

Chapter 1

Blitzkrieg Bop

You know, comrade Pachman, I don't enjoy being a Minister, I would rather play chess like you, or make a revolution in Venezuela.

Che Guevara

Khan's got a bishop aimed at my kingside. He's staring at the guts of my position, looking for weaknesses. He wants to slice my pawns open to get at my king. I watch as his eyes scan the board. He sees how his queen can take action. He grabs that potent piece, slides it three squares forward, swings his arm to the side of the board, and hits the chess clock, stopping his timer and starting my own.

It's my move. There are two minutes left on my clock. I take seconds to decide on a good response. Khan's on the attack. I've got to get some counterplay going, some active maneuvering to keep his initiative at bay. I drop my knight onto a square in the middle of the board. The move looks good, but I'm not sure. I hit my clock. It's back to Khan, his eyes trained on the board.

We're playing five-minute blitz games on a damp summer night at a chess club that convenes Monday evenings on the ground floor of a Presbyterian church in the crowded suburban city of Yonkers, New York. We're tossing pins and skewers, forks and double attacks. We've been at it a good hour now, each of us winning and losing playfully cutthroat games, but I'm starting to fade. I'm trying to hold on, but it's not easy playing Khan. He has a sharp eye for tactics. He's infinitely resourceful and thinks and moves fast. I feel like a middle-aged jogger trying to keep pace with a track star.

The position is fraught with possibility, but neither of us has the time to consider it closely. We're down to a few seconds each. A fierce tension heats the board; something's going to break. Khan snares my king in a deadly mating net. I try some desperado moves, sacrificing my knight for two pawns; but Khan sees through my tricks, and my pieces lie scattered about. No choice but to resign. I stop the clocks.

"Damn," I say. "I thought I'd get out of that."

Khan smiles as he gathers up the pieces.

It's late, close to midnight. Other club members were here earlier tonight, playing rounds of a tournament, but they've all gone home.

We switch colors and arrange our pieces. Khan resets the digital clock.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Yeah."

Khan taps the clock; I make the first move of a new game.

Cognitive Junkies

I first met Khan in November 2002, at the same chess club, when he was nineteen. Since then we've played hundreds of blitz games together. When he worked at a restaurant in my town, he would drop by my place during his lunch break. We would play for an hour or more, racing pieces around on a cloth board at my kitchen table, until he had to return to work. The games were a gleeful respite from our daily labors. Once the clocks start, I find myself trying to follow his imaginative, quick-witted play while plodding through my more methodical moves.

A bright guy with a movie-star-handsome face, Furqan Tanwir-or Khan, as his friends know him-grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Yonkers. By his late teens he had severed ties with his parents. Without family support to fall back on, he has gotten along in life through his resourcefulness, his smarts, and his good nature. I sometimes wonder if this is reflected in his approach to chess: he's wildly creative at the board; he takes a lot of chances, some of which fail; and he plays best, by his own admission, when he's faced with a losing position. "My strength lies in creativity," Khan once said. "I'll salvage something, and I find that when I'm down, I'll tend to play a lot better, for whatever reason. I think largely for me a survival instinct kicks in, and in a sense it becomes almost easier. You don't have the choice to create anymore because you're forced to find the right moves, and if that pressure is not on you, it's much more difficult to find the same moves."

Khan enters a lot of tournaments, where he's out for the big-money prizes. He also likes to play quick games, day or night. He has an abiding love for the game.

Chess gets ahold of some people, like a virus or a drug. Just as the chemical properties of heroin directly and immediately affect the central nervous system, so chess can lock into certain pathways of the mind, and it doesn't easily let go. "Playing chess got to be a problem," writes Charlie McCormick in one of his poems, published on his blog:

Because I would play

To the exclusion of everything else,

Including eating and sleeping.

I quickly discovered

Chess was my one real addiction,

That it would get in the way

Of all the other areas of my life

If I let it.

This has been going on for centuries now. A person's body, thoughts, consciousness become wrapped up in the ideas of the game. "It hath not done with me when I have done with it," laments the anonymous author of "A Letter from a Minister to His Friend Concerning the Game of Chess," penned in England in 1680. "It hath followed me into my Study, into my Pulpit; when I have been Praying, or Preaching, I have (in my thoughts) been playing at Chess; then have I had it as were a Chess-board before my eyes; and I have been thinking how I might have obtained stratagems of my Antagonist, or make such motions to his disadvantage; nay, I have heard of one who was playing at Chess in his thoughts (as appear'd by his words) when he lay a dying."

Marcel Duchamp, the French artist, was similarly smitten. "My attention is so completely absorbed by chess," he wrote in a letter in 1919. "I play day and night, and nothing interests me more than finding the right move.... I like painting less and less." Duchamp gave up painting altogether to concentrate on chess, for he found chess to be a purer, more compelling medium for artistic creativity. The story goes that when he married in 1927 he spent much of his honeymoon in Nice at a chess club. One week into the marriage he stayed up late studying chess problems. The next morning he awoke to find that his wife had glued the pieces to the board. They divorced weeks later. "Duchamp needed a good game of chess like a baby needs a bottle," his good friend Henri-Pierre Roché wrote in 1941. He wasn't the only one. Many committed chess players are cognitive junkies. They need their daily fix of tactics and strategy.

Chess or Death

I felt the same way a while back, the year Khan and I first met. I am an anthropologist by trade-a sociocultural anthropologist, to be precise. By training and inclination, I am interested in getting a read on the social, cultural, and experiential dimensions of people's lives around the world in an effort to understand better what it means to be human. Many evenings and weekends these

days, however, I can be found seated before a chessboard, looking for good moves. I've got the fever.

I returned to playing seriously in the summer of 2002, after a twenty-year break from competitive chess. I had played as a teenager while growing up in a residential town in western Massachusetts. Chess was one of my main interests in life. "All I want to do, ever, is play chess," Bobby Fischer once said. That idea made perfect sense to me then. I homed in on the game's strategic nuances and competitive challenges. During my high school years I woke up early to study the masterworks of Fischer and Anatoly Karpov, the best players of that era. I snuck a pocket chess set into my classes to mull over game positions. I felt at home at the board, less so anywhere else. Chess formations patterned my thoughts. Some days, after looking at a board all day, my chess-crazed mind would construe game positions—a knight here, a rook there—out of the arrangements of people and furniture in a room.

