



The New Age of Internet Chess

In this month's column I would like to discuss Internet chess, because whenever I lecture I receive countless questions about Internet play. At one time, the Internet was mostly for those who were younger, hipper, and more technically astute. Today, it is for just about everyone and it has had a very big impact in developing younger and younger grandmasters, but there are advantages and disadvantages.

In this column, I will answer:

- Why Internet chess is convenient?
- Why it is cost effective?
- What problems can arise while playing?
- How much it costs?
- Which sites and servers are best?

Despite some drawbacks, the Internet offers a great opportunity for players, especially novices, to learn and play the game at their convenience, which is not true in over-the-board games. Usually, the costs are reasonable and a list of sites is included at the end of this column with comments about each site's features, design, and the types of players who tend to use them.

Weighing the Pros and Cons of Internet Chess

Some of us are so busy with our daily lives that between our jobs, family, and other obligations, it is hard to play chess over-the-board. That is why Internet chess has thrived in the past seven to eight years. So, what can it offer that regular over-the-board chess can't?

The Pros

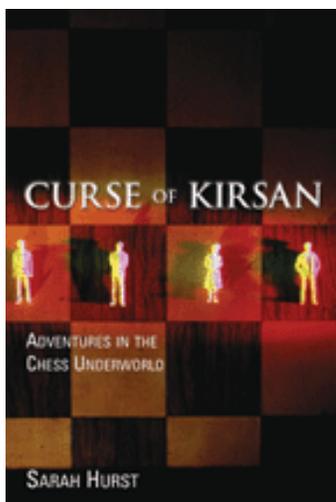
Overall, the advantages of Internet chess outweigh the disadvantages.

1. **Flexibility:** You can play chess 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year online. Some players sneak in a game here and there during their lunch hour, or get in a game or two before they head to school or work. Others enjoy playing late at night and into the wee hours of the morning after the kids or spouses have gone to bed. This kind of flexibility would be difficult to achieve when trying to arrange an over-the-board game.

COLUMNISTS

Susan Polgar *on* *Chess*

Susan Polgar



Curse of Kirsan
by Sarah Hurst

2. Convenience: For those of you who do not live in or near a large metropolitan area with an active chess community, it may be hard to find a chess club or a chess tournament. Even if you live in a big city, it is not always easy or convenient to go to a chess club or attend a chess tournament. With millions of people living in New York, there are only two full time chess clubs (the Marshall Chess Club and the Polgar Chess Center). Internet chess solves this problem. There is always a game or a tournament available online at almost any time.

3. Cost: Many clubs charge an annual membership fee not to mention tournament entry fees. Add to this the cost of getting to a chess club or tournament: if you drive there's the expense of gas, tolls, parking, and the wear and tear on the car. And public transportation, when it exists, has its costs, too; moreover, buses and subways do not always run when you need to get somewhere. It is quite expensive to play a lot of chess over-the-board. Yet, on an Internet chess server the annual membership for always-available access ranges at around \$50, which is a fraction of what you pay to play over-the-board chess. That makes it a very appealing alternative.

4. Time: When you play over-the-board chess, you have to factor in commuting time, which may be time you'd prefer to spend on other activities. Additionally, many chess clubs are only open one or two days a week. Most chess tournaments are held over the weekend, when job commitments or family responsibilities may have priority; then you can kiss your chess activities goodbye. Conversely, with Internet chess you can play at any time and save yourself a burdensome commute.

5. Quantity of Games: Another problem with over-the-board chess is the number of games you get to play. Most tournaments entail 3 to 6 rounds in a given weekend event. To spend two days sitting around just so you can play a few games can be quite frustrating. The same caveat applies to chess clubs. With Internet chess, some people can actually play 100 to 200 games a day! For a chess enthusiast, this is a dream come true.

6. Quality of Games: Let's say you are a novice. Well, some novices do not like to play against people who are very experienced. They feel intimidated and uneasy about playing against someone so much better than they are. Similarly, most chess experts and masters do not want to play weaker competition. With over-the-board chess tournaments, a player cannot choose the opponent. With Internet chess, you can seek games against certain types of players of a certain skill level, and you can use a time limit that is suitable for you.

7. Social Environment: When you play Internet chess, you can meet people from all over the world. You may play chess against a five-year-old boy or an eighty-year-old woman. Moreover, the Internet players you meet represent any number of different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds with a wide range of experiences. We have played people from Europe, Asia, Africa, Central and South America, as well as residents of nearly every state in the union.

