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Twin City Chess Club: a Visual Ethnographic Examination of Chess

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Twin City Chess Club: a Visual Ethnographic examination of chess.

For centuries, wars have been waged on the battlefields of chess boards. The game can be a casual, friendly challenge or, for others, an addicting and immensely beautiful art form which whole lives can be devoted towards. The Twin City Chess Club of the surrounding Bloomington-Normal, Illinois area is a chess club for those individuals who take a greater interest in chess and play it avidly in a more organized fashion. They meet weekly on Mondays at Colley's Chess Cafe, during which time they play each other in timed matches, teach each other new tactics, and enjoy their experiences of learning more about the vast ocean that is chess. The Twin City Chess Club has as many as ten members which form the organization and all of its internal dynamics.

These members have a zeal for the game and find value in understanding it in greater depths. Instead of simply playing chess, members of the Twin City Chess Club actively research, read, and study the game. They then apply their knowledge in tournaments organized internally or externally through other organizations. It is this philosophy of greater interest which unites them, creating a cohesive group. All the while struggling to understand their place in society, the Club attempts to diversify its membership as well as share their ideas by means of educating others as well as themselves.

Learning the Game

Initially, I believed chess was just a game. I knew of its competitive elements, but I had no idea the degree to which the game was deeply embedded in people's lives. I had no knowledge of the enormous number of hours people spend studying the openings of chess, and the theories of play. While familiar with the rules of the game, and understanding how to play, my exposure to chess was limited. I did play occasionally online, but did not consider myself good, by any means. I was aware of scholastic chess teams, but did not know of any adult organizations or tournaments. I did not know the extent to which chess was mainstream.

There is a structured hierarchy within the world of chess. Individuals are connected to clubs which are connected with national associations, like the United States Chess Federation. These larger national organizations are ultimately unified by the World Chess Federation (FIDE)

(Puddephatt, 2008, p.159).

This creates a framework for

chess players within their universe. They can navigate locally through clubs all the way to the international platform. When crossing between these levels of organization players are able to understand another person's proficiency at chess at a glance. They are then able to understand themselves spatially to others across the globe, by using a common rating system. The World Chess Federation (FIDE) publishes rankings of chess players four times a year, using a statistical system entitled Elo. With this knowledge, a player can navigate the world of chess knowing where he/she is ranked. The definition of an expert is a rating of 2000 (Chassy, 2008, p. 313). The rating system is objective, and a player's rating is very public. Everyone can view each other's ratings, and it becomes a symbol of one's competence within the game (Puddephatt, 2008, 165).

To some players, as mentioned by A.J. Puddephatt, chess consumes many people's lives. Some players interviewed, dropped out of university, cut social ties, and devoted all their time and energies towards the study of chess. He notes there is a positive feedback relationship between playing chess and studying. Players want to increase their ratings, so they are motivated to study significantly more. This desire escalates, and the players study even more, increasing their focus which further isolates them from other endeavors (Puddephatt, 2008, p. 166).



Figure 1 The Twin City Chess Club meets here, at Colley's Chess Café, on Monday evenings. They both have USCF affiliation.

The amount of time afforded for studying, playing, and receiving guided instruction is seemingly large in order for a player to excel. A lot of time must be allocated to studying the game. According to Anne Maass, to become very good, players must study the game comprehensively, play in tournaments, and have personal instruction for many hours. All these factors help contribute to strengthening a player's skills and takes up most of their time. Other potential keys to success include memory capabilities and image visualization skills, as chess players are able to memorize extremely large numbers of patterns, openings, and positioning. They also have to be able to visualize the concepts of a chess board clearly in their minds, so they can make the best move (Maass, 2008, p. 232).

Chess also retains an extreme competitive aspect which serves to motivate its players and severely impacts the games. Chess players are relentless and play to win. If they lose, they immediately reset the board to positions which happened during their match and quickly learn the fatal flaws of the game. Taking such measures provides insight into their game and teaches them the best course of action for future games, should they be in a similar situation later on. They are quick to prepare for the future and it is this type of aggressiveness that is needed to play chess (Maass, 2008, p. 232).

There are many motifs of war and aggression within the game, such as the words *battle*, *defeat*, *destroy*, *victory*, *attack*, *capture* (Maass, 2008, p. 232). These fundamental incorporations in the language of the game set up the competitiveness and metaphor for war, and adds to the games appeal and may lead to why chess has a constituency of mostly males. In my research, I came to find chess is male dominated. According to Bilalic and McLeod, "there is only one woman among the top 200 chess players in the world" (Bilalic, 2007, p. 789). There is a very large disproportionate number of men in competitive chess compared to the number of women participates- a figure so large men outnumber women to about 17 to 1. Although women are greatly outnumbered, their numbers have steadily increased in recent years (Bilalic, 2007, p. 789-790). Another author cited Thierry Wendling, quoting: "the cardinal value in the world of chess is the strength of one's game." The most important characteristic of a player is their ability to excel (Lavenda, 2003, p. 744).



