

The Impact of COVID-19 on Chess in South Africa

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Abstract

In this chapter I address the question of the way that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic with its new normal and social distancing, impacts the sport code of chess in South Africa. This pandemic has already drastically altered the fixtures of numerous sport codes including the planned events and outcomes of some elite professional leagues. Chess as an Olympic sport code, although more amateur in South Africa, offers benefits across the socio-economic spectrum in terms of administrators, players, coaches and referees (arbiters). I employ an auto-ethnographic case study methodological approach, which enables one to draw on ‘personal and experiential data,’ for example, my own observations and experiences as a chess player and administrator. Amidst the uncertainty of the future and in anticipation of perhaps a large-scale devastation, the COVID-19 pandemic imposes the need for innovative and creative thinking to keep future aspirations of chess alive. Drawing on my lived experiences, I employ an auto-ethnographic approach to inspire hope for the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, chess ecosystem, over-the-board chess, online chess,

1 Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has sent shockwaves around the world, leading to a public health emergency that has killed thousands and plunged the global economy into what the International Monetary Fund warns could be the

sharpest downturn since the Great Depression (Hall 2020). Not surprisingly, COVID-19 has also disrupted the sporting calendar, with professional leagues everywhere suspending their activities to limit the spread of the virus. Even the Olympics which was scheduled for Tokyo 2020, typically one of the world's most-watched sporting broadcasts, has already been re-scheduled for 2021. The global value of the sports industry was estimated to be \$471bn in 2018 – an increase of 45% since 2011 – and before coronavirus stopped play, the only trajectory seemed to be upwards (Hall 2020). Now, every part of the sporting value chain has been affected, from athletes, teams, and leagues, to the media that broadcast and cover games.

There can be little doubt that COVID-19, lockdown, and social distancing have drastically affected the future of sport in the world as we have come to know it. As a sport executive member of a code and as a sports journalist within the sport community, I have experienced first-hand how our daily activities have been displaced into the virtual world, a reality that will inevitably become a feature of the sporting landscape of tomorrow.

Internet connectivity has become a cornerstone of our daily lives. From a sporting point of view, the coronavirus crisis has given new impetus and traction to being connected – with its advantages of instant access to online meetings and the exchanges of innovative ideas. This will advance sports meetings in previously unimagined ways, an exciting prospect that should inspire us for the road ahead.

However, the lockdown period has also highlighted two aspects that we should not lose sight of: the lack of internet connectivity that is still a stark reality for many people in our country and on the rest of our continent; and the light that human connectedness shines on the essence of our humanity in trying times. Volumes have been written about the high cost of data and the lack of internet connectivity over vast swathes of our country, and the impact of these realities on poor communities and the general advancement of our people.

Although many people associate playing chess with computers and hi-tech thinking, it does not necessarily mean that all chess players who normally play over-the-board chess have access to electronic gadgets and data. As a code, we have had to display some grit and innovation during the past few months to ensure that our code was not hampered by circumstances. The code has, by and large, been able to migrate successfully to online playing. Yet this has not gone without challenges as Kenny Willenberg (2020) a Lichess Online Chess organiser reported that only about 30% of the active chess-playing

community were exposed to and play online chess. Lichess is an online chess platform where anyone can play chess or register an account to play rated games.

Today whilst practising social distancing and experiencing lockdown as part of COVID-19 prevention, my thinking about the future of chess as an active over-the-board sport exclusively might have shifted. The question I set out to answer in this paper is: How has COVID-19 made an impact on the code of chess in South Africa?

2 Background

Before expounding about the impact of COVID-19 on chess in South Africa it would be useful to give a background about the chess environment and how the ecosystem of chess works in South Africa. Prior to 1994, the South African sporting system was organised along racial lines and many anti-apartheid activists adhered to the slogan – ‘No normal sport in an abnormal society’. The history of chess is documented, but during the apartheid era not much was written about people other than Whites playing chess. It has therefore become necessary to start talking not only about the history of South African chess and sport in decisively different ways, but also about the code in the future. As Brailsford pointed out that, ‘Ever since human beings began to live in organised communities, politics and play have been irresistibly entangled’ (Brailsford 1991: 45).

