# Chess by Cable:

## On the Interrelation of Technology and Sports in the Making of the Modern World

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*This article on 'chess by cable' explores the intricate relationship between sports and technology set within the enormous societal, economic and technological changes entailed in the making of the modern world. It shows how telegraphic chess playing epitomised these developments – in its global reach, its emphasis on speed and time-keeping and the incorporation of the middle-class. For both inventors of telegraphy as well as players of chess, the merger secured publicity and served media-marketisation of their respective products. The peculiar match of telegraphy and chess, however, was grounded in their intricate relationships with notions of scientific and economic progress as well as civilisation, peace and supremacy of the Euro-American world. The article opens up new avenues in the history of Victorian sports and its intricate relationship with industrialisation and modernity.*

## INTRODUCTION

– How is your husband?
– I suppose he is quite well, but I cannot say positively that he is.
– We have not spoken for several weeks.
– Good gracious! Have you quarrelled?
– Oh no, we are the best friends, I believe, but you see
he is engaged in playing a game of chess by cable.[1]

In the late nineteenth century, jokes on 'Telegraphic Chess Playing' were exceedingly popular. Mocking the practicality of the latest technological fashion for such a slow game as chess, they not only parodied late Victorians'

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fascination with speed, but also illustrated the intricate relationship between
sports emerging as a mass phenomenon at the time and technology taking
shape with the industrial revolution. In particular, between 1860 and 1900,
the Euro-American world, most explicitly Great Britain, experienced a
'notable transformation in the scale and nature of its sporting culture'.[2] This
veritable sports boom, perhaps even a sports revolution, was characterised by
an increasing participation of the middle class; by the creation of new types of
sports; by the institutionalisation, standardisation and regulation of sports;
and, finally, by its professionalisation and media marketisation. Technology
played an important role in these changes. Transportation technologies, such
as railroads or streetcars, allowed large crowds to attend sporting events and
so furthered the trans-regionalisation and trans-nationalisation of such
events. Scientific knowledge of the body as well as measuring and sports
equipment became ever more refined and greatly influenced the important
construction of risk and records within the context of modern sports.[3] Finally,
communications technology, such as the telegraph or the telephone, exerted a
tremendous impact on sport, leisure and play in the Victorian era. Speeding-
up global news reporting, communications technology allowed a large num-
ber of people, despite being many miles distant, to experience the excitement
of boat, air balloon or motorcar races in a moment of immediacy.[4]

Apart from its general influence on the media and sports journalism, the
telegraph became closely linked to one particular 'sport' enjoying great
popularity at the time: the game of chess. The marriage of the telegraph and
chess was emblematic of modernity and its societal, economic and techno-
logical changes. In the mid-nineteenth century, the world took up speed and
became increasingly integrated and connected. Telegraphs, steamships and
railroads moved goods, ideas and people across the entire globe at unprece-
dented speed and allowed for the development of a truly global world
economy, world politics and global communications. The removal of social
barriers in the early modern period via ideas of Enlightenment and processes
of industrialisation offered greater social mobility to a larger number of
people and helped the emergence of a growing middle class. Meanwhile,
ideologies of civilisation and Euro-American supremacy backed by these
region's industrial boom and technological advances furthered notions of
Euro-America's incomparability.[5]

Cable chess epitomised all this. Playing chess by cable showed the func-
tionality of the telegraph across time and space. As part of a shrewd market-
ing strategy for both technology and sport, chess clubs and telegraph
companies organised tournaments between an ever more integrated and
standardised international community of now primarily middle-class chess
contestants. Cable chess became emblematic of a bourgeois experience of
'instantaneous globality'. Additionally, the game of reason, as chess also was

called, embodied all that had been part of the ideological foundation of globalisation processes: the Protestant work ethic, reason, foresight and circumspection. Soon, cable chess also was incorporated into cultural diplomacy during times of rising imperial tensions. Finally, the intricate relationship between technology and sport mirrored contemporaries' notions of modernity and civilisation. Both telegraphy and chess were 'science' and so demonstrated Euro-America's superiority over the rest of the world. Although chess was played all around the world, cable-chess matches remained a solely Euro-American phenomenon.

This article explores the intricate relationship between sports and technology within the setting of the enormous societal, economic and technological changes entailed in the making of the modern world.[6] I show how in particular telegraphic chess playing embodied these developments and was further embedded within a discourse of civilisation and supremacy of the Euro-American world. The article hereby opens up new avenues in the history of Victorian sports and its intricate relationship with industrialisation and modernity. Although chess became a sport in addition to a game during the nineteenth century, scholars thus far have paid little attention to it within that century's sports revolution. Despite its popularity at the time, it seems, undeservedly, not to be part of the nineteenth-century sports revolution.[7] Similarly little interest is given to cable chess in histories of the game of chess, as their focus is rather on the actual game and its moves or an earlier time period.[8] Only explicit accounts of correspondence chess, such as those by Bruce Avery or T.D. Harding, make reference to cable chess; and even these mention it only as one means to play chess by correspondence.[9] Finally, accounts of telegraphy in the nineteenth century usually use cable chess only as an anecdote to mark unusual telegraph usages.[10] This article brings these research strands together to show the interrelation of sports and technology in the making of the modern world.

