

Online Chess

for amateur and hobby players



Stefan Breuer

chessprogramming.com

Online chess for amateur and hobby players

Second updated and extended edition

STEFAN BREUER

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I „play” chess in the truest sense, while the others, the real chess players, “work” it, if I may use the word in this daring new way.

(Stefan Zweig, Chess: A Novel)

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2019, the World Chess Federation FIDE recorded 754,683 active players on its international ranking list, including 1,363 Grandmasters and 2,513 International Masters.

The online platform chess.com advertises with 30 million(!) registered chess players. More than 40 million online games were played on the Lichess servers in October 2019. Between 10,000 and 40,000 chess players are active here at any time of day or night. Further chess servers such as Schach.de, FIDE Online Arena or the Internet Chess Club will be added.

Chess is - although still little noticed by the mass media apart from the world championship fights - no longer a marginal sport (yes, in Germany chess is an officially recognized sport, I can't change that) and has massively profited from digitalization. Apart from the transmission of national and international tournaments on the Internet, the triumph of chess databases and training programs and the possibilities of adapted time controls by electronic chess clocks, it is above all online chess that has revolutionized the royal game for millions of amateur and hobby players.

Classical "analogue" chess in clubs and tournament sports over the board is time-consuming and is therefore not suspected to be particularly job and family friendly. It sets limits for the amateur player, who usually still has to cope with a life beside the chess board. Online chess, on the other hand, offers the enthusiastic fan of Caissa the possibility to pursue his passion intensively with a bearable investment of time.

Online chess is also becoming more and more attractive for master players, on the one hand as a training ground in the game against other masters, on the other hand to improve their income as a teacher for (willing to pay) amateur players. And so it doesn't take a big miracle to sit as an amateur or hobby player in an online tournament opposite a real International Master or even Grandmaster - which is almost impossible in normal tournament operation over the board (so to say kicking with Messi or Ronaldo).

In this narrow book different aspects of online chess are addressed and the most important chess portals are presented.

The 1st (German) edition was published in May 2018 and since then nothing fundamental has changed in online chess, but progressive

improvements and innovations on the chess portals lead to an ever better and more attractive offer. So this 2nd edition offers some updates and extensions as well as a recommendation for an unorthodox opening repertoire for online players.

Aachen, December 2019

The original edition of this book was published in German. The present English version was translated by the author himself. I ask for your indulgence for possible translation errors and insufficient language.

PLAY ONLINE CHESS

In traditional chess, also called over the board, the two players sit opposite each other on the board in the same place. In online chess there is no real board and no pieces to touch. And the players can sit at the farthest ends of the world as long as they have a computer (or even a tablet or mobile phone) with internet access.

Via the servers of a chess portal the moves of the players are transmitted. The software (either in the internet browser or as proprietary software) usually displays the chess position in a two-dimensional diagram on the screen (some programs also offer a three-dimensional representation, which visually resembles the game over the board, but is only used by a few players; the diagram representation has proven to be clearer and more playable). By clicking with the mouse and dragging the piece symbol the moves are executed (a few chess portals also support the connection of a so-called DGT board, a special chess board with pieces, which can be connected to the PC via USB cable and transfers moves executed with the pieces to the PC and the chess program). All additional information (notation of the moves played, remaining time available for consideration, etc.) is also displayed on the screen.

This way of playing chess did not have to be reinvented for online chess, it has existed since the first PC chess programs. What is new is that with this technique one does not play against a chess program, but against a human opponent somewhere in the world.

Of course the traditional game over the board has its own charm, which online chess cannot replace. The aesthetics of a real board and real pieces, the atmosphere of a tournament hall, the duel where the opponent is just an arm's length away - online chess can hardly convey this. Online chess, on the other hand, has its own strengths, which will be presented in this book. These become particularly apparent when the possibilities for classical chess over the board are not available or only at great expense. Thus classical chess and online chess are not opposites or even competitors, but complementary options for all friends of the royal game.

ONLINE CHESS - THE MODERN CHESS FOR THE AMATEUR PLAYER

Even though the Internet, PC and smartphone are taken for granted today, the analogue times are only a few decades behind. Chess players in their relaxed early 50s still remember well that chess clocks had to be wound by hand, chess computers had no chance against the club's best youth player and Chessbase was a strange database program that only ran on an ATARI computer.

Times have changed. The world champion is now a blatant outsider against the best chess programs, which are now called engines. Digital chess clocks allow for creative rules of time to think (keyword increment), the chess database Chessbase in combination with engine technology has turned the opening theory upside down - and online chess via Internet has revolutionized the game for millions of hobby and amateur players.

Perhaps the latter point is the most important, because it does not only concern the game of the professionals, title holders and club players. Chess is not only one of the oldest, but also one of the most widespread games of all. There is hardly a classic game collection that does not include chess. In countries like Russia chess is part of the national cultural heritage. Measured against this, the number of chess players organized in club and tournament chess worldwide is negligible. This is not least because classical chess is a time-consuming game and hobby. While a football match usually ends after 90 minutes (plus half-time and additional time), typical chess tournament games over the board are rarely finished in less than four hours (a lengthy final game with more than 80 moves, often referred to as a "sea snake", can easily take six hours). The way from the occasional game to the regular hobby in the chess club had hardly any intermediate stages in the analogous time. There are more worlds between a hobby player who knows the rules and occasionally plays a game and a club player of the lowest district class than there are between a football field kicker and a football player of the lowest district class.

Online chess has closed this gap, revolutionizing the royal game. With the help of the numerous chess portals on the Internet, it is now possible for any

interested player to spend as much time playing chess as he can and wants at any time of the day, on any day of the week (and this spontaneously and at short notice, independent of the weekly game evenings of a chess club). Millions of players do this, and most of them have never seen a chess club from the inside and will hardly ever do so in the future.

But online chess is not only suitable for hobby and amateur players. This is rather a relatively recent development. The first chess portals were (and still exist) playing and training facilities for club players and title holders. Today you can find both groups of players on the big portals, hobby and amateur players together with club players and grandmasters. For the former, this gives them the incentive to play against a "great" in an online tournament; quite a few title holders, in turn, offer themselves online as teachers and trainers.

It is precisely this combination of playing and learning that is characteristic for many chess portals, also for financial reasons. Most of the portals are commercial projects with which profit is to be made (at least the running costs must be covered somehow). Besides regular fees for server usage, the sale of chess videos and training courses is an important second source of income. The costs are comparatively moderate, online chess is affordable for everyone. If necessary, it can be done without money (more about this below).

Anyone who plays chess exclusively online, without reference to club or tournament chess over the board, does not have to do without the sporting competitive kick. On every chess server a rating system is running, which continuously measures one's own playing strength and brings it into a comprehensible comparison with all other players of the server. The rating systems are different in their detailed calculations, but on the whole they are comparable. An online player with a rating above 2,000 points knows that he could easily play over the board in a top non-professional league team. In the meantime there is also the possibility to acquire official amateur online titles of the World Chess Federation FIDE (in the FIDE Online Arena). So if you do not necessarily intend to become a professional chess player, you can also achieve successes and "honours" online like over the board, but with considerably less time expenditure.

THE RIGHT TIME LIMIT – A PLEA FOR INCREMENT

Chess is a random-free unpredictable game with perfect information for both players. It is random-free because there are no dice in play, no cards are shuffled or other random elements are included. Unpredictable, because nobody (not even a computer so far) can calculate all possible games that can result from the initial position to the end (whether the number of possible moves on the chessboard actually corresponds to the number of wheat grains that, according to legend, the inventor of the game of chess asked the Indian ruler Shihram for may remain a moot point; the number is 18,446,744,073,709,551,615). The information is complete because the board is open to both players and there is no other game information than the position of the pieces on the board (and the state of the available time for the rest of the game, also open to both players, on the clock).

So much for game theory. In other words, chess has a lot to do with thinking. Every move is a good or bad one, but in any case it is a conscious decision of the player, which he came to after short or long thinking. Intuition plays a role insofar as a player intuitively thinks of moves which he then considers, calculates and analyses according to his possibilities in order to come to his move decision. If he does not do this, if he plays the first move he intuitively comes up with without any thinking, I call this reflex chess.

Every move in reflex chess is lightning fast, just like a reflex. But not every lightning-fast move is based on reflex chess, and not if there is a well thought-out sequence of moves at the beginning, which then proceeds in the same thoughtful way as at the beginning because of the opponent's moves. Then the moves of this sequence of moves are also played as fast as lightning, but not as a reflex to the opponent's move, but in implementation of the sequence of moves that has been thought out in the same way.

In fact, reflex chess is the opposite of real chess and as such a danger for every serious chess player. Often enough you find yourself in a game in the situation to intuitively and spontaneously make a move as if shot from a gun - and only too often this shot backfires. Quite a few players, especially in the game over the board, have acquired techniques of self-discipline to avoid

falling into this trap, for example by never making a move before they have carefully written down the opponent's move that they have played before, or by putting down the pen properly after writing it down, folding their hands and thus forcing themselves not to reflexively play the next move of their own. Unfortunately, this technique does not work online, as the computer takes over the notation for the players. So the danger of reflex chess is much greater here.

What does this have to do with the question of the right time control? Well, when the remaining time available for consideration is zero or close to zero, there is no more than reflexive playing possible. Even more extreme, you sometimes have to "handle" your move in advance: Regardless of your opponent's move, you have already made your own move with the computer mouse and only have to "let go" of the piece above the target field (and thus save possibly decisive fractions of a second). Experienced reflex chess players even plan this behaviour, for example they adjust a piece senselessly single-moved, because they expect that their opponent reflexively plays another move than the one that is obvious. In my opinion this has nothing to do with chess at all, apart from the rules of the game.

A player can get into this situation because he has a bad time management (it's his own fault), or because he plays games with a time control that makes this situation mandatory or highly likely. Whoever plays Bullet chess with 60 seconds per player for the whole game or even Hyper-Bullet (30 or 45 seconds per player for the game) does not play chess, but reflex chess.

