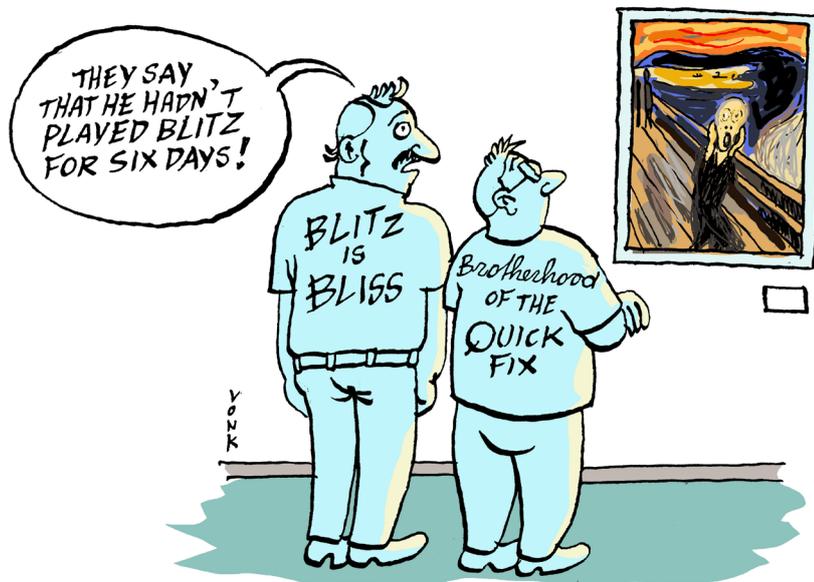


# Is Blitz a drug?

Or a fun playground where a lot can be learned?



It's so good that sometimes we wished it didn't exist. Who hasn't played blitz for hours and hours and wondered: Am I an addict? Is this a drug? **JENNIFER VALLENS** takes a look at the dark and bright sides of speed chess and explains how getting your fix may fix your game.

**B**am! The slam of the clock, pieces are flying everywhere, hands flailing as one hand moves a piece while the other hand stands up pieces that have been knocked off the board. You are left with seconds on the clock, your heart is pumping out of your chest, your foot is furiously tapping. You are down a piece, you have a losing position *and* your king is exposed! But, then, in grease lightning speed, you see a way to sac your queen and throw your opponent off guard. He hesitates... and he flags! He lost on time, another one bites the dust! But there is little respite. In an automatic gesture the pieces are being put in the their starting positions again, the clock is reset. The only follow-up for a blitz game is... another one!

## Intoxicating

You don't often put the words fast, noise and mess together when you are discussing chess. But speed chess is a different animal altogether. In blitz, as speed chess is commonly called, the drama of an entire game – or even more – is compressed in a time span of literally minutes. There are more mistakes and blunders and many classic chess rules are thrown out of the window. Small wonder, as in the most popular time rates

you only have 3 or 5 minutes for the entire game. Or slightly more if you play with increments of a couple of seconds per move. Or even far less, if you play bullet, which allows you only one minute for a game.

The pounding of the clock and the mess of the pieces on the board is often combined with boisterous trash talk that charges the air and often draws attention from a crowd. The energy of the crowd, the thrill of the moment, the fear of flagging and the potential of dramatically crushing your opponent, can be intoxicating.

Playing blitz can certainly bring up the same feelings one might associate with methamphetamine, commonly known as speed. This isn't a coincidence. When you are racing the clock playing a game of blitz or bullet, your heart rate starts to increase, your palms get sweaty and as the adrenaline pumps throughout your body, the feel-good chemical dopamine is being released, causing you to feel, for lack of another word, high.

### Insanity, passion and addiction

Playing in front of a crowd may be the ideal setting for the excitement that blitz can create, but – as most of us know only too well – many more people play speed chess in the confines of their own home, behind a computer screen. The flying of the pieces may not be present and the cheering of the crowd is lost, but the adrenaline rush remains. And some believe it might be more addictive to play blitz online.