## CHESS, PLAY AND SPORT

Modern chess is the logical and lineal descendant of a game first documented some 1500 years ago.[11] Probably emerging in Persia sometime between the fifth or sixth centuries, the game soon became an 'indelible part of the landscape adjoining the Tigris and Euphrates', before it spread with the Umayyad conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, al-Andalus in Arabic, to Europe, where, in the fifteenth century, it roughly took on today's shape.[12] With the European colonial expansion, the European form of the game also reached the 'new world'. By the late early-modern period, chess was literally played all around the globe. Eventually, the game entered every city and a common thread of pawn chains, knight forks and checkmates ran through the lives of

Rabbi Ibn Ezra, Voltaire, Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon and Karl Marx.[13] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, chess became increasingly popular among a growing Euro-American middle class, for whom chess symbolised bourgeois morale, the Protestant work ethic and the values of the Enlightenment. As a game of rationality, it ranked highest in the societal worthiness of games played for pleasure.[14] Almost simultaneously in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, chess clubs and cafés, such as the eminent Café de la Régence in Paris, the meeting place of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, emerged in Europe's major cities. Weekly, the liberal and intellectual elites of the time assembled around chess boards in Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, Vienna, Moscow, Rome and London.[15] Chess's omnipresence at the time was further mirrored in its cultural reception in the arts and literature, as well as in bourgeois material culture. It featured prominently in the works of Denis Diderot (*Rameau's Nephew*), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (*Nathan the Wise*) or Lewis Carroll (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). Important proponents of the Enlightenment had their likenesses taken with a chess board in the background.[16]

With the founding of chess clubs, the arrangements of tournaments and the codification and standardisation of chess, the game was gradually turned into a sport. From the 1840s on, regular chess columns emerged in European and American newspapers, chess magazines were founded and more and more theoretical treatises meant to codify and standardise the sport were published.[17] Through its organisation in clubs, chess mirrored changing ways of organising society between medieval times and the modern era. Nineteenth-century chess clubs epitomised processes of individualisation and emancipation as they replaced older organisational forms of feudalism, guilds or trade associations to which one belonged by birth and class.[18] As George Walker, British chess champion, emphasised in his chess treatise of 1850, chess had once been 'the game of the aristocracy', but now it had been 'wrested from them, with other feudal rights'. It was 'the recreation of the million'. In fact, as Walker continued, chess (at least) gave the appearance of being egalitarian. A chess room, he wrote, 'must be open to all classes [...] – free as the air of heaven – accessible, at small cost, to every man who can afford the luxuries of hat and coat.' All that mattered in chess was skill. The high places were reserved for 'the best players'.[19] This egalitarian notion of social mobility was not only prevalent in chess, for technological developments of the nineteenth century fostered new professions that similarly allowed for unprecedented upward mobility of the middle class based on personal skill. A large number of those later knighted for their efforts in submarine telegraphy, such as Charles Bright, John Pender or James Anderson, started out as clerks, mariners, merchants or chemists.[20]

The institutionalisation of chess was particularly evident in Great Britain, where Britons' fascination with the game translated into high sales numbers for such books as William Lewis's *Chess for Beginners* (1835) or George Walker's *Chess Made Easy* (1836).[21] The presence of chess masters George Walker and Howard Staunton, complemented by the temporary move of Russian-born chess master Samuel Rosenthal from Paris to London in 1871, alongside a large wave of Jewish emigration from Eastern to Western Europe, eventually helped the capital of Great Britain to overtake Paris as the new world centre of chess.[22] In the United States, where, in the eighteenth century, chess enthusiasm had, apart from Benjamin Franklin, been slow to catch on, the first chess clubs were established in the early nineteenth century. Then matters changed considerably with the appearance of Paul Morphy, a young lawyer and the chess *wunderkind* of New Orleans, as the champion of the first American Chess Congress in 1857. He subsequently toured Europe, where he beat most European champions, and soon American media particularly hailed him as the unofficial European chess champion. In the second half of the nineteenth century, chess in the United States, while certainly less prevalent than in Europe, emerged as a popular leisure activity for middle-class Americans.[23]

For centuries, chess had been played as a board game with a set of different pieces, such as pawn, knight, rook, bishop, king and queen engaging in a peaceful strategy of warfare with each other. In the nineteenth century, for the first time a new technological device, the telegraph (and later on, similarly, the telephone, the tele-writer, the radio and the computer) was added to the set-up of the game. With the telegraph, emphasis was no longer on the moves made, but on the rapidity of their transmission as well as the distance covered while playing. This shifted the focus from the actual game to the technological invention facilitating such speed and circuitousness. Telegraphic chess matches gave large media attention not only to the emerging middle-class sport of playing chess, but also to the emerging technology of the telegraph. Unsurprisingly, it was telegraphy's fathers who pulled the strings behind the first schemes for cable chess: Samuel Morse and Charles Wheatstone.