Figure 2. Working with groups of individuals like Dennis Bourgerie (left) and Max Powers (far right), I was able to gain a clearer understanding of the Twin City Chess Club.

With this basis for knowledge, I was able to have idea of what to expect from Twin City Chess Club. I formulated questions, and thought about the types of issues I might see. However, I was adamant about not letting the literature dictate what I would see. I made it a priority to understand the Twin City Chess Club in terms of its members' own views. I

wanted my experience with the Club to guide me to the real issues and allow our

interactions to draw conclusions together. I was excited to delve into a topic I was genuinely interested in, and was thrilled when the members were responsive to my premeditated questions as can be seen in Figure 2.

Opening Moves

Prior to observing the Twin City Chess Club, I had decided on a topic I found interesting to me. Growing up I had played a little chess, but had never taken the game seriously. My search began on Google where I was fortunate to find Colley's Chess Cafe in Bloomington, Illinois. From there, I was excited to learn the Twin City Chess Club hosted their meetings at the Cafe, which in turn I contacted Colley Kitson, owner of Colley's Chess Cafe, and was invited to join the club at their weekly Monday meeting. On Monday, February 8th, I brought my notebook and a list of questions, and I went to the meeting. After explaining my purpose and goals to the group, I immediately began interviewing the original founder of the club, Garrett Scott. I purposely asked him to describe his initial interests in chess to understand his background in terms of a historical perspective. Then, I began asking more and more specific questions which were open ended and left room for elaboration. The questions were framed in a way to identify the major themes and very nature of the group so I could understand the club holistically. I left room for members to contribute what they believed was important and asked more questions about prevailing issues.

Over the course of the next five weeks, I attended the Monday meetings and interviewed members in a group setting. I asked questions to everyone and allowed anyone to contribute. This way I could understand the group's dynamics. Meanwhile, I would continue my original methods of interviewing individuals: getting singular inputs. I touched upon previous topics to make sure what I had written was accurate, and I was able to learn details about the members' lives which bridged the connection between us. On a few Friday afternoons, I was able to meet Colley at the Cafe and interview him individually. Again, I tactfully asked questions which were specific in nature, but allowed him to give a broad response and expand on anything I asked. It was with his help, I gained access into the Twin City Chess Club and was able to participate freely, observing the meetings and enhancing my understanding of the members and chess.

Over time, I was able to ask questions about chess and about its teachings so I could learn even more. The Club raised my own interest in the game, and I have begun playing more regularly. I used information from my secondary research as well as information I had gained from previous interviews to frame even more inquiries, so as to understand their perspective in greater detail and gain an enhanced clarity so I knew exactly what the members of the Twin City Chess Club meant. All the pictures, chessboards, and other items hanging on the walls in Colley's Chess Cafe provided excellent detail and insight within the Club itself. I asked questions and enthusiastically learned about the items' meaning and value.

Beginning with my second visit to the Twin City Chess Club meetings, I brought along a camera. I was able to take pictures of the members, the cafe, the pieces, the games, the wall ornaments (which will be defined literally as items hanging on a wall), and other visualizations. Most importantly, I was able to collaborate with the members and gain feedback on what they believed was important. I consciously took pictures of the things each member emphasized in their talks with me. This ensured that the photographs I took were the best possible ones that reflected important aspects of the Club. At one point, Colley took a couple pictures and was able to expand on the pictures he already had taken himself. On the last meeting I attended, Colley retrieved pictures from his visits to Germany where he attended the 2008 World Championship; I was able to learn

about his trip and his experiences with chess on his terms, which turned out to be very useful.

Middle Game

From my first interviews, I was able to gather information concerning the place avid chess players fit into in the world. I quickly learned chess players believe popular culture refers to them as "geeks" or "nerds." My initial conversations with Garrett Scott reveal chess players are notorious for having little or no social skills. Scott told me about the "typical" chess players: "In a disproportionate number of chess players we have some very good logical recognition analysis strength, [whereas] both interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities are strikingly weak." It is these characteristics which give rise to the names mentioned previously, adding negative connotations to anyone associated with the game. Nevertheless, another member, Darren Erickson, describes chess as a very social medium, especially for kids. In my experiences, everyone was extremely social. Everyone talked amongst each other during matches, and discussed their lives, as well as helped educate one

another. The members made jokes quite frequently, and there were never any long periods of silence.