Like other young people captivated by the game, I entertained the notion of devoting my life to it and becoming a professional chess player. But since I wasn't especially talented, and since the mill towns and farmlands of western Mass. were by no means a hotbed of chess praxis, there was little logic in doing so, and I played competitive chess only infrequently in college. When I left for graduate school in California in 1985, I sold all of my once-cherished chess books at a used bookstore.

Over the next twenty years I played casual games with friends now and then or against a program on a computer. I had other priorities; chess was only an occasional, fleeting diversion. I also knew that even a half-serious flirtation with the game could chew up valuable time. One day, while perusing a bookstore in Manhattan in the mid-1990s, I came across a collection of the games of Garry Kasparov, then the world champion and widely regarded as one of the greatest players of all time. The diagrams of the chess positions found on every page—pictures of dynamic forces in tension, the product of richly creative ideas—hit me hard. The intense pleasures I had known as a teen but long ago effaced surged through my nervous system. I thought about buying the book, to work through in my spare time, but it was dangerous, addictive stuff. I put the three-hundred-page narcotic back on its shelf.

On a Saturday in June 2002 I found myself walking through the streets below Washington Square Park, in New York. I happened upon one of the chess shops on Thompson Street, where anyone can play for a dollar an hour. I had been there once or twice before. I decided to try a few games and soon realized how much I enjoyed the act of thinking about my next moves and responding to my opponent's ideas. *Why can't I take up the game again?* I thought when leaving three hours later. I was in the middle of writing a book on the death and funeral

rites of Nepal's Yolmo people, an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist society. This was my second book project in quick succession, and I was tired of writing, tired of the anthropological profession, and tired of thinking about death all the time.

A few days prior to my visit to Manhattan I had pulled my car into a parking space by my home in Bronxville, New York, after running some errands. As I stepped out of the car I'd found myself thinking, *That's a great parking job. If I could have a death like that, as neat and fluid and comfortable as the way my car slipped into that spot, then that would be a good death.* The perversity of this logic struck me, and I stood silent in the parking lot, car keys in hand. *Time to take a break,* I thought, *from the seductive aesthetics of death.*

Two days after playing chess in Manhattan I drove up north a ways to the national office of the United States Chess Federation, then in New Windsor, New York, and purchased a year's membership, a chess set, and a handful of books that would reintroduce me to the game. I quickly found that the game, at the highest levels, differed from what it was when I was in my teens. It was more dynamic, more aggressive, with a complex revolution of thought emergent in its recent history. It was rife with energy, imbalances, precision, flush with lines of thought waiting to be gleaned. I was hooked again.

"So you're making a comeback," quipped the director of the first tournament I played in, when I told him that these would be my first rated games in twenty years. "Yeah, right," I replied. Sitting at the board was at first like dusting off old memories.

Gradually I got a finer feel for matters. I continued to pore over chess after returning to teaching in September. I attended chess clubs three nights a week and competed in tournaments. I came home from work each day and immersed myself in the rich, bounded world of chess. My bookshelves were soon lined with twenty, then thirty, then fifty books on diverse aspects of the game. Attending professional anthropology meetings became a chore; I would find ways to sneak back to my hotel room to study Capablanca's rook endgames. Chess had become infinitely more interesting than keeping up with the scholarly research in my field.

There was much to learn. It was all so new, so exciting and intriguing. I felt as if I were separating from my spouse of fifteen years, anthropology, and reigniting a passion for my high school sweetheart.

I had gone native. Or, to lift a term from the social sciences, there was a keen shift in the *illusio* that motivated my efforts in life. The concept of *illusio* comes from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. A Latin word, *illusio* involves the interest that a person holds in a particular field in life—be it scholarly work or religion or football—or in life in general. It's the investment people make in the activities that give

meaning to their lives, their commitment to them. Devoted cliff climbers, dog show attendees, Buddhist monks, religious fundamentalists, novelists—each of these engage with their own *illusio*, their own "interests, expectations, demands, hopes, and investments." Bourdieu draws on the fact that the word *illusio* relates etymologically to the Latin word *ludus*, "game," in speaking of the ways in which people are invested in a number of social games over the course of their lives. "Illusio," he suggests, "is the fact of being caught up in and by the game, of believing the game is 'worth the candle,' or, more simply, that playing is worth the effort."

To the outside observer, uninvolved and uninvested in the social game being played, it can appear arbitrary and insignificant. Bourdieu makes this point in commenting on the social airs of early nineteenth-century Paris, where the members of court society were engrossed in a culture of status and propriety. "When you read, in Saint-Simon, about the quarrel of hats (who should bow first), if you were not born in a court society, if you do not possess the habitus of a person of the court, if the structures of the game are not also in your mind, the quarrel will seem futile and ridiculous to you." For those caught up in the spell of a certain *illusio*, by contrast, the social game they're playing is an important one; it can give rich meaning to their lives—even to the point of becoming "possessed by the game." As Bourdieu puts it, "The game presents itself to someone caught up in it, absorbed in it, as a transcendent universe, imposing its own ends and norms unconditionally."

That's how I thought of professional anthropology for some twenty years. But by 2002 I had become disillusioned with the academic routines and status rites that came with the profession; I was coming to see it as a shallow game of note-taking and hat-tipping. When I started to play chess again that summer, a new interest took shape for me, with a force and intensity comparable to a religious conversion. Chess emerged as the main *illusio* in my life, much as it has for countless chess buffs. I became absorbed in chess, preoccupied by it, and took it seriously—so much so that I was willing to submit to a social death in the anthropological profession.

An Anthropology of Passion

Chess remained a priority for me over the next few years. At the same time, what sparked my interest in anthropology in the first place—a desire, chiefly, to understand what people are up to in their lives—led me to reflect on the personal and social dimensions of the game. My efforts in chess came to be motivated by two chief aims. I wanted to learn how to play better, so I could appreciate the game's depths and compete at a consistently high level of expertise; and I wanted to gain a better sense of the realities of chess in the early twenty-first century. I also sought an angle on why so many chess players are so passionate about the game.