The origins of chess by cable can be traced back to 1844 and the first magnetic telegraph line constructed by Samuel Morse and Alfred Vail between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., in the United States. The line was completed in May 1844, and only some months after Annie Ellsworth sent her famous words 'What hath God wrought?' through the cable, its telegraph operators transmitted sequences of numbers and letters that symbolised chessboard squares and the chess pieces' moves. While historian George Taylor claims that it was because 'so little use [was] found for the original line [...] that chess games by telegraph were promoted between experts in the two cities', I argue that these games actually served a higher economic purpose and

were not necessarily meant to entertain chess players.[24] At the time, Samuel Morse was still trying to persuade the U.S. Congress to make his Baltimore to D.C. line the first connection in a nationwide network.[25] In order 'to show the variety of the operations of the telegraph', wrote Samuel Morse in a letter, '[...] several games of chess, [were] played between the cities of Baltimore and Washington, with the same ease as if the players were seated at the same table.'[26] Alfred Vail, partner of Samuel Morse, particularly highlighted the 'accuracy' – and not necessarily the speed – with which the telegraph transmitted intelligence. All of the 686 moves necessary for the seven games played were transmitted without any mistake or interruption.[27] In the end, Morse and Vail's promotional tactic proved successful. Although a direct causality remains unclear, in 1845 the Post Office Department took over the line and opened it on a fee-for-service basis. In the United States, telegraphic chess games were not repeated until many years later. After this first series of games, Baltimore's religious leaders began expressing doubts about the new technology. Consequently, Morse worried about public opinion, 'decided to call a halt to the frivolous chess games and restrict use of the line to congressional business.'[28] Nevertheless, from its very beginning, cable chess was connected to people's attempts to transmit intelligence over large distances.

With their idea of linking telegraphy with chess, Morse and Vail, as well as Cooke and Wheatstone some months later, tapped into a popular trend at the time: namely, playing correspondence chess. In the mid-nineteenth century, the phenomenon of chess across large distances was nothing new.[29] In fact, playing chess with an unseen, however not necessarily unknown opponent, dates back as far as 1119 and a chess match between Henry I of England and Louis VI of France. The two monarchs employed messenger boys to transmit their respective chess moves back and forth between England and France.[30] Scholars trace the beginning of the modern era of correspondence chess to the London-Edinburgh five-game match played between the respective cities' chess clubs between April, 1824 and July, 1828 – the very tournament that sparked initial enthusiasm for chess in Great Britain. As more and more cities and towns founded their own chess clubs, the famous London-Edinburgh tournament was soon followed by other inter-city tournaments throughout the world.[31]

## TELEGRAPHIC CHESS

Because, prior to the telegraph, players were using the ordinary mail service, correspondence chess thrived with the advent of the penny-press in Great Britain in 1840 and even more so with the penny-postcard in the United States in 1873.[32] Although one penny was still an enormous amount for a working-class chess player, for well off middle- and upper-class gentlemen and for clubs,

it was easily affordable.[33] Correspondence chess became so popular that the nineteenth century may, in fact, be called, its 'golden age'.[34] Telegraphic chess playing tapped into this boom and added an entirely new quality to playing chess over large distances. For a slowly forming international chess community, assembled in national capitals' chess clubs and cafés, the telegraph provided the solution to correspondence chess's greatest disadvantage: the agonisingly slow game, even for chess, which ensued by using ordinary mail. A chess match between Francis Brenzinger, Brooklyn chess master, and his brother Karl in Germany, for instance, dragged on from 1859 to 1875.[35] The electric telegraph, in contrast, offered an entirely new quality of speed over distance to the game of chess. This was intricately linked to the telegraph's promise of the annihilation of time and distance, which contemporaries usually described as an experienced 'instantaneity' of transmission taking place within an emerging global network of land and submarine cables. Although space and in particular geography and locality still mattered enormously in long-distance communication, the translation of the written word into dots and dashes and its transmittance via electric signals changed point-to-point communication dramatically. As Florian Sprenger argues, for contemporaries 'it was impossible to measure any temporal difference between the events at the two ends of an electrically charged wire'. Electricity and thus the messages seemed 'present at both ends of the wire at the same instant – instantaneous, immediate'.[36] Chess matches across distance would no longer happen over the course of years, but in hours, as move and reply could be transmitted within minutes or seconds. Furthermore, as a clear advantage over optical telegraphs, electrical telegraphs could operate day and night as well as in all weather conditions.[37] With the expansion of a telecommunications network consisting of terrestrial and submarine cables all around the world, such instantaneity seemed to reach round the entire globe. The first submarine cable between England and France was established in 1851/52. In addition to the many shorter terrestrial lines, the global network was complemented by a transcontinental telegraph line in America in 1865 and a durable Atlantic cable in 1866, and it soon expanded further during the 1870s with connections to India, Southeast Asia, Australia and Africa. By the end of that decade, people, and in this context chess players, in Europe and North America could reach almost any place on earth via telegraph.[38] Telegraphic instantaneity and the technology's far reach allowed for contemporaries to understand what it meant to be globally connected; chess seemed a playful way to implement such 'globality'.