The first reference to organised chess in South Africa appears in *Men of Good Hope*, by Immelman (1955). According to Reitstein (2003:10), ‘in 1847 a chess club had the use of a room in the Commercial Exchange building’, situated on the Heerengracht in Cape Town. This was almost 20 years before any reference was made to the existence of a chess club in the country. The oldest chess club that still exists to this day since 1885 is the Cape Town Chess Club. However, this is almost certainly not the first club that was formed, as an unknown club met regularly at the Heerengracht in 1847.

Recently, I spoke with the stalwart of non-racial Chess in South Africa, Andre van Reenen (2020) and he told me that he played chess from a young age and officially joined the Salt River Chess Club in the 1950s. He recalls playing with club members Tape Adams and Jamiel Gierdien (SACOS chess stalwarts). They formed the Western Province Chess Association (the first non-racial chess association), of which he became the President in 1964. As a

youngster and a founding member of a chess club, I started playing for the Manyanani Chess Club established in 1976 in the township of Manenberg and today this club is the recipient of the African Club Champs trophy. However, the purpose of this chapter is not to expound the history of chess in South Africa nor to dwell on the plight of Non-White players. My brief is to critically discuss and unpack the impact of COVID-19 on chess in contemporary South Africa. However, it is worth pointing out that with the formation of the new democratic dispensation in South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and the ANC in 1994, chess, like other codes, also formed a new South African organisation called Chess South Africa or CHESSA, as some members would call it. All national codes of sport were then affiliated to SASCOC (South African Co-ordinating Council of Sport) which became the overall governing organisation that regulated and controlled all codes of sport under the Department of Sports and Recreation.

Chess as a national code is an affiliate to the World Chess Federation (FIDE, in its French acronym). FIDE was founded in Paris in 1924 and consists of over 150 delegates from national chess federations (Blanco 1999). FIDE organises competitions which takes place on a wide variety of levels. Chess events can have a municipal, state-wide, provincial, national, zonal, continental, or worldwide nature. Its championships also embrace all ages, from children (under 8) to senior citizens (over 60). The most prestigious event is the Olympiad that takes place every second year and the World Annual Grandmaster Individual Championship.

It takes a player years of chess practice and competitions to make his/her country's Olympic chess team. One South African Olympic player whom I interviewed recently (2020) took a two-year sabbatical from his studies and his work to train for the 2020 Chess Olympiad, but with the cancellation of the Olympiad because of COVID-19, he was left devastated.

It is not only just the game that has been suffering, but the entire chess ecosystem that has taken a beating. Many players, coaches, administrators and tournament arbiters were left without an income, adding to the extremely high percentage of joblessness and unemployment in South Africa. Coaches and professional players have no income. Regions, provinces and the national controlling body, Chess South Africa, has also been severely affected by this lack of any opportunity to generate income. Most importantly, the players cannot practise and improve their game. The unusual and sudden impact of COVID-19 checked the chess world and they had to find a way to move out of

this checkmate position. This paper describes an attempt to move out of check and to defend and to counter the attack of the impact of COVID-19 in a sequence that would protect the chess ecosystem.

3 Methodology: An Autoethnographic Case Study

This qualitative research is both autoethnographic and a case study. Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 8 - 10) summarize the characteristics of qualitative research in terms of five key attributes:

- a) reducing the use of positivist or post positivist perspectives;
- b) accepting postmodern sensibilities;
- c) capturing the individual's point of view;
- d) examining the constraints of everyday life; and
- e) securing rich descriptions.

These attributes are commonly exemplified in case study research. In this case study approach, I try to gain an in depth understanding of a situation and meaning for those involved (Henning *et al.* 2004: 41). In this case study design, the case is of importance and the interaction between the context and the case becomes the unit of analysis (Henning *et al.* 2004: 41). Given the focus on COVID-19 and chess in this study, the researcher aims to capture the reality of lived experiences and thoughts in this particular situation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2001: 182). Data-collection techniques used in this study included reflective and self-reflective accounts, documents and reports. Creswell (2014) suggests that conducting research in environments where you have a vested interest, it can be particularly challenging to analyse incidents of discrimination. When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about, amongst other things, epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. Auto-ethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyse their own experience, but also must consider ways in which others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illuminate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders (Creswell 2014). To accomplish this might require comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research

(Ronai 1995; 1996), interviewing cultural members (Foster 2006; Marvasti 2006; Tillman-Healy 2003), and/or examining relevant cultural artefacts (Boylorn 2008; Denzin 2006). In this auto-ethnographical case study I, as an insider in the chess fraternity, specifically look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the chess community and how this community intends to respond.