A few years back I attended the graduation at Sarah Lawrence College, where I've taught since 1994. After the commencement ceremonies ended, family, friends, and faculty were milling about the main campus lawn, congratulating the new graduates. I ran into a former student of mine as I made my way through the crowd. He had graduated two years before but had returned to campus to see a friend receive his diploma.

"By the way, I've kept in touch with Shahnaz since I've left here," he said, referring to another former teacher. "She tells me that you've been spending a lot of time playing chess."

"Yes, that's true. I've been playing seriously for a while now."

"Why?"

"What's that?"

"*Why?*"

Taken aback by his blunt question, I muttered that I found the game fascinating, but my answer was vague and unconvincing. The man soon walked away, no doubt wondering what had become of his former teacher, who a few years before had been expounding on cultural relativism and non-Western medical systems.

The more I gave thought to the question, the more it intrigued me. Why play chess at all? Why take up a game-if *game* is the best word for it-that can be so exhausting, so demanding, so maddeningly frustrating? Why spend summer weekends holed up in an airless hotel convention center, shoulder to shoulder with similarly single-minded chess enthusiasts, staring for hours on end at an array of wooden pieces on a stretch of cloth? Why devote one's energies to a time-intensive pursuit that is little valued or understood in one's own society? How is it that, in a world rife with social inequities, violence, economic upheaval, and fast-paced transformation, people are drawn to chess-playing? The anthropologist in me got to thinking: Why not conduct fieldwork at the chessboard and train an anthropological lens on the cultures and motives of chess players? Why not hang out with the locals and learn what they're up to?

"Participant observation" is the main research method that anthropologists rely on when trying to learn about a particular way of life through ethnographic research. They participate in the everyday activities of the people whose lives they are attempting to understand, while making observations about their rhyme and reason. As a participant observer, I did what other chess players do: I frequented chess clubs, played in tournaments and informally with friends, read chess books, analyzed positions with the help of computer programs, took lessons, developed a

repertoire of openings, sacrificed rooks and blundered away queens, lost sleep after tough games, and played countless blitz games with friends and on the Internet. I played a lot of chess, but I also gave thought to what it means to focus on the game in a serious, committed way. I also spoke with a number of chess players, at both the amateur and the professional level, about their experiences of the game. My guiding idea was that by undertaking such inquiries, I could put myself in a position to portray the lifeworlds of some chess players accurately—much the way anthropologists have attempted to understand and convey in writing why, say, Ilongot people of the Philippines used to go on head-hunting expeditions, or how globalization has shaped the ethnic identities of peoples in Peru. Indeed, only through writing this book did I come to appreciate anew what anthropology can offer the modern world.

Considering chess through an anthropological lens makes good sense. Anthropology has been a holistic discipline from its inception in the nineteenth century, with anthropologists attending to the diverse and interrelated dimensions of humanity, from the biophysical and linguistic to the material and sociocultural. In studying the chess-playing world, adopting such a holistic focus helped me to tease out the interconnecting forces—social, psychological, technological—woven into contemporary chess practice. A popular conception of chess is that it's purely a mental activity, conducted in a bodiless, wordless domain by solitary thinkers who grapple with each other in a space of pure thought. But the game—like all human affairs—has always been a product of social, cultural, political, biological, and technological arrangements. A chess player is not a lone, heroic actor but is, rather, caught up in complicated webs of meaning and action. Chess is an ever-shifting tangle of neural networks, bodies, social relations, perception, memory, time, spectators, history, narratives, computers, databases. A combinational complexity fixes any human chess scene, not unlike the combinational interplay of pieces on a chessboard. Giving thought to that complexity, making a study of it, an anthropology of chess can attend to the thickets of forms and forces involved in contemporary chess practice—and, more generally, in life itself.

It makes sense to think of chess players as participating in distinct cultures or subcultures—or, more precisely, in sets of interconnected chess communities—for the social realities of chess players are defined by culturally specific practices, values, languages, and social relations. Backward pawns, weak color complexes, seizing the initiative, en passant, back-rank mates, weak masters: the game involves an arcane set of rules, concepts, and vocabulary that can prove inaccessible to the uninitiated. Stuart Rachels, a philosopher and former U.S. chess champion, deems this "the curse of chess"—the fact that "even a rudimentary understanding of chess takes time to develop, and until it is developed, chess seems utterly dull." For seasoned players, in contrast, chess is like some enchanted palace they have stumbled across, its beauty and astonishing intricacy known only to a few. "It's an amazing game," one player tells me, "but most people don't understand anything

about it." While that may be true, it's possible to convey the complexities of the game to others. The conceptual stance I've adopted in portraying the lives of chess players is not very different from the one I employed a few years back while trying to grasp the cultural logic of shamanic healing practices in Nepal, or the felt immediacies of life in a shelter in downtown Boston for people considered homeless and mentally ill. Through an intensive engagement with the forms of life in question, I've tried to understand those forms well enough to explain their makeup to others previously unfamiliar with them.

There is no single chess culture, just as there are no singularly bounded "cultures" at work in people's lives. Any single portrait of an actual chess player entails a specific time, place, and nexus of people. The temporal setting of this book is the first decade of the twenty-first century, an age of weekend tourneys, fading neighborhood chess clubs, globalized networks of chess players, and rapid innovations in computer and media technologies. Global interconnectedness has made the already intense practice of chess even more fast-paced, information-rich, and cyborgian. The regional setting for this study is primarily the Northeast of the United States, where city dwellers and suburbanites find ways to cram in chess around the edges of hectic, cell-phoned lives. The people under consideration are, chiefly, a multinational mix of amateur, semiprofessional, and professional players, ranging in age from seven years old to eighty-two, from both the United States and elsewhere, whom I've come to know through my engagements with the game. Considering that those engagements are at a decidedly amateur level, the realm of chess I write about most intimately is that of people who do not make a living from competitive chess but are intensively involved with the game. Accordingly, I do not privilege professional chess as the most authentic and informed realm of chess experience (though professional chess is clearly at a higher level of mastery than amateur chess), but regard it, rather, as one of several fields of practice involved in a much broader theater of human action and interest.

