

Chess and the Dance of Death

By Tim Wall

(Some parts of the piece do not necessarily reflect the views of the ECF.)

"I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world."

Humphrey Bogart, Casablanca

The Scandinavian champion, brave and fearless, offers his mysterious, hooded opponent a choice of a white pawn and a black pawn, both clasped in his sinewy fists. His black-robed opponent nods his head, indicating one hand.

"Black – how appropriate," the dark figure shrugs.

In a time of generalised pandemic, the players keep the dreaded virus at bay by following the social distancing rules, staying apart from each other by what could be around two metres. On a rocky stretch of forbidding beach, with waves crashing on the shore, a bird of prey menaces them from above and a medieval-style chessboard lies between them, their game symbolising the eternal human struggle.

But this is not a European Chess Union-sponsored outdoors chess experiment, or even a Dominic Cummings "eyesight-test" family outing in Barnard Castle.

No. It is literally a game of chess against Death. And it forms the iconic opening scene of the legendary 1957 Ingmar Bergman film, "The Seventh Seal," which takes its title from the Biblical Apocalypse, somewhere in the "half an hour of silence in Heaven" in between four rampaging horsemen and a plague of locusts.

The rugged Knight, Antonius Block (played soulfully by the great Swedish actor Max von Sydow, who sadly died aged 80, in March) challenges Death to a game of chess, wagering that he can live as long as the game lasts, and that if he wins, he will be spared. It is set at the height of the Black Death sweeping across Europe, in the mid-14th century.



'Best of three, Antonius?'

The opening scene is so iconic that it is often cited as the most memorable in Bergman's films, filled as they are with themes of love and loss, angst, death, redemption – the whole shebang of good to evil and back again.

The Knight's ongoing game of chess with the Grim Reaper runs like a thread through the entire film, and symbolises the existential angst that the Knight feels after a decade of fighting in foreign crusades, only to come home to find his homeland ravaged by the plague, and his faith in God (or any higher purpose) shattered.

Cheated by Death

Yet, by the end of the film, he strangely he finds a form of personal redemption in the act of helping an innocent family – a happy, travelling juggler, his wife and their infant child – escape the Knight's own fate.

(SPOILER ALERT: Death wins the game after tricking Antonius into revealing his strategy by impersonating a priest in confession, thus becoming the first recorded cheat in cinematic chess history. He then claims the Knight and all his friends as his victims, leading them on a later-much-parodied Dance of Death in the movie's final scene.)



The final scene was later mimicked by Woody Allen in his Bergman parody 'Love and Death.'

As an allegory for our times, “The Seventh Seal” is spookily appropriate.

As Humphrey Bogart put it in another classic film, “Casablanca,” speaking to the “other Bergman,” Ingrid, a war-weary world in its time of troubles has no regard for the fate of “three little people.”

It is the same today. Compared with the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, the ongoing social restrictions we face for months if not years to come, and the attendant economic crisis that threatens to wreck millions of lives for a whole period, our little problems in the quaint world of chess seem to matter less than “a hill of beans.”

And yet. Without diminishing for a moment the huge challenges we face – how to save lives, fund the NHS properly, get everyone tested for the virus and its antibodies, find a way to get children back to school and people back to work safely, and work to get a reliable vaccine, not to mention avoiding the worst recession for decades – one of the ways to get through such a time of troubles is to find a way to keep living, and to keep human culture alive.

Chess can be part of that. Not in terms of saving anyone from the pandemic, of course, but in helping us keep our sanity, and in providing a stimulating and diverting pastime during a time of great stress and uncertainty.

Social distancing in the 14th century

In “The Seventh Seal,” the struggle of the villagers for survival in the plague-ravaged countryside exists alongside the efforts of a small troupe of actors to entertain people. And tavern life continues (social distancing doesn’t really seem to have been a thing in 14th century Sweden). But there are darker forces at work, and clear signs that human society is losing its collective mind, even if it survives the plague.

The religious powers-that-be don’t have a way to explain the plague beyond, “It’s God’s punishment on a sinful world,” so they are looking for scapegoats – their

victims include young women who they can brand as witches and burn at the stake for “communing with the devil.”



Penalties for cheating in medieval chess were often severe.

Max von Sydow’s Knight fails to save one such victim – and struggles with his own lack of faith. He sees in the chess game a final chance to do something meaningful with his life. He saves the juggler and his family’s lives by diverting Death with the prospect of a checkmate next move, allowing them to escape.

And this provides Bergman with one of his central themes: That human beings must find a way to survive the awfulness of the world through simple pleasures, and by caring for each other.

It might seem a bit of a stretch, to zoom forward the best part of seven centuries and draw analogies with today’s pandemic. But in global events of the last couple of weeks – the death of George Floyd in the United States due to police brutality and racism, and the seeming attempt by a floundering Donald Trump to start a race war to gain re-election – there is also a kind of madness.

This societal crisis shows itself here in the UK. Alongside the physical health crisis, our mental health is under strain as we seek to come to terms with our enforced social isolation and likely hard times to come. Life, but not as we know it, is being lived both on a large, Breughel-style canvas of horrors, and equally in miniature in quiet desperation.