The Cons

With all the advantages to the Internet, playing chess online does have some disadvantages.

1. Cheating: Cheating is a very serious problem in Internet play. On every Internet chess server, there are players who cheat by using computer software or a strong player to help them find the best moves. The problem is how to prove it. Catching cheaters is difficult even for the best experts because they are as prone to making errors as anyone else. Charging a player with cheating is a personal call and, as you know, when it comes to making an assessment about human behavior, perfection is an unattainable ideal.

Even if we are charitable and say that an expert is right about calling out a cheater 90 percent of the time (which is unlikely to be the case), that means he is going to be wrong the other 10 percent of the time. And if he makes a mistake and wrongly accuses an innocent player of cheating, he can ruin someone's reputation for life. Even world-class players have been accused of cheating and sometimes no evidence is needed to make damaging and ridiculous charges. This can actually cost the accused players students, endorsements, sponsorships, invitation to tournaments, and sometimes much more.

2. Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Another problem with Internet chess is unsportsmanlike conduct. Some players are very sore losers and they do not like to resign or be checkmated. Therefore, if they feel that they are losing, they disconnect from the Internet to avoid a loss. On some servers this will cause the game to be adjourned to resume later. Needless to say, this kind of behavior can be quite frustrating to the player who is winning.

Some players disconnect on purpose for 5 to 10 minutes during a difficult game to give themselves more time to analyze the complicated position. Then they log back on after they think they've found an optimum continuation. There is no way to prove who is disconnecting on purpose and who is doing it accidentally and who simply lost their Internet connection. After all, it's always possible that your opponent's three-year-old has unplugged the computer. You will never learn the real reason.

3. Rudeness: Upon losing, some players will accuse their opponents of cheating, or resort to using foul language. Unfortunately, these horrible outbursts or false accusations are vented out in the open for all to see, including children. Some servers have strict policies against this sort of behavior, but there will always be a few who slip through the cracks. So be prepared to deal with this problem if you decide to play Internet chess.

4. Impersonality: On most Internet chess servers, players are not required to use their real names. Players usually choose a handle, or nickname, and unless the players choose to tell you who they are, there is no way of knowing whom you are playing against. Some opponents will be especially chatty, while others are so reticent they won't say a word no matter if they win, lose, or draw.

5. Technical Difficulties: When you play on the Internet, anything can happen.

Sometimes the server may crash or your own Internet service provider may boot you offline. Occasionally there is “lag” (slow transmission of the moves) because of router problems, and other times, your computer may freeze or your electricity may go out during a bad storm. All these potential problems are often beyond your control, but disrupt your game nonetheless and cause a great deal of irritation. All you can do is hope that things will go smoothly on a day-to-day basis. However, expect the unexpected.

6. Technologies: Believe it or not, not everyone owns a computer, knows how to use one, or has access to the Internet. This is a bigger problem for the older generation. That is one of the reasons more players are not playing chess on the Internet. In some countries, of course, Internet access is not widespread or is far too expensive for most of the population.

The quality of computers can also come into play. For example, any player who has a powerful computer and a large monitor enjoys a great advantage over someone who is using a six-year-old computer with a 14-inch screen that flickers every few seconds.

Inferior technology can be a disadvantage when it comes to the mouse and modem as well. There is a big difference between an optical mouse versus the old mouse with a ball. While this is a problem on the Internet, in over-the-board chess, both players use the same equipment.

7. Lack of Uniform Rules and Policies: Every server has its own rules and policies. There is no overall international Internet chess federation that governs and monitors the activities or conduct of any server. Because of this lack of consistency, serious problems can sometimes arise.

For example, there was a recent case where players entered a big Internet chess tournament for the World Championship. In the middle of the tournament, some players were disqualified and expelled because the management felt that the players were cheating. However, no serious evidence was presented, no hearing was ever set, nor was there any process of appeal. No one anyone really know whether the players were guilty or innocent. In the meantime, the players’ reputations were badly damaged. One of these players even took the organizer to court.

Most Internet chess servers recruit server administrators or server representatives who volunteer to help out. In some cases, these staff members (who can be as young as 14 or 15) use their positions and power to intimidate, harass, or abuse paying and nonpaying members. Because there is no federation or organization to appeal or complain to, the members have to suffer.