The Twin City Chess Club, in contrast to many chess players, relies on its camaraderie and socializing to maintain its identity. The membership fees are minimal, only totaling \$40. However, Colley reveals that each member contributes something intangible. He says the members of the Club are wholly responsible for the chess scene in the Bloomington-Normal area. Dennis Bourgerie donated many diagrams and a comprehensive curriculum to Colley to use for teaching. Garrett Scott has helped establish multiple clubs in the area over the years. Together these men have developed



Figure 3 Darren Erickson (left) and Max Powers (right) go over notation. They discuss a previous game Max once played in so they can understand the best game play.

friendships, and it was chess that brings them together. Colley reveals: "It's not about the money; it's about the love of the game." As Garrett Scott puts it, "Chess becomes a passion; it becomes the center of life." The members help out and bring support to each other. They help organize tournaments and play in them as well as go to external tournaments with each other. Through all these experiences, the members have emerged friends and have fortified a rapport between each other.

Even outside the Twin City Chess Club arena, chess is social. Colley and Garrett are in the process of contacting other local clubs to meet up and play the game. Among these is the Decatur Chess Club. One of the weeks, a member from this club, Josh Rohrscheib came to Colley's Chess Cafe to play. Developing more inter-club events will diversify play, and give people a chance to play others. It will also strengthen chess across Central Illinois. In addition to inter-club play, several members mentioned the "skittles area" at chess tournaments where people gather between rounds and even play chess. There are always interesting conversations to be had, and new people to meet.



Figure 4 According to Colley, the dagger in the bottom-right hand corner symbolizes "check"-the precursor of the end. Meanwhile, Max Powers (above) is playing a quick game of chess, hoping to checkmate his opponent.

Despite chess being a seemingly social entity, the game is still played individually. With this comes the theme of destroying your opponent. You play the person across the board. You play their style and make the entire process of the game as uncomfortable as possible for them. Garrett

remarked, "Attack, attack, attack. If they [the opponent] keep having to have a counter-move, then they eventually won't be able to make a counter-move

[in the end]." Yet another member of the club who wanted to be called, Max Powers, uses the term "mental surgery" to describe a game. You are trying to rip the person apart, and collect their "head." He calls the game, "brutal."

A second close association with the game of chess is intelligence. Members of the Twin City Chess Club cite the society's general attitude towards intelligence as a fairly accurate measure of the acceptance of chess in a population. Scott mentioned, "Bloomington High School is a struggle [to maintain a Chess club] because bright kids keep their heads down. At University High School it's not [a struggle] because intelligence is something that is expected and respected." This means society's opinions on intelligence directly impact the popularity of chess within the community. The stigma against intelligence has not always been present. Scott told me during the 1950s people admired intelligence and believed in its importance. As a result, chess used to be a respected game. Today, he says, "intelligence is not commanding as much respect [as it once had]." Even so, Colley asserts, the chess field is full of high end intellectuals.

It is with these stigmatic beliefs Colley Kitson approaches his business. He does not



Figure 5 Colley Kitson: "One of the things that draws me to chess is that you can never learn it all." Colley is the owner of Colley's Chess Cafe and member of the Twin City Chess Club.

try to market to the 18-21 age demographic because of the "geek" stereotype. Instead he solicits to young children. Serving seven schools, and coaching over 400 students a week with an additional 50 students through his cafe, Colley, spreads the principles of chess to a lot of people. He noted the group environment really helps cultivate a learning environment, since no one wants to lose

frequently the dynamics catalyze learning. With this atmosphere it does not matter what age, gender, or background you have. The game is ethnically diverse as well. Colley tells of tutoring many Indian students, and claims he would be out of business without them. Chess is all about the skill and a person's ability to play. If you have the ability, you will have the respect of others.

One element lacking from chess is the presence of women in the game. Many of the members mention how children and girls play chess avidly when they are young. However, when they reach puberty they discontinue playing, and use their time in other ways. Colley says one third of the 400 students he has are girls, and in the Twin City

Chess Club there are none. He says women are rare to the game, and that the women that do play don't find enough time because of motherhood. He also attributes the fact that men "are born for warfare and like competition" as another reason for why women don't have an affinity for the game. Nevertheless, Colley's Chess Cafe provides "Thursday Night Chess" for Moms and Dads in an attempt to expose women to the game, and to allow parents to enhance their skills for when they play their kids.

The largest driving force and important aspect for the Twin City Chess Club is the spreading of knowledge and educating each other about chess. Colley mentioned: "One of the things that draws me to chess that you can never learn it all."

