

Chapter

Why Play Chess?

In This Chapter

- ◆ Chess: easy to learn and a lifetime of fun
- ◆ The history of chess
- ◆ The popularity of chess today

Many people feel intimidated by chess. People often think that chess is just for intellectuals, or that chess is too hard to learn unless you can do calculus in your head. And if you have to be so smart to play chess, how could it be much fun?

But chess is some of the most fun there is! And get that idea out of your head that you have to be some kind of genius to learn how to play chess. Could millions of people in the United States alone play and *enjoy* chess if they had to be some kind of genius to learn it? The truth is, hundreds of millions of people around the world play chess, and more people are learning the game every day, because chess is the most fascinating, most exciting, and most enjoyable game in the world!

But tons of people are still intimidated by chess. Many people find chess intriguing, but they don't think that they could learn it. And you know, I totally understand why people think that. I mean, look at the chess column in your newspaper (if it has one); see those weird-looking symbols,

4 Part I: Let's Play Chess

letters, and numbers that don't make any sense? Who wouldn't be intimidated? Or maybe you know an eight-year-old who plays chess, and you think to yourself, "I'm not going to be shown up by someone who's still in the second grade!"

Well, if you think chess is kind of interesting, but also maybe a bit intimidating, this book is written for you. I teach you the rules, show you how to play, and even tell you how you can find an opponent to play with. And it's not going to hurt.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

I remember how it feels not to understand the basics. I'll take you through them slowly and explain everything step by step. Because I really understand the ins and outs of chess, I can teach you quite a lot without getting you confused. Before you even finish, I bet you'll find you can beat that eight-year-old! (And I even have a special chapter on how to beat your computer, in case that's been giving you a headache.)

But just as important, I want to make sure you enjoy learning chess as much as I know you'll enjoy playing it. After all, chess is a game. What's the point of playing a game if you don't enjoy it?

Part of the reason I'm so sure you'll enjoy chess is that I know from my own experience how wonderful a game it is. After all ...

- ◆ Chess is easy to play anywhere. For just a few dollars, you can buy a set that fits in your pocket. Or you can play against one of the many computer programs on the market. Or you can even find an opponent on the Internet and get a game literally 24 hours a day!
- ◆ Chess is the fairest game I know. No dice spoil good play by a bad roll; no umpire robs one side of a deserved victory. All that matters is how well you play.
- ◆ No matter how big or small you are, no matter how old or young you are, you can learn to play as well as anyone.
- ◆ The rules of chess are easy to learn. Trust me: once you read the next few chapters, you'll have the rules down cold.
- ◆ Once you learn the rules, there's always more strategy to learn to play better; you can never be bored by chess. Every game has the potential for the tension of battle, the beauty of new ideas, and the excitement of conquest!

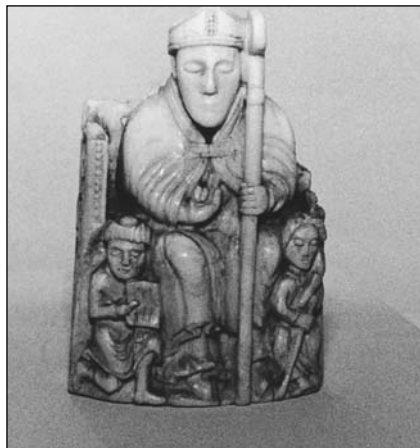
People have been enjoying chess for more than 1,000 years, and chess has never been more popular than it is today. Let me tell you some more about the amazing history of chess, and then I'll tell you how popular it is today.

Once the Game of Kings ...

Chess is so old that nobody knows for sure when or where it began. People have been playing games with pieces on some kind of board for thousands of years, and the earliest version that has definitely been linked to chess is a game called *chaturanga*, played in India almost 1,400 years ago. Yet there is controversy about whether this really is the oldest version of chess: Artifacts that seem to be chess pieces have been excavated in Italy, and some people claim they should be dated at the second century C.E. Because it's so hard to draw definite conclusions from such scanty evidence, we may never know for sure where chess really came from.

Chaturanga moved east before it came to the West. Buddhists who traveled to spread their religion brought the game with them to China, Korea, and Japan. And in fact, both China and Japan have their own versions of chess (called Chinese chess and *shogi*). But very little else is known about the eastward movement of chaturanga.

We know much more about the journey of chaturanga through the West. It reached Persia, where it was called *chatrang*. When Persia was conquered by Arabs in the middle of the seventh century, the game was again renamed, this time to *shatranj*. And this is the game that was brought to Western Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries by the early invasions of Spain and Sicily. The following figure shows an example of an ancient chess piece.



