewhere that they want to use as well. If they enjoy playing the game and want to popularize it, that's fine with me.

However, I have three problems with Fischer Random Chess. The first is the supposed justification for it; namely that it is a necessary step in the evolution of chess. The shop-worn argument is that chess openings are so 'played out' that chess is now basically a game of memorization. By having so many different starting positions in FRC, this becomes impossible and a 'freshness' is restored to the game, with players being forced to think for themselves. Sounds good to me, except no one asks the obvious question "**Why** are the chess openings so 'played out'?" You don't have to be a mathematics genius to know the following: Given the fact that there are 20 potential first moves for White and 20 potential first moves for Black, there are no less than 400 different positions possible on the chess board after just one move! That seems like one heck of a lot of variety to me, even after weeding out a few of the 400 positions which are simply too weak or dangerous for one side or the other.

Now, some rainy Sunday afternoon when you have a little time to kill, go to your computer chess databases with their millions and millions of games and conduct a search for each of those 400 positions, writing down how many matches you get for each one. (Don't worry, it's a lot quicker than it sounds!) I'd be willing to bet that you'll find a lot more games beginning 1. e4 e5 than you will 1. a3 h6. Why?

We all know that, considered by itself, 1. e4 is a better move than 1. a3. However, most chess games last more than just one move. What if White follows up 1. e4 with 2. Nc3 and 3. d3 versus White following up 1. a3 with 2. b4 and 3. Bb2? And what if White does this against an opponent who is a virtually unbeatable wizard with the Najdorf Sicilian? Maybe playing 1. a3 instead of 1. e4 in that case isn't such a bad idea after all!

As your database search will reveal, the problem with chess being 'played out' isn't a problem with the game itself, it is a problem with the **players**!! In the first chess book I ever bought, Fred Reinfeld's **The Complete Chess Player**, the author talks about the relative youth of single king pawn openings, saying "For a long time, it was considered craven or unsporting to avoid 1. ... P-K4" in reply to 1. PK4. Given the fact that double king pawn openings dominated the chess scene for centuries, and given the fact that players tend to copy their chess heroes, and given the fact that virtually every chess coach and beginner's chess book recommends studying the king's pawn openings first, is it any wonder that these **particular** openings have been analyzed to death?

In fact, it is the very richness of the king pawn openings which prevent most chess players from ever moving on to try one of the 19 other choices for their first move as White, other than as an occasional adventure. How can an amateur be expected to keep up on the current opening theory of 1. e4 when the professionals can't? Do you know of any chess player who can be said to be an infallible master of just the King's Gambit, Ruy Lopez, and Sicilian Defense? Those players who may claim to have done so have probably just conquered a single variation of those openings and play it over and over, ad nauseum (i.e. Fischer and the Najdorf Sicilian). No wonder they get bored!!

Another factor which I suspect is a 'conspiracy of mediocrity' among the top chess players. Does everyone pretty much know what openings everyone else likes to play? Makes 'grandmaster draws' a little easier if we're all on the same page, right? No need to rock the boat and embarrass anyone, right?

Football eliminated the 'fumblerewski' play and the old 'sleeper play' not because they were dangerous or because the fans didn't like them but because the same coaches who didn't have the guts to try those plays themselves didn't like being tricked by them and embarrassed in front of thousands of fans. When it comes to chess opening surprises, it's sad how the Frank Marshall's and Bent Larsen's of the world always seem to be the exception rather than the rule. And once again, most amateurs just follow the crowd.

Another reason I'm against FRC is the fact that it eliminates one of the best things about chess, its incredible literature and history. Been to a bookstore lately and seen "1000 Immortal Games of Parcheesi" or "The Best Chinese Checker Games of Won Hung Lo"? The thing which gives chess its soul is the fact that the games can be easily recorded and studied. Why study a brilliant FRC game if you will probably never have the same opening set-up in your own games? What is there to learn?

Finally, I'm against FRC because of those people who believe that "Bobby's Word is Law" and that everything he ever said or did was brilliant. I realize that trying to psychoanalyze Bobby Fischer is always a hit-or-miss activity but in this case I wonder if maybe he decided that chess was the cause of all of the problems in his life and that he could exact revenge on the game by destroying it. And what better way of destroying it than replacing it with another game, bearing his name? Something to think about.

Just keeping up with chess opening theory is a full-time job. And it's even harder if, like me, you are someone who has struggled to find the right fit for their opening repertoire for decades. It just seems hypocritical to voluntarily play the same extremely limited number of openings over and over for years, and then complain that the reason you're bored is because there's something wrong with chess. Perhaps the way to cut this Gordian Knot is to select a small number of openings which are extremely flexible and give the most latitude for creativity. However, I then wonder if the same people who always seem to 'follow the crowd' are ever going to be particularly creative.