It’s definitely true that the camaraderie and intellectual diversion of chess can lessen feelings of isolation and despair amid the pandemic, and thus be of use to society as a whole.

The game has been taken up with enthusiasm by people stuck in lockdown, especially online chess, with a veritable explosion in people playing, watching and learning on the various sites: Chess.com, lichess.org, chess24.com and icc.com.

Even though it is not as important as chess’s part in helping society, it is also useful to turn the telescope around, and look at what effect the whole Coronavirus crisis is having on our own, much smaller, Lilliputian organised chess world.

As unprepared as Boris?

When the UK lockdown came suddenly in March, the chess community was probably just as ill-prepared as Boris Johnson's government was. By and large, event organisers and local chess clubs simply shut up shop, and this was also the case with our national federation. Office staff were sent home on furlough, and the work of keeping national competitions alive during the lockdown fell to a handful of volunteers.

It was largely grassroots organisers that got online chess going in place of local leagues and club nights. But like with the Covid-19 crisis exposing the deficiencies and gaps in the NHS and social care system, so the lockdown has revealed the underlying weakness of our chess infrastructure.

Many of our chess clubs didn't even have functioning websites before the lockdown hit, and the suddenness of the halt left many of them suspended in mid-air. The obvious alternative, to play online, was slow in getting started because the work on connecting over-the-board chess organisations with the online chess world had been going on at a snail's pace (until the valiant work done by the ECF's newly appointed Manager of Online Chess, Nigel Towers, in recent months).

As a consequence, many of our local club organisers (often not the youngest and most internet-savvy among us, due in part to the aging demographic of the organised chess community) simply did not know how to organise online matches and tournaments – and many of us (I count myself in that number) had and still have an incredibly steep learning curve when it comes to mastering the technology.

The struggle to get players who had never played chess online before to take part in weekly club events on lichess or Chess.com is something that will have been experienced by organisers up and down the country.

Let's face it: We were simply not prepared at all.

A rough idea of how many chess clubs currently have functioning online events can be seen by looking at the ECF Online web page, but I would estimate it is fewer than half of the existing OTB clubs before the pandemic hit. And of those clubs, how many members are regularly taking part in online events? I don't have figures, but based on what I see in my native North East region, it seems like a fraction of the number of OTB players.

'Come and get your stuff – we're closing'

And what will happen to these OTB clubs and congresses in the months to come? Will some elderly club organisers simply give up the ghost – particularly when faced

with their pub, hotel or social club venue either closing down for good or not operating normally anytime soon?

One chess club on Tyneside, for example, was simply told one day in March to “come and get your stuff out of the cupboard” at a couple of hours’ notice, as the pub was being closed down.

Will my club, Forest Hall in Newcastle, with six teams and around 60 active adult and junior members before the lockdown, still have a venue to go to, come September? Like many clubs, we have cultivated a strong relationship with our venue, a former British Legion club, which has extended to us organising music nights and refurbishing the chess club room ourselves. But not all clubs have that kind of strong bond with their venue, and chess clubs may be the last stakeholders to be consulted when pubs and social clubs eventually reopen their doors.



Like many chess venues, Forest Hall Ex-Servicemen's Institute faces an uncertain future.

I would wholeheartedly agree that the biggest success in organising online English chess has been through the 4NCL. With 170-plus teams of four in the main 4NCL Online, and some 120 teams in the Junior 4NCL, the league has played a big part in keeping chess going in these difficult times.

Yet even though this number of up to 1,500 players is unprecedented for a national league in this country – and that is impressive at the top end of the grading scale – it still does not completely balance out the fact that the majority of organised OTB players, particularly at the lower end of the grading scale, are probably not playing regularly online.

Now I must come to a painful subject – that of online cheating and Fair Play regulation. This is not a subject that I knew anything about three months ago, nor wanted to. But, like many local chess organisers, it is a subject that has found me. As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky once reputedly said: “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”

Cheating online, and the lack of education among junior and adult OTB players about it, first reared its ugly head for me in March, when I organised some local Friday night blitz and rapidplay tournaments.

Heart-breaking experience

Two promising players – both conscientious, well-behaved and intelligent school students – cheated in these events. One confessed immediately, writing an extremely apologetic email to me, and the other confessed to the club's chairman after a serious heart-to-heart conversation over the telephone.

It was a heart-breaking experience for all concerned, and one that we never thought we would go through as a local chess community. We had never focussed on online chess before – instead believing that OTB chess, and the camaraderie of club chess – was the thing that mattered most. Those two children took a backseat in club events – one has not played at all since the episode in question – and it may have potentially ruined their future (and/or interest) in chess.

I now feel bad that we did not have that tough heart-to-heart conversation with the juniors before lockdown hit – so they would know the consequences of cheating online, and the utter futility of the practice – but it simply was not even a distant thought in our heads back in January. After all, why would it be? We had a fantastic group of kids who gave their all in club and league matches, displayed great team spirit and had gone through virtually a whole season cheerfully playing teams much higher graded than themselves.