Call it an anthropology of passion-of the ways that people are enraptured by certain endeavors and activities, and of the vectors of such fervor. Others have written about the passionate engagements of orchid enthusiasts and scrabble players and amateur boxers. I want to chronicle the passions and counterpassions of chess players. My aim is to explore the sinews of their interests and consider when their ardor veers into addiction or obsession. I also want to probe what happens when the zeal for certain endeavors runs dry and people grow ambivalent about their investment in them. Chess lays bare key existential themes in the lives of those touched by its energies. These themes are not unique to chess players; they underpin much of modern life. What delights, struggles, and ambivalences sway people? How do they manage competing interests and passions? What are the rewards and costs of obsessive focus?

With passion comes purpose. Many competitive chess players work hard on their games. They study the game, sharpen their tactical vision, analyze past battles, steel themselves for competitive grinds, and try to promote effective modes of thought while playing. They engage in "self-forming" activities and devise certain "technologies of the self," to use the words of French historian Michel Foucault. As Foucault deems it, such technologies allow individuals to affect "their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality." Chess players employ, often with zealous discipline, a number of technologies of self and subjectivity—some physical and social, others cognitive, emotive, mnemonic. Appropriate to this current age of individualism and self-fashioning, the self becomes an abiding project in the drive toward mastery. Some also draw on chess to improve themselves as persons, to become wiser, more ethically refined beings in the world. Chess offers an education as much moral as intellectual, and that adds to their appreciation for the game.

These pages bid for a phenomenologically inclined, semi-autoethnographic approach to thinking and writing about chess, one that gives priority to the personal and social dimensions of people's involvements with the game. What are the roles of play, ritual, thought, feeling, imagination, memory, empathy, creativity, sociality, and technology in the lives of chess players? What are the lines of pleasure, the histories of pain? How, once the variations are played out, might the vagaries of chess add to our hold on what it means to be human? This book offers a "knight's tour" jaunt into the experiential, social, cultural, and technological expanses of the human play form known as chess.

Amatory Obsession

So what incites the passions of chess players? What do they find in chess, and why do they return to it time and again? While spending time among serious chess players I've found that, by and large, they love the game.

Take Joe Guadagno, a Bronx native and computer software engineer now in his early fifties. I met up with Joe and several chess associates one Sunday afternoon at a weekend tourney held in Stamford, Connecticut. We got to talking about the trials of tournament chess, how grueling it can be. "You know, I was just thinking about that when I was in there," Joe said, gesturing toward the playing hall. "{hrs}"Why am I here?" I asked myself. You've got to be a masochist to want to play competitive chess."

I spoke with Joe ten days later at the Northern Westchester Chess Club in Peekskill, New York. I found Joe more rested, and less masochistically inclined, than when I had seen him last. Joe started playing in his early teens, right after the "Fischer boom" in the early 1970s, using a chess set that he was given when he

received his Catholic confirmation. No one else in his Bronx neighborhood knew much about the game, so to play at all he had to hop on a subway heading south to Manhattan, where he played at the Manhattan Chess Club. He developed other interests while in college, but then took up the game again in the late 1990s. "I love the game," he said, with a slight Bronx accent. "It's a source of endless enjoyment.... It's more than just a hobby, it's a passion at a number of levels." Joe's also aware of the game's addictive qualities. "I've had a couple of times in the past six or seven years where I've had to say, you know, if you don't cut a little time away from chess, you're jeopardizing a relationship."

The aesthetic qualities of chess hold Joe's interest. "Before I finish," he said, "I want to play at least a few games that are close enough to mistake-free that I can actually present them and say, 'Here's a chess game that's really worth showing to other people.' As if it was a minor work of art ... 'Here's a minor work of art, but a work of art nevertheless.'"

"The cliché about the beauty of chess is, to me, not a cliché at all," Joe added. "It's an incredibly rich game. Everything that you see written about chess by its lovers, about how it's game, art, and science, is absolutely true, as far as I'm concerned. I see the artistic element.... So in that sense, the game is attractive to me in so many ways. It's an art form, and it's a challenging pursuit. It's a whole bunch of different things."

Or take GZA, the master lyricist of the rap group Wu-Tang Clan. Born Gary Grice, GZA learned to play chess in 1975, when he was growing up on Staten Island. Although he did not play much in his youth, its strategies now intoxicate him. "I play at home, in chess shops; I skip meals to play," he said in 2008. "In the studio, I'll sit and play for six hours instead of finishing a song. At home, a lot of times I'm playing on Yahoo! [on the online chess server there]. I play, like, thirty games every time I go online."

GZA and his cousin RZA, another member of Wu-Tang Clan, launched the Hip-Hop Chess Federation in 2007, with the idea of getting more young kids to take up the game. "You are like a sponge when you are young," GZA explained to the *New York Times*. "Kids are not being stimulated. Chess is a game of stimulation."

At the end of his track "Queen's Gambit," GZA rhapsodizes,

I be liking chess

Cuz chess is crazy, right there, that's the ultimate

It's like a great hobby right there, playing chess

The board, the pieces, the squares, the movement

You know, war, capturing, thinking, strategy

Planning, music, it's hip-hop, and sports

It's life, it's reality.

Most of those who take up the game are and always will be amateurs at it. But it's important to keep in mind that the word *amateur* stems from the Latin *amator*, "lover, one who loves." For some, chess is a hobby picked up along the way, while for others it's a cathedral of truth and beauty. There's a score of interlocking reasons why people stick with the game. The attractions often relate to the drama that each game promises, the competitive challenge in pitting one's skills against another's, the intricate complexity that comes with any chess position, the rewarding intellectual conversation that takes place between two minds during a game, how focused concentration can take a person into a domain of pure thought removed from the hassles of everyday life, the way chess enables people to know their mind better, the pleasures of learning and participating in the conceptual history of modern chess, the camaraderie to be found at chess clubs, the thrill of accomplishing something creative at the board, and the way in which truth and beauty-and perhaps a measure of wisdom-can be found in chess. It's a swirl of deeply felt intensities that cut through the lives of chess players.