4 How Serious is COVID-19?

Guys, I have decided to share some of my thoughts on the situation right now. I have been very involved in looking after patients with Covid and, unfortunately, I have seen the worst of it in the ICU at Vincent Pallotti. This illness will be mild for the vast majority, but in anyone with risk factors it can be a death sentence. I can tell you that all of our critically ill patients have been diabetic, hypertensive and obese. Some have also been asthmatic. Covid does not hold back in these patients. It does not follow the normal rules. For the patients in the hospital who have not survived, they had walked into the hospital and said goodbye to their families, remaining in hospital for 2-3 weeks and dying alone. No visitors are allowed in any of our hospitals right now. We haven't even reached our peak yet and my colleagues in the state sector describe full ICUs. It will only get worse. So, after painting this picture, I urge you to think twice if you are gathering on Eid or any other time thereafter. Remember, even if you are just meeting direct family, all of you have different exposures and the bigger our gatherings the greater the risk. Look after yourselves and Stay Safe!

From Nabeel Bapoo (Physician/Nephrologist Cape Town) 22 May 2020.

Since this advice by one of our local community doctors, the number of deaths related to COVID-19 has spiked. By (24 June 2020) we had 9 million cases in the world with about 470-000 deaths recorded (COVID-19 SABC 2020). Presently in South Africa 100 000 cases have been identified with an estimated amount of 1450 deaths (SABC 2020). South Africa initially tried hard to flatten the curve of the infections by imposing strict stay-at-home regulations and proclaiming compulsory social distancing and the wearing of masks as part of country's new normal. On 26 March 2020, COVID-19 Alert Level 5 was instituted and a month later this was followed by Level 4. On 1 June 2020 South Africans went into Level 3, with schools being partially opened and some professional sporting codes such as rugby, cricket, soccer as

well as some elite individual athletes were allowed to practice. With the opening of schools in South Africa, there has been a spike in infections amongst educators and learners, resulting in the forced closure of numerous schools. As part of Level 3, places of worship, such as mosques, churches and synagogues were also allowed to have gatherings limited to 50 congregants. Most places of worship opted to remain closed to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Alcohol was initially banned in Levels 5 and 4, but since the selling of alcohol was allowed under Level 3, there has been a spike in violence and accidents due to alcohol abuse. Smokers have been the hardest hit as tobacco sales have been banned, and since 25 March 2020 the cost of a packet of cigarettes has increased from R30 a packet to R230 a packet in the black market. Although a maximum of 50 mourners are allowed to attend burial ceremonies, there have been sad cases of certain people not being allowed to see or visit their family members before they die. What exacerbated the COVID-19 threat was its economic impact, which resulted in loss of income due to job retrenchments and unemployment for many thousands of people. This vividly outlines the seriousness and the devastation of COVID-19. Chess is a recognised sporting code in South Africa and in the world, and numerous people are employed under its wing. Thus, the effect of COVID-19 has been felt in all spheres of society including a game of chess.

5 Checking the Code of Chess Over the Board!

One of the advantages of chess is that you can easily play online unlike other physical contact sport codes such as rugby or soccer. However, migrating from over-the-board play to online chess entails virtually a complete overhaul of the chess ecosystem. The current online play unfortunately does not add much value to the longer game and it also does not sustain the whole chess ecosystem.