Now one does not have to renounce games with reduced time to avoid reflex chess. The quality of the game does not necessarily (and certainly not proportionally) increase with the duration of the reflection period. And the limitation of the time for reflection, for example in Blitz chess, is certainly a sporty and demanding element in the mental sport of chess. Only a minimum of time must remain, so that one can speak of thinking at all. Thankfully there is a solution for this.

Until the introduction of electronic chess clocks, the time for consideration in chess was determined exclusively by the maximum time for the entire game (e.g. 5 minutes per player for a Blitz game) or for a certain number of moves (e.g. 2 hours for 40 moves, then 1 hour for each additional 20 moves). There was a good reason for limiting the time for consideration at all. In tournament reports from the 19th century, when many tournaments were still played without clock and time limits, there is sometimes the entry of the

recorder "both players are sleeping". With the introduction of electronic chess clocks, a suggestion already made by world champion Bobby Fischer could be implemented, the so-called increment. This is an additional time for thinking, which is added to the player's total time per move. This allows regulations like the following: 120 min. + 15 sec. Translated this means that each player has two hours for the whole game plus 15 seconds for each move! If he plays individual moves faster than in 15 seconds, this will even increase his total thinking time. If he has used up his time to think about the game, he still has at least 15 seconds for each move, no matter how many more moves the game lasts. This considerably reduces the risk of one of the players falling into the reflex chess trap described above. The frustration of losing (or winning, which is not much less frustrating) a game in pure time after four hours of thought struggle is almost only theoretical. The "spectre of lack of time", which has in no way been beneficial to chess, is banished by the increment.

The beneficial effect of the increment is not limited to long games as in the above example, but has at least as positive an effect on games with a shorter time for thinking. Here it can be cleverly adapted to the respective basic time for consideration of a lot. In Blitz chess, for example, with a basic time of 3 or 5 minutes, an increment of 3 or 5 seconds per move is appropriate (this is called 3+3 or 5+5 games). Even Bullet chess can be brought back from the shadow of reflex chess in Caissa's light with the help of the increment: 1 minute for the whole game plus 2 seconds per move or 2 minutes for the whole game plus 1 second per move will result in completely different games than 1 minute plus 0 seconds increment.

Without increment one should only play chess if the time for thinking about the whole game is large enough that one can escape the total lack of time with a halfway disciplined time management. In my opinion this starts only with classical Blitz games with 5 minutes time limit (i.e. 5+0), better 10 minutes (10+0, which is already classified as Rapid chess and not as Blitz chess on some servers). In principle, however, games and tournaments with increments should be preferred.

Let us now turn to the individual categories of time control. Thereby the limits of the respective categories are defined slightly differently on the individual chess servers. Here the increment forces the programmers to come up with a formula, into which an assumed average number of moves per game, basic time and increment are entered. All portals disclose this formula,

so it is no secret why one game is considered to be Bullet chess and the other as Blitz chess.

Bullet Chess

Bullet Chess starts at 0+1 (no joke), that is 1 second per move and nothing else, and ends at about 2 minutes basic time plus 1 second per move (2+1). Without increment it is pure reflex chess. The ambitious player should keep his hands off it. Why? It harms your own game! If you play reflex chess regularly, you run the risk of doing so even in games with a longer time control. And at the latest then the shot will backfire.

But aren't there numerous Grandmasters who play extreme Bullet chess and still remain Grandmasters? Yes, there are, but Grandmasters are not normal chess players (maybe not even normal people, but that's another matter), but so damn good that they can't even ruin their chess skills with reflex chess. And yes, even the chess reflexes of a Grandmaster are usually of higher quality than the seconds of thought of an online amateur.

So don't let the fact that Bullet tournaments are populated by titled players or other players with a high rating drive you crazy. If you enjoy Bullet chess, you should bet on Bullet tournaments with increments. 1+2 or 2+1 are fast enough and still somehow chess.

Blitz chess

Blitz chess ranges from about 3 minutes of reflection without increment (3+0) to 5 minutes plus 5 seconds per move (5+5). Blitz chess is the most frequently played time control online, and also the preferred form of play outside of "real" tournament games on most evenings at the local chess club. Blitz games offer enough time to play halfway thoughtful chess, but are short enough to play quite a few games (or even a whole tournament) in a reasonable time and to keep up the kick of the impending time pressure (for those who like it). Good players in longer time controls (Rapid chess and classical chess) are usually also passable Blitz players, but this does not necessarily apply the other way round. There are many good to very good Blitz players who do not achieve a comparable rating in Rapid chess or classical chess. Their game is not always aimed at finding the best move in chess, but the one that is most unpleasant for the opponent and which costs him a lot of time. The shorter the time, the higher its value.

Decades ago Blitz chess was frowned upon by quite a few chess trainers. They advised their protégés not to play Blitz chess, as it would hinder the development in "real" chess (classical chess with a long time to think about it). These advices were of little use, so that the question of whether they were justified remained purely academic. The attraction of playing a Blitz game quickly is simply too great, as is the fun factor in a Blitz tournament.

So if you like to play Blitz chess, you should continue to do so online, but if possible with 5 minutes basic time and if possible additionally with increment.

Rapid chess

Rapid chess starts at about 10 minutes time and goes up to about 25 minutes time (per player and per game). A popular combination is about 15 minutes plus 10 seconds increment (15+10).

With this amount of time you can seriously play chess. "Stupid" mistakes, loosing pieces by unforced errors, overlooking a mate threat etc. should not occur in Rapid chess (they are not excluded in Blitz chess).

Rapid chess tournaments are offered much less frequently on chess servers than Bullet or Blitz tournaments. One reason for this is that at least traditional Rapid chess tournaments take considerably more time due to the longer time to think about them. Traditional Rapid chess tournaments are tournaments according to the Swiss system or round robin tournaments where a new round only starts when all games of the previous round have been completed. If your own Rapid chess game ends early, you may have to wait 15 or 20 minutes until the next round starts.

It is noticeable that in many online Rapid chess tournaments the average rating of the players is significantly lower than in Blitz tournaments, i.e. stronger players play less Rapid chess than weaker ones. One reason for this may be that weaker players are more insecure in quick Blitz chess and prefer to have more time to think about it (which is a very reasonable reason); another aspect may be that stronger players are afraid of encountering cheaters more often in Rapid chess than in Blitz chess. More on this below.

Despite the disadvantages mentioned above, Rapid chess is from a chess point of view at least the second best time control for the aspiring amateur and hobby player. The time for thinking is sufficient to play consciously and to learn from his won and lost games. In Rapid chess a real thought duel

between the players is created. So if there is no Rapid chess tournament available or if you don't have time for a long tournament, you should look for a partner for a free Rapid chess game. On the big portals this will take a few minutes at best, unless you are looking for opponents beyond 2,000 rating points.

Classical chess

Classical chess with a time control beyond the 25-minute limit often led a shadowy existence on the online servers, although in tournament chess over the board it is by far the most important, actually the only serious variant. What is the reason for this?

Online chess is characterized by tournaments. An online tournament begins, lasts for a while, and ends. It is not interrupted and continues on another day. This can only be achieved by reducing the time needed to think about it so that the tournament can end within a few hours. For example, with a 60-minute time limit per player per game (which is less than half the time of a classic over the board game), a 5-card tournament lasts 10 hours if played in a row. Understandably, there do not seem to be enough people interested in this.

On the other hand, especially for weaker players (and that's most of them) a longer time for thinking is very popular, which is reflected in a correspondingly large number of free games.

As in Rapid chess, less super strong players are active in classical chess than in Blitz chess. Even more than in Rapid chess, especially strong players fear being cheated by weaker opponents using (forbidden) engines.

The only chess server with a significant tournament offer in classical chess is Lichess. On the one hand, official tournaments with a longer time control are offered regularly (although less frequently than in the shorter time control modes), on the other hand, users themselves also use the possibility to offer their own tournaments with time control up to 60 min + 60 sec and a maximum tournament duration of 6 hours. For free games a maximum time of 3 hours per player plus 3 minutes increment can be chosen - that's more than enough.

If you want to play classical chess online under competition conditions, you can also use one of the leagues presented in the following chapter "Online tournaments".

In the end, classical chess is the only "true" chess, because chess is a thinking sport, and thinking takes time. Therefore it would be very welcome if portals like Lichess would expand their offer of classic tournaments (e.g. in the form of a tournament over several days of play) and if other portals would at least take first steps in this direction.

Correspondence chess

World champion Magnus Carlsen is reported to have once said that he would be available for every variant of chess, with one exception: correspondence chess.

The reason may be that with the development of the computer engines correspondence chess lost its hitherto existing sportive attraction. In correspondence chess the players do not have hours for a whole game to think about, but several days for a single (!) move. It was and is allowed to consult chess books. Correspondence chess games have thus had a great importance for the development of opening variants outside the main variants for decades. Correspondence chess players of the old school are theoreticians in search of the chess truth of a position, only secondarily interested in victory and points.

The use of computer engines in a correspondence chess game is forbidden by the rules, but the temptation, at least after one has decided to make a move, to have the computer check it afterwards is often too great. From then on it is only a small step to "question" the engine a little earlier. Correspondence chess as a sporting competition is therefore "dead" for most players.

Nevertheless correspondence chess killed by the engines experiences a rebirth on the online portals. How does that happen? Correspondence chess on online portals is much more user-friendly than the older correspondence chess by e-mail or even than the very old correspondence chess by postcard (yes, correspondence chess in its high time was played by postcard, one card per move, even if the opponent lived in Australia; a game could last a few years). On chess servers, which offer correspondence chess, you can see all your simultaneously running games in a functional overview, together with the time for consideration and all information you need. This even works with the smartphone. And that's exactly how you should play it: mobile.