*An ancient chess piece,
discovered in 1831.*

6 Part I: Let's Play Chess

By about the year 1000, shatranj was widely known throughout Europe. It was popular among religious orders, in the courts of kings, and among some soldiers. But although this was definitely the ancestor of chess, it was not the same game! Shatranj was probably played on the same board, but some of the pieces were different, and some of the rules that governed the same pieces in both shatranj and modern-day chess were different.

Sometime in the late fifteenth century, the game was radically changed. Before, there had not been a queen; now it was added. Also, the bishop replaced another piece. And some of the rules were changed to make the game more exciting. In particular, the lowly pawn was allowed to promote to any piece it wanted when it reached the other side of the board. (You will learn about these rules and more in Chapters 2 and 3.) And the game was renamed, so that it was called *chess*.

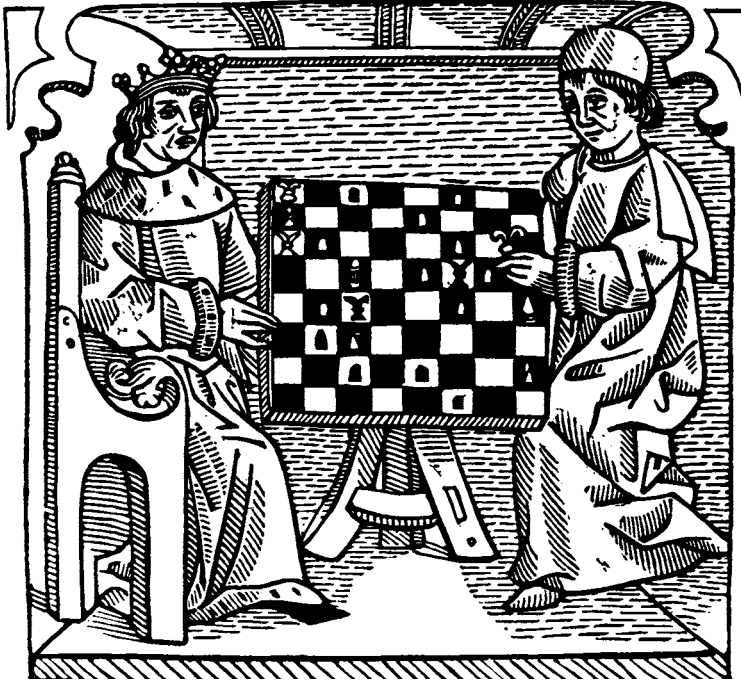
Chess must have been a huge improvement on shatranj, because it spread like wildfire throughout Europe, replacing the old game completely. Suddenly, the game was played by more people: Some masters even started writing and selling books on how to play chess well (see the following illustration). (But no *Complete Idiot's Guide*, to the best of my knowledge!) There was even a period of time during the seventeenth century in Italy when the leading chess players were sponsored by royal patrons! (Ah, that was the time to be a grandmaster!)



Chess Lore

The word "grandmaster" refers to the highest international title one can receive in chess. The word had been used throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to a very strong player, but it wasn't until 1950 that the specific title was created. In order to earn the title, you must prove your abilities in tournaments against other grandmasters, but once you've earned the title, it can't be taken away. There are currently around 650 active (that is, who still regularly compete in chess tournaments) grandmasters in the world.

Unfortunately, the royal subsidies for chess died out. But the game was still very popular. During the eighteenth century, chess was played in popular coffeehouses throughout Europe. And a few professionals could make a living by playing against the regular patrons of whichever coffeehouse they inhabited. Eventually, this gave rise to clubs devoted to chess, which sprang up in the big European cities.

Chapter 1: Why Play Chess? 7

*An illustration from *Game and Playe of the Cesse*, the first printed book on chess in Europe.*

And they weren't just playing chess in Europe! Over here in America, people began to play chess more and more. For example, both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin not only played chess, but even wrote about it. But whereas chess had once been the game of the aristocracy (why else would it have kings, queens, and knights?), by the start of the 1800s it was becoming more popular with ordinary folks like us, both in Europe and America.

Well, with all those people playing chess in coffeehouses, it was only a matter of time before actual chess tournaments were organized. One of the people who did the most to popularize chess in the middle of the 1800s was Howard Staunton, one of England's greatest chess players. Staunton advocated standards for laws, notation, and the timing of moves. Until then, there had been slightly different variants of chess played in different regions. No standard system had been worked out for recording the moves. And sometimes a game would have to be aborted because one player would take so long to move the other would fall asleep! So a time limit had to be imposed on how long you could think on a move. After Staunton standardized the rules, he organized the first international chess tournament in 1851, in which the best players from around the world competed. (Of course, the tournament was held in London, where Staunton lived.)

