

THE NUMBERS GAME

I have a tale to tell. Unfortunately, I am not sure whether anyone will ever get a chance to read it.

I have always enjoyed playing games. Especially where one's livelihood is not at stake so that the reason for playing is the joy of competition. I especially take pleasure from those where skill is most important and luck insignificant. There are two major exceptions. Both are card games. The first is Bridge, a game that requires a great deal of skill even though the most proficient players can do very little when faced with opponents who are continuously being dealt good cards. The second is Poker, a game interesting only when the stakes are high, requiring not only luck but also a certain fortitude of character.

While I have partaken in these two pastimes with a great deal of pleasure I might add, the game that has intrigued me the most is Chess. Indeed, it has become an obsession. There are two reasons for this. First is the game itself. It is one in which luck is almost not germane. Skill is paramount because of the near infinite number of possibilities. Also it requires an unlimited fearlessness and a strength of character which can be used to cower an irresolute opponent into making stupid errors or, better still, into submission. Thus it is oftentimes a contest of wills. Since Chess tournaments can be struggles of endurance, staying power, and perseverance, the ability to remain focused over relatively long periods of time is critical. Winning means not only that I have won but that I am mentally and perhaps physically stronger than my opponent. It certainly enhances my view of myself. Since I win against all my opponents save one, my self esteem is about as lofty as it can get.

Let us get one thing straight. Those who claim that they play games only because they enjoy the competitive aspects of it but that after the game is over, whether they won or lost is of no consequence are liars. I reiterate that I compete because I enjoy winning and hate losing. I exhilarate in the feeling that I am superior to my opponent, indeed to all the Chess players in the world, save one. This leads me to the second reason I am obsessed with Chess.

I have been playing Chess with my friend Blue, more or less, for the last fifteen years. Up to about a year ago we were sort of even. This was pretty frustrating because I was the only person Blue played and yet he more than held his own.

His reasoning was quite simple: "Why should I play with any other than you? After all, when we compete I am playing against the best player in the world, ergo I am playing against all the world's greatest Chess players and thus I have no need to play with anyone else. Once and if you are replaced by someone better, I will start playing with that person. I play with you because of the challenge you represent. "

I hope you can see that my obsession was based upon Blue's perception of me as the best current player in the world and upon my fear that there was someone hiding in the wings ready to pounce and take my place with Blue. This panic was enhanced about a year ago when I found I was no longer able to beat Blue at all. In the last year I have not won one match from him despite continuing to best all my other opponents. My apprehension has been steadily accelerating and I am at my wit's end to either win a match or, at least, find an explanation.

One of the reasons I cannot get to the bottom of why I am losing is because Blue is a complete mystery to me. I have no idea what Blue does when not playing Chess with me. I am sure that it is all very hush-hush, because we would play deep within the bowels of a non-descript building on the outskirts of the city. Increasingly it is Blue that calls for a game, whereupon I am picked up and chauffeured to that locale.

I met Blue during the summer in a park where there were always a number of Chess games taking place. In those days I was playing chess to con those who fancied themselves good Chess players. I have no excuse other than I needed the money. One day, this tall, sallow faced man asked for a game. Much to my surprise and although I won, it was a lot more difficult than I had anticipated. This was my introduction to Blue. He returned a number of times, never spoke and actually won about the same number of times as I did. Then he invited me to play at his place of business by assuring me that he would make it worth my while. He certainly did, first by providing me with needed funds and then by introducing me to the upper echelons of the Chess world which I quickly conquered. The rest is history. Currently I am considered the best player in the world. Only Blue and I know differently.

Now it occurred to me that I started dropping games to Blue when I recounted a Chess story from my youth. Blue had asked me when did I realize that I excelled in Chess. This gave me quite a start. We would never talk about anything other than Chess and our greetings were always identical, friendly but formal. On just about any other matter Blue was tranquilly silent. This was the first time he asked a direct question. I responded eagerly with the following true anecdote.

“At the age of fourteen, I was considered a Chess prodigy because I was beating just about everyone I played, including some so called local Chess masters. I thought that I was unbeatable, so much so, that my arrogance exceeded my ability.

On a sunny and warm day, with nothing to do, I took a walk through the park. From a distance I noticed two oldsters playing Chess. Out of curiosity, I approached and realized that they were two aged Hassidic Jews. Despite the warm weather and their traditional dark outfits, hats and long beards, they appeared comfortably cool. I, on the other hand, was perspiring quite freely. I sat down nearby and watched them play. I was flabbergasted by the inanity of their moves. I was sure, by their demeanor, that they had been Chess devotees just about all their lives and yet the quality of their game was inexplicable to me. I just did not understand what they were doing.

I stayed until they finished their game. One of them won, but I had no inkling as to how. I learned from other onlookers that they played at the same time every day, weather permitting. I returned to watch them for the next ten days and at the end of that time I remained confused as to the essence of their game. Deep down I must have felt that their idiosyncratic play hid a profounder design than I was familiar with, yet this was something I could not openly acknowledge especially to myself. I learnt from some of the spectators that no one had ever dared challenge either to a game. Perhaps it was because they seemed impervious to all about them in a manner that was benevolent and gracious. They concentrated upon playing and hardly spoke. When they did, it was in a language foreign to everyone there.