Don’t expect these problems to change any time soon. In other words, play at your own risk.

8. Privacy: Privacy is an overall Internet problem, not only in the Internet chess arena. Most chess servers guarantee that the information you provide to them is

secure and will not be revealed to the public. However, what these servers claim and what actually takes place are two different things. I have personally encountered instances where certain servers have disclosed information to the public even after having assured their members that their records were guaranteed to be confidential.

Some servers even have the ability to read or observe private and personal chats between members. Of course, this is illegal and most servers claim they do not do such things. The question is do you believe them?

But what can you do if your privacy is violated online? Who would you complain to? You can take the server to court but because many servers are so small, it is not even worth your time or money to go after them. Of course, you can try to mitigate the damage by limiting the information given to any chess server. However, unless you provide the information that is requested, you cannot get a playing membership. So it's a Catch-22 situation and a serious dilemma to think about if you sign on to one of these services as a member.

Can Internet Chess Help Me?

I am a true believer in Internet chess. If you are an avid chess lover, there is nothing better. Most of the chess players who play on the Internet are amateurs. By playing on the Internet, you can:

- Practice a lot more than playing over-the-board. With Internet chess, a chess player can play hundreds of games a day. With over-the-board chess, most players are lucky to play 50 to 75 games a year. You know the saying: "Practice makes perfect."
- Improve by playing stronger players. In over-the-board chess, it is hard for an amateur to get a chance to play against a chess expert or chess pro. The chance of being able to play a lot more games with players who are better than you improves dramatically with Internet chess.
- Improve by observing good players. With over-the-board chess, unless you are willing to travel to major tournament sites, it is almost impossible to have the opportunity to observe good players. With Internet chess, this is possible all the time.
- Take lessons from a chess pro for a much more reasonable price. Chess lessons with grandmasters or other professional chess instructors and trainers can cost you from \$60 to as much as \$250 an hour. By contrast, the typical rate for chess lessons on the Internet is between \$25 and \$75 an hour. Some grandmasters charge as low as \$20 an hour online.
- Access serious chess databases! Many servers offer a large chess database of games played on the server, chess puzzles, or even chess robots that can help you improve your game. These games and features can prove helpful to a chess player who is still getting acquainted with the game.

I strongly believe that Internet chess can help most players. You just have to compare the various sites and make your own informed decision.

Some Popular Chess Servers on the Internet

Below you will find a list and comparison of some of the more popular chess-playing servers on the Internet. The criteria I used to rate the following sites were: cost, number of members, level of competition, server features, graphical interface, general environment, friendliness, ease of use, server activities, frequency and type of tournaments, chess information, variety of games (*variants chess*), direction, and privacy.

 = Exceptional

 = Very Good

 = Good

 = Average

 = Below Average

www.ChessClub.com

The Internet Chess Club (ICC) is designed for players from novice to grandmaster. With over 25,000 paying members from all over the world, and over 125,000 games played per day, ICC is the longest-running and one of the most vibrant chess communities on the Internet.

The site's graphical interface is good and offers a lot of special features. The level of play is strong. The server size is large. There are more than 1,000 players from all over the world playing at once most of the time. But if you are looking for a cozy atmosphere with personal attention, this is not the place for you. If, on the other hand, you are looking for top-level Internet chess, you are at the right place.

Many of the world's top players play here. There are countless grandmasters playing daily. You can play games and get a rating; watch grandmasters play while discussing the game; take lessons; play in tournaments; play in simultaneous exhibitions; try chess variants with names such as bughouse, crazyhouse, and atomic; play chess programs of all levels, and much more.

There is also a relay program where all members and guests can follow countless live tournament actions from around the world.

Membership fees: Membership fees are \$49 a year for adults and half price for students.

Assessment: If you like the best competition and are willing to pay for it, this is

it.

Rating:  1/2

www.PlayChess.com

The world's fastest growing chess server. There are more than 2,000 players online every night and around 100,000 games per day. There are also top grandmasters playing, free chess training, live events with audio commentary, free chess tournaments with prizes every day, simultaneous exhibitions, special beginners and computer chess rooms.

The site's graphical interface is good and it is nearly identical to Fritz software. Therefore, if you have used Fritz, you can get used to it almost instantly. The level of play is strong. The server size is large with many grandmasters and it also partners with the Association of Chess Professionals (ACP). Many of the ACP Internet events are held on the server.