As English GM Danny Gormally, the author of *Insanity, Passion and Addiction: A year inside the chess world*, a book dedicated to his chess addiction, wrote to us: 'Having speed chess available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week only adds to the temptation to play "just one more game". The problem is that while a chess club that exists in the real world will have to close at some point, online chess never closes.'

US chess blogger and chess coach,

Michael Aigner, opines: 'Speed chess hooks a player just like a good video game. When you lose, the natural temptation is to press the "Play Again" button and start over.'

And conservative columnist and political commentator Charles Krauthammer said about chess: 'It's like alcohol. It's a drug. I have to control it, or it could overwhelm me.' He felt the danger more acutely than ever when he started playing on the Internet Chess Club. In an article in *Time Magazine* in 2000, he famously described the ICC as 'It's so satisfying it should be illegal.'

These days the ICC is one of many online websites where chess players can get their fix 24/7. Chess.com, Chess24, Playchess and Lichess are just as popular or even bigger, and there are many more.

But they all create a permanent blitz environment that for many users is too good to be true. Mike

**'The ICC reports that the most played speed chess games on their site of all time by one user is over 640,000 games.'**

Klein, Director of Content for Chess.com, recalls having a member write to him asking him to lock him out of his account because he couldn't control himself to stop playing on his own.

The ICC reports that the most played speed chess games on their site of all time by one user is over 640,000 games. The most bullet games played on their site is by a WFM who goes by the user name lollipop and has played a total of 327,645 games.

## Popular time-controls

Chess.com gets between 8,000 and 10,000 new members a day. The number of games that are being played is staggering. A total of more than 2 billion games have been played since 2007, a memorable mark that was passed this summer. Not surprisingly, the faster time-controls prove the most attractive. Here is a list of the most popular time-controls and the number of games played with them over a recent period of 24 hours. (10/0 means, ten minutes per game per player, no increment; 5/5 means five minutes per game per player, with a 5 second increment per move).

10/0	498,000		
5/0	377,000	2/1	63,000
3/0	335,000	15/10	50,000
1/0	282,000	5/5	50,000
3/2	71,000	30/0	46,000

On Chess.com, launched 12 years after the ICC was founded, the most active user goes by the name of Peace-MyFriend. He or she has been a member from 2007 and so far has played 262,207 blitz games. The most active titled player on Chess.com is gmjoey1 (Rogelio Antonio from the Philippines) with 97,213 bullet and 32,685 blitz games. Is this too much? What is too much?

### Instant gratifying reward

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) added Internet Gaming Addiction as one of the potential disorders that need to be treated. The APA explains that Internet gaming activates reward systems similarly to using drugs. The euphoric feeling when you win a match or unlock an achievement is the same as getting high, as both activities trigger dopamine releases in the brain. When addicts get engrossed playing

online games, certain pathways in their brains are triggered in the same direct and intense way that a drug addict's brain is affected by a particular substance.

There are even hospitals across America, China and Korea which help people suffering from gaming addiction. Statistics show that 10% of all 30 million gamers in China are addicted to online gaming. For the US, data from the American Medical Association shows that 15% of all gamers, or approximately five million people, are addicted.

The allure of speed chess then isn't about playing the best move. It isn't about the beauty of the position,

**Nakamura states 'Blitz is just getting positions where you can move fast. I mean it's not chess.'**

the brilliant attack or the depth of calculation. It's a cheap thrill, a shot of adrenaline, an instant gratifying reward.

The effects of an adrenaline rush increase manifold. The more you play, the more you get. Because bullet chess is played with one minute on the clock, you are getting a spike in dopamine every minute, opposed to blitz, which could be every 10 minutes. The problem is that you start to build up a tolerance to it and you need to play more to get the same high.

English IM and commentator Lawrence Trent acknowledged: 'When I play speed chess I definitely experience a rush. It's a testosterone booster for sure. I really, really enjoy playing bullet chess online. I have

played tens of thousands of games and still get the urge to play, a lot. Though I've calmed down compared to a few years ago, bullet, for me, is the ultimate thrill. I still get a kick out of flagging someone in a lost position, or saving a game when I am busted, or even just playing a great attacking game in such a short period of time.'