Online correspondence chess offers the amateur player the possibility to

occupy himself with chess in between (coffee break in the office, in the suburban train, please do not play in the car at the wheel) without playing a complete game. While I strongly advise against Blitz or Rapid chess (not to mention Bullet) via smartphone, mobile correspondence chess is an ideal training tool. Provided that you don't take the rating in correspondence chess too seriously and don't get upset when you are obviously taken apart by an opponent with the help of an engine. Then you simply check this game off, put the player on the list of blocked players and continue.

Five to ten online correspondence chess games at the same time is a training workload that can easily be managed on the side. The chess win is enormous. And there is no harm if you disagree with world champion Carlsen on this issue.

ONLINE TOURNAMENTS

The salt in the soup of online chess are the tournaments. They exist in numerous variants with regard to the time control, the starting position (theme tournaments), the rating limit (upwards and downwards), the prizes to be won and the tournament forms. No chess portal offers all variants, but for online players it is quite common to be active on several portals (this is probably the only thing that online chess players and online poker players have in common). Let's bring a little order into the offer.

The tournaments differ on the one hand with regard to the time control. The most important points have already been mentioned above in the chapter on time limits. Blitz tournaments are the most common, followed by Bullet tournaments. The offer of Rapid chess tournaments is already clearly smaller, even less frequently tournaments with a classic long time limit are offered. Lichess offers the most tournaments in Rapid chess and with longer time controls.

So-called theme tournaments are offered again and again with pleasure. The starting position of the game is determined by the tournament director, so you are not completely free to choose the opening. If you pay close attention to your rating, you will only choose thematic tournaments whose opening fits into your active opening repertoire. In my opinion, it would make more sense to hold theme tournaments without a rating, but this is rarely the case.

Although most online tournaments are open to all players (provided they have played a minimum number of games and have proven that they are suitable for tournaments), there are some with restrictions. So-called elite tournaments require a minimum rating, e.g. beyond 2,000 or even 2,200 rating points. This can indeed be considered a master or elite tournament. But there is also the reverse condition that you are not allowed to exceed a certain rating (e.g. 1,800 points). Here, weaker players stay among themselves and choose their tournament winner from their own ranks. In my opinion, online tournaments which are only open to title holders (Grandmasters, International Masters etc.) make little sense; because these official titles of the World Chess Federation FIDE cannot be acquired online, and the attraction of online chess is not so much watching as playing along.

Most online tournaments are "just" about the fun of the game and the

honour of a good position in the table at the end. Only very rarely (and almost without exception in tournaments reserved for title holders) are there cash prizes, occasionally you can win free server time. Some portals award virtual trophies, which are displayed in the respective player profile and thus demonstrate your success to other players. Basically, online chess tournaments are amateur competitions in the best sense. The special thing about chess compared to other games or sports is that besides the ranking in a tournament there is always the so-called rating, which expresses one's own playing strength in a concrete number. So during the whole tournament up to the last round there is always something to win and something to lose for every player, no matter if at the top or the bottom of the table.

Online tournaments are held in the forms known from over the board chess as well as in special online formats which do not exist analogously. In the (rare) round robin tournament everyone plays against everyone else, the number of participants is limited accordingly. In the tournament format "Swiss System" the number of participants is theoretically unlimited. In each round, players are drawn against each other who have scored as much as possible the same number of points from the previous rounds, whereby, in addition, a change of colour (black or white) from round to round is taken into account. This is by far the most common tournament form online. Tournaments based on a knockout system are rare.

A relatively young but booming form of tournament, which is only available online, are the so-called arena tournaments. Here, not the number of rounds is fixed, but only the duration of the tournament (e.g. two hours). At the end of this time, the final score of the tournament is determined; ongoing games are played to the end and also count for the rating of the players, but their results are no longer included in the tournament table. Players can enter Arena Tournaments at any time (even just before the end of the tournament). They can also drop out early or take a break without being considered unsportsmanlike, as this will not harm the other players. Once the game is over, you will be assigned a free opponent for the next game as soon as possible; you don't have to wait for the end of an ongoing tournament round. This tournament form was invented by Lichess, in the meantime it has also been taken over by Chess.com and is thus firmly established on the two largest chess portals.

Apart from the ongoing, regular tournaments offered on all portals (almost all of them have a reasonably structured tournament calendar, so that you can

quickly get an overview of what's on offer), there are always special tournaments, which are usually announced with the appropriate lead time. For some you have to qualify, for others you just have to be online at the right time and register. Such tournaments are highlights, visited by many players, also by many strong players including title holders. Entry fees are not to be paid for these as for all other online tournaments, at least I haven't come across such a tournament yet. Tournaments are included in the monthly server fee (if one is charged at all).

On some servers, players have the option of holding their own tournaments with certain restrictions, either public for all or private tournaments (access by password). Private tournaments extend the general offer of the server, but usually have much less participants than the official server tournaments. Nevertheless private tournaments are a very good idea, as they extend the technical possibilities of a chess portal by the creativity and commitment of its users.

A special tournament form with a classical (longer) time control is the so-called league chess. These tournaments are not visible on the chess server at first or second glance. League tournaments are organized on their own websites, and on the chess servers only those games are played that look like free games from the outside. You can join an existing team (or create a new one). Under the guidance of experienced tournament directors, a season plan is then drawn up and pairings for teams and players are determined. During a season there is usually one matchday per week. The players assigned to each other then arrange a match date together via forum messages or communication services such as Slack and meet at the agreed time on the designated server to play their match. Examples of such leagues in classical chess are the All Nations Chess League, Team4545 or Lichess4545 League (for the latter, the 45 minutes + 45 seconds increment is already in the name). These leagues offer the possibility to play classical chess online under competitive conditions. There is no reason to fear that making an appointment with an opponent who may be on the other side of the world and has a completely different idea of a suitable playing time could be difficult to frustrate. In practice, the procedure works very well thanks to dedicated tournament directors and moderators.

Ultimately these leagues are an emergency measure; it would be much more elegant if they were fully integrated into a chess portal, which is not (yet) the case.

Last but not least, the so-called simultaneous chess should be mentioned, even if it is not a classical tournament form. In simultaneous chess a usually much stronger player plays games against several opponents at the same time. This works as well online as over the board and is especially popular on Lichess.

TACTICAL TRAINING

Tactical skill is more decisive for the outcome of the vast majority of chess games than strategic knowledge, especially in the amateur sector. Of course, it also happens among amateurs that, for example, a player with the Ruy Lopez Opening exchange variation (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Bxc6) brings about a strategically won pawn structure and this leads to a win in the pawn end game; however, it is more likely that the game ends beforehand due to at least one tactical error by a player. Training tactical skills is therefore of utmost importance for the aspiring amateur player.

Portals such as Lichess, chess.com and Chessbase offer their own tactics training in addition to playing. Chess puzzles are set, the difficulty of which is adapted to the respective level of the player. If you can't get any further, there are help functions, so the risk of frustration is very low. The pool of these tasks probably contains several hundred thousand positions, at least I have never encountered a task twice.

For these tactical tasks there is a separate rating, so the player can track the success of his training.

Tactical training is ideal for mobile use. The famous coffee break in the office, the ride in the subway, relaxing in the garden in the shade of a tree - here, with the help of the smartphone app, you can train chess tactics alongside and very successfully. This is particularly well implemented in the apps from Chess.com and Lichess.

HONESTY IS THE BEST

Until the 90s of the last century chess was a "doping-free zone". Attempts to cheat were limited to having a stronger teammate whisper moves to you (or wave complicated sign language) during a game. This was rather silly and usually went wrong, because if you play a move you don't understand, it's hard to find the next suitable move on your own.

"Fraud attempts" of their own kind were at best still the alleged hypnotisations to which Grand Master Viktor Kortchnoi was subjected in his World Cup fight against Grand Master Anatoly Karpov in the 1970s, but that is another story.

The performance explosion of chess programs and their transfer as engines to mobile phones and smartphones has ended this period of innocence. Since then, there has been a strict ban on mobile phones in tournaments over the board. Even the use of headphones to listen to music during a game is unfortunately impossible today. A pity, but it can't be changed. Because there are always players who want to help their sporting success with the help of engine power. The classic (no joke) is still the hidden mobile phone in the men's toilet (surprisingly, I have never heard or read anything about female chess players cheating in this way; what does that tell us?) But even players who wear a hearing aid often have to at least look suspicious; technically it would not be a big problem to have an accomplice whisper the best moves calculated by an engine into your ear.

In online chess, this problem is even more obvious. Here there is no control of the players. In theory, a player could run an engine on the same computer or on a second device and have the best moves predicted. Or (even more extreme) he could have a program, a so-called bot, play for himself (as is known from fraudulent bots in online poker). This is actually a reason why some players refuse online chess on principle.

The problem of cheating in online chess cannot be denied, but this is no reason not to play online chess. Cheating attempts can be found everywhere where a successful cheat is worthwhile (prime example once again: online poker, because this is about money). Cheating in chess over the board is worthwhile in the short term if a player wins a tournament or at least a prize money that he would never have achieved otherwise. In the long run,

cheating over the board does not pay off either, unless a cheater manages to outwit the security measures in every tournament.

In online chess, the profit of successful cheating is limited to your own ego (tournament successes, rating points). This should not be underestimated and ensures that there are indeed attempts at cheating, but to a far lesser extent than one should expect given the easy possibility of cheating. The vast majority of online players (I put the unprovable figure of 99 percent in the room) want to play, not cheat. And if you want to use engine power in your game without cheating intention, you can do this quite legally on some servers by creating a so-called centaur account. Such an account does not mean creatures half man and half horse playing chess here, but a human player with the support of an engine.