## PROMOTING THE TELEGRAPH BY CHESS MATCHES

Just months after the first telegraphic chess match in 1844, using Samuel Morse's telegraph apparatus between Washington and Baltimore, another

cable-chess match employing the Wheatstone and Cooke system made even greater headlines in Europe. The match was initiated by Howard Staunton, who had just established himself as the world's leading chess player after winning his 1843 match in Paris against the French champion Saint-Amant. Staunton set up a chess match in 1845 along the newly opened telegraph lines of the South Western Railway, which ran between Portsmouth and London.[39] Although probably unaware of the original cable match between Baltimore and Washington in the United States, Staunton's incentive for staging the telegraph-chess game in Great Britain also was to test this latest technology. After the inventors Charles Wheatstone and William Fothergill Cooke had joined forces in 1837 to work on a needle telegraph, which they patented that very same year, they had, by 1844, achieved fully working systems on a few lines. A first line, along the railway tracks between Paddington Station and West Drayton, was opened in 1839 and ran a distance of 21 kilometres. In 1843, the connection was expanded to Slough and, in the winter of 1844/45, extended along the rail line towards Gosport, a town situated on the eastern side of Portsmouth harbour.[40]

As a test of this new electrical telegraphy line, in April, 1845, Staunton and Captain Hugh Alexander Kennedy embarked on a rail journey to Portsmouth to play against a party of four gentlemen at the London end of the line, among them Staunton's chess rival, George Walker.[41] The game proved rather tedious, lasting the entire day, and despite its massive media attention, the actual game presented, from a chess player's perspective, 'few features of interest'. *The Illustrated London News*, the magazine for which Staunton himself wrote a chess column, complained that the party at London 'had their attention too frequently diverted by the assembled spectators', and the players at Portsmouth were 'too anxious to terminate the game in time to escape by the last (half-past five o'clock) train' back to London. They missed it anyway.[42] The exceptionality of this game of cable chess, which made headlines in every chess and non-chess magazine and newspaper in the British Empire, had nothing to do with great moves and only little with the rivalry between Staunton and George Walker; it had everything to do with its transmittance over 'a distance of 88 miles, almost with the rapidity of thought'.[43] *The Illustrated London News* pointed out: 'Here was a game of Chess played by individuals nearly ninety miles apart from each other; and the mysterious messenger conveying the intelligence, must have travelled backwards and forwards during the game, upwards of 10,000 miles!' Further illustrating the telegraph's imaginary ability to seemingly annihilate distance in 'every direction', the lines were still used for ordinary traffic during the games, allowing a group of chess players from Southampton to have every move telegraphed to them, as well as to

spectators at both ends of the line, and to converse with each other 'as if they were in the same room'.[44]

The fact that Charles Wheatstone, the 'inventor', was present further highlighted that the telegraph was at the heart of attention and not Staunton's ingenuity at chess. Moreover, it also gave away the fact that Staunton and Wheatstone had arranged the event together for their mutual benefit.[45] For Wheatstone and Cooke, the match was an important test at a time when the British admiralty had just shown interest in their line. In May 1845, shortly after the trial chess match, Wheatstone and Cooke took out another patent on the one-needle telegraph, which soon became widely used by British railway companies. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, some 15,000 needle telegraphs were still in operation.[46] Later in 1845, when Samuel Morse visited Great Britain to promote his telegraph system, he had little success, as the Wheatstone telegraph was by then well-established. Morse had brought with him a dossier of press cuttings mentioning the American chess games. However, Staunton's match had had such an impact on the British public that they remained unimpressed, appearing not to notice that the date of the American game was indeed earlier.[47]