Before discussing the new proposed online system, let us first look at the ecosystem of chess and see how it was disrupted by COVID-19. The chess ecosystem of South Africa consists of players, coaches, administrators, tournament arbiters and other entrepreneurs such as sponsors and parents of junior players. Prior to COVID-19, all chess activity took place over-the-board (OTB) and at the annual South African Junior Championships (SAJCC) for example, you will have over 2500 registered young players playing. These players ranging from Under 8 to Under 20 attend this annual event with their

coaches, parents, and administrators. The event is organised by an international organiser and the tournament is supervised by numerous tournament arbiters. Participants are compelled to stay for at least 7-10 days at specific accommodation arranged by the organisers. At senior level we have the South African Open or the World Olympiad where participants also stay for a lengthy period and the financial gains for all stakeholders, are massive. The amount of revenue and income generated is huge for the chess organisers and their various components. The knock-on effects of COVID-19 spells devastation for all who are involved in the chess code, but especially so for the individuals who derive an income from the code.

Competitive chess players normally start playing at schools, tertiary institutions and clubs. Once they excel, they go on to represent their schools, institutions and clubs at various competitions and events. In South Africa you can represent your province, region, district, club or school, or you can participate as an individual in numerous competitions. One of the biggest drivers in the chess ecosystem is rating. Players at a tournament can generally be divided into two groups: those who want to improve their game by improving their rating, and those who are at the top and who cannot gain more rating points but desire other incentives like prize money. In the end, it comes down to a trading system where rating is at the centre of it all. The one group of players are prepared to pay a fee for the opportunity to gain rating points and the other group is willing to risk and lose rating points for the opportunity to win prize money. The chess ecosystem cannot function effectively without games being rated. For players to improve their play and their rating, they are coached, and this comes at a price. A professional coach can earn anything between R500 – R1000 a session. After discussion with a seasoned coach, I discovered that a coach earns about R10 000 – R40 000 per month in South Africa. Players with titles, Candidate Master- CA, FIDE Master – FA, International Master – IM and Grandmaster - GM are paid to play or represent their respective regions, provinces or countries. A player who reaches GM status in chess enters events without paying a fee and if s/he walks away with the prizemoney, it can be a lucrative affair. For coaches and players to thrive in the chess fraternity they need competitions and events to be organised by event organisers and tournament arbiters.

Event organisers and tournament arbiters (chess referees/ umpires) earn regular incomes of thousands of rand monthly. They also get the opportunity to host international or continental events where they attract big

sponsorship. The International Chess body FIDE gives them added accolades by sometimes employing them at prestigious world-class events including the Chess Olympiad. Event organisers and tournament arbiters get graded and become International Organisers (IOs) or International FIDE Arbiters (IA's).

6 Online Chess as a Saving Grace!

Currently the chess ecosystem finds itself in the grip of a challenging situation. To alleviate the crisis and to assist and guide the SA chess ecosystem, South Africa has assembled a committee to investigate the feasibility of including online chess games in the Chess SA rating system. In launching online games as opposed to over-the-board competitions, one can anticipate many teething problems and unforeseen challenges. Initially a new online chess vocabulary had to be introduced. For example, firstly, an organiser is an individual or organisation that organises a tournament. Secondly, a platform handle is the pseudonym a player uses on an Online Platform that hides his/her real name. Thirdly, Online play takes place when a player plays against an opponent over the internet or network on an electronic device. Fourthly, an online platform is any system that provides for online play.

Amongst the advantages of playing online are the following (Du Toit 2020),

- a) competitive chess could start again, whilst OTB is prohibited;
- b) the players can actively work to improve their game;
- c) organisers, coaches and players can start to earn a living again;
- d) entry fees could be cheaper because of fewer overheads for organisers;
- e) tournaments with longer time controls over several days could be more viable due to absence of accommodation costs and the elimination of travelling costs;
- f) It will allow the remote regions to attract more players and get exposure to the top players; and
- g) selection tournaments can take place again.

It is crucial for this system to be credible and have the support of the chess fraternity to be successful. Initially there will be a leaning more towards being conservative through abiding by the rules of some of the commercial platforms.

The objective of going online is to simulate as closely as possible the pre-COVID-19 playing ecosystem. In principle, the entire process, from the tournament being publicised until it is rated, must be as close as possible to the over-the-board scenario. The only major difference is that, instead of playing at a common playing venue, the two players can play from their homes.

According to the proposed policy, the objectives are:

- a) To mainly serve the SA chess community and extend it to other countries if needs be;
- b) To create a fair playing environment and prevent cheating;
- c) To create an environment to support the South African chess ecosystem; and
- d) To make participation cheaper.