Nevertheless, it is the duty of the operators of chess portals to prevent or clear up attempts at betrayal, and they must not be released from this duty. A simple request not to do so is not enough. The approaches here are different (both in terms of construction and effectiveness). No portal discloses in detail how it works, out of concern that cheaters might adapt their behaviour accordingly. Basically there are two different approaches:

1. Control during the game: Here the software monitors the player's behaviour during the game. Does it switch to another program window? If so, how often? Then it is assumed that the player has a chess computer program running alongside and gets information from there for his next move. This method is easy to circumvent, you don't even need a second PC, all you need is a mid-range smartphone with a powerful engine app. Moreover, this method is virtually predestined for false alarms. Because there are numerous honest reasons to click into other computer programs during a game (especially in Rapid chess or classic chess, where you usually don't play under time pressure): you receive an email, you choose another piece for the background music, your favorite club plays soccer at the same time and you use a live ticker ... In these cases it can happen that you as an honest player receive an unpleasant email, usually a standardized text, in which you are accused of cheating and threatened to close your account in case of repetition. If one reacts with righteous indignation and demands a

justification for this insinuation, one hears - nothing. The operator cannot and does not want to give a reason at all, because he does not want to disclose the details of his anti-cheating technique. If you stick to your behaviour during the game, it can actually happen that your account is closed. Mind you, without the portal operator having provided proof of fraud. This is certainly not legal (especially with accounts for which you have paid), but lawyers would have to deal with this. This kind of anti-cheating control is a comprehensible attempt, but it is doomed to failure. Actual cheaters can easily avoid it, honest players are unnecessarily restricted in their freedom during the game or even pilloried (a closed account is usually not deleted, but only closed, i.e. for all other players the account is recognizable as "closed due to cheating").

2. Control after the game: This is the intelligent anti-cheating technique that someone had to come up with first. So to speak a doping control after the end of the competition with the help of what chess portals have sufficiently available: computing power. This is because the system does not search for suspicious behaviour during the game, but uses analysis software and engine technology to check the finished game to see to what extent it was played suspiciously. Human and engine simply play differently, and fortunately this can be analyzed. It is certainly a programming challenge, but several portals have obviously mastered it. Honest players can click where they want on the screen during a game, they don't get any more insinuations emailed to them. Cheaters can't feel safe after winning a game, because the transfer follows time-delayed, according to own experience within one or a few hours (own experience doesn't mean here that I cheated to try it; as a victim of a cheating attempt you also get a message that you fell victim to a cheater in your own game against Mister X., and you get back the possibly lost rating points!) This kind of anti-cheating technique is player-friendly and intelligent and will hopefully work for a long time and better and better.

The principle danger that attempts to cheat can (also) occur in online chess is not an argument not to play online chess. Just play where the anti-cheating technique has been implemented best. And if you should ever suspect that

you have lost a game against a cheater - check off the thought and continue playing.

THE MAGIC OF NUMBER: RATING

How good are the Liverpool soccer players really? Or Real Madrid? Or Roger Federer, Lewis Hamilton, Tiger Woods?

In most sports and games, this can only be found out by direct comparison, and even then only with restrictions (keyword: daily form). In chess, there is an additional way to recognize the playing strength of a player: the so-called rating.

The theory and mathematics behind the rating system is relatively complicated, but can be simplified for our purposes. Each player has a rating number between approx. 800 and 3,000 points. The higher the number, the better the player. If two players meet, the rating numbers of both players change (depending on the game result: win, draw or defeat). If you lose to a player whose rating number was much higher than your own before the game, your own rating will hardly or not at all decrease. Conversely, the rating of the much stronger opponent hardly improves at all. After all, the outcome of the game was to be expected with these strongly varying scores. However, if you manage a draw or even a win against a player with a higher rating, your own rating increases accordingly, as does that of your opponent. In the mathematical formulas on which the calculations (which are performed in real time on the servers) are based, factors such as the number of scores already scored and other aspects also play a role. The rating of beginners changes faster and more drastically than that of grand- and world champions.

Roughly simplified, the strength of a player can be estimated with the help of his rating as follows:

- Up to 1,200 points: Beginner, casual player
- Up to 1,400 points: Hobby player
- Up to 1,600 points: Club player level, lower division
- Up to 1,800 points: Club player level, middle league
- Up to 2,000 points: strong club player

Beyond the 2,000 limit the area of chess experts begins. For an amateur player, 2,000 points are something like a small "sound barrier", which he can

be justifiably proud of having broken through.

- Up to 2,200 points: Prospective Master (in official women's chess already international titles as *Candidate Master of Women* and *FIDE Master of Women*)
- Up to 2,300 points: *Candidate* or *National Master* for men, *International Master* for women
- Up to 2,400 points: *FIDE Master* for men, *Grandmaster* for women
- Up to 2,500 points: *International Master*
- Starting at 2,500 points: *Grand Master*

Especially for its own FIDE Online Arena, the World Chess Federation FIDE has introduced new arena titles, which are acquired when a certain minimum rating is reached and held for a certain number of games. So it is not enough to reach a Blitz rating of 2,000 points once to become Arena Grandmaster; even after that you are not allowed to fall below this rating for 100 Blitz games (which is not that easy). Here are the criteria for these new amateur titles:

- *Arena Candidate Master (ACM)*:
at least 1,100 points
- *Arena FIDE Master (AFM)*:
at least 1,400 points
- *Arena International Master (AIM)*:
at least 1,700 points
- *Arena Grandmaster (AGM)*:
at least 2,000 points

You might smile about an official title like the Arena Candidate Master (ACM), which you can already earn with a rating that would make it hard to compete in the Kreisklasse. But the requirements for the AIM or even the AGM title are real challenges for an amateur player. The somewhat exclusive circle of the Arena Grandmaster also only includes 285 active players (as of November 2019).

How strongly are the individual service levels represented on online

servers? The easiest way to check this is at Lichess, the statistics can be called up there at any time on the basis of the last week. In Blitz chess almost 300,000 players are active there in one week. Half of the players have a maximum rating of 1,500 points, another 25 percent have between 1,500 and 1,800 rating points. Beyond the 2,000 point limit the air becomes thinner: only 10 percent of the players have a rating higher than 2,000 points, beyond 2,300 points it is only 1 percent. Real master players.

The significance of the rating also depends to a not inconsiderable extent on the time limit variant to which it applies (all servers assign their own rating for bullet, Blitz and Rapid chess). A Rapid chess rating says more about the chess skill of a player than a Bullet rating. It doesn't matter if you have a rating of 1,800 points in Rapid chess or Blitz chess, but don't get more than 1,400 points in Bullet chess. In the opposite case, you should be more concerned.

GOOD BEHAVIOUR

Almost every portal offers a chat function during the game, some additionally a general chat for all users not playing, and most of them a separate forum. For all forms of communication, the same basic rule applies as in real life: what matters are good manners.

Chatting with the opponent during the game is not for everyone, and it's perfectly fine if you don't want to (I personally feel as if I have a haircut: I want to have my peace and quiet and not be "chatted up", but that's another story). So, without being considered unsportsmanlike, you may deactivate the chat function at the beginning of the game (this is especially true for decisive tournament games). On the other hand, you should send a short message at the beginning of the game to see if your opponent is interested in chatting during the game. For free games with a longer time to think about it, this can be an entertaining way of playing. It should only be desired by both players and not be tolerated by one of them just to be polite.

It is certainly not polite to use the game chat to let off steam because you made a mistake or even lost the whole game. Don't do that! Not to mention that it can have unpleasant consequences (you can't undo the possibly offensive message you wrote, your opponent can forward it to one of the moderators, and you'll be at least warned or even banned for improper behaviour), it's just not polite. At best, spontaneous self abuse such as "I am an idiot! I blundered!". If the opponent then reacts relaxed with a smiley face, smile back. Subject matter closed. Apart from that, the same rules of behaviour apply in the chat as in real life, and even if in real life (and even more so in digital via Twitter and Co.) manners go steeply downhill, this is no justification for impertinent and - with respect - idiotic behaviour in chess chat. Reading note in the margin: "About decency in difficult times and the question how we deal with each other" (German book) by Axel Hacke offers almost everything that can be said on this subject on almost 200 pages.

Besides the game chat, which only you and your opponent can see, this also applies to any public chat. The rules of civilized communication and politeness also apply here. Not every Russian chess player is a communist, not every Iranian user pleads for Sharia, and not every female online chess player sees herself as a sex object that wants to be chatted up (all seen).

If you are a strong player, you may be approached by weaker players directly, during or after a game (unless you have disabled chat). Consider this as recognition and appreciation and respond politely. Do not hesitate to answer questions and give one or two tips. Some portals offer a follower function, i.e. players can mark other players and "follow" them. Top players on the major portals may well have several thousand followers (not to be confused with stalkers). They do not have to react to this, but may consider offering these followers their own online simultaneous events, for example. For players with a rating below 1,500 points it is already interesting to play against a 2,000 opponent simultaneously. Think of it as a kind of "development aid" for chess (and of course it's fun, too).

So if we assume that you yourself maintain a good behaviour in the chat, how should you behave if you encounter a troll that either attacks and insults you directly (in game chat or public chat) or does so to others in public chat? First rule: stay calm. This is easier in chat than in real life, because you are not facing the nagging idiot face to face. In the game chat it is enough to deactivate the chat or simply not answer at all. Nothing is worse than when a face-to-face insult simply fizzles out. If it gets really bad, report the incident to the moderators. In many portals, this can be done with just a few clicks. May they then take care and impose sanctions, that is the job of the portal operators.

In the public chat you can hope that other users will step in and rebuke the troublemaker. In order for this to happen, you should of course also take action in reverse when a user verbally abuses and insults another. Here civil courage and commitment is demanded. Of course, you will then immediately become a target yourself, but you can stand that. As a German player, you should be prepared to be insulted as a Nazi, even if it's not very original.