It was this experience that led me to urge the 4NCL to publish an online video appeal against online cheating, involving Sarah Longson (of the UK Chess Challenge) and GM David Howell – both exemplary role models for aspiring players. And this was done, just in time for the start of the 4NCL Online, thanks to the efforts of the 4NCL's chief arbiter, Alex Holowczak, and chief organiser, Mike Truran.

(A link to the video is here:

http://www.4ncl.co.uk/data/junior_4ncl_online_results.htm)

I thought (and hoped) that the problem of online cheating would be dealt with effectively (and as sensitively as we had dealt with it on a local level). But then I experienced the flip side of the coin of a zealous anti-cheating policy: the problem of false positives.

Like many OTB players I was not very aware, before the Covid-19 crisis forced us all online, of the exact way the online chess providers dealt with the problem of cheating. As it would never occur to me to use a chess engine to cheat in my games online, I had barely considered it.

The method, to grossly oversimplify it, is to compare a human player's moves with those of an engine, and if the two closely correlate, to ban a player. Additional grounds for suspicion, such as switching between windows on your laptop or strange

move times, are used to back up these conclusions. But there remains a conundrum – however accurate the websites’ statistical algorithms claim to be in assessing the probability of computer assistance, there is always the danger of a false positive (someone being found guilty of cheating when they didn’t).

From what I have read and heard (including from Lichess.org founder Thibault Duplessis in a 2017 lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZgyVadkqml>) Lichess looks for a range of suspect behaviours, including: “Move times, ...switching between windows – probably it means they used a chess engine on the same computer ...detecting analysis in other tabs ...and identifying the code of chess bots.”

Apart from this rare comment by the Lichess guru, the various websites do not seem to be minded to share their methodology with anyone, citing commercial secrets.

Yet none of the websites seems ready to acknowledge that their flagging of “suspect behaviours” could also be flagging totally innocent behaviour – such as checking a teammate’s game in an online league match to know whether to play for a win or a draw, or answering a friend’s email or text message that has nothing to do with the chess game in play.

Presumption of innocence

I will not go into any details about individual cases, but a small number of strong players I know have now been banned by a certain online chess provider for allegedly using computer assistance. I must emphasize they have strenuously denied doing anything wrong, and surely we should respect the presumption of innocence – as the British legal system does.

That chess provider has not offered even the remote semblance of an appeals process, or divulged with any responsible chess body their methodology (even on a confidential basis, citing the need for a punitive non-disclosure agreement with unlimited financial damages.)

It seems currently like we are stuck between the mythical Scylla and Charybdis in the chess community: Either we succumb to the supposed army of cheaters online (the vast majority of whom, I believe, are either very casual players or uninformed/basic-level cheaters among juniors and others) or we inadvertently prosecute (and even persecute) innocent players because of the unproven suspicion that they cheated.

It may be that the numbers of innocent players banned is small – but this is another area that the chess-playing websites are reluctant to give numbers about, so we do not know. And even a handful of unjust bans could lead to untold damage to individual players’ reputations.

As one senior figure in the chess world has pointed out to me, referring to a player found guilty by a website of cheating but maintaining their innocence, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

There are tournaments being conducted with the use of Zoom and other webcams by Chess24.com (in particular, the excellent Magnus Carlsen Tour events) and Chess.com as a means to catch cheating (and protect the innocent players against unfair false positives), and these experiments should undoubtedly be expanded and used more widely as online chess competitions become more popular.



Magnus Carlsen unplugged: The world champ about to blunder his rook in his semi-final Armageddon game against Hikaru Nakamura at the Lindores Abbey online tournament.

Webcams may not be the whole answer to the online cheating conundrum, but it seems to me they are a good place to start.

Regardless of what we would wish the future of chess to be, it seems inevitable that it will include more and more serious online competitions.

And it seems that if we are not careful, and fail to find a way for the chess community (preferably through proper regulation by FIDE) to deal fairly with cheating online, we are in danger of chess adding to, and not reducing, the general craziness in the world.

We do not want to be like the self-flagellating monks in Bergman’s “The Seventh Seal,” looking for a witch-hunt to conduct in our general frustration at the state of the world.

It is mainly by the simple enjoyment of the game that we will get through this crisis, just as Bergman’s stoical juggler’s family survived the plague by entertaining others and quietly getting on with their lives.

For me, I really hope that this enforced hiatus in over-the-board chess can be used for productive purposes – and that we do not let our community descend into recriminations over the issue of online cheating. We should primarily use this period for education, training and enjoyment of friendly chess online, until such time that we can meet again (at an appropriate social distance, of course), bow gracefully at the start of a game, and enjoy a friendly post-game analysis over a pint.

When that happens, we will need all our community spirit and love of the game to revive chess together as this crisis hopefully eases. The other way lies madness...

Ingmar Bergman's classic film "The Seventh Seal" can be viewed courtesy of the British Film Institute:

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/subscription/film/watch-the-seventh-seal-1957-online>