8 Part I: Let's Play Chess

From that point on, chess blossomed into the most popular game in the world. Tournaments were held everywhere, adopting the standard rules. Newspapers started printing columns devoted to chess. One by one, countries organized national federations to coordinate chess activity. (You can learn how to contact the United States national federation—as well as other national federations—in Chapter 17 and Appendix A.) Matches between the strongest players were held to determine the world champion. Eventually, a federation to govern all the national federations and also to run the world championship title evolved, and exists to this day. The game that had started as *chaturanga*, a lowly pawn among games, had grown to become chess: king of all games!



Chess Lore

You probably have heard of Bobby Fischer, but few people know about the other great American chess genius, Paul Morphy (see his picture). This remarkable man was born in New Orleans in 1837. By the age of 20, he was recognized as clearly the strongest chess player in America. But the strongest chess players in the world all lived in Europe, so in 1858 Morphy voyaged overseas to challenge them.

What happened in those matches cannot be understood, it can only be admired. Morphy didn't just win, he crushed his opponents mercilessly! His victories showed that he was clearly the best player in the world. How did he become so good when all the major chess activity was still in Europe? Nobody can say. But for this feat, Morphy is recognized as the greatest natural chess talent in the history of chess.

Morphy returned to America in 1859 to find that he had become a national hero. Here was the first American to defeat the Europeans at one of their own games! But Morphy didn't want the life of a professional chess player. As it was, he had only been marking time until he could be admitted to the bar in Louisiana. (He had to wait until he was 21 years old.) So, after his extraordinary triumph, he retired from chess and returned to New Orleans.

Sadly, his law career was unsuccessful and his personal life was tragic. As he grew older, he suffered from delusions of persecution. He never married and was cared for by his sister and mother. Paul Morphy died soon after turning 51, but his brief chess career was so marvelous that he will be remembered always as one of the great geniuses of chess.



Paul Morphy.

Now the King of Games

Today, hundreds of millions of people play chess, making it the most popular game in the world. You can find players matching wits in parks, in schools, or simply across the kitchen table at home. Of course, there are also thousands of chess clubs. Formal tournaments allow for even more serious competition. (Later in this book, I'll tell you how you can find clubs and tournaments that are near where you live.)

The explosive growth of the Internet has opened vast, exciting new opportunities to enjoy the King of Games. Literally thousands of websites are devoted to chess. Go to a popular web portal like Yahoo! and you will find more people playing chess than almost any other game. There also are online chess clubs where you can find opponents 24 hours a day: players of every level strength, from all around the globe. And although a big part of the fun of chess is in the opportunity it gives you for meeting interesting people, in a pinch you don't even need a real live opponent. Millions of chess-playing computer programs are sold every year for the PC. You can even get a chess-playing game for your Palm Pilot!

10 Part I: Let's Play Chess

Believe it or not, chess is a spectator sport, too! That might sound funny if you're conditioned to the fast-paced action of televised sports. “*Two guys playing chess— isn't that a bit like watching grass grow?*” In fact, when you think about it, chess has special qualities that make it one of the very best spectator sports. Chess spectators actually get to *play alongside* their superstars. When you follow a live game in progress, you evaluate positions, speculate about each side's plan, weigh possible moves ... In other words, you do exactly the same things as the actual players are doing! It's as if you were allowed to get down on the court to play with Shaq and Kobe.

Here again, technology has added to the ways chess enthusiasts enjoy their favorite pastime. In big international tournaments, games are played using special boards and sets with embedded electronic sensors that display the current position on video screens for spectators to follow. At the same time, wireless headsets deliver expert commentary to chess tournament audiences. Online, things get even better! Major tournaments set up websites that stream the games, live and in real time, to tens of thousands of spectators worldwide. Here, too, there will be running commentary, of course—both expert and not-so-expert, because the fans can post their own observations on the unfolding battle.

Chess Goes To Hollywood

With so many people playing, it's no surprise that chess shows its face in popular culture more and more. Most of these appearances are in a “supporting role,” of course, in advertising, movies, or television shows. However, sometimes chess even takes center stage for itself.

For example, the Oscar-nominated film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* was all about the (mostly) true story of a talented young player, Josh Waitzkin. More recently, Vladimir Nabokov's novel *The Luzhin Defense* was made into a chess movie, starring John Turturro. There was even a major musical titled, simply, *Chess*. Its creator, Tim Rice, had previously written such hit shows as *Evita* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. His plot loosely adapted personalities and events from the real 1972, 1978, and 1981 World Championship matches.