The vast ocean of knowledge presents a challenge, and it makes the game very exciting. Members spent much of their

time playing games with each other, but almost equal amounts

describing past moves, and going over games and situations with each other. If members weren't playing, they were showing each other matches they had, and understanding the flaws and implications of each move. Dennis explained some of his best games are when people had him on the ropes and he was able to come back and win. The entire process of the game is then a learning experience. He learns from his mistake, and then is better prepared next time. Several members mentioned how before tournaments players will often study traditional openings other player's will use, and try to find weak spots in their methods. With the advent of the internet and computer software, this revision and learning processes have become even easier, just like the software "Chess Base." According to Darren Erickson, it essentially tells you exactly what you've done wrong. He showed me how to use it, and the computer tells you the best moves in terms of probability.



is

Figure 6 Chess base is the computer software used to analyze games, positioning, and understand strategy. It is vital to "dissecting" your opponent.

Trying to understand the game and its important elements, I inquired into the pedagogy of learning chess. Talking with Darren Erickson and Max Powers gave me a better understanding of the ways in which to learn. They both recommended learning the endgame first. More generally, they advocated for learning how to win and then working backwards from there. One reason to learn the endgame is because novices may not ever reach it and will not have a good understanding of the main concepts. This way a player can learn how to win a game and understand how to get there. If a player doesn't understand the goals, then they will not excel. By learning the endgame, players will know what pieces are necessary to win, and whether or not trading pieces will attain those ends. Max Powers says to make things easier learn what moves you can make in order to simplify to an ending. From there, they say to learn the theories and patterns for opening moves. These principles and philosophies will ultimately set up the endgame and allow a player to win. With this parallel method players will be learn the weaknesses and advantages to their game, but there is still one important aspect they encourage people to learn, especially children, and that is the concept of resigning. They believe it is a good lesson to learn, and allows you to learn how to lose. Children are guilty of assuming their opponent will make a mistake, however, most of the time the opponent will make the best move, players ought to learn to give their opponents credit.

With all these concepts though, Erickson and Powers cannot stress the importance of chess base software. They explained how it is a huge tool to learning the game, and how it has revolutionized the game as well as learning. Both exclaimed how the software is "gospel" in the chess world. It is essential to developing one's game. The internet is also a huge tool as well. It connects people with each other to spread ideas, share criticism, as well as let players play chess against other people. With a click of a button, a player can play someone across the globe. While cruising Colley's website, I noticed there was a scholastic tournament held in his cafe between kids from Bloomington-Normal and children in Vladimir, Russia. Connecting players to the game is quick and almost effortless. The members described the large amounts of games they have played online as well as increased frequency of play.

During the meeting, the members collaborate with each other and discuss, reflect, and analyze games they have encountered before, and ways of understanding how to play.

Colley several times mentioned different patterns to all the members using the large television seen in Figure 7. Dennis provided insight into games as well. After a game, Darren explained his thought processes to his opponent. It is with this careful and intimate collaboration that the



Figure 7 Colley shows the members strategy using the television. On looking, Dennis discusses the tactical significance of the advice.

members explore chess in greater detail. They communicate ideas and philosophies to each other and extensively spread knowledge. The members help teach students, and have helped create scholastic clubs. Garrett Scott, Colley, and Dennis have founded many between them, and have organized tournaments as well. The wealth of knowledge encourages people to learn.

Simplifying the Board

Contrary to literature, the Twin City Chess Club is a social experience. The members are passionate about chess and devote many hours to the game, however, they maintain social ties within their group in order to spread ideas and learn. Although Garrett mentioned the absence of interpersonal skills in some chess players, understanding your opponent and their mind is very important component to the game, as Max Powers described it as being a "mental surgery." You are playing your opponent, which makes understanding their mentality vital to winning. This individualistic understanding of people helps foster the local environment within the club. However, these seemingly unsocial tendencies are further developed by

collaboration between members as well as connections to other clubs. Members help teach each other concepts, philosophies, and knowledge in order to hone their playing abilities. Their intelligence allows them to understand the game, and to soak up knowledge easily. The atmosphere is relaxed, as members joke around and talk about previous experiences of value. The games played utilize the learned skills of the players, and provides insight into their style. The members are all friends and varnish a robust rapport with each other. Together, they embody the Bloomington-Normal chess culture.

The club collaborates with other clubs to play matches together. Unlike the literature which seems to focus on individuals, examining the chess club illustrates the connections that allow ideas to diffuse and provides the basis for complicated social networking. The Twin City



Figure 8 Garrett Scott (left) and Dennis Bourgerie (right) provide support, time, and wisdom to the Twin City Chess Club. They're efforts have raised awareness of the benefits and joys chess has to offer.

