May 22, 2014

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PUBLISHED IN The Message

https://medium.com/message/why-chess-will-destroy-your-mind-78ad1034521f

Why Chess Will Destroy Your Mind

That's how it looked back in 1859, according to Scientific American.

Let's take a trip back to 1859, when our mental environment faced a dire new threat. An upstart form of entertainment was exerting a hypnotic, addictive pull on our fragile minds, forcing them to engage in a useless, pointless activity that threatened everyday cognition. Sober cultural critics patiently critiqued and denounced the new past-time, but to no avail. The population was

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addicted. We were doomed.

I speak, of course, of chess.

Earlier today, my friend Bill Braine pointed me to a Q&A with the authors of the new book *Bad For You: Exposing the War on Fun*. It's a history of moral panics over things that, historically, kids enjoyed and adults hated. That includes the fare you'd expect, like comic books, video games, and Dungeons and Dragons. But what caught my eye in that Q&A was a reference to a moral panic over … chess:

> ***Cunningham:*** *Just wait. Each new wave of fear over the latest technology that interests kids is just that: a wave. The wave comes, it crests, and then it crashes against the shore and fades away. That's partly why we chose to create the timelines in the book, like Youth-a-Phobia or Fear of the New, to give a historical view of these hysterical reactions. But with the distance of time, all these panics start to look foolish and quaint..*
>
> ***Pyle:*** *Especially that "pernicious excitement" of chess embraced by children "of very inferior character."*

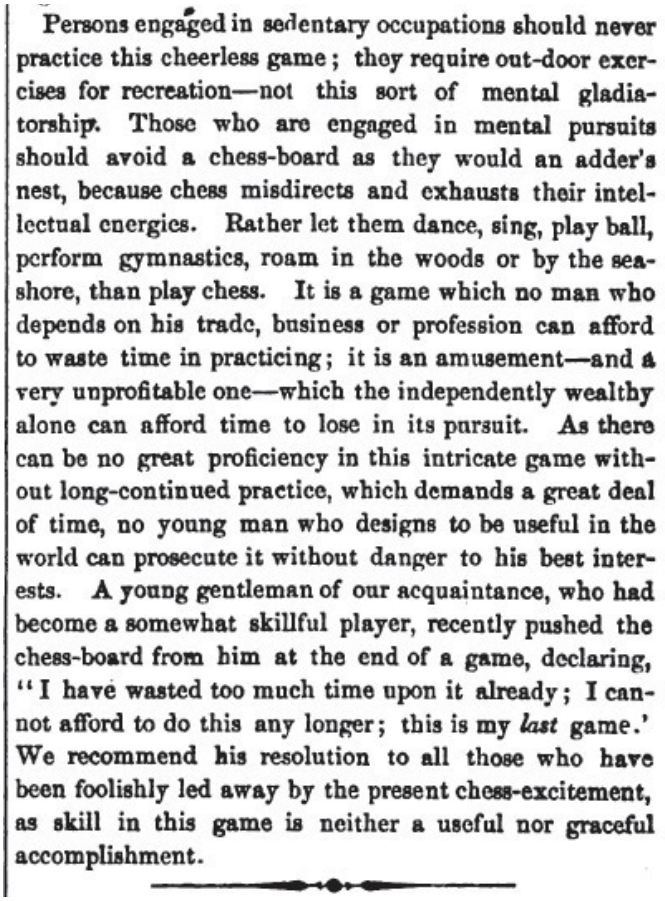
Chess as an "inferior" activity? I had to read this! And I had to read the original text. Thankfully a quick hunt on Google Books turned up the article they're talking about:

"CHESS-PLAYING EXCITEMENT", which appeared in the July 2, 1859 issue of *Scientific American*.

It begins by talking about how the US champion Paul Morphy had recently trounced his European competitors. But then the author goes on to bemoan the chess-playing of average Americans. It turns into such an awesome jeremiad that I'm going to quote it nearly in full, beginning with its complaint that ....

