

Playing My Part in the Chess Boom, or the Rise of a New Esport

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It is December 2020, the final month of a year that has felt excruciatingly long. I am sitting at my desk, laptop in front of me and little else. My cat is lying just behind it, leaning on the back of the screen, enjoying the heat emitting from beneath it. This is how I work, this is how I relax.

I could never muster much enthusiasm for popular trends, even less for quarantine raves about making sourdough (in the spring), or hardening yourself with cold water (in the autumn). It feels forced; Netflix doesn't. The recent Queen's Gambit miniseries was quite impressive. When was the last time I played chess? That must have been years ago, a few casual games with a friend who was much better. Maybe I could try a few games online, refreshing my memory about the rules?

A quick Google search with Chess.com in the top results. Free registration, a few matches with random strangers. After a week or two, I am hooked. Getting a paid membership to better analyze my play. Tens of matches, then hundreds. Watching YouTube videos with both historical and current matches. Learning about Paul Morphy and Magnus Carlsen. Unwittingly joining a craze. The Chess Boom of 2020.

Chess has been online since around 1993. Of course, it was a board game long before that, perhaps the most prestigious one, spanning centuries of tradition, rich culture and lore surrounding it, whole libraries of theory, Olympics, grandmasters and world champions. In 2020 it has also become an eSport.

On 25 March 2020, the Candidates Tournament, to decide the challenger for the current World Champion Magnus Carlsen, had to be suspended halfway due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the rest of the year, all major tournaments were either cancelled or moved on-line. Millions of non-elite (both amateur and professional) chess players all over the world had to do the same. Chess.com and other online gameplay platforms experienced a surge in new memberships. From tens of thousands joining in March to hundreds of thousands in October after the release of The Queen's Gambit. In October, Chess.com accrued 81 million total views. This grew to 162.5 million total views in December. The wave seems to have culminated in March 2021 at 200 million. By June, the numbers were similar to December, making Chess.com the 205th most visited site globally.

Executives of eSports organizations took note of this rapidly growing interest. The first chess player to become a content creator for an eSports club was the Canadian female grandmaster Qiyu Nemo Zhou in August 2020. A week after, TSM announced a deal with the five-time U.S. champion Hikaru Nakamura. Nakamura started streaming on Twitch in 2018 and became the most popular chess streamer on the platform with 1.2 million followers. After the Nakamura deal, other eSports organizations raced to sign chess players as well.

There is audience, there are online tournaments with prize pools comparable to other eSports (Carlsen was rated the no. 1 eSports athlete of 2020 by Esports Earnings), and chess players are also streamers. On top of chess calculations, on-line chess requires other skills, common for eSports, especially in time formats of fewer than 10 minutes. Even the greatest players aren't immune to mouse slips, misclicking and putting their pieces or pawns on a different square than they intended, turning a winning game into a sudden loss.

As for myself, playing chess is probably the best interest I picked up during the pandemic. Not that I'm good. After half a year my rating is under 800, safely below the average. Most probably it will stay there.