At Play

Play is one of those intensities. What are we up to, Khan and I, while playing chess? We're playing a game, a serious game. We're involved in a certain cultural form, one that carries a rule-bound structure and a particular pattern of interaction. Brains, eyes, arms, hands, fingers, chess pieces, board, clock, and speech are cued into a "single visual and cognitive focus." We've brought to the table culturally informed understandings of what play is, what a game is, what competition entails, what it means to win or lose, and how people should relate to their play rivals.

The cadences of play skip through a vast number of situations in everyday life. Play motifs crop up in conversations and legal proceedings, in presidential debates and on stock market exchanges. Children learn about the world through play. Play is evident in moments of dreaming and daydreaming and fantasy, in acts of flirting and foreplay and erotic play, in stretches of recreational drug use. We hear the jest of play in riddles, jokes, puns, gossip, wordplay. We find play at work in beauty contests and white-water rafting, in hobbies and gambling, at parties and in psychotherapy. Play is central to musical performances, theater, film, and television shows. It has an important role in creative and scholarly work, in fiction and

poetry. People busy themselves with pretend play and symbolic play, ritual play and sportive play. It was the ubiquity of play forms in human societies that led Dutch historian Johan Huizinga to title his landmark 1938 book *Homo ludens*, "Playing Man." While we don't have to accept Huizinga's bold thesis that human civilization itself is founded on play, his contention that play "is an important factor in the world's life and doings" is convincing. Play is as basic to human functioning as eating or dreaming. Indeed, rather than think of play as being bound within certain situations only, it makes sense to conceive of it as an elemental feature of people's lives. "It's wrong to think of play as the interruption of ordinary life," says performance theorist Richard Schechner. "Consider instead playing as the underlying, always there, continuum of experience.... Ordinary life is netted out of playing." Chess belongs to a larger universe of play; when two people are playing chess, they're up to something that is fundamental to the human species.

Like most other games, a chess game is circumscribed within limits of space and time. Chess is played on a chessboard, a bounded domain—a "consecrated space"—and there's a clear beginning and end to a game. The outcome is uncertain, however, and that's part of the intrigue of playing or watching a game. There has to be some degree of indeterminacy, some sense of opportunity and contingency in the activity at hand, to make it worthy of being called a game. What will happen, who is going to win, and how? In competitive chess, something is staked on the outcome, be it the players' chances in a tournament, adjustments in their ratings, a sense of self, or the regard of others. Chess play entails narrative intrigue. Undertaking a chess game trips a sense of adventure, of venturing into surprises and unanticipated situations.

There's a measure of fantasy and make-believe in games of chess; while the participants are palming wooden figures, they're proceeding on the shared assumption that those figures stand for much more than their concrete materiality. In the course of playing chess a dual consciousness can take form, in which a participant is at once minding the play of the pieces in a virtual space and conscious that people are the operators of those pieces. At any moment either the chess realm or the human realm can take priority. Those enmeshed in a game can become consumed by it to the point of forgetting their surroundings. What occurs is a "socialized trance" akin to that found when people are engrossed in a conversation, playing sports, or watching a theatrical performance. While being absorbed in this imaginative sphere, players can be transported to another realm, distinct from everyday life. This can entail a kind of ecstasy, that of *ex-stasis*, to use the ancient Greek term, which means "to be or stand outside oneself, a removal to elsewhere." Nolan Kordsmeier, a friend of mine, says one reason he likes to play chess is that "the rest of the world disintegrates around you while you are playing chess.... There's a larger amount of concentration, nothing else is important. It's like escaping into a whole other world." As Huizinga paints it, the

primordial quality of play lies "in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening."

People *play* chess. In languages that speak of chess, from English and Russian to Spanish to Hindi, one "plays chess," as one plays games in general. "Playing is no 'doing' in the ordinary sense," says Huizinga. Playing chess often-but not always-involves an attitude that can rightly be called "playful." It's an attitude of frolicsomeness, of mischievousness even, of holding the world "lightly and creatively," of launching into back-and-forth movements with another or with the world in general. Such movements are central to the phenomenon of play. As German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it,

The movement to-and-fro obviously belongs so essentially to the game that there is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself. In order for there to be a game, there always has to be, not necessarily literally another player, but something else with which the player plays and which automatically responds to his move with a countermove. Thus the cat at play chooses the ball of wool because it responds to play, and ball games will be with us forever because the ball is freely mobile in every direction, appearing to do surprising things of its own accord.

There's a direct back-and-forth movement between two chess players, as they swap moves hand over hand. But there's also a sense in which you play with the canvas of chess itself. You toy with the different possibilities available to you, much as a boy can spend hours fielding a tennis ball as it rebounds off the side of a house, or a punster frolics in the play of words. British poet W. H. Auden suggested that true poets are those who like "hanging around words listening to what they say." Avid chess players enjoy hanging out with chess pieces, minding how they interact. Tending to these interactions can occasion a sense of pleasure, of *jouissance*. "This is why I like to play chess!" gushed one man while analyzing a juicy position with friends one afternoon.

Chess can be played in a mood of levity and amiability, as when friends get together to play casual games, or it can occur in a climate of grave seriousness, as when two pros tussle over the world championship. I've watched buddies play games with mugs of beer close at hand, with little care for who wins or loses. I've seen a child throw pieces against a wall after a tough loss, and I've watched a man pound his fist against a hotel door after losing a game. I've overheard players accuse their rivals of cheating. I've observed friendly games turn combative after perceived slights. Chess is often far from "playful." Competitive chess is a "serious game," as anthropologist Sherry Ortner would put it, a politically charged arena of social relations and cultural formations that people grapple with and live through "with (often intense) purpose and intention." One veteran player told me that he thought participating in tournament chess made people less, rather than more,

playful: "People take it very seriously. There's a lot at stake." There are different possible modes of engagement in the game: serious, studious, reflective, playful, social, solitary.