Now the impression should not be created that chats in online chess are full of trolls and idiots. The opposite is the case. But it happens, and you should know what possibilities of reaction there are. I always have to grin when a troll "pukes up" for five minutes and then suddenly a moderator message appears like "User *** has been banned for 30 minutes because of improper behaviour" (which at the same time makes his verbal lapses disappear from the chat history). When can you ever in real life simply put your hand on the mouth of a screamer or otherwise turn off his voice without danger?

Besides the chats, the portal forum is the most important place for communication between users. Mind you, you can play online chess without

entering the forum once. But it can increase the fun of the game.

The forum is on the one hand the place to get answers to questions. This always works when there are active experienced users who take the time to answer the questions (even for the hundredth time). On the other hand, the forum of a chess portal also serves to bring together players with common interests in groups. These interests can be as diverse as (chess) life. Thus, players who prefer a time control variant not offered on the server (e.g. long games) like to organize themselves in the forum and in this way organize games or whole tournaments. Or they exchange ideas about a special variant of the opening theory. Or, or, or, or ... On big portals like Chess.com and Lichess the forum is a world of its own.

Of course, the same rules of politeness and decency apply in the forum as in real life. But here you will have problems or encounter trolls much less often.

A non-verbal form of communication should also be mentioned briefly: some programs allow you to send a sign of recognition to a player (after a game or independently), e.g. an applause (Playchess) or a special trophy for sporting behaviour (Chess.com). These tokens are collected and displayed in the profile of the player in question. A nice gesture says more than many words.

One of the most unpleasant gestures, however, is the bad habit of letting one's time for thinking expire in a lost position instead of giving up. In Rapid chess or even classical chess, this can drive you crazy if you suspect that your opponent no longer intends to continue playing. On the other hand, you cannot simply turn your back on the game despite your winning position and your opponent's passivity, because he might have just been waiting for it and make a move shortly before the end of his time (I have already experienced all this) - and then you have to be careful not to lose the game you have not observed for a while! Fortunately the big chess portals are working on this problem, too. If a player has actually left the game (no more connection to the server), a grace period will pass at first (it could be a normal connection problem or a crashed PC, which has to be restarted by the player), but then the software offers to abort the game and give the remaining player the winning score. Or the player who does not make a move for an unusually long time, but is online, must confirm with a mouse click that he is still there and willing to play. Ultimately, this does not prevent any form of unsportsmanlike sitting out, but similar to cheating, this is less common in

online practice than one might think.

CAUTION CHILD!

Chess is conducive to the development of children and young people (even if not every young chess player is automatically good at mathematics). This is not the place to go into detail here. At several primary schools in Germany chess is taught as a school subject, as it contributes in many ways to counteract the central problem of learning disorders in children and young people. At many secondary schools chess workshops are specifically promoted. Thirty years ago this was (unfortunately) quite different.

Children and teenagers who have a wider interest in chess beyond school eventually end up in online chess (the classical way to a chess club is often frustrating when the local club unfortunately cannot offer an appropriate program for children and teenagers or still holds its game evenings in the back room of a pub). Only a few portals react specifically to this young group of players. Playchess offers an own room "Kinderschach", which is not isolated from the other rooms. Only Chess.com offers with Chesskid.com an own portal for children playing chess. If you are parents and have children who are enthusiastic about chess, please have a look at this portal together. This could be the right place for your kids.

This means that when you play your own online game, you can also meet children and young people as playing opponents. As an adult, you have a responsibility here, as in real life, of which you should be aware.

How can you recognize that you are playing against a child? Firstly, on many portals a click on the player's name is enough to see the player's profile including age or year of birth. On the other hand chess playing children are often communicative and start a game with "Hi, I am *** from India, 11 years old." If you (like me) usually don't like to chat during the game or even at length, make an exception here. Of course, you should not give the child any unsolicited lectures, but answer questions, give a tip, encourage your opponent, especially if he plays much worse than you. In short, make sure that playing with you does not cause frustration or even demotivation for the kid.

Stay even more responsible and calm when you are taken apart by the above mentioned 11-year-old boy (or more rarely: girl) on the board! Because these Chess Kids are also present online: talents who will probably

become international champions or even Grandmasters in a few years and use online chess to practice, practice, practice ...

LEARN FROM ERRORS

A conventional game over the board usually ends with a short joint analysis by the players (What were you thinking in this position? Would I have played this one better in the 17th move?). This is also possible online, but more complicated. Usually the opponent is already "gone" before you could suggest a joint analysis of the game on the analysis board.

Instead, for online games, a quick analysis with the help of engines is a good idea. In the large portals this is done with a few clicks. You let an engine analyze the game specifically for tactical errors (strategic analysis is not that easy, that's the nature of things). Even a computer analysis lasting just a few minutes can reveal the critical positions in an amateur game where one side or the other has made a (pre-)decisive mistake or overlooked a much better move.


Take your time for these analyses! Learning from your own mistakes is known to be one of the most efficient learning methods of all. And to recognize afterwards in a game lost in the end, at which point you could have turned into the winning lane yourself, sometimes helps to cope with the pain of defeat more easily ("If I hadn't missed that, I would have won!").

The two portals that are advancing very far here in different ways are Lichess and Playchess/Chessbase.

Lichess offers for all played games a powerful computer analysis with the usual position evaluations in numerical form, but also with speaking comments at the crucial points. In addition, the player can also use "Chess Insights" to have his entire played games analysed from numerous points of view. The possibilities here are so varied that one is almost confused at first glance. One should not be deterred by this, even if some analyses seem less meaningful than others. Lichess computer analyses and "Chess Insights" are powerful (and free) tools for everyone who wants to analyze his game, eliminate mistakes and advance his chess playing.

Playchess goes a different way, because Playchess is based on a different concept and has a completely different history than Lichess. Behind Playchess is the leading chess database program Chessbase and therefore the greatest know-how regarding the structuring and analysis of chess games. Provided that you own the (not quite cheap) database program Chessbase,

preferably together with a top engine that can be used by Chessbase, you can call up your own games played on Playchess directly in Chessbase and analyse them according to all the rules of the Chessbase art. Of course this also works if you are a Chessbase user playing on Lichess or other portals; then you just have to export the games played there and import them into Chessbase first. From the analysis of your own games and the automatic comparison with sample games, you will get hints for improving your game in a short time.



THE DARK KNIGHT SYSTEM AND THE BIRD - A RECOMMENDATION FOR AN UNORTHODOX OPENING REPERTOIRE

No player, not even a Grandmaster, can master all opening systems in the same way or even know them in the essential main and secondary variations. Therefore, everyone specializes in a few systems, which he changes during his chess life - and this is highly recommended to every amateur player - and thus expands his opening theoretical knowledge.

As a player over the board in a chess club, for example, you will quickly become a "glass" player with regard to your opening preferences (this is even more true for Grandmasters whose games are published in the relevant game databases immediately after the end of a tournament). The opponent in the next round of the club championship or the next league matchday will usually know whether you are a player who opens more often with 1.e4 or 1.d4, whether you are a supporter of the Sicilian or French defence with Black, etc. In online chess it is a little bit different. On most portals your games can be viewed by all players, but you usually only know who you are playing against immediately before or at the beginning of the game. A game preparation, as you know it from the normal league operation over the board, is not possible at all (apart from the above described special online leagues like Lichess4545).

Nevertheless, online chess players also need a solid opening repertoire in which they feel at home. But online players are freer, because they are much less "glassy".

Of course there is no perfect repertoire. Fortunately, individual playing styles and preferences are too different for that. Nevertheless, I would like to make an unorthodox suggestion here, based on the following assumptions.

Assumption 1: You want to play your own games and not primarily unwind memorized variations in the hope that your memory is better than that of your opponent.

Assumption 2: You want to leave the traditional opening theory paths as

early as possible in your games and think creatively on your own (and force your opponent to do the same).

Assumption 3: You want to decide where the journey is going to lead with Black as well as with White, if possible from the first move on.

Assumption 4: You want to play an exotic but serious opening system, not a "diddle opening".

If all four assumptions meet your expectations, I would recommend you to play Black, the so-called "The Dark Knight System (TDKS)", or "1... Nc6 against almost everything". This system relies on the black knight move 1 ... Nc6 against almost all white opening moves (1.e4, 1.d4, 1.c4 and 1.Nf3). This is far less exotic than it sounds at first, and there is enough serious theoretical discussion, especially about the types of positions that arise after 1.e4 Nc6. An overview including a game database (amateur online games) and literature tips can be found on the German website www.moritex.de .

TDKS has an irreversible disadvantage - you can only play it with Black. For the other half of your games, where you are leading the white pieces, I recommend the Bird opening 1.f4 . Not only, but also in view of the fact that 1.f4 is one of the few opening moves against which TDKS should not be played (why this is so is also explained on the aforementioned website www.moritex.de).

With *The Dark Knight System* and the *Bird* opening, an excellent opening repertoire for the amateur online player can be developed in a tolerable amount of time. Due to its many variation possibilities, it offers a varied, satisfying and successful playing experience. There are no limits to the success. At least this repertoire has accompanied the author of these lines to an online rating above the 2,000 point limit. Even if the choice of opening is ultimately not decisive for chess success: *"The importance of concrete knowledge of the opening is vastly overestimated by most chess players, from laymen and modest club players to grandmasters. The decisive factor in chess is skill and general understanding, not opening knowledge"*. No one less than the German super Grandmaster Dr. Robert Hübner has aptly summed up this chess truism.

ONLINE CHESS VERSUS ONLINE POKER

There is a persistent rumour that good chess players are also good poker players. There is a Russian online poker player (nicknamed "Stickman") who successfully plays high-stakes poker and is - supposedly - a chess Grandmaster. There is a German Grandmaster (known by name), who was one of the biggest talents in Germany around the year 2000, who turned his back on chess in 2006 and became a poker player, founded an online poker school and (allegedly) can now afford a life as a private with his earnings.

The above rumor is based on the assumption that poker is a calculable game (based on the mathematics of probability) and chess players are particularly good at calculating games. So far, so trivial.