WGM Jennifer Shahade, who is also a poker player, commentator and author, looks at it from a broader perspective: 'The rush of seeing your rating go up or down online may make online blitz even more addictive, but I also think that over-the-board blitz and bullet is addictive. It's fun and tactile, and late night blitz and bullet sessions are actually an important staple of improving a player's diet. It keeps chess fun and leads to lifelong friendships.'

And, of course, the fastness of it all already provides a kick in itself. In 2013, Hikaru Nakamura and Bruce Harper released a book on the fastest form of speed chess, *Bullet Chess: One Minute to Mate*. The first line of the first chapter of their book is: 'Experienced players will likely spend less than a minute on this chapter, but that's the whole idea of bullet chess, isn't it?'

### Detrimental effects

The issue of addiction is one potential threat of playing a lot of speed chess. But the question of whether playing a lot of speed chess can damage one's slow game, is also a matter of concern for many. One of the fiercest critics of the detrimental effects of blitz was Mikhail Botvinnik (1911-1995) and one gets the impression that the oft repeated condemnation of fast games by the father of Soviet Chess had a huge impact. Even in the last decades of the 20th century official blitz competitions among the chess elite were a rarity.

Many chess purists did not or do not consider speed chess as chess, but merely as a variation of the game. While classic chess is about deep

## The World of Chess

With 188 member federations, FIDE is one of the biggest sports organizations in the world. The global strength of chess can be gleaned from the following figures that Chess.com provided: the number of players from the most active countries that played on their website over a recent period of 24 hours. The second figure indicates how many of them were titled players.

1. United States	304,066	701
2. India	90,928	43
3. United Kingdom	46,796	38
4. Russia	43,738	137
5. Canada	37,895	72
6. Norway	25,628	32
7. Spain	25,434	56
8. Mexico	24,272	15
9. Germany	24,115	80
10. Philippines	23,432	30
11. France	23,181	68
12. Australia	22,442	44
13. Brazil	22,124	59
14. Turkey	21,720	23
15. Italy	21,086	38
16. Netherlands	20,857	68
17. Indonesia	14,998	13
18. Argentina	13,930	27
19. Ukraine	13,009	73

strategies and out-thinking your opponent, speed chess is mainly about time and the pressure that is created when you have so little of it. People play because the rush of crushing an opponent under ruthless conditions is exciting, as well as the unpredictable outcome that keeps one on the edge of their seat. And they get, perhaps unexpected, support from the blitz maverick himself, Nakamura, who states 'Blitz is just getting positions where you can move fast. I mean it's not chess.'

### Raising the stakes

Playing blitz for money adds to the excitement of the game. While Nakamura commented that he thinks blitz is without question addictive, he

added with a smirk, 'and when you raise the stakes and play for money, it only becomes more fun.'

Asa Hoffmann, a New York FM and chess teacher, who features in the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, made a living off playing blitz games in the 1960s, \$5 at a time. Now 74, Hoffmann told us that his longtime friend Bobby Fischer 'would only play blitz for money and would play for odds 10-1 or in some cases 20-1 and he hardly ever lost a game.' He remembers how he once played Bobby at the Henry Hudson Hotel in New York, a 20-1 odds blitz game. Hoffmann unexpectedly won the first battle that day throwing Fischer off with the Evans Gambit, shocking all that watched, including Bobby himself. 'Bobby annoyingly fished out \$1 bills out of his pockets to pay up. Bobby wanted to play again, but he no longer had even a dollar to ante up. We all staked him so that we all could play Bobby more games. We continued to play, with Bobby winning most, if not all the games after that.'

Fischer once remarked that 'Blitz

chess kills your ideas', but just like most great champions he was a formidable blitz player. His win at the Herceg Novi blitz tournament in 1970, where he scored an unbelievable 19/22 against the world's best and finished 4½ points ahead of Mikhail Tal, remains one of the most legendary blitz feats of all time. And it wasn't only about being quicker than his opponents. According to Tal, his American rival barely made any mistakes.