Chess is primarily a social enterprise. While playing chess you can spend five intense hours with someone you hardly know otherwise-and might never see again. A sense of comity often comes with playing chess at a neighborhood club or a tournament hall, as you're surrounded by others who endorse what you're doing and likewise find it to be a meaningful endeavor. Chess is often taken to be a lonesome, semisolitary matter, in which a person is alone with his thoughts for long stretches of time. But playing chess is often a deeply social affair, as opponents, friends, acquaintances, and potential onlookers are often close at hand.

Chess belongs to a larger social game in which we're invested, with its social circles, tournaments, rating systems, and status hierarchies. Part of the game of competitive chess is to see how far you can climb in that particular "skill culture." For many, participating in this scene constitutes one of the main purposes of their lives, with their interest and investment in chess waxing and waning as the years pass. For some, competitive chess is the foremost focus of their days on earth. *Chess Is My Life* is the title of two autobiographies of world-class players.

People play chess, it's true, but it could also be said that the game plays them. As Gadamer puts it, "all playing is a being played." That's to say, while playing chess people step into a specific form of activity and engagement, and the formal qualities of the game shape how they think and act. They get caught up in the game. An unwritten script is at hand; chess players know, in general terms, what will happen through the next minutes or hours of their games: they'll exchange moves until someone wins, or the game is drawn. While playing chess you can be carried along by the formal flow of the game. Being carried along in that way can be comforting or enticing or confining. Social life proceeds in much the same way.

There's a ritual quality to chess, as there is in many games and domains of play. Chess games are governed by rules, they involve patterned routines and standardized actions, they entail a restricted code of behavior, and they have a set of fixed beginnings and endings. All this speaks to the formal, ritualistic tone of many chess encounters. Rituals often promote a sense of inclusion and belonging. People participating in ritual acts can feel that they are part of a community or shared sensibility. Players can come to understand that they are part of a community-be it a network of "chess buddies," a nationwide clan of chess players, or a global chess society.

The rituals of chess can also convey a sense of the sacred, of otherness and transcendence. Forms of play have a lot in common with religious rites found around the world, for both play and ritual entail a set structure separated,

spatially and temporally, from the happenings of everyday life. As Huizinga sees it, "the arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart." Both play and ritual can offer a sense of transcendence to those who participate in them. "It is possible to speculate," remarks play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, "that the primordial association of the two, play and religion, is due to the power of alterity, of otherness, that they both share. They both take their participants beyond their present circumstances, one through prayer, meditation, song, or rapturous transport, the other through ecstatic play in the game." Play participants step beyond ordinary existence. "I believe chess can bring me closer to the spiritual part of this world in a way that simple material stuff can't," observes Irina Krush, an international master from Ukraine.

"Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer," claims French philosopher Simone Weil. The painstaking observances required of chess players can involve a kind of prayer. Some scholars contend that the origins of chess lie in religious rites. As it is, a chessboard physically resembles an altar upon which sacred rites take place. A board with pieces on it reminds me of Hindu mandalas that I've seen in Nepal, or the altars of indigenous healers in Peru, as each includes a bounded domain that contains symbolic icons. Religious designs like these at once represent and summon the forces and energies of the world. Chess does the same, or so it seems at times. While playing I sometimes feel I'm tapping into the forces of the universe and thus sensing its primal matter and physics. "It ever was, and is, and shall be, ever-living Fire," said Heraclitus, "in measures being kindled and in measures going out." Chess touches those fires.

"Quick Now, Here, Now"

Right now I've got Khan to contend with, in another fast-paced game. The detritus of our actions, captured pawns and pieces, lies about the table. I've got a decent position, something to work with. My pawns are solid; my pieces, active. But Khan has a way of stirring up trouble, setting fires left and right that I have to snuff out before they burn up the board. He's got a penchant for helter-skelter positions where his imagination can pay off. His energy appears endless. I'm finding good moves and my mind is crisp. We're matching each other threat for threat, cascading through a succession of possibilities, until we reach an endgame in which I have the edge. Khan resigns just before his clock runs out. The thrilling energy of games like this makes bouts of blitz chess worth the effort.

Blitz is chess as its most playful, especially in informal settings-at chess clubs, in parks or homes, between rounds of tournaments. "I like playing blitz because it's

fun," Khan tells me. "You can play a lot of chess, and get some games in, and it becomes more psychological, with the time factors involved. It makes it a lot more entertaining as opposed to a slow game."

Many love blitz. Some steer clear of it. Blitz is one of four major kinds of chess played these days, each defined by the time controls used. With correspondence chess, players send their moves by mail or e-mail in games that can take years to complete. Classical games, the foci of most tournament and match contests, can take four to six hours. In rapid chess, each player has from twenty to sixty minutes. Then there's blitz chess, wherein "the slowest game in the world becomes the fastest." Each form carries its own temporality, its own mood and flow in time; each promotes a different mode of consciousness and social interaction. With blitz you can play five-minute or three-minute games, or, if you're a true speed freak, revel in one-minute frenzies. If your time runs out, you lose the game, even if you have a winning position. The wins usually go to those who play both accurately and quickly. Many games end in frenetic flourishes of moves and flung pieces. *Blitz*, which means "lightning" in German, is the right word for this kind of chess. "Our nature lies in movement; complete calm is death," wrote French philosopher Blaise Pascal.

Blitz is poetry in perpetual motion. It's Bud Powell on jazz piano, Charlie Bird on tenor sax. The tempo is fast and furious, but also blissfully melodic. It's NHL hockey without the breaks between plays. It's a pleasure when both sides are playing with precision and imagination. At times while playing blitz I feel I'm at one with the world, flowing with its flow, in synch with its bebop rhythms. At other times, I've entered a plane of tense energy.

Blitz is the antistructural counterpart to serious chess, its wild, Dionysian energies antic in contrast to the more Apollonian orders of tournament chess. Psychologist Jerome Bruner calls play "that special form of violating fixity." By this he means that play, chiefly undertaken by the young, disrupts patterns of action that are altogether fixed within a particular animal species. Blitz chess violates fixity: it can take its players out of the set structures of everyday life and those of more classical forms of chess. Often after dallying in a stream of blitz chess I find myself to be looser and lighter in spirit, less constrained, and more open to creative approaches to the world. Richard Schechner says that the looseness common to many play moods-looseness in the sense of "pliability, bending, lability, unfocused attention"-encourages "the discovery of new configurations and twists of ideas and experiences." Blitz promotes creative looseness.