Chess players have an advantage in any game that includes elements of strategy and calculation. This is also true for Mensch-ärgere-dich-nicht. The more strategic and predictable a game is, the more the analytical skills you acquire in chess come into play. But that is all there is to it. Therefore, good chess players do not automatically win at backgammon or "Settlers of Catan". But if they do win, they occasionally have to put up with comments like "You also play chess!" That's the way the world is.

Poker is a game of luck. Not only de jure, but above all game theory. That's what makes it so appealing. Any "fool" can become a millionaire in poker, just like in the lottery, assuming the corresponding outrageous luck. Unlike the lottery, however, active action is required in poker, even if not particularly differentiated: You bet or fold. More is not to be done. Unlike in chess, you do not have complete information. In classic poker Texas Holdem, the card game consists of 52 cards. One player receives 5 cards in his hand, 3 more are dealt face up on the table. So you know 8 of 52 cards, the remaining 44 cards can be in all possible combinations in the hands of the other players or in the remaining pile, of which one card is laid open on the table in each of two further rounds. At the end of the game you still have 5 cards in your hand and like all the other players you will see 5 cards face up on the table. Who now has the best hand (and wins) cannot be predicted, but the probabilities of the different possibilities can be calculated. In online poker, this is no longer

done by the player himself, but by a software that runs along with the game. This means that the possible advantage that chess players are supposed to have in online poker no longer exists.

In theory (and in practice), it is possible to win at poker in the long run if you play disciplined and follow a few rules of conduct. Winning can even be predicted: if you play in a disciplined manner, you can earn about 1 EUR per hour with a stake of about 600 EUR. If you risk 6,000 EUR, you can also earn 10 EUR per hour. However, the higher the stakes become, the higher the number of players who are equally disciplined. This reduces the expected profit. If everyone plays disciplined, nobody wins in the long run. Poker players live from the undisciplined players, the so-called "fish".

With a profit expectation of 1 EUR per hour you can't even finance the Christmas presents for your family. So poker as a serious game is just not the way to become a millionaire. You can only do that (as in the lottery) by outrageous luck in poker tournaments with correspondingly high prize money (and correspondingly high entry fees!). All this would be no problem if the poker game itself were interesting and entertaining. Which is not the case.

Disciplined poker (especially online poker) is dead boring! The playful depth and complexity compared to chess is about the same as the comparison between a stick figure drawing and the fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. And since you have to invest a lot of time to achieve a measurable return (profit), online poker is above all: a senseless waste of life.

It is not impossible that "Stickman" is really a chess Grandmaster. Then at some point he decided to become a professional poker player with the appropriate stakes and risks (as a poker professional you have to be prepared to play with a bankroll of 1 million EUR and at the same time mentally endure incalculably long periods of loss). And the aforementioned German Grandmaster was simply a clever businessman who, in the high days of online poker, founded a website "Poker School" and made good money with poker, not with playing poker. Clever as he was, he sold this website at the height of the boom for good money (and is supposedly returning to chess).

Chess players are not better poker players. And online poker is a waste of time. Take these two truths to heart and play online chess!

PORTALS FOR ONLINE CHESS

Now where is the best place to play online chess? The number of portals is not as large as in online poker, but it is still not easy to keep track of the situation. Some portals rely on their own software, on others it is played from the browser. Some score with an enormous number of players, others specialize and focus on a smaller number of interested players. The differences in additional offers are also considerable. With regard to costs there are also significant differences, but all chess portals have in common that they are payable. Online chess is not a game for the wealthy.

In the end, a player does not have to decide on an exclusive portal. Playing on several servers is common and also recommendable. So one can decide for a main game location, but at the same time use other portals for special tournaments or special offers and game variants.

In the following articles the most important individual portals are briefly introduced. A complete listing of all functions was deliberately omitted, since these are also constantly changing. Rather, the aim is to give an impression of the essential key points and the philosophy underlying the respective portal. Because this usually changes less in the course of months and years than the screen layout, the gameplay or the list of functions.

Chess.com

Chess.com, online since 2007, is the (self-proclaimed) number 1 among online chess portals with more than 30 million registrations. This may include multiple registrations and inactive accounts, but it is undisputed that at most Lichess still has a comparable number of active online players.

The player can choose between different memberships at Chess.com. The free account limits the number of tournaments, tactics training and lessons as well as the analysis functions. In addition, you have to endure advertising on the screen (at least beside and not on the board). With the paid account levels Gold, Platinum or Diamond these restrictions are gradually removed; Chess.com is ad-free from the Gold level on.

Chess.com is very American - and very coloured. Even if you have a lot of possibilities to adjust the design of the board, the whole thing remains a very colorful, partly comic-like affair. This style obviously goes down very well with the general public, but is not for everyone.

Chess.com really knocks you out with news, game offers, forum invitations etc. You could say: Chess.com never sleeps.

A special strength of Chess.com is the correspondence chess offer. Not represented on other servers at all or only as a marginal function, correspondence chess (which is called "Daily Chess" on Chess.com) is here in the first row. New tournaments are constantly offered by the players themselves, with different reflection times, rating restrictions or openings (theme tournaments). For this alone a (free) account at Chess.com is worthwhile, nowhere else you can play correspondence chess so user-friendly, also and especially not on the PC, but in the Chess.com app on the mobile phone.

Chess.com rewards its players with comic-style trophies that you can put on your profile. These are not only badges for 1st to 3rd place in tournaments, but even more for achievements or behavior in the game. These trophies can also come directly from other players. How much importance is attached to social exchange in the Chess.com forum. Here, too, the fun factor is clearly in the foreground.

The offer of lessons, videos and other forms of learning is enormous, maybe already too big to keep the overview. Especially for beginners and

newcomers to online chess the learning offer is large and attractively prepared. On Chess.com so much is offered that one cannot be sure not to have missed something somewhere.

It is more clearly arranged in the actual game area, called "live chess". Here you can easily find more than 50.000 players. So it is almost surprising that tournaments take place with less than 20 participants. It seems as if a very large part of the players play only single free games.

The rankings, which Chess.com not only differentiates between the different levels of consideration, but optionally also according to the nationality of the players, list almost all title holders who have rank and name in international chess. However, one rarely meets these giants on the board, they seem to play mainly free games among themselves.

The permanent tournament offer around the clock is extensive. You do not have to wait for a long time. And if you don't want to wait at all, you can also join one of the running arena tournaments, which were invented by the competing portal Lichess (and are therefore introduced there in more detail).

Chess.com is also the venue of the so-called PRO Chess League, the only professional league in online chess. As the name suggests, this is an event for professional chess players. Amateur players can only watch, there is no even theoretical possibility to qualify for a participation.

Chess.com is so extensive and full of additional offers that the actual online game is almost a little bit pushed into the background.

Lichess

The most unusual and (perhaps) best chess portal for online players is Lichess (lichess.org), online since June 2010.

At Lichess, around 40,000 players are online almost all the time. Every day more than 1 million games are played, over 1,000 moves per second. This places the portal on a par with Chess.com in terms of quantity, but also puts an end to the similarities.

Lichess owes its existence to the French programmer Thibault Duplessis. His idea: a professional offer for online chess on a "world class level" - completely free of charge. At Lichess there are no fees, all functions and features are available to all players, and there are no advertising banners or similar. Accordingly, the visual impression on the screen alone is much calmer and less colourful than for example at Chess.com.

Lichess thrives on the input of its founder and an extremely active and dedicated team of volunteers around the world who take care of this exciting project. The money, which is necessary, for example to run the servers, Lichess receives on a voluntary basis from so-called patrons. Every player can make a donation (permanently or once, by credit card or PayPal). He gets nothing else than a virtual badge that identifies him as a patron. There are no further considerations, such as premium accounts: "Lichess will never create premium accounts." Lichess counts a little over 1,100 patrons - and that is enough! Lichess even publishes the necessary expenses, which amount to around 130,000 US dollars per year. Those who absolutely want to spend money for something in return can order Lichess merchandising items such as coffee mugs, mouse pads and T-shirts in an online shop - not so easy to find. This shop is not operated by Lichess itself.

Lichess is not commercial and, by her own admission, never will be. Some people find it "communist", and so there is e.g. an own Facebook account for the sole purpose of preventing chess players from playing on Lichess, because otherwise one would support "hippies" and "communists". You have to come up with an idea like that first!

Question: If Lichess is free, does that make the offer "cheap"? Answer: No! Lichess is world-class in terms of features and offerings as well as pure server power, just as founder Thibault intended. Even more, regarding the

functions and offers Lichess does not only take over well-known standards of other portals, but creatively develops online chess further. Let us try to present the whole thing in a structured way.

The pure game runs in a well-organized gameplay. Board size, colour and design can be freely selected from a sufficiently large selection. The screen view provides all necessary information even off the board, but the board itself always remains the central and prominent element. The movement of the figures is fluid, nothing jerks. Purely subjectively, Lichess offers the best gameplay of all chess portals.

In a free game, the time control per player can be freely chosen between 0 and 180 minutes (per game) and an addition of 0 to 180 seconds (per move), the so-called increment. Correspondence chess can also be played with a time limit between 1 day and 14 days per move, but not as a tournament like Chess.com.

Most players, however, compete in tournaments that run around the clock. Lichess sorts the various time limits into the following categories, for each of which the player also earns a separate rating number:

- Bullet (up to about 2 minutes + 1 second increment)
- Blitz (up to about 5 minutes + 3 second increment)
- Rapid (up to about 25 minutes)
- Classical (from 25 minutes on)

The differentiation between Rapid chess (Rapid) and classical chess (Classical) was only made in December 2017.

Tournaments on Lichess have their own format, which has now been adopted by Chess.com as an option. On Lichess it is the only way to play tournaments: the Arena!