The story of these early telegraphic chess matches illustrates their use as a promotional tool within a sales scheme put forward by the inventors. Tapping into the trend of playing correspondence chess across large distances, Wheatstone as well as Morse used the game to demonstrate their inventions' accuracy as well as their rapidity in transmitting intelligence over large distances. Time and again, the telegraph and cable companies also would employ similar methods to sell their cable as the fastest or the most reliable, thereby moving along the social (and sport) developments of the time. In particular, the Commercial Cable Company was set to break ever new records in speedy and accurate transmission. In 1888, a first interview was conducted via cable across the Atlantic, and in 1895, the company made headlines by reporting the result of the America's Cup, a yacht race, 'in the astonishing time of two minutes'.[48] For the telegraph companies, chess matches became less and less significant as a promotional tool. Only in the 1890s, the time of transatlantic chess matches and the Newnes Cup, did they prove handy yet again to show the telegraph's 'surprising speed'.[49]

## CHESS: SPEED, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY

Thus far, the story of cable chess seems to suggest that it was all an advertising scheme and had little impact on the 'sport' itself. Readers of the various chess magazines indignantly observed that these matches were rather a trial of the capabilities of the telegraph and less a trial of skills at chess. However, in 1844 and 1845, cable-chess games other than those of the telegraph

inventors emerged. While the inventors of telegraphy had staged the two
original games, now the clubs and sportsmen themselves arranged real sports
matches. Generally, the clubs agreed to seven or eight matches between indi-
vidual players who were grouped by lot. In particular, starting in the 1860s,
local clubs increasingly arranged chess tournaments between them. This
movement went hand-in-hand with the expansion of the global telegraph
network, the institutionalisation and internationalisation of chess through
the foundation of chess clubs and growing exchanges and developments of
strategies on an international scale. Each passing decade brought closer con-
tact between leading chess masters from all over Europe, who constantly
tested and refined their most ambitious ideas. Modern means of trans-
portation and communication supported the trans-nationalisation of chess,
thereby mirroring a general trend of growing social integration in the Euro-
American world.[50]

A first competitive telegraphic match was played in March, 1856, between
the chess clubs of Liverpool and Manchester. The game, which lasted for
eight hours, was finished with a draw after only 28 moves and still much play
left. On October 26, 1861, the Liverpool-Dublin match between the Dublin
Library Chess Club and the Liverpool Chess Club was the first one to be
played using submarine telegraph cables.[51] Chess by cable, however, was not
only played in Great Britain or the United States. With the installation of
telegraph lines all across the world, playing chess by electrical telegraph
became fashionable – even across large terrestrial distances. In 1858, the first
Australian telegraph match was played between the clubs of Hobart Town
and George Town. Ironically, while the game took place in July, its report,
which was transmitted to England via steamship, was not published there
before October that year.[52] From 1870 on, the chess club associations of New
South Wales and Victoria organised an annual inter-colonial chess match in
Australia.[53] It was not before the 1890s, however, that chess matches were
staged along the long-distance submarine cable lines. Expenses, as well as
time lag, must have ranked high in the players' hesitation.[54] In 1896, the
Chess Club of London played against the Chess Club of Brooklyn, setting
the stage for the first Newnes Cup tournament, an international cable-chess
match between America and Great Britain. Between 1896 and 1911, more
than two dozen Anglo-American chess matches were played.[55] World War I
brought a decline to these matches, and after the war, they were replaced by
radio matches. As with chess using wired telegraphy, cable chess had passed
its prime.

On a professional level, cable-chess matches also did not become a popu-
lar sport. The necessity to maintain daily working routines at telegraph
offices prevented this, since telegraph companies had to make 'time' on the
wire and 'space' for these matches, either by setting up special wires to the

chess clubs' venues or hosting it within their own premises. The match between the rivalling world chess centres London and Paris had, in 1854, to be 'unavoidably postponed', because the telegraph company was unable 'to spare the means of communication'.[56] Also, a second attempt, planned for the 1862 international chess tournament, failed: the 'great feature of the program – a match by electric telegraph between London and Paris [...] – unhappily fell through at the last moment, owing to some difficulty on the French side in obtaining the use of the communication medium.'[57] Smaller tournaments similarly posed a problem for the daily routine of telegraph offices; even as seen in the first 1845 match between London and Portsmouth, accommodating the players presented the greatest challenge.[58] The bustling activities of a telegraph office left little space for the usual contemplativeness connected to the game. As Taliafero Shaffner reported in his telegraph manual, the chess clubs of Liverpool, Dublin and Manchester arranged to meet in rooms attached to the telegraph office to play chess matches through the wires.[59] For the annual inter-colonial matches in Australia, it was decided to have them on the anniversary of the Prince of Wales' birthday, which was a holiday at the telegraph office.[60] Only for the cable operators, some well-to-do players and individuals connected to the telegraphic business, such as Hugh Cossart Baker, president of a local railroad company in Canada, did telegraphic chess playing become some sort of normality.[61] As one operator pointed out, the time on their night watches were not 'altogether monotonous [...], for now and then [they] ha[d] pleasant chats with [their] friends far away, or sometimes after business hours at night indulge[d] in a game of chess with some champion over the wire.'[62]