Whilst the objectives of the proposed South African Chess Policy appear quite straightforward, the main challenges facing online play as opposed to over-the-board play have to do with the fair play policy. How do one know that an online player is not cheating? Amongst the challenges are the following:

- a) The players can be illicitly assisted by an ‘engine’ or any electronic means,
- b) The player can consult any material during the game,
- c) The player can be assisted or consult with any other person,
- d) The player impersonates another player,
- e) The player submits incorrect or false information,
- f) The player is playing with two or more accounts.

In order to promote fair play online, numerous discussions and online workshops were held, from which a number of proposals emerged. Players needed to have a Federation Internationale des Echecs (FIDE) Identity and instead of a pseudonym, the real name of the player must be used as it would be easier to find in Zoom for the arbiters. The International Chess Federation (FIDE) is the governing body of the sport of chess, and it regulates all international chess competitions.

Prior to the actual event organisers must inspect the playing area, check and supervise their screen and see if there is no chess base or other

equipment that might assist the player. It will also be forbidden for players to leave their seats during a Blitz online game. FIDE defines Blitz chess as time controls between 5 and 10 minutes per player.

There was also a suggestion that arbiters make use of red cards and yellow cards. After two yellow cards, a player can be given a red card and automatically lose the game. One Zoom call will be acceptable for 50 participants. In other words, one arbiter cannot be responsible for more than 50 participants. A disconnection will automatically result in a spoilt game. Thus, the proposed online Chess SA policy, which is at present still a discussion document, was geared to outline the rules for online chess and perhaps serve as the saving grace for chess in the immediate future.

According to the President of Chess SA, Hendrik Du Toit (June 2020) there is a lack of online organising experience in the country and, even though it seems far-fetched, there is now a dire necessity to get the chess players to play during lockdown. This is especially important if we intend keeping the ecosystem viable.

Although there appears to be no end in sight yet for the national lockdown and for when society might return to normal, players and coaches should use this time to move beyond their comfort zones (Willenberg 2020). A more virtual and digital approach will have to be adopted. In a recent article on social media the Western Cape Chess President, Andre Lewaks (June 2020), explained that before the lockdown, the Western Cape was the biggest and the most active province in the country based on the national ratings in South Africa, but this will soon count for nothing if the players don't compete. He thus advocated for online chess as it will serve as a saving grace.

7 The Manyanani June 16 Online Blitz Tournament

To experience the challenge of online playing, the Manyanani Chess Club decided to host an online chess tournament. As the club hosted this event annually as part of the Western Cape chess calendar, permission was granted for the club to go ahead with the online tournament. This June 16 Youth Day event was always commemorated to honour the death of Hector Petersen during the Soweto uprising of 1976. A feature of the tournament was that it was always held in a township area to attract poorer communities and to highlight the injustices and inequalities within sport. Although it was acknowledged as a recognised annual event, it was not that popular amongst

the previously advantaged in society. Strategically, it was intended mainly to cater for the poor and because of its low prize money for the winners, it did not attract the players who boasted high chess ratings.

This year's inaugural open online tournament was advertised and entrants for the tournament were received up until just before the commencement of play at 15h00 on the day. Reflecting on the occasion, the same tensions I experience before and during the organisation of a normal over-the-board chess tournament I also experienced during this online tournament. A few minutes before we started play, as an organiser and arbiter, I still had to direct players via my mobile phone on how to link to the tournament that was held on the Lichess platform.

I also experienced the same tensions during the actual play as I joined the platform and participated as a player. After 2 hours of 5-minute Blitz chess, Keith Khumalo – name handle on Lichess – South African Wolf – with an International rating of 2450 won the tournament. The prize money of R1500 was transferred to him immediately after the online prize-giving ceremony.

One of the winners was disqualified because the treasurer of the tournament committee discovered that he had produced a fake payment receipt. After interviewing a few participants and spectators, I realised that this online lockdown tournament was a resounding success. There were many positives; players were stressed out and their adrenalin running high, but the recorded jokes and conversations on the club's WhatsApp chat group indicated enjoyment.