In contrast to conventional tournament forms such as round robin tournaments, Swiss system or knockout tournaments, only the start time and duration are fixed in an Arena Tournament (and of course the time limit, the starting position in case of a theme tournament and, if applicable, the minimum or maximum rating in rating limited tournaments). The number of rounds is not fixed. Players can also enter, exit or pause the tournament at any time. So you don't have to be online in time not to miss the start of a tournament; it's perfectly normal and not at all unsportsmanlike to leave a

tournament; you'll be assigned a new opponent very quickly after the end of a game, because you don't have to wait until all games in a round are finished; and in especially long tournaments (e.g. the 24-hour marathon) you can always enter the tournament for a few games, pause, re-enter, etc.

This tournament form is only possible in online chess. In traditional chess over the board, such a tournament would fall into chaos. And there are two more special rules for Lichess tournaments:

1. The so called Berserker rule: If a player renounces half of his time to think (and the full increment) at the beginning of a tournament game, he can score an additional tournament point. A win therefore counts 3 instead of 2 points, a draw 2 instead of 1 point.
2. The "win" rule: If a player wins at least two games in a row, his points are doubled from the next game on, as long as the winning streak continues. For example: the first win brings 2 points, the second win also. The immediately following win counts as 4 points, as does the next win in a row. After three wins in a row, the player has 8 points (instead of 6). If the fourth game ends in a draw, he gets 2 points for this draw (twice the number of points of a normal draw); if he has lost this fourth game, he gets no points ($2 * 0$ is zero even for Lichess). In both cases, the winning streak is over and the player must win again two games in a row to earn extra points.

Both rules also apply in combination, so a victory with the Berserker rule in a winning series results in 5 points (2 for the victory, another 2 by doubling, 1 extra point for the Berserker). Sounds more complicated than it is in practice.

Around the clock the tournament offer at Lichess is good to very good. Official Lichess tournaments for Bullet, Blitz and Rapid tournaments are running constantly, plus tournaments with rating limits. In addition, there are numerous private tournaments, because within certain limits in time control and duration, players can also organize their own tournaments.

Special competitions such as the 24-hour marathon tournaments (with more than 10,000 participants!) or the monthly so-called shield tournaments

for the above-mentioned four time control variants are also particularly popular. The winner of these tournaments receives a trophy, a so-called shield, for one month, which is displayed separately in his profile.

Other special tournaments are reserved exclusively for title holders and there is also prize money to be won. None other than world champion Magnus Carlsen has already participated in (and won) several of these tournaments and has had the greatness to donate his prize money to the next tournament. When even Grandmasters and world champions play arena tournaments, the format cannot be so absurd.

The rating system at Lichess is similar to the ELO rating of the world association FIDE, but is technically based on the so-called Glicko system, which is supposed to be an improvement of the ELO system. Normally, however, the ratings are comparable, beyond the 2,100 mark one belongs to the 1-2% top players also at Lichess (the top 200 list e.g. in the category Rapid chess starts at approx. 2,300 points).

On Lichess not only normal chess can be played. Very popular are also chess variations, which are also rated in a rating system and for which tournaments are also offered. You can argue about the usefulness of these variations, and trainers who already consider Blitz chess "dangerous" will certainly turn a blind eye to the following "chess specials":

- Chess960, also called Fischer Chess: The most serious attempt to advance the rules of the royal game. In Chess960, the basic position is not predetermined (except for the pawns on the 2nd row), but randomly (but symmetrically for black and white) with each new game. The idea here is to reduce the importance of opening theory and opening preparation and to play "pure chess" from the beginning. This chess variant was ennobled in autumn 2019 with an official World Championship of the World Chess Federation FIDE.
- Crazyhouse: Instead of a move a captured piece can be put into play (we used to play something like this in the chess club on several boards next to each other as "Tandem" or "Tridem", with much fun and low chess value).
- Antichess: The winner is the one who has no more pieces at first. A piece that can be captured must be captured (also known

from analogous times as “Robbery Chess”).

- Atomic: A beaten figure explodes and takes the neighbouring figures into nirvana.
- Racing Kings: The winner is the player who has brought his own king to the opponent's basic row first.
- King of the Hill: The winner is the player who has first placed his own king on a central square.
- Three-Check: Whoever gives chess three times first, wins.
- Horde: A normal chess army against a horde of pawns.

Whoever thinks in view of these game variations that Lichess is a place of desperate chess anarchists will be taught a better lesson at the latest during the training and study functions.

Every player can create so-called chess studies on Lichess and share them with a limited number of people or with everyone. Theory book and engine support can be included. Studies can contain several chapters. This all works quickly and easily and is intuitive to use. The application possibilities of this new study technique are far from exhausted.

Players can also offer simultaneous events on Lichess.

Also popular is the connection to streaming services like twitch. Here you can watch a player in the current tournament and follow his live comments. The quality of these streams is, carefully formulated, very different. Experienced streamers offer a high entertainment value; however, sometimes the quality does not exceed the streamer's self-presentation needs.

Playchess

Playchess (playchess.com or also schach.de) is the online portal of the German company Chessbase, known and famous for the leading chess database program of the same name, the chess software Fritz, the chess magazine Chessbase and a wide range of chess videos and training programs. In short: Chessbase knows a lot about chess, and has been doing so since the 80s.

This is also the main advantage of the online portal Playchess: it is perfectly integrated with Chessbase and Fritz software. Where it makes sense, functions can be called and connected from the programs. Games played on Playchess are immediately available in Chessbase or can be analyzed later with Fritz. Anyone who owns Chessbase and Fritz will be happy on Playchess (especially as access to Playchess is already included when you buy the programs).

There are two memberships (apart from the free guest access) on Playchess, the Starter subscription and the only slightly more expensive Premium subscription. Here, saving money doesn't really make sense, because in the Starter Subscription you do without live databases, and live transmissions of tournaments are limited. Above all, the Starter Subscription does not include the high-quality Chessbase videos. Not every chess video on the Internet is good or very good, but the Chessbase videos are nearly perfect. Decades of experience in this field are obvious.

A special strength of Playchess is the (commented and uncommented) live broadcast of tournaments.

The actual playing is done through a good gameplay with very good controls. However, there are seldom more than 2,000 players in the so-called large game room. Playchess does not come close to the player numbers of Chess.com and Lichess. This can lead to the fact that you have to wait longer to find an opponent with the desired time limit and a preferred rating range. The offer of regular tournaments is rather small, or in other words small but nice. In these tournaments the participation of (also known) title holders is common. Title holders like to play on Playchess, even without a running tournament you can find (test on 19.05.2018) 1,400 players and nearly 40 title holders in the big game room. No wonder, title holders use Chessbase

quasi professionally and are in the Playchess game room with a short click.

For the amateur player, however, the tournament offer is predominantly ensured by privately organised tournament managers who offer smaller tournaments almost around the clock in one of the "side rooms". Despite the commitment of these tournament leaders, this tournament offer does not come close to Chess.com or Lichess.

If Chess.com is very American, Playchess is decidedly "German". Sober instead of colourful, functional instead of playful, aimed at perfection. Playchess is directed less at the hobby player and more at the ambitious club player. To say it with Stefan Zweig: on Playchess chess is rather "earnest" than "played".

ICC – The Internet Chess Club

The Internet Chess Club ICC (chessclub.com), online since 1995, belongs to the bedrock of chess portals. In contrast to the Chessbase portal, however, the ICC's control and overall construction of the portal is no longer up to date. The operators have not succeeded (or are no longer able) to cut off old habits and to go new or even only contemporary ways.

The ICC can be accessed via several different access programs, none of which is state of the art in terms of usability (this also applies to the Android app). This may not be a problem for experienced online gamers who are not afraid of command lines in their daily computer life. Newcomers are simply overwhelmed by the structure. Essential information as well as commands must be entered via a console in the ICC. This is too much of a good thing about tradition.

The ICC is primarily aimed at US players. The tournament calendar is geared towards this market, which has a negative effect on European players as there are no tournaments around the clock.

In addition to a temporary free membership, subscriptions can be purchased for different durations. If you don't want to take out a 1 or 2 year subscription right away, playing in the ICC is rather more expensive than with the competition. Is it worth it?

The ICC scores basically only in two aspects. One is the cooperation with the US Chess Federation. ICC members can also become members of the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF), and there are special online tournaments where official USCF ratings can be purchased. If you are interested in this, ICC is the right place for you. On the other hand, relatively many title holders (Grandmasters and International Masters) play here, probably out of tradition. However, these mainly play free games against each other, which means that the chance to flash against a grandmaster as an amateur is not necessarily higher than on other portals. Because tournaments (see above) with Grandmaster participation do not exist at ICC any more than elsewhere.

So the ICC leaves a ambivalent impression. Even the ICC slogan "Where the Grandmasters play!" doesn't really help. For beginners Chess.com, Lichess or Playchess are the clearly better offers, for experienced players or club players the ICC is worth a try.

FIDE Online Arena

The FIDE Online Arena (FOA, arena.myfide.net) is the official portal of the world chess federation FIDE, operated by Premium Chess. This sets the bar high, especially for a working anti-cheating technology, because in this portal the game is about official world ranking points (even if only for the FIDE Online Rating).

FOA basically has great potential. The software runs fast and smoothly, but is not rich in features or customization options (personally, I can't quite get used to the possibilities of the board display, but that's purely subjective). Whoever plays here can acquire an official ID of the world federation, i.e. even without being a member of a chess club or national federation, one receives an ID of the world federation and can thus (theoretically) acquire an official FIDE rating by participating in a classical tournament over the board. This was previously impossible for a clubless amateur player. It certainly has its charm to be listed in the same world ranking list together with Grandmasters and other title holders, even if it is "only" in the online rating.