Blitz chess can provoke a return to childhood glee. It can inspire a metaludic tone, a playing with play, in which the players cavort with the play form itself. "It's just more fun than tournament chess," Greg Shahade, an American international master from Philadelphia, said one day, during a stretch of years when he'd been

opting for blitz chess over rated competitive games. "All I want to do, actually, is play blitz. I think if chess was all blitz, that would be my dream. It would completely ruin the quality of the game, but it would be fun for me."

Mikhail Tal, a Latvian player who became world champion in 1960, at the age of twenty-three, was fond of blitz. "That's enough for today," he would say at the end of a day's training in preparation for a match in 1967. He would then signal the next activity: "Blitz, blitz." Tal was happy to play blitz with fellow grandmasters or with amateurs who spotted him in hotel foyers. At the end of a tournament in Zurich in 1959, he found an avid blitz partner in a kid from Brooklyn. Tal had already packed his bag to leave when he got a call from Bobby Fischer, the famed American player, then sixteen, who had also competed in the tournament and was staying in another room in the hotel. "I'm flying to New York in the hour," Bobby said. "But if you agree to play some blitz I'll give up my ticket."

Not everyone is up for such pleasures. When grandmaster and chess author Genna Sosonko interviewed Soviet grandmaster Mikhail Botvinnik in 1988, he asked the former world champion, "Do you still play for fun sometimes?" to which the chess patriarch, then seventy-seven years old, responded, "I have never played for fun."

"I suppose that you are not very keen on blitz?"

"The last time I played blitz was in 1929, on a train," said Botvinnik. "We traveled with a team from Leningrad to Odessa to play a championship match and we had a blitz tournament during the train journey. I came in first."

The ludic qualities of blitz often occasion an amiable social scene, particularly when "skittles" (casual) games crop up in clubs or among friends. The games are marked by friendly bantering from both players and any kibitzing onlookers. The word *kibitzer* stems via Yiddish from *Kiebitz*, the German word for peewit, a bird that makes a high-pitched call that can be heard as "pee-wit," or perhaps "kee-bitz." While kibitzing is taboo during formal games, kibitzers often sound off during informal blitz games, bleating warnings, cooing advice. "Watch out for his rook!" The players themselves also dispense comments on their own positions. "My piece seems to be square deficient," remarks one player during the course of a game at a neighborhood club upon discovering that one of his knights, attacked by a pawn, had no safe square to land upon. "I can't believe I just did that," says another after locking his bishop into a corner.

Or they riff on their opponent's actions. "That's very mean, very mean," wheezes a player whose position is collapsing. "He's turning to feathers!" chortles a man, intimating that his opponent is chickening out. "Yes. Yes. No. No. Yes. Now we come in like flint. Now we're coming in like flint," said a man while playing blitz chess in the skittles room at the 2009 World Open tournament, held in a hotel in

downtown Philadelphia over the Fourth of July weekend. Others voiced rambles of their own or exchanged sallies with varied amounts of attitude as the games, hours, and cash bets capered on. "You're going to pay. You will pay." "That don't look kosher. That does *not* look kosher." "Now, that's cute. That's cute. That is cute. That, my friend, is cute." "That should have been a draw." "Draw? You couldn't even draw a picture."

My favorite line was heard in the southwestern corner of Washington Square in New York City, where chess hustlers convene to win some cash from other hustlers or from unsuspecting passersby. "You can't dance at two weddings," said one seasoned player as his opponent was trying to stop two of his pawns from reaching the eighth rank, where they could be promoted into queens. "No, sir. You can't dance at two weddings."

Remarks by players can have a strong performative force. Provocative speech can serve as effective action on a par with good moves made on the board, adding to the tactical and psychological impact of the play. They can prod, taunt, tilt, destabilize, sweet-talk, or trash-talk an opponent. As anthropologist Thierry Wendling says of blitz talk in his 2002 ethnography of chess players in France, "Speech is used like a weapon, a 'verbal joust' that doubles the purely chess confrontation.... It's remarkable how much the players have a half-intuitive, half-reasoned knowledge of the power of speech. Used in this way, with its psychological, expressive, and performative powers, speech reinforces and doubles the efficacy of moves played on the chessboard." Words and gestures often converge, with utterances sounding in time with the assertive placement of pieces and the pounding of chess clocks. "Thus," Wendling writes, "the gesture, the blow on the chessboard or on the clock dramatizes the expressivity of speech; the body serves as a technique of language."

Such talk, usually good-natured, is part of the game. My friend Nolan tends to deliver a running commentary on his blitz play, painting a stream-of-consciousness canvas of a chess player's mind. "Why did you do that? Oh, I see. My rook's attacked. So what can I do about it? ... It's just a game."

Players vary in the velocity of their chess reasoning. To watch expert blitzers is to revel in the speed and accuracy of their thoughts and actions. Hikaru Nakamura, a young American grandmaster and one of the best blitz players in the world, rifles out his moves at exceptional speeds, stunning his devastated opponents. ("It's amazing," one youth says of Nakamura. "His mind works so quick. Boom-boom-boom!") I find that I can't keep up with strong blitz players; I can't see as much as they do in split-second intervals. Moving at lightning speed, they appear to possess a more advanced perceptual consciousness. "How can they see so much, so quickly and so accurately?" I ask myself. One answer lies in the fact that strong players have a vast storehouse of chess patterns from which they draw. This gives them a

rich and habituated practical feel for the game; they can size up a game position at a glance and hit on viable ways to proceed after thinking about the situation for only a few seconds. Even so, mistakes happen often in blitz chess, especially in comparison to the precise artistry of grandmaster chess.

