Chapter 67

"A Girl Move":
Negotiating Gender and Technology in Chess Online and Offline

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ABSTRACT

The confluence of gender and information technology in chess is explored in this chapter based on a small empirical interview study. By interviewing nine women chess players who compete in men's tournaments, the chapter examines the underrepresentation of women in the traditionally male domain of chess and discusses the role of computers and the Internet in women players' work/play routines. Five in-depth interviews were conducted Face-to-Face (FTF) and four interviews were conducted over the Internet using the textual chat feature of the International Chess Club during the summer of 2010. How women negotiate gendered identity and how they position themselves in regard to information technology are discussed. The interviewees' reflexive accounts discussing gendered practices and the changing notion of gender in chess challenge technologically infused male culture in ways that help us to understand the role of embodiment in mastery and expertise.

INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY WOMEN AND CHESS?

The body of knowledge exploring the nexus of gender, games, and technology is incomplete without literature exploring women's experiences in competitive and technologically saturated pursuits like chess. The chess culture underrepresents women, and the marginalization of women in chess is analogous to the underrepresentation of women in video games, sports, and in the fields of science and technology. As of May 2015, only nine percent of the players on the World Chess Federation (FIDE) list is women. Past work in the cognitive and computer sciences has shown that chess playing skills are associated with visualization, spatial imagination, and memory (e.g. Charnes, 1992; Charness et al., 2005; Frydman and Lynn, 1992; Waters et al., 2002), and there has been some exploration of women's underrepresentation in chess as a gender gap in intellectual pursuits (Chabris and Glickman, 2006; Howard 2005).

When women enter the patriarchal chess culture, gender is often highlighted rather than erased similar to other "first women stories" (Rosen, 2000) entering traditional male domains with little to no regard for historically formed power relations of gender. In the classical work 'Throwing like a girl,' Iris Young (1980) ruminates on how a woman's comportment and bodily timidity is conditioned by sexist practices in patriarchal society that routinely subject women to unjust scrutiny and normatively disciplined expectations. Young argues that girls often have fewer opportunities to tinker and practice; thus they develop ambiguity in their intentionality due to the dual perception of their bodies as objects and subjects at the same time. This research voices women's lived experiences and demystifies the underrepresentation of women in the traditionally male domain of chess based on a small empirical interview study. Seeking out mastery and skills in chess requires from women certain competitiveness, aggression and relentlessness that many girls and women are not socially prepared for. Women do not have many opportunities to face such ritualized combative, aggressive and sometimes cruel encounters on an equal term against men outside chess tournaments. International chess master Jennifer Shahade (2005) argues in her book *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport* that in countries like Russia and China, where socially glorified female chess role models exist, women are much more inclined to learn and master chess. Shahade develops her argument drawing upon her personal experience, as well as from her interviews with leading female chess players including Judit Polgar, once a top ten player in the world. Then, Shahade (2005) goes on to say that contrary to cultural expectations of girls being less aggressive when they play chess, the pejorative phrase 'a girl move' in the chess culture today has been subverted to mean a move seeking fierce and aggressive play with great complications. Shahade's (2005) observations on social, cultural and generational differences in gender expectations in chess evoke the instability and fluidity of gender. Judith Butler (1999) in her foundational work *Gender Trouble* reminds us that what constitutes gender and what ought to constitute gender is not fixed, and exists on a performative continuum that changes over time. 'What we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body' (Butler, 1999, p. xv). Gender is performative and the naturalness and stability of gender categories need to be de-constructed. What is considered 'a girl move' or feminine enactment in chess has been shifting as Shahade (2005) observes.

Shahade's (2005) observations of cultural differences in gender expectations in chess further Young's (1980) argument on the social construction of gender. More women have competed with men in chess and sports since Young's (1980) article was written; yet despite the ideology of 'fair competition' in sports, women frequently face 'disciplinary constraints' of culture as Butler (1999) among others explains. The public and media scrutinize female athletes' identity and sexuality, and subject women athletes to traditional heterosexual femininity (Sloop, 2005) and the 'ideal models of post-feminist commodity' (Kearney, 2011, p. 290); or frame them as masculine and hence lesbian (Mean and Kassing, 2008). Unlike other sports where athletes often wear spandex uniforms and compete in gender-defined sections, the dress aspect in gender-mixed chess tournaments, apart from the flippant 'distracting cleavage argument' when a man loses to a woman, has not been explored. Young (2005) argues that the aesthetic freedom women choose in their clothing has 'liberating possibilities because it subverts, unsettles the order of respectable, functional rationality in a world where that rationality supports domination' (p. 74). This research aims to flesh out never invisible, but subtle gendered aspects of performances in chess.

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