8 Implications for Online Chess as Opposed to Over-the-Board Chess!

Allow me to unpack my experience both as a player and organiser of this event and chart the way forward for chess during COVID-19. As an organiser, I arranged for the advertising by social media via the national, provincial and regional bodies. The advertising was only one day as organisers were sceptical about holding the online competition. We invited players through our media contacts and eventually received responses from 50 participants. The normal annual event attracts 250 players. The reasons for the low turnout included the following.

Lack of Professional Marketing and thorough Planning.

Back in 1776, Benjamin Franklin (1992) who recommended chess as a life skill also reminded us in one of his famous quotes, ‘By Failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail’. In sampling this tournament, we wanted to incur as little expense as possible. We used our own social media connections and we advertised for only one night. We did not get the active support of the national, provincial and regional federations as the tournament was not given the rigorous publicity as initially intended. Some of the members on our committee believed these federations wanted to control the marketing and regulate income. The federations also did not want to market a local club as being the first online event organiser, as this might undermine their authority. While these were sentiments expressed by a few individuals, it is worth mentioning them. The point is that buy-in from all the parties involved is essential for successful marketing.

Lack of Enthusiasm for Blitz Online Chess as Opposed to Classical Over-the-board Chess

Most of the traditional players still prefer the over-the-board style of play. Blitz chess is a quick format of play. So, a 5-minute blitz as opposed to a normal 3-hour game is not in any sense a compromise for your traditional player. This player wants to make a move and maybe sip on his/her coffee, walk around the playing arena and then return to make a carefully calculated and measured move. Most of the fanfare, the socialisation and atmosphere of meeting real people over-the-board are absent from the online blitz format.

Lack of data and competent online equipment

Most of the players have a mobile phone but they cannot afford to buy data bundles. Some players professed that they were busy – on a lockdown June 16 public holiday – but the real problem was probably that they did not have the finances to pay to play or to purchase data to pay for their entry. Normally development players (economically challenged players) are transported to a tournament and given food and free entry. This does not equal to paying an entry fee, forwarding it to the organiser and then to get a mobile or a computer to join the online competition. Thus, the economically challenged players are even more hampered during online competitions.

Lack of Knowledge and Information Regarding Online Play

Some players were too scared to play online as they lacked the basic technological knowledge to get themselves equipped to play. Getting the link to Lichess, paying the online registration fee, and making a few online calls proved to be too much of an effort for some players. Normally their coaches or managers would do everything for them. So, a fear of the unknown and a little discomfort also impacted on the players' ability to apply basic practical knowledge to get involved in online play (Willenberg 2020).

9 Concluding Remarks

I started this chapter by stating how COVID-19 has impacted on and disrupted the sporting calendar, with professional leagues everywhere suspending their activities to limit the spread of the virus. I then gave a description of the background to the chess world and how the chess ecosystem works in South Africa. This was followed by a discussion and an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the chess fraternity. Many players, coaches, administrators and tournament arbiters were left without an income, adding to the extremely high percentage of joblessness and unemployment in South Africa. COVID-19 challenged the chess ecosystem and so Chess SA became proactive, took the initiative and assembled a committee to investigate the feasibility of playing online chess games. The challenges of online chess were experienced when the Manyanani Chess Club initiated and hosted an online chess tournament. The outcome of the online tournament gave the organisers, including myself, deeper insight into, and a more practical understanding of, the challenges associated with online chess games. Players and organisers had to adjust and adapt to the conditions of playing under strict COVID-19 lockdown rules. A further outcome was that we learnt of a decline in participant numbers due to the lack of technological knowledge and information about online play and a lack of data and online equipment. Online playing is new and learning new rules and online skills can take people out of their comfort zone and creates a certain amount of anxiety. So, despite the advertising and online marketing, and even some positive feedback, players and spectators preferred the over-the-board competitions and the socialisation aspects of playing chess.

It could nevertheless be concluded that, in the absence of chess being played over-the-board, COVID-19 has produced a positive outcome. It has presented an opportunity for virtual technologies to grow. But the future of chess will not be without challenges, as politics and play remain part of being human. Allow me to conclude by quoting Grandmaster David Shenk (2007),

‘Chess is rarely a game of ideal moves. Almost always, a player faces a series of difficult consequences whichever move he makes’.

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