### Rook odds

For our current World Champion, Magnus Carlsen, blitz can be both an awful lot of fun and a very serious matter. The fun part was manifest in one of the most stunning bets in modern chess. At the end of the 2015 Sinquefeld Cup, as the players and other guests were relaxing at the St. Louis Chess Club, Carlsen played a blitz match with the already mentioned Lawrence Trent, offering the English IM rook(!) odds in 3-minute blitz. Carlsen bet Trent he would score 4 points from 10 games. Trent couldn't believe it – and who

could blame him? – and eagerly accepted the challenge. But after 9 games, Carlsen, starting with a rook down, had already scored 4 points! Indeed, the crowd at the club went crazy. How special this feat was, was proven by Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, who immediately offered Trent the same bet and lost all 10 games.

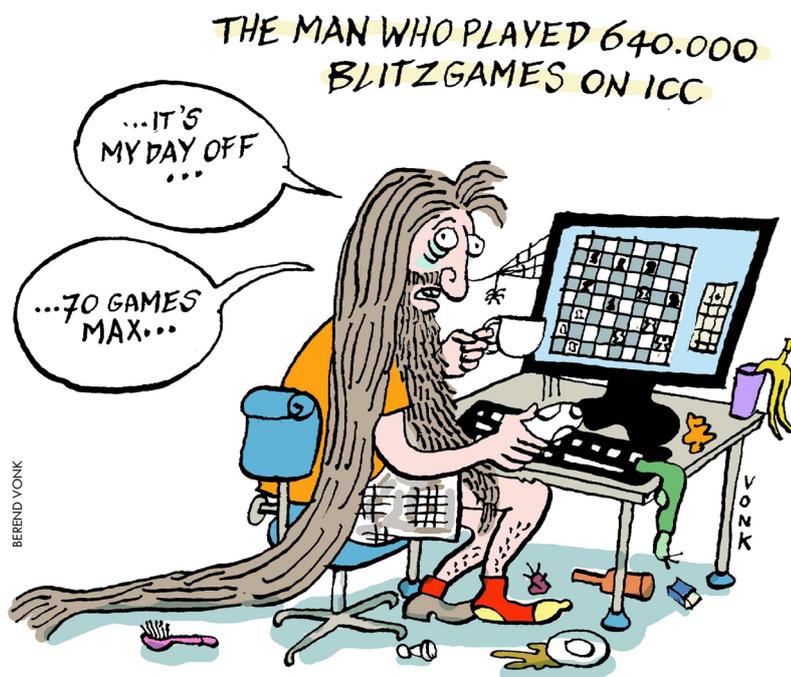
How seriously Magnus Carlsen takes blitz chess was once again shown in his Champions Showdown match against Chinese number one Ding Liren, that is reported on elsewhere in this issue. And his fanaticism has been seen numerous other times when the Norwegian took part in major blitz championships. It wasn't for nothing that he was one of the first to sign up for the upcoming Rapid & Blitz World Championships in Riyadh.

### Training tool

Many prominent players believe that blitz is not only great fun, but also an adequate and useful training tool. One of them is Sergey Karjakin, Carlsen's challenger in the 2016 World Championship match and the current Blitz World Champion. The Russian grandmaster says that he doesn't play a lot of blitz, but that when he does, he takes it very seriously. He affirms that when he was younger, playing blitz online was certainly fun, but also useful. 'Back then you could play experienced, strong players like Alexander Grischuk, who may play you blitz, but might not be willing to put in the time for a classical game.'

Alexander Grischuk has won the Blitz World Championship three times. After his third victory in Berlin in 2015, he told Chess.com that he is better at playing blitz games than slower-paced contests. And if it was up to him the faster chess disciplines would be much more important, perhaps he wouldn't even mind if classical chess was abolished.

The current number 2 in the overall world rankings certainly



doesn't want to go that far, but Levon Aronian also insists that blitz can be useful if you take it seriously. He himself plays blitz to keep in shape. As in his case it can be difficult to find a player of similar strength, he usually arranges set matches against strong colleagues online.