Furthermore, FIDE awards new official titles in the Online Arena, which have already been presented above. Yes, these are pure amateur titles, which can also only be acquired in the online game (but according to the FIDE manual they can also be used in tournaments over the board). Nevertheless, this was not the worst idea the (over a long time scandalized) world federation had in the last years. What is annoying is that the title will be removed from the FIDE players' list if you do not renew your (paid) FOA account every year - a clear violation of FIDE's own regulations for the awarding of titles.

In FOA tournaments are not held around the clock, but regularly. Some are open to all players, some are reserved for FIDE members only. Because you can (via various other premium-chess accesses) also play in the arena without having a FIDE identification. However, games against a non-FIDE member do not count for the official FIDE rating either.

At non specific intervals, special tournaments take place, such as the FIDE Online Grand Prix (a series of Blitz and Bullet tournaments that are held on one day) or Blitz tournaments, where a starting place (including accommodation) for an over the board tournament (usually held in Italy) is

offered as a prize. This is an original and welcome idea.

All in all a passable software, some good ideas, the unique selling proposition of official FIDE titles and FIDE ratings - why does it all not work?

Because the potential is not used. Actually thousands of players should be in the FOA, including title holders. In reality, there are less than 500 players at any one time, of whom more than half are not FIDE members. It can happen that a tournament is not even started due to lack of interest. In the higher rating range beyond 1,900 points, you always play against the same handful of opponents. In view of the small number of players and games, the rating itself is close to speculation. The FIDE Online Arena is like a new building that nobody wants to enter.

It is the operators who have to think about the reasons, not the players. Maybe it is because community functions were not visibly built in. The forum is hidden (and logically quite dead). Private tournaments cannot be organized. The engagement and participation of the players, a matter of course on the big portals Lichess and Chess.com, is neither encouraged nor seems to be desired at all. But in the end this is no explanation for the fact that the portal is basically seemingly dead.

The idea behind the FOA is good, but it is not thought through to the end. Technically mature, the last conceptual steps and probably also a more offensive marketing are missing to make the FIDE Online Arena the place for official competition online chess. The operators at FIDE and Premium Chess probably expected that life would come into the arena all by itself, if only the setting was right. The setting is right, but as an operator you have to take care for traffic yourself at least in the beginning. Only when a critical mass is reached, self-runners emerge. Want some ideas? Tournaments with prize money or other real incentives for title holders (where title holders play, amateurs also play), official tournament cycles with more sensible reflection times than at the current online Grand Prix, official championships - other portals cannot offer this.

It remains to be seen whether the FIDE Online Arena will degenerate to its present state, or whether someone will take the controls and use its undeniable potential. Then this portal can still become something special.

Chess24

Chess24 (chess24.com) is online since 2014. With about 7,000 simultaneously logged in members it is one of the larger portals. The focus of the portal is less on the games themselves, and probably the 7,000 users mentioned are not (at least not all) here to play.

Chess24 is an ideal information centre for national and international tournaments that are currently running. This also works excellently via the app on your mobile phone. You can quickly see where which tournament is currently running and can join in the live broadcast games. For club players or other chess friends interested in current tournament chess this is a great function. Amateur and hobby players, who primarily want to play, can do so at Chess24 as well, but somehow a bit less well than at Chess.com or Lichess. Somehow one has the feeling that active playing at Chess24 runs alongside, besides the coverage of tournaments and the numerous video offers.

But playing in the free account is just as well possible as in the paid premium account. The latter only activates additional features for videos, eBooks, cloud engine, training and chat.

Chess Stars

Chess Stars (chessstars.com) is a phenomenon that is difficult to explain. One hardly dares to call it a chess portal, so reduced are the functions and offers. And regarding the members, Chess Stars is probably by far at the bottom of the table.

But still Chess Stars is something special. Because the few players who meet here (and almost exclusively at a few fixed times when a tournament or challenge is played) are, in large percentages, title holders. Here I have (as a bloody amateur) already participated in Blitz tournaments with less than 20 players, more than half of them title holders! It makes you feel as if you could train with Bayern Munich (or Borussia Dortmund, of course).

A special feature of Chess Stars is the so-called Master Challenge. Here a Grandmaster does not make himself available for simultaneous chess, but plays for an hour against anyone who wants to and places himself in the line. And this is sometimes not just any Grandmaster. Here I took part in a challenge with Grandmaster Guseinov (among the TOP 100 in the world!), which was so poorly attended that I could play with this giant several times within an hour (all games lost, of course). And Guseinov had enjoyed the whole thing so much that he added another quarter of an hour. Where do you get something like that?

Whatever the operators of Chess Stars (the Chess Supersite Corporation) intend to do, it can't be money-making (or the breath is longer than you can imagine).

You cannot play Chess Stars around the clock, there is simply nothing going on around the clock. But specifically visiting the events at the announced times is an insider tip (which is hereby made public) that amateur players should not miss.

ChessFRIENDs

The portal with the inviting title "Chessfriends" (chessfriends.com) is one of the larger providers after Lichess and Chess.com with around 5.8 million registered players (including inactive accounts). There are usually around 4,000 players online at the same time, and as with all other portals, this number is more decisive than the number of registrations. Chessfriends is therefore big and well visited enough to offer you enough traffic for free or tournament games at any time of the day.

The free basic account is limited in the number of tournaments and free games (per day and month). The browser-based display looks clean, but a bit outdated. On large screens there is no scaling, so that screen space remains unused. The board display offers hardly any possibilities for adjustments, what is sorely missed is the possibility to enlarge the board (or even play it in full screen mode). Also the not changeable display of the chess diagram is not very convincing.

The regular tournament offer (Bullet, Blitz and Rapid) is moderate. Only traditional tournaments (Swiss system) are offered, no arena tournaments like on Lichess or Chess.com. The overviews during a tournament (running games with the possibility to watch them, round pairings, tables) are well thought out and easy to use. This is also the most important advantage compared to Lichess: if you don't like the arena tournaments, you should have a look at Chessfriends.

Chessfriends also has its own area for correspondence chess (but without tournament offers).

ChessWorld

The portal ChessWorld (chessworld.net) is completely and exclusively dedicated to online correspondence chess. The offer of tournaments (solo or in teams) is immense. Anyone who likes to play correspondence chess is in the right place here. However, the whole thing only works in the Internet browser on the PC, there is no app (and in the browser you already need a PC screen to display the flood of information sensibly, that does not work on a smartphone display).

This already limits the usability a bit, because online correspondence chess (see above in the chapter about the reflection time forms) is most useful for mobile use, as a training method for live chess.

SPARKCHESS

„The problem with most chess programs today is that they feel intimidating. They are often the kind of professional tools that grandmasters use for training, but for regular people they feel hard and, even worse, boring.”

This - quite debatable view - is the basis of the Romanian online portal SparkChess (sparkchess.com). And so the portal is not oriented towards the functions and game offers of the classical chess servers, but towards "fun". SparkChess stands for the fast game in between, primarily in 3D board view (optionally in fantasy outfit) and with otherwise unusual time control regulations (time per move). In the free version the possibilities are limited, but the paid version also requires only a one-time moderate price (no monthly subscription). SparkChess offers software for almost all digital systems (Windows, Mac, Android, iOS and browser) and thus allows easy gaming via smartphone.

If you are looking for the sportive challenge in chess, you are definitely wrong here. For beginners, however, the concept of SparkChess seems to be interesting. So the computer modes you can play against are deliberately "human": *"They make mistakes, they have moods, they have overlook details, sometimes they get bored."* They have human names, have a funny comic-like profile picture, and the second strongest computer mode "Boris" (according to SparkChess an aggressive, strong opponent for the advanced player) can be defeated comparatively easily by a strong amateur player. Clearly SparkChess wants to entertain beginners with a sense of achievement and an attractive board display and to make them permanently play through the entertainment. This seems to work. According to own statements about 100.00 gamers play on SparkChess every month.

Who seriously wants to play online chess will not be happy at SparkChess in the long run. But he can recommend it to those who are looking for a quick and easy introduction to online chess.

CHESSTEMPO

ChessTempo (chesstempo.com) is a chess portal on which you can *also* play. But the emphasis here is elsewhere: on ChessTempo you can do training, and that in a range of possibilities that no other chess portal offers. Thus ChessTempo is clearly aimed at experienced chess players, not at beginners.

Tactical tasks, opening training, endgame training, potential motives - ChessTempo offers an environment for everything, combined with numerous statistics and evaluations. This can irritate a newcomer at first; you should take a few hours to understand the concept and recognize the possibilities.

To what extent this training offer, which is unique in its entirety, appeals to you more than the classic use of books, videos and databases, is something that each person must decide for themselves. As the introduction to ChessTempo is free of charge, a visit is definitely worthwhile. And you can also play (against human opponents or against computer bots), but only free games; there is no tournament offer.

AND NOW?

Now we're ready to go! If you already play online chess, this small book may (hopefully) have given you a few ideas on how and where to continue playing. If you are new to online chess and even now you don't know how and where to approach it, I suggest the following:

Start on Lichess. It doesn't cost anything, is clearly arranged and you can quickly get started playing. First play about 15 free games here. This will qualify you (regardless of whether you win or lose these games) to participate in the Arena Tournaments. Jump into these tournaments. Everything else will take care of itself. Visit Chess.com and Playchess, have a look at the FIDE Online Arena - all this is completely free of charge at first. Or you can stay on Lichess and find yourself in good company.

No matter where and no matter how much time and sporting success you have - just have fun with online chess. Be warned of one danger: Online chess has an obsessive potential which no addiction control center warns you of! Once there, always there.

Good luck and even more fun at the royal game!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefan Breuer (born 1965), who holds a doctorate in history and is a passionate chess player, lives and works in Aachen/Germany. His active time as a club and tournament chess player ended when the seriousness of his working life began. About seven years ago he started to rediscover his old passion with online chess. He is Arena Grandmaster (AGM) and plays mainly on Lichess (nickname Moritex). At www.moritex.de he runs a website which deals with the opening system *The Dark Knight System* (1. ... Nc6 against almost everything).