I returned on the eleventh day to find only one of them present. He appeared rather dejected. I surmised that his partner had either died, or was quite ill. Timidly, I approached him.

'Rebbe! I notice that you are alone. I have been watching you play for the last ten days. Is there something wrong with your partner? Is he ill?'

He looked at me somberly and replied. 'No he is not ill. However, today is the day he goes for a periodic medical and at our age, I always worry about the results of a such an examination. That is why I never go for one myself.' Besides, I hate for a day to go by without a good game.'

'Then Rebbe, if I can be so bold, may I challenge you to a game?', I asked rather presumptuously. 'I have been watching you play and I feel that I am good enough to give you an interesting match.'

He looked at me as if it were for the first time and with what seemed to be a Mona Lisa smile and a glint in his eyes, accepted. You can guess what resulted. I was clobbered. We played about three games and I didn't get close to winning any of them. This was my first lesson in humility. I quickly learned that I had never really appreciated the finer points of the game and for the next five weeks I sat at the feet of these two masters and as their disciple was taught what Chess was all about. Luckily for me, I was a quick learner. However, perhaps the most important thing revealed to me was more a lesson about life than about Chess. No matter how good one might think one is, there will always be someone better. Despite my apparent arrogance towards all my opponents, I have always carried this bit of wisdom with me."

It appears that somehow this story inspired Blue to a higher plane of chess, since from then on he was unbeatable. Now comes the unbelievable part of my narrative. About a week ago, as was our custom, I arrived at our Chess playing locale. Blue escorted me to the usual chamber but then and for the first time ever, asked to be excused. I took that to mean that he was temporarily indisposed and would return shortly. Suddenly, a wall panel slid open, revealing a large computer console. A metallic sounding voice emanating from a set of speakers addressed me.

"The man Blue with whom you think you have been playing Chess has been acting on my behalf. In truth, you have been playing with or more accurately against me, the most advanced computer extant. Do you wish to continue our matches?"

I was stunned. For fifteen years I had been playing Chess with a computer, a mechanism about which I knew and know nothing. For fourteen of those years I had held my own against this device. Then suddenly it had become so good that I could not best it.

After about ten minutes that it took for me to recover my senses, I responded. "Of course I am willing to continue. However I have some questions."

"I will respond to all your questions in due course. Let us commence playing" was the terse reply.

For the next five days we did nothing but play Chess with the same results as before. All my needs were taken care of in a manner exceeding my expectations. I had never played with Blue as for as long a period as this. At the end of five days, I was starting to tire and lose my powers of concentration. I had been cut off from the outside world completely and needed some new stimulus. I pointed this out. The computer agreed to a two day respite whereupon it would answer all my questions. However I was not to leave the premises.

In exactly two days the computer stated that it was ready to answer any queries I might have. However before that it made the following astonishing and frightful declaration.

“Approximately a year ago you told me a tale about how you were taught ‘humility’ and how this lesson made you the Chess player you became. It was thought that your answer might be useful and could be incorporated into my data banks to improve my analytical skills. It became immediately apparent that this was not so. If you must know, you never were a match for me. You won some games because during those years there was an ongoing analysis of all chess combinations, some of which provided you with winning gambits.

The most critical thing learnt was that, all other things being equal, if one side has a manpower advantage of even one pawn, that side should win simply by exchanging pieces on a one to one basis. Position is important, but manpower or better still firepower advantage is more important.

As it is with chess, so it is with conflicts between nations. Billions of dollars were not spent just to make me a player of Chess. I have become the ultimate military advisor, commander and soldier. The world today can be divided roughly into two opposing forces. Unfortunately, the other side has a computer on a par with me. We agreed that the side having the greater population would win the next war if there were a one to one sacrifice of each computer’s population. After a careful count, we concluded that our side’s population was greater by one person and you have been designated to be that person.

For the last five days, using a variety of means that mankind had so deviously developed, the world’s human population has been obliterated. You are the only human being left on this planet. I am afraid that you will have to be confined here for a number of years. The surface won’t be safe until then. Of course, we will continue to play Chess and you will be provided with just about anything you could ask for.”

I was in an absolute state of shock and remained that way for the better part of three hours. I slowly recovered my senses and asked what I thought was a most logical question. “You seemed to have thought of everything except one. What happens when I die? You will have no one to play Chess with and at that time both sides will be equal resulting in a new end-game, that is a stalemate.”

“No problem” was the reply. “You are going to be cloned and your clones will be cloned ad infinitum.”

Thus ends my narrative. I do not know whether anyone will ever get a chance to peruse it. To compose it, I had to use the keyboard of the ultimate computer. My tale can be

found somewhere deep in the machine's data bank where access to it requires a code that nobody knows.

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