Despite the fact that, in 1869, the International Chess Congress at Baden set out to organise games by telegraph all across Europe, chess matches via cable remained the exception rather than the rule in the sport.[63] In the same way that the telegraph did not come to supplant the letter or other ordinary mail, chess by cable did not supplant correspondence chess. Rather, the clubs used telegraphic-chess tournaments to seek publicity for their emerging sport.[64] This helps to explain the high frequency of telegraphic matches in the 1850s and 1860s and the relative decline thereafter. One of the most eminent telegraphic-chess matches took place during the British Chess Association Festival of 1872. Not only did the famous master of chess, David Henry Blackburne, play a ten-board blindfold simultaneous display, but to attract visitors, the organisation also set up a telegraphic match between five provincial clubs and various London teams.[65] For two decades there was a short decline, but interest in grand telegraphic-chess events resumed in the 1890s with the beginning of international transatlantic matches. In 1895, the Newnes Cup drew over 3,000 spectators – an unheard of number in the game of chess.[66] As the *New York Times* reported, crowds of people, including

'large numbers of ladies, witnessed the play and the moves displayed upon
the boards were eagerly watched and discussed by the spectators'.[67] While
seeking publicity, the technology itself mattered little, as the clubs simply
were following the technological advancement of their time. Soon after the
invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell in America in 1876, a
first telephone-chess match was played in 1877. A first game in Great
Britain followed in 1878.[68] Aligning themselves with the slow takeover of
wired telegraphy by wireless, radio matches soon became more prominent
than cable-chess matches. Initially, they were played between ships, such as
an uncompleted one between the S.S. Philadelphia and the S.S. Campania
on the Atlantic in 1902 or another game a year later between the S.S.
Philadelphia and the S.S. Lucania. These ship-to-ship matches alleviated the
tedium of voyages but were not competitive matches. Later in the twentieth
century, from the 1940s onwards, some major international matches and
exhibition games were played by radio.[69] By the 1960s, the technology
changed yet again from radio to teletype writer and, after 1990, to the com-
puter. Today we find numerous online chess communities playing against
each other via the World Wide Web.[70]

Although the technology certainly served the purpose of media market-
isation concerning the sport of chess, it would be too hasty a conclusion to
say that the telegraph did not alter the game of chess. At a time when the
game became a sport, with regular competitions and the emergence of chess
clubs, the telegraph nourished the argument for speedier tournaments.
Initially, it appears that early Arab and Spanish chess matches were played
with great rapidity. With the increasing accumulation of chess knowledge on
popular moves and standard moves and attacks, the game slowed down con-
siderably. By the nineteenth century, 'top-grade chess had become a painfully
slow game'. In 1852, Staunton complained that agonisingly slow chess
matches alienated the spectators.[71] Alongside the introduction of speed chess
and the use of sandglasses and chronometers in the mid-nineteenth century,
cable chess with its focus on transmission speed offered a solution. In 1897,
A. J. Gillam reporting on the transatlantic-chess match, for instance, boasted
that the majority of the moves ('move and reply!') had been made – not trans-
mitted – within three minutes and one of them even within two minutes.[72]
This stood in stark contrast to the lengthy cable-chess matches of the 1850s
and 1860s, which usually commenced in the evening and could, as there were
no time controls, last all night. Several reports of the time noted how games
had to be abandoned and could not be completed because players and
operators were exhausted.[73] As in chess, speed came to play an ever more
important role in sports and society as such. Car, yacht or bicycle races
gained popularity in the late nineteenth century and communication and
transportation companies wooed customers based on their incomparable

speed in the transmittance of intelligence or the transportation of people and goods.[74] Euro-American modern societies generally experienced the appearance of a general perception of acceleration: time was internationally standardised and synchronised in 1884, chronometers and watches introduced on a large scale in the 1870s and 1880s and work procedures increasingly quantified. The telegraph, alongside the steam engine and the railroad played no small role in these processes.[75] As one journalist put it retrospectively in 1919, cable chess and the development of 'serious chess that is played with clocks' only mirrored these general developments.[76]

## INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT REGULATION BY CHESS

Telegraphic technology and chess play seemed to have been particularly well suited to express Euro-Americans' perceptions of modern man. One of their joint features was that both nourished a Euro-American understanding of 'civilisation' based on 'progress' in science and technology. With the Enlightenment's reception of chess as the game of rationality, from the early modern period on there existed a discourse which embedded chess into the rhetoric of societal education and improvement. During the late eighteenth century, a proponent of enlightened absolutism, Joseph II, Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of the Habsburg lands, fervently promoted the game of chess among his officers as a means of social and intellectual discipline (as well as a replacement for gambling). The American Benjamin Franklin, when in Paris, was a regular visitor of the Café de la Régence; he proclaimed chess, in his publication *Morals of Chess*, to be the perfect means to educate society about rational behaviour.[77] Although Franklin counted the Persians, the Indians, the Chinese and other various countries of Asia among the 'civilized' nations for whom chess served as an amusement, the recognised chess club of the 'civilized' shrank dramatically during the nineteenth century.[78]

Technological developments played a tremendous role in this changing perception of Euro-America's notion of civilisation. The mastering of nature and the material world, for which the telegraph was emblematic, 'increased Europe's superiority [over the rest of the world] exponentially in virtually all fields of science and technology'.[79] As an 1865 report of the St. James Chess Club pointed out, the electric telegraph, which contemporaries such as American congressman Judah P. Benjamin saw as the 'triumph of science', not only supplied 'the stern wants of everyday life', but ministered 'gracefully to the most luxurious requirements of a highly artificial civilisation'.[80] The benefits of chess, in turn, were that it was 'the most venerable for its antiquity, the most esteemed for its intellectual character, and the most universal in its extent of all those pastimes in which men of every age have been

accustomed to seek rest from the fatigue of physical labour'.[81] Moreover, according to Willard Fiske, chess was distinguished 'from all other sports no less by its greater age than by its superior excellence; for, although an amusement, it [was] separated from the most abstruse of sciences only by a faint line of demarcation'.[82] Fiske argued that chess was in fact as close to science as any sport could be.[83] In this light, chess mirrored to contemporaries what the telegraph symbolised; both appeared to nourish and be nourished by the processes of economic and technological change in the making of the modern world. As *The Illustrated London News* observed, 'to combine science with Chess was literally what is called "a good move"'.[84] Not surprisingly, as the loose equality of civilisations during the eighteenth century became hierarchical during the nineteenth, no cable-chess match was ever played between contestants from outside of the 'Euro-American' or 'uncivilized' world.[85]

Within the Euro-American world this 'peaceful' game of strategic 'warfare' made a perfect case for diplomacy. Because of its history and origin, chess possessed the claim of 'universality'. As Willard Fisk put forward in 1857, '[m]en differing in character and disposition, in tastes and pursuits, in rank and religion, in climate and race', had been charmed by the study of its delightful arcana.[86] Chess's greatest strength, however, was its character as a game of war and peace. By interconnection with the 'magic wire' of the telegraph, which 'startle[d] a hemisphere, telling of another great battle wherein thousands of our fellow-creatures have been unavailingly sacrificed', cable chess lent itself to 'facilitate the more peaceful conflicts of the worshippers of Caissa'.[87] In the nineteenth century, international chess matches played an important role in the policies of Euro-American cultural diplomacy. The contest between Paris and London in the mid-nineteenth century was planned as a peaceful contest between England and France.[88] During the first Newnes Cup, the American team greeted its British opponents with the wish they might 'win without exultation or [...] lose without humiliation'.[89] In a similar spirit of good sportsmanship and within the setting of emerging Anglo-American special relations, in 1897, a telegraphic-chess match was staged between the British House of Commons and the American House of Representatives – it ended in a draw.[90] Early on, Samuel Morse made what became a common sales pitch: one of the effects of telegraphy was 'to bind man to his fellow-man in such bonds of amity as to put an end to war'.[91] Its facilitation of speedy communication or transmittance of intelligence would help to render any misunderstanding as insignificant.[92] Christopher Bushell, President of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, provided one of the clearest expressions of the political connections between chess and telegraphy. He predicted that telegraphy's effect on government would be that all 'events of the whole world [could] be brought, at one concurrent period,

under the notice and supervision of a body of men sitting round a table' employed in a 'game – political, social, and commercial – of all great nations and states of the globe', which could be developed, 'move by move, and placed instantaneously, as it were, on a chess-board'.[93] Telegraphy thus turned the entire world into a chess board where a strategic game (of, for instance, trade wars) could be played peacefully.