Even Harry Potter plays chess! One of the pivotal scenes in the movie *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was a chess battle. Pursuing the forces of darkness, Harry, Ron, and Hermione must somehow traverse a chessboard battlefield where behemoth stone pieces are crushing captured rivals to rubble. The heroes themselves become pieces in this deadly game. At its climax, Ron sacrifices himself so that Harry can deliver checkmate and proceed safely.

Chapter 1: Why Play Chess? 11

The opening scene in the 1963 James Bond classic *From Russia With Love* presented a glamorous fantasy vision of how top-level matches are staged. (Alas, I'm afraid that tuxedoed waiters and audiences all in evening clothes are more typical of James Bond's world than that of real chess professionals!) The scene introduced a villain, Kronsteen, as a chess player—intimating the calculating nature of his evil genius, I suppose. Kronsteen receives a summons from SPECTRE (Special Executive for Crime, Terror, Revenge and Extortion) headquarters just as he stands to win a prestigious international tournament. Rather than obey immediately, he risks the wrath of his SPECTRE bosses by staying at the board until the victory was sealed. The filmmakers used a position based on an actual game from the 1960 USSR Championship.

Mr. Spock played a futuristic three-dimensional version of chess in the old *Star Trek* television series. One episode turned on Spock's deduction that someone must have tampered with the Enterprise's computer. Otherwise, by Spock's logic, it should not have been possible for him to win against a chess program that he himself had coded. (Chapter 19 reveals the flaw in this reasoning.)



Chess Lore

The popular TV game show *Jeopardy!* has used chess as a topic on more than one occasion. Here are a few examples, all of which appeared on actual *Jeopardy!* broadcasts. If you can't solve them now, I guarantee you will be able to by the time you finish this book! Until then, you can look up the solutions in Appendix C. Don't forget to phrase your responses as a question, Jeopardy-style!

Chess for \$100:

Before becoming a legend, this star of *The Maltese Falcon* hustled strangers at chess in NYC.

Chess for \$200:

The only chess move in which a player may move two of his own pieces at the same time.

Chess for \$300:

In 1997, at the age of 14 years 2 months, France's Etienne Bacrot became the youngest one of these.

Chess for \$400:

A special way a pawn may capture—it's French for "in passing."

Chess for \$500:

Bobby Fischer beat this man in Iceland in 1972 to take the World Chess title.

12 Part I: Let's Play Chess

Of course, a chess set fit right into the Huxtable home from the beloved TV series, *The Cosby Show*. (And Bill Cosby is himself a chess player in real life, by the way!) Whether it was Theo gamely trying to beat his dad, or little Rudy smacking the chess clock and gathering the pieces into a heap, chess made regular cameos in the series. The list of other popular television icons who revealed themselves as occasional chess players includes everyone from Thomas Magnum (Tom Selleck's character in *Magnum, P.I.*) to Alex Keaton (Michael J. Fox, in *Family Ties*); from stylish detectives Tubbs and Crockett (Philip Michael Thomas and Don Johnson, in *Miami Vice*) to Bart Simpson (*The Simpsons*). An episode of *The West Wing* was centered on chess games between President Bartlet (Martin Sheen) and two of his staffers (Rob Lowe and Richard Schiff). The course of the games mirrored a simultaneous diplomatic "chess match" that was playing out between the president and China.

One of the most remarkable technology stories of the last decade was the defeat of then World Chess Champion Garry Kasparov by IBM's computer Deep Blue in a six-game match. Literally millions of onlookers swamped the IBM server that was providing live coverage of the play, making this match perhaps the biggest online event in history. Kasparov's loss was much more than just a chess story—it made newspaper and TV headlines around the world! Pundits of all sorts weighed in about "what it all meant" for the relationship between computers and humans. (I've got my own point of view, which you can read in Chapter 19.) Yet, although it must have pained Kasparov to lose that match, at least he got a partial "revenge," beating a machine in a 2001 Super Bowl Pepsi commercial. Chess has truly come into its own when it is the star of a Super Bowl TV spot!

Austin Powers (Mike Myers) plays for mate in Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me.

(Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (c) MCMXCIX, New Line Productions, Inc. All rights reserved. Photo by Kim Wright. Photo appears courtesy of New Line Productions, Inc.)



Chapter 1: Why Play Chess? 13

As we begin the twenty-first century, we are more and more becoming a society of people who depend upon and celebrate the products of our intellect. What better game for us than chess? Computers have given us the possibility of a partner that is always ready to play chess, and the Internet has made it possible to find a new partner any time we want. There's never been a better time to start playing the world's greatest game.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Chess has a long history, extending back more than 1,400 years.
- ◆ Chess has become one of the most popular games in the world, and its popularity continues to grow.
- ◆ Anyone can easily learn how to play chess, and this book teaches you how.