The use of blitz as a training tool is echoed by many others. Judit Polgar, Hungarian Grandmaster and arguably the strongest female chess player of all time, said in a Perpetual Chess podcast interview that she played tens of thousands of blitz games when she was little as part of her training. She further commented without question that if she was starting out today, she would be playing lots of online blitz on a daily basis.

GM Maurice Ashley remembers back in the day playing blitz for 12-14 hours non-stop on a Friday night till the sun came up. He and his friends would also play Friday-Sunday, stopping only for naps and food (and the occasional shower). His opinion is that to play well over 100 games in one sitting can be a test of one's mental toughness.

### The boons of blitz

One of the biggest advocates of blitz, both as a passion and a way to get better at chess in general, is Maxim Dlugy, the former number 1 of the now defunct World Blitz Association, originally founded by the late Walter Browne, a lifelong promoter of blitz. The 1985 Junior World Champion thanks playing blitz for his being good at chess. In his 2017 book *Grandmasters Insides*, he even devotes a whole chapter to the pros of using blitz as a preparation tool for chess improvement. According to Dlugy, here are just a few key benefits of how playing blitz actually helps your chess play:

- Blitz helps you learn to make decisions faster
- Blitz lets you try out new openings

and ideas without being afraid of the result

- Blitz allows you to practice lots of chess without going to serious tournaments.

Another benefit of playing blitz as part of your training program is that it allows you to work on time control. NM Dan Heisman, author of eight chess books, advises that when you play speed games, you should use the same increment or time delay as your important games. He insists that this trains your brain how much leeway you have each move when your time runs short.

### When to quit

Speed chess, however, is not for the weak. Frustration and anxiety abound. Blunders and mouse slips happen frequently. Time forfeitures in winning positions are frequent as well. Depth of calculation is compromised. Blitz encourages unsound risk taking. You entice mistakes in others and reinforce bad habits when you are playing quickly for traps. These strategies work well in fast games, but can be detrimental if you rely on them for slow games.

But good or bad, knowing when to quit is paramount. There is no question that being addicted to blitz is not nearly as destructive as, say, being addicted to gambling, smoking or even extreme sports. The chances of you losing your house, getting arrested, injured or jeopardizing your health from playing blitz are unlikely. But if you find that you start to neglect your hygiene and forget to shower or if you are constantly calling in sick to work, begin to lie to your spouse, or, heaven forbid, develop bad habits that affect your slow game, then it might be time to call in the professionals!

Bottom line is, too much of anything is bad. It is all about moderation. Some players find they can stop with little temptation to continue. Others have to take extreme measures to quit. If you are simply trying to recoup lost

rating points, much like a poker player on tilt, then you probably need to stop. Nakamura voiced 'if you're winning a lot of games on the board *and* the clock, you know you're on form. But if your wins are primarily on time in a lost position, then it might be time to quit and preserve your rating before the tide turns against you.'

### Excessive and addicted

But really, isn't having a dependence or being addicted to something only considered bad, unhealthy or problematic when it interferes with your daily living? Many people describe their marathon sessions playing blitz as a state of flow. A study was conducted in 2010 and concluded there was a difference between an excessive gamer and an addicted gamer. They had two players who spent an equal amount of time 14 hours a day gaming. The difference was the motivation, experience and meaning in gaming. The addicted gamer experienced withdrawal once he was away from the game. Over time, he had developed dependence to gaming, creating conflict with his life. The excessive gamer didn't experience any withdrawal. He did not neglect responsibilities and even met his girlfriend through online games.

The study supports the argument that Internet Gaming addiction, and in my opinion, blitz, can be similar to drug addiction, but only to the extent of the symptoms such as withdrawal, mood changes or negligence. If the rush of playing speed chess becomes a compulsion and interferes with your daily life, causing you to no longer enjoy playing, then by all means, quit. But losing track of time and being able to spend hours doing something that brings you intense joy and may even improve your chess game, how bad can that be?

Anything can be addictive if you are predisposed to it. If you have an addictive or obsessive personality and speed chess provides your fix, then the good news is, at least it won't kill you. ■