> *... a pernicious excitement to learn and play chess has spread all over the country, and numerous clubs for practicing this game have been formed in cities and villages. Why should we regret this? it may be asked. We answer, chess is a mere amusement of a very inferior character, which robs the mind of valuable time that might be devoted to nobler acquirements, while at the same time it affords no benefit whatever to the body.*
>
> *Chess has acquired a high reputation as being a means to discipline the mind, because it requires a strong memory and peculiar powers of combination. It is also generally believed that skill in playing it affords evidence of a superior intellect. These opinions, we believe, are exceedingly erroneous. Napoleon the Great, who had a great passion for playing chess, was often beaten by a rough grocer in St. Helena. Neither*

> *Shakespeare, Milton, Newton, nor any of the* great ones *of the earth, acquired proficiency in chess-playing. Those who become the most renowned players seem to have been endowed with a peculiar intuitive faculty for making the right moves, while at the same time they seem to have possessed very ordinary faculties for other purposes. A game of chess does not add a single new fact to the mind; it does not excite a single beautiful thought; nor does it serve a single purpose for polishing and improving the nobler faculties.*



Persons engaged in sedentary occupations should never practice this cheerless game; they require out-door exercises for recreation—not this sort of mental gladiatorship. Those who are engaged in mental pursuits should avoid a chess-board as they would an adder's nest, because chess misdirects and exhausts their intellectual energies. Rather let them dance, sing, play ball, perform gymnastics, roam in the woods or by the seashore, than play chess. It is a game which no man who depends on his trade, business or profession can afford to waste time in practicing; it is an amusement—and a very unprofitable one—which the independently wealthy alone can afford time to lose in its pursuit. As there can be no great proficiency in this intricate game without long-continued practice, which demands a great deal of time, no young man who designs to be useful in the world can prosecute it without danger to his best interests. A young gentleman of our acquaintance, who had become a somewhat skillful player, recently pushed the chess-board from him at the end of a game, declaring, "I have wasted too much time upon it already; I cannot afford to do this any longer; this is my *last* game.' We recommend his resolution to all those who have been foolishly led away by the present chess-excitement, as skill in this game is neither a useful nor graceful accomplishment.

Dude really didn't like chess.

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Here's the thing, though: We can chuckle at what seems like a nutty, off-base argument—except the author makes some extremely good points. Take, for example, the

argument that chess is too sedentary a past-time for people who were living increasingly industrialized and sedentary lives. This was true, and still is! We're now discovering that physical activity helps prime mental activity, and that taking walks in nature stimulates creativity. If you were a desk worker in 1859, finishing your work-week and then plunking yourself down at a chessboard—the video game of the day—for hours more of butt-planted, immobile cerebral activity probably *did* risk driving your mind into deep mental ruts. (Much as finishing one's 40-hour work-week of staring at a glowing screen, only to go spend one's leisure hours by staring at another glowing screen, is not exactly a recipe for cognitive diversity.) What's more, the *Scientific American* author is quite right that chess-playing prowess doesn't necessarily transfer to other domains. Play it as hard and well as you want, but it's not necessarily going to help you be smarter in other fields.

Even the idea that chess ensorcels its disciples into an addictive loop is not straightforwardly crazy either. A decade ago I interviewed several high-level chess players, and they all described the difficulty of trying to get the game out of their head. After a tournament, some would lie in bed unable to stop visualizing the pieces. (It sounded precisely like "Tetris head": Play that game obsessively and you start seeing the bricks in your mind while you try to fall asleep.) For really good glimpse of compulsive power of chess, read the opening few chapters of David Shenk's wonderful book *The Immortal Game.* ("Think of a virus so advanced, it infects not the blood but the thoughts of its human host," Shenk writes, going on to quote Einstein: "Chess holds its master in its own bonds, shackling the mind and brain so that the inner freedom of the very strongest must suffer.")

So what's more interesting here isn't the critique of chess. It's the yawning cultural gap between the author and our own age—evinced in the behaviors we applaud and revere. Today, chess is regarded as a deeply virtuous activity, because it supposedly helps develop a Jedi-class

control over one's attention. But laser-like focus wasn't always regarded as such a terrific thing. As my fellow Message writer Virginia Heffernan wrote a while ago, many people in the 19th century found deep powers of attention and focus kind of creepy and unhealthy. Go too far in that direction and you wind up like Ahab in *Moby Dick:* Focused, sure, but also a total obsessive. This is precisely the perspective from which this *Scientific American* author denounces chess. Too much focus, too much devotion and sitting down, can be bad for you. Who's to say that's not a healthier balance?

Chess may not have changed over the years, but *we* certainly have.