Chess Club maintains an affiliation and connection to the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF) which allows the members to retain access to a larger network of chess players across the nation. Globally speaking, Twin City

Chess Club is remotely connected to the International Chess Federation. The enthusiasm for chess across the globe creates social networks and opportunities for play. With the advent of the Internet, access to playing others has been important in increasing the popularity of the game. It also provides a medium to fill in the gaps and connect local clubs with each other from across the globe. Bridging a connection globally, the chess tournament between children in Bloomington area and students from Vladimir, Russia allowed a richer diversity of the ways in which to play chess. The students connected through the internet play each other through an international competition in real time. These types of hierarchical structures, combined with the

medium of the internet, allow for a greater diversity of chess play, and a means to explore others with common interests. It is the structure of the chess world and its members which allows the Twin City Chess Club to be a means of social and educational purposes.

The absence of women can clearly be seen within the Twin City Chess Club, which tends to be the case in the literature. There are no women in the Twin City Chess Club comprised of ten members. The only female I had seen was either a student's mother or was a spectator of a member. It is clear that the game of chess is a male dominated world, and women are in the minority. Colley uses his teaching skills to spread interest in chess to girls and boys. He believes if kids take particular interest from a younger age, they will stick with chess for longer. His main goal is to share the wonders and beauty of Chess with others, whether they be male or female. The club has a disproportionate number of males to females which coincides with the game as whole when viewed macroscopically. As mentioned, the members of the Twin City Chess Club describe chess as war and how men embrace the competition. They say these types of things have an affinity to men, and don't appeal to women as much. The lack of women in the game seems to be an issue both the Twin City Chess Club and the greater Chess playing world are working on. If women were present, they would help diversify the culture as well as increase the number of players in the world. It's something that is prevalent in most chess arenas across the world, and it is true of the Twin City Chess Club.

As noted by Anne Maass, getting instruction from another person is fundamental to learning chess. Guidance is vital to becoming better, and the members of the Twin City Chess Club not only utilize this concept of guidance from a particular individual, but the members also embrace intense collaboration and group cooperation with each other, in order for everyone to get better together. They teach each other past games, and analyze the games they play each night. Members will pull out notation and will set up the board, and they will study the best way to play the game to the finish. It is these types of steps which facilitates learning, and forms the connection between members of the group. Further supplemented by Chess base and other technology, the members work out the best moves of any game. They are then prepared to win, should they ever

encounter that situation during a game again. The sharing of ideas enhances the play of the members in the Twin City Chess Club, their increased success at the game encourages the players to continue to work together to get even better. Their passion for chess is then spread to others which are beginning to learn the game. The member's enjoy teaching others that have limited knowledge, and are prepared to help. It is the love of the game which helps the members spread the philosophies and ideas to others through social means.

Endgame

The Twin City Chess Club offers insight into competitive chess of the Bloomington-Normal community. In this research, there was an emphasis on understanding the club as a whole. The members unite together to socialize, and to better understand the game they cherish. Unlike the stereotypes of popular culture, the members use the time to offer each other advice and increase their performance in the game. This local connection goes beyond the nearby community, tying clubs to national and international entities. The internet connects players together, and adds a global perspective to the individuals that play the game. The disproportionate number of men to women indicates it is a male dominated sport, but efforts to get kids involved at an early age are underway to add even more diversity to the game. The most important thing to the survival and added appreciation of the game is the sharing of knowledge. Teaching each other, as well as novices, helps spread the love for and beauty the members have for chess.

It is with all of these ideals that these members approach the chess world. Going beyond this initial research, it would be interesting to understand the dynamics of multiple chess clubs instead of a single one. Most literature focuses on understanding the individual, however, an added perspective and clearer insight would be gained through studying the club singularly as well as within the context of other clubs. Learning about the interactions of multiple clubs will give insight into the overarching infrastructure of chess on a more macroscopic scale. This adds context to the issues chess players currently have, and will allow for identifying where chess is going to go in the future. It would also be of value to understand how individuals incorporate chess

philosophies into their thought patterns and individual world views. This information can then be related to the club as a whole as well as compared to the chess world at large. With the limited time it had, this particular study delved into the cohesive group. However, understanding the topics highlighted provide value for understanding the culture and could allow comparisons to be drawn to other games such as checkers. Chess is a majestic sport that is characterized by meticulous thought and preparation, the Twin City Chess Club embraces the connections between members so each individual can access a wealth of collaborative knowledge, as the club advances through the chess playing world.