There are some small inconveniences and it takes a little to get used to all the commands and features. But with patience, that will not be a problem.

Membership fees: The first 30 days are free if you download the software from the server website. After that, you can purchase a code for the year on the server for \$24.99. It is free for one year if you own Fritz 8 or some other ChessBase software.

Assessment: If you like a larger size server with a familiar interface, good competition, and a lot of extra benefits, it is a good choice.

Rating:  1/2

www.Chess-Live.com

The Chess-Live server is designed for players from novice to grandmaster. It is a small but serious server and it caters to special types of players. The server is going through drastic positive transformation and is working toward creating scholastic programs (tournaments and training).

The graphical interface is one of the best with excellent features. It offers many different types of variant chess such as bughouse, crazyhouse, atomic, suicide, loser, Fischer-random, and many types of wild chess, etc. The atmosphere is cozy. Because of the smaller size of the server, it feels more personal. The other advantage is because the server is partitioned into many individual channels; it makes it a lot less confusing to chat with other members or even one of one.

This server offers "Battle of the Minds" in which two chess masters play against each other while explaining their thoughts on each move to the audience a great way to understand and learn chess. Just like ICC, there is also a relay program where all members can follow countless live tournament actions from around the world.

Membership fees: There are two basic levels of memberships, regular royal and junior royal.

The fees for the royal membership are quite reasonable at \$39.95 per year for auto-renewal and \$24.95 per year for juniors under 21 years old. Three-year membership will run you \$99.95 for adults and \$59.95 for juniors.

Assessment: If you like the boutique type of server where you enjoy the personal attention so you don't feel like one out thousands, this is a very good choice.

Rating: 

www.WorldChessNetwork.com

The World Chess Network server is designed for players from novice to grandmaster. It is owned and operated by Master Games International, Inc., a corporation founded in 1997 by chess organizers, international grandmasters, and patrons of the game.

On the World Chess Network, you can earn a rating, access your personal game history, and view games from around the world and more. The World Chess Network download is small and it takes just a few minutes.

This was the first chess server to offer "banter chess," in which two chess grandmasters play against each other while explaining their thoughts on each move to the audience a great way to understand and learn chess.

The graphical interface is decent. The server activities for the Gold members are good. The server size and playing level are respectable. The management is very professional and courteous.

Membership Fees: There are three levels of memberships:

Bronze (\$9.95 per year): Limited features and only two rated games per day.

Silver (\$19.95 per year): Some limitations and 12 rated games per day.

Gold (\$49.95 per year or \$79.95 for two years): Members receive the full benefits of the Red Carpet experience with more than two hundred events each month featuring many of the world's finest players.

Assessment: This server is definitely worth checking out. It is growing quite rapidly.

Rating: 

www.freechess.org

The free chess server is designed for players from novice to grandmaster. As its name suggests, the Free Internet Chess Server (FICS) is the world's largest free Internet chess server where you can play chess, observe games, talk to friends, obtain a rating, and rank yourself among other players from all over the world. This server is famous for variants chess. Most of the best variants chess players in the world play here.

The graphical interface is decent with a fair amount of features. The level of play is adequate. A significant number of players are playing at all times.

Membership fees: Free

Assessment: There are some drawbacks if you compare to other servers. However, if you are willing to live with it then it is fine.

Rating:  1/2

All in all, every server has its own strengths and weaknesses. In general, using the Internet will help improve your chess game, and you will have a lot of fun doing it. I have tried to give you the most up-to-date membership costs, but the servers may change their prices and policies. There are also many other chess servers and you can easily search for them.

The best thing to do is to log on, check the pricing, and follow the instructions. Once you create a handle and download and install the software, you are on your way to playing chess on the Internet.

Now that you know many of the pros and cons regarding playing chess on the Internet, you can make informed decisions whether to play or not to play and which server best matches your needs and experience. Enjoy!

(The above information is based on my book *Teach Yourself Chess in 24 Hours*.)

Miscellaneous Chess News

Two weeks ago, the chess world received some bad news when world's #1 Garry Kasparov abruptly withdrew from the World Championship unification process. One of the reasons Garry cited for his displeasure with the process was that his life and plans were put on hold too many times by FIDE because of their failure to organize his match with World Knockout Champion Kasimdzhanov. For instance, he was unable to play in this year's Corus super tournament at Wijk aan Zee and Kasparov felt he couldn't continue putting his life on hold for one uncertainty after another.

