

Chess Historians and their Definitions of Chess

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It is easy to quarrel on the sense or non-sense of definitions of `chess', especially as definitions make it possible to include or exclude about everything into the category of `chess'. It seems sensible to set up a catalogue of criteria, in order to be able to decide whether or not a given [board] game is ``a predecessor of chess" or ``no more a chess game"². - In August 1998 the Förderkreis Schach-Geschichtsforschung started a poll amongst researchers working on the early and earliest history of chess. They were asked ``What do we actually mean, when we use the term CHESS in speaking or writing?". Fifty people were asked, 28 replied. The definitions they sent have now been published as ``Arbeitspapiere Enquete Definition `Schach' ". The results of this poll will be commented upon.³

The text length of the definitions varies greatly. Beginning with short and concise definitions of four lines (Awerbakh), up to four pages (Seidel, Meissenburg), every length can be found. But not all of those asked have really offered a **definition** of the term ``chess", e.g. Wakankar and Syed explicitly refer to *caturanga*⁴, Sankarnarayan presents a collection of early Indian sources on board games. Linder talks about *Proto-Chess*. Some of the definitions aren't really definitions: the question quoted above just cannot be answered with ``When we speak and write `chess', we generally mean the game of chess." The same is true for other texts as well: Schädler explains the problems of defining ``chess": in certain situations it is necessary to distinguish between types of chess.⁵ Dietze just describes what the game of chess (and playing it) mean to him; Kramer categorizes chess as a *rule-ordered tactical and strategical game*.

Apart from that we are presented with different catalogues of criteria to delimit what ``chess" is. As soon as a game has certain named properties it is deemed a chess game. Some of these definitions (Ditt, Friedrichs, Pratesi, Seidel) refer to FIDE chess, but call the development towards it as the `main line' and concede that there are branch lines or suggest a model of concentric circles in whose centre resides FIDE chess. Here (dis-)similarity with FIDE chess is the yardstick.

Not all of these go as far as Ferlito who states: ``... all these past definitions of Chess are *obsolete*. We all must refer to the Definition of Chess given by FIDE". For him thus chess is the game played according to the FIDE rules of 1996. Questions of chess history cannot be tackled with such blunt instruments.⁶ This problem is shared by all those definitions that have been written with one special form of chess in mind. Including e.g. a special board design into the definition means declaring all games whose board does not conform to be non-chess games. Thus: a board for FIDE chess that isn't chequered isn't a chess board. Persian chess *catrang*, and Arab chess, *shatranj*, (both games and their descendants being mostly played on single-colored boards) would not be chess, but games similar to chess; even though even the most

tireless critics attest that both are immediate predecessors of FIDE chess. Strictly speaking both games couldn't be classified as 'similar to chess' as some of the definitions do not offer any criteria to decide if a game is similar to chess. The English version of the FIDE chess rules contain the pieces' names. What to do if we speak about chess in a foreign country? Do the different names of the pieces make FIDE chess, let's say in Germany, not FIDE chess? Of course that is an easy-to-solve problem, but that would mean that some of the definitions would have to be revised.

Some of the definitions comprise - instead of the goal, FIDE chess - the supposed point of origin. Either expressly or tacitly the idea that the earliest predecessor of FIDE chess⁷ originated in India is part of these definitions. The hypothesis of an Indian origin of chess games is the most widely propagated and best researched idea on the origin of chess, but it is still unproven. Furthermore there still is problem whether the question of the origins of chess is solved as soon as the oldest chess game has been found. Isn't it true that the origins and development of chess must be seen in context with the history and development of board games in general?⁸ Only when this hypothesis of an Indian origin of chess, through being backed with further source materials and proof, and has become a Thesis, we can begin to formulate Theories: and a theory of the origins of chess **must** be able to explain the origins of *all* chess games and their genealogies. If and how *caturanga* and e.g. the earliest Chinese forms of chess games are linked is still unanswered. What if we can't prove (or disprove) a connection? Should one ignore the blatant similarities between the early forms of Chinese chess, *Xiangqi*, and *caturanga*, and reduce chess history to the "History Of What Was To Become FIDE Chess (67th FIDE Congress [Yerevan])"? If that had been the intention, it had been better to openly state it...

At least the definitions show that chess historians currently do not speak the same language. The different catalogues of criteria are not so much the problem, the differences between them are mainly gradual. The authors of those definitions aimed at a certain specified chess game ought to answer the question whether their main interest is "exclusion" instead of negotiating a common basis for further research and communication.

Definitions can be instruments of research to help classify an object, an idea, a phenomenon. But they can be weapons as well: weapons used by researchers against other researchers, in order to defend one's darling working hypothesis against 'dangerous' opinions. Anyone using a definition as a weapon cripples the scientific value of his work and of its results.

All in all the answers to the question "What do we actually mean, when we use the term CHESS in speaking or writing?" are very instructive. On the one hand they show the span of what chess historians understand by "chess". On the other hand I learned that I must have misunderstood some chess historians when reading their works: what they actually wrote and spoke about was not what I thought they were writing or speaking about. Manfred Eder, the publisher on behalf of the Förderkreis Schach-Geschichtsforschung, in his introduction deplores that most of the definitions are "technocratic-descriptive"⁹ and do not answer the "intended search, focusing on the historic question as to the origin of the game - as described in the task-outline."¹⁰ In contrast I think that 'descriptive' definitions are the most promising attempt to get a grip on the manifold forms of chess games during their development. Eder is right in stating that this publication ought to start anew the discussion on the topic of defining chess in a historical context. Discussion hadn't better not been arrested in this state of discussion. - In his comments on this publication Eder says he hopes that the definitions in this publication might be scientifically polished off. Thereby he

(surely unintended) questions the seriousness of the ``Enquete''. Supposedly none of those who worked to formulate a definition of chess did that rashly or thoughtlessly, in spite of the necessary critique. Their work deserves just appraisal.

The publication is devoted to the memory of Prof. Joachim Petzold. Perhaps a more placable and less impugnable work would have been more appropriate.

Footnotes:

¹ Already the mixed German/ English title shows that portions (roughly more than half) of this publications are in German.

² It may come as a surprise to chess enthusiasts, but I do not think it a special honour to declare a board game a chess game. The category ``chess'' (better ``games of the chess type'') only denotes a class of structurally similar board games. - Anyone who deems chess to be a single game, FIDE chess and its immediate forerunners of course needn't discuss hat chess is.

³ All quotations are from the work under review. Page numbers have not been provided as the texts are quite short.

⁴ Wakankar strictly refuses to deal with a definition of ``Chess'', but deals with *caturanga*: ``and not CHESS - which is not a purely Indian word''.

⁵ His refusal doesn't solve any problem (and it doesn't become clearer what chess is).

⁶ Chess following the FIDE rules of 1996 originated in 1996, even if it had itsforerunners...

⁷ The true meaning of course being ``... and of all chess games''.

⁸ Even if we accept that *caturanga* developed out of military sand tables: the next question should be `How did that happen?' Has something inspired that metamorphosis? Was it inspired by another [board] game? By which [board] game? - Are these questions part of chess history or not ...

⁹ In my opinion this is unnecessarily polemics.

¹⁰ This sounds a little more aggressive than in the German parallel text. Here it says: ``... die auf die eigentlich gesuchte entstehungsgeschichtliche Kernfrage eingehen, auf die unsere Ausschreibung ausgerichtet war.'' (... that delve into the central issue of genesis, which our question was aimed at.) In my opinion the `task-outline' does *not* ask for opinions on the origin of chess.