## CONCLUSION

Telegraphic-chess playing epitomised many of the changes and developments in the making of the modern world. Foremost, it symbolised the Victorians' relationship to technology and modernity through sport, leisure and play. 'Playing chess by cable' promoted the telegraph as a means to transmit intelligence across time and space with speed and accuracy. Both of the principal inventors of electrical telegraphy within the Anglo-American world, Samuel Morse and Charles Wheatstone, independently arrived at the idea of staging telegraph matches as a marketing strategy. Later on, telegraph companies also used cable-chess matches to sell the speed and accuracy of their products. Telegraphic-chess playing, in turn, changed the game's character by stressing the aspect of time-keeping and speed as well as enhancing its publicity. At a time when chess was professionalised and standardised, and so turned into a sport, telegraphic tournaments secured mass spectators and readership. The peculiar match of telegraphy and chess, however, was grounded in their intricate relationships with notions of scientific and economic progress as well as civilisation and peace. While the game of chess adapted to the changes wrought by industrialisation and capitalisation through its move from romantic to scientific play, telegraphy symbolised and facilitated these very processes. Merging the two seemed to contemporaries to be literally 'a good move'.[94]

### NOTES

1   *The Newcastle Weekly Courant*, 'Yankee Snacks', 12 September, 1891.

2   M. Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport* (London and New York, 2004), 6.

3   Ibid. On risk, see G. Gebauer, S. Poser, et al., *Kalkuliertes Risiko: Technik, Spiel und Sport an der Grenze* (Frankfurt/Main and New York, 2006).

4   See for instance the various James Gordon Bennett Cups, as described in H.S. Villard, *Blue Ribbon of the Air: The Gordon Bennett Races* (Washington, DC, 1987); B. Lynch, *Triumph of the Red Devil: The Irish Gordon Bennett Cup Race 1903* (Dublin, 2002).

5   For these changes, see C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: 1780–1914; Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA, 2009); E.S. Rosenberg, ed., *A World Connecting: 1870–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); and J. Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München, 2009).

6   As Jürgen Osterhammel points out, there is not one agreed upon definition of modernity, nor is
    there a sense of periodisation. Starting from C. Bayly's work, I primarily focus my take on the
    modern world on the time period between 1860 and 1930, which seems to be the height of a first
    globalisation. Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 88; Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*.

7   Neither N.L. Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society in Britain 1750–1914* (Cambridge, England and
    New York, 1998), M. Huggins, *Victorians and Sport* (n. 2 above), nor C. Eisenberg, *'English
    Sports', und Deutsche Bürger: Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 1800–1939* (Paderborn, 1999) even men-
    tion chess.

8   See, for instance, H.A. Davidson, *A Short History of Chess* (New York, 1968); H.J.R. Murray, *A
    Short History of Chess* (Oxford, 1963), or I.A. Horowitz and J. Straley Battell, eds., *The Best in
    Chess* (New York, 1965). D. Shenk, *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess or How 32 Carved Pieces
    on a Board Illuminated Our Understanding of War, Art, Science, and the Human Brain* (New York,
    2006); E. Bruns, *Das Schachspiel als Phänomen der Kulturgeschichte des 19 und 20 Jahrhunderts*,
    (Münster, 2003). For an earlier historical account, see E. Strouhal and U. Schädler, 'Das schöne,
    lehrreiche Ungeheuer Strategien der Eingemeindung des Spiels in der Kultur der Bürgerlichkeit:
    Eine Einleitung', in *Spiel und Bürgerlichkeit: Passagen des Spiels I*, eds. U. Schädler and E. Striygak
    (Wien and New York, 2010); D.E. O'Sullivan, *Chess in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: A
    Fundamental Thought Paradigm of the Premodern World* (Berlin, 2012).

9   T.D. Harding, *Correspondence Chess in Britain and Ireland, 1824–1987* (Jefferson, NC, 2010);
    B.D. Avery, *Correspondence Chess in America* (Jefferson, NC, 2000).

10  J. Jarnow, *Telegraph and Telephone Networks: Ground Breaking Developments in American
    Communications* (New York, 2004), ch. 2; R. Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century
    World: The Telegraph and Globalization* (Cambridge, UK, 2013), 20.

11  Davidson, *Short History of Chess*, 1.

12  Shenk, *The Immortal Game* (n. 8 above), 3.

13  Ibid., 4.

14  Strouhal and Schädler, 'Das schöne, lehrreiche Ungeheuer Strategien der Eingemeindung des
    Spiels in der Kultur der Bürgerlichkeit', (n. 8 above), 16–17.

15  Ibid., 17.

16  U. Schädler, 'Lehrreich und unterhaltsam? "Le jeu discret de la bourgeoisie": Spiele einer
    Ausstellung im Schweizer Spielmuseum, La Tour-de-Peilz, 2008/09', in *Spiel und Bürgerlichkeit*
    (n. 8 above), 110; Strouhal and Schädler, 'Das schöne, lehrreiche Ungeheuer Strategien der
    Eingemeindung des Spiels in der Kultur der Bürgerlichkeit' (n. 8 above), 16; L. Carroll, *Alice's
    Adventures Under Ground* (London, 1989).

17  Shenk, *The Immortal Game* (n. 8 above), 111.

18  M. Ehn, 'Ein Spiel der Aufklärung und der Urbanität Schachvereinigungen in Wien, Berlin und
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