I can sympathize with Garry. In early 1998, FIDE was supposed to organize my World Championship title defense match against Xie Jun. After many months from this date had passed without any news from FIDE, I finally decided to have a family. FIDE then informed me a year later that the match would take place, at a time when I was supposed to deliver my first baby. They never even bothered

to consult me on the date and they did not give me the required six months notice.

FIDE was at fault for not organizing the match in a timely manner and for not following their own published rules. When I rightfully asked for a short extension to recover from the birth of my son, FIDE inexplicably rejected my request. FIDE has no respect for the inconveniences or problems that were caused to me or to Garry in the current situation.

When I spoke to Garry some time ago he strongly expressed his desire to play in Corus 2005 and he waited as long as he could to accept or decline his invitation. The organizers also kindly waited as long as they could before asking my sister Judit to take his spot.

My suggestion for the whole debacle of the World Championship title is to invite the top three rated players in the world and the last Classical World Champion (perhaps Kasparov, Anand, Leko, and Kramnik) and let them play a Round Robin tournament. The player who comes out on top after six rounds (18 games) will be crowned the new world champion. In case of a tie for first, a play-off would determine the winner. If any player declines the invitation, FIDE should just go down the list strictly by ratings. There will be no more whining, complaining, ducking, or holding the world championship hostage.

With regard to the World Knockout Championship, if FIDE likes the idea and wants to keep it, that event can remain in conjunction with a classic championship, but the two events should remain separate and not be combined. FIDE can do the same thing with the Women's Championship and can select the top four strictly by ratings. The only caveat being that they should not insult us by offering the women 10-20% of what the men earn. This is 2005 and not 1905.

Bobby Fischer Update

According to the latest news, the Icelandic government is seriously considering granting Bobby Fischer Icelandic citizenship through a special Parliamentary vote. If this happens, it may allow Japan to deport Bobby to Iceland to live out the rest of his life in peace. No one should go to jail for playing chess.

As I have said numerous times, I strongly respect Bobby for his chess genius on the board. He will always be remembered as one of the greatest world champions. He will also be remembered as a world champion who made one of the greatest impacts in the chess world. However, I strongly disagree with many of Fischer's personal beliefs and I wish that he had not said many things, even though Bobby has the right to express his opinion.

The Popularity of Chess

In this modern day and age with so many tragic problems around the world, I am very disappointed that many world-class chess players don't do more for their sport. We can all whine and complain about chess not being more popular, but why not get off your behind and do something about it?

I recently read an article on ChessBase.com about grandmaster Nigel Short, who wrote a short review of *Pal Benko's Life and Games* in one of his columns. In this article, Nigel attacked and insulted me because in the foreword that I wrote for the book, the publisher put the title of World Champion next to my name instead of former Women's World Champion or 4-time Women's World Champion. I never asked the publisher to do this nor did I see it until the book was printed.

It was the decision of the authors and publisher, so why attack me? This was one of the best researched, most well-written, and beautifully published books about any player and this is all he can think of? Yet, we wonder why chess is not more popular?

Speaking of making chess more popular, I am about to start a new project called *Excel through Chess!* This will be a project designed to bring chess to more children and more schools around the country with the help of businesses, governmental agencies, and individuals concerned about the education system in America.

Everyone agrees that education is very important and that we should do more to help children learn better in school. However, if we do not help children develop the necessary skills to absorb the material, they will not be able to learn it properly. Countless researchers have shown that chess helps develop decision making, critical thinking, logical thinking, evaluating, planning, problem solving, and perseverance skills. Chess also improves concentration, memory, intuition and self-control; in addition to inspiring self-motivation, self-esteem and self confidence.

Our children need our help and I think this is something very worthwhile. I hope to have your support and if you want to help, please feel free to contact me. I want to work with as many people as possible to make this happen. After all, the future of our children is in our hands. We can do something about it now.

Paul Truong assisted Susan Polgar in the preparation of this column. Susan Polgar is available for chess instruction. For more information, visit the Polgar Chess Center, 103-10 Queens Boulevard, Forest Hills, NY 11375 (Tel: 718-897-4600) or email: PolgarChessInc@aol.com



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