Blitz's fast pace means that one has little time to calculate systematically. The thinking is quick, abrupt, and largely intuitive because the seconds are ticking. Imagine playing a game of Scrabble in which each side has five minutes for the entire contest, or consider writing a poem with a five-minute deadline. That gives some sense of the breakneck thinking involved in blitz chess. You have to be a "spontaneous strategist," much like boxers in the ring, whose training enables them to act and react reflexively. This helps to explain why, as compared to players who rely on straight-out calculation, so-called "intuitive players" tend to fare well in blitz and other rapid time-controlled games: their feel for chess positions helps them to make snap judgments.

Blitz games often entail a rapid succession of moves, followed by quiet interludes when a player devotes twenty seconds to thinking about his options, and then another flurry of moves, like a boxer's combination of punches. To do well you have to think quickly and keenly. If players are distracted while playing blitz, even at a subconscious level, they can lose their playing edge, and miss things left and right. The same goes for when they're tired.

Blitz carries tones of pure immediacy. When playing blitz you're in the moment of that moment, with little time to think of anything else. It's a world of spontaneity and presence, of the "quick now, here, now, always," to use a poet's words.

Blitz games are often ephemeral. A game is played and finished; then the pieces are primed for another round. Blitz is like unrecorded jazz in a nightclub: you are attending to the beautiful sequences, the lush chords, all the while knowing they'll be lost to any permanent record. One of my fieldnotes entries speaks to this: "October, 2006. A blitz game against Dale Sharp, at the Friday night club. A Catalan, where I sacrificed my rook to open up lines of attack against his king. A complete onslaught, memorable, breathtaking. We swept the pieces up a few seconds later, to start a new game. No trace of it afterwards. Not sure if everything was correct, or how the game would play out with exact play on both sides. A thrill and melancholy to this." Usually there is no record of a blitz game, no lasting trace of it, except in the minds of the participants—a kind of phantom chess.

Manhattan hosts several public places where blitz players congregate. Along with the chess shops on Thompson Street there are several parks. Battery Park is one of them, but folks say it hasn't been the same since 9/11. Some players who worked in the twin towers never returned. The southwestern corner of Washington Square Park fields a semicircle of concrete chess tables where homed and homeless

gather. Grandmasters were known to play there regularly in the 1970s and 1980s, but that golden age is long past; now the corner is inhabited mostly by "hustlers, drug dealers, and crazy people," as a refugee from the place puts it. Bryant Park, next to the New York Public Library on 42nd Street, has a cleaner feel to it, as suits its central location. Many blitzers go there for their speed fixes. Money is wagered, discreetly, in these places: from \$5 to \$10 a game, but I've heard some gamblers have thrown down \$10,000 or \$20,000 stakes. Many park players rely on offbeat schemes that work best on short notice but are scoffed at by tournament players. "He's a street player," one man says of another. "That stuff might work in the parks, but not in tournaments."

Blitz evokes strong sentiments among chess players. A few take delight in blitz and consider it to be chess in its purest form. Others argue that the quick pace can lead to superficial thought and a reliance on cheap tricks, which can be detrimental to a person's game. "Blitz and rapid chess involve a lot of smoke and mirrors, while standard chess is a quest for truth," remarks one player. The sentiment dates back at least to the eighteenth century, when French chess sage André Philidor averred that "skittles are the social glasses of chess-indulged in too freely they lead to inebriation, and weaken the consistent effort necessary to build up a strong game." More modern language gets at similar ideas. "It's sad to realize that there are people who think that chess is only a 5-minute game and miss the beauty, creativity, logic, and depth of slow games," says chess writer Kelly Atkins. "Blitz is fine for those who enjoy it, and it has its place, but it's the fast food version of our game-McChess in my book."

If you dally in too much blitz, goes the conventional wisdom, you can slide into bad habits. You can develop a penchant for playing obvious moves quickly, without giving serious thought to the nuances of the position. "Blitz kills ideas," said Bobby Fischer. A person's play can get sloppy, pedestrian. I've seen this in my own efforts: if I muck around too much with blitz, when I sit down at the board to play a slower game I act hastily, flinging a knight there, slapping a pawn here, in a scattershot of knee-jerk responses.

"It's dangerous to play too much blitz," says Sam Shankland, a young international master from California. "It builds bad habits. I used to move notoriously quickly, which is very bad for one's practical chances. It's dangerous to play too much." Still, Sam executes thirty to eighty blitz games a month. "It keeps my game in form, reminds me of my openings, and keeps my tactics sharp." Others as well try to modulate between the conflicting pulls of passion and reason, between wanting to bask in the pleasures of blitz and knowing it's best to go about chess in more purposeful ways.

Most players find that blitz, like a lot of other dangerous substances, can be imbibed in moderation. You don't want to get hooked on it at the expense of more

classical modes of play. But you don't have to avoid it like the plague, either. "Use fast games to practice openings, or to relax once in a while, not as a steady diet," Dan Heisman, a chess instructor, advises his students. Many find that it's a good way to learn new openings, as one can get in a lot of games on short notice, and that playing bout after bout helps one to develop a richer feel for the game. Robert Cousins, an expert-level player, spoke of this one day as we talked about the game. "Yes, I enjoy playing blitz," he said. "There's also a different feel to it. It's like rap music as opposed to opera."

Robert received confirmation of the value of playing blitz when he started to take lessons a couple of years back from Adnan Kobas, a FIDE master from Bosnia who teaches chess in New York and Connecticut. "When I first started studying with Adnan," he told me, "he looked at my games and said, 'Okay, you and I are going to play a lot of blitz, because it improves your tactical vision, it helps you with practicing your openings, it exposes you to new ideas. And it helps with playing in time pressure.'{hrs}" Robert plays blitz with friends and on the Internet, a handful of games each week. These encounters are balanced by tough, over-the-board competitions.

Then there are those players, less ambitious, who think they've seen better days at the board, who end up playing blitz more than anything else, who love its fleeting joys and miseries, who sit down for a few games and are still playing hours later.

{orn}

I look at my watch. It's after midnight now.

"A couple more?" Khan asks.

"Sure."

We've lost track of the number of games we've played tonight. There's a world sleeping around us, we've got things to do in the morning, but we're thirsty for a few more combinations. This is chess as friendship.

We set up the pieces. Khan reaches out and starts my clock.