

# The Moves that Matter

## A Chess Grandmaster on the Game of Life

In the summer of 2008, **JONATHAN ROWSON** helped Vishy Anand prepare for his World Championship match against Vladimir Kramnik. In a fragment from his new book *The Moves that Matter*, Rowson remembers how he was confounded by the question how many cores his laptop had. 'I will never forget that feeling of being an analogue creature, floundering in a digital world.'

**T**here is a story of Mahatma Gandhi boarding a train that had just started to pick up speed. When one of his sandals fell off in the process of embarking, he instinctively removed the other one and threw it down, so that somebody else would find them, and have a pair to wear. No despair at the loss, no befuddlement, just a clear action grounded in compassion for a person in need whom he had not yet met. Many of us might see the wisdom in the act, but only several moments later when it would be too late.

My Ph.D. thesis was a sustained reflection on what we can learn from that kind of story, of which there are many. The aim was to consider wisdom not as a folksy construct relating to sage advice, but rather to try to understand how we might better become ready, willing and able to help others in complex or charged situations.

Most doctorates have a clear, narrow and specific research question within a single discipline, but I had no appetite for that. Through chess I had already tasted domain-specific expertise and shared it widely in writing; and what I really wanted to understand was the broad transdisciplinary question of what it means to become wiser.

The thesis involved lots of reading and conceptual wrestling, and trying to make sense – partly through my own meditation efforts – of what exactly is supposed to transform through spiritual practice. In the end my examiners were satisfied. My main supervisor, Professor Guy Claxton, remarked that while he had

hoped my thesis would become more like a carefully curated wedding cake, he was happy that I had produced such a delicious bowl of spaghetti.

In the summer of 2008, I was a few months from finishing the thesis. As fellow doctoral survivors will know, it's not easy to write between 80,000 and 100,000 coherent words that represent something resembling a contribution to knowledge. But I was in the home straight, and had set 5 November 2008 as my delivery date, partly because this was the day Barack Obama was expected to be elected the first African American president. I figured if I was going to be distracted by the political drama

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of the time – which I was – I should also be motivated by it. I was not yet aware that I would be a father the following year, but it was in that life context of beginning to detach from the chess world that I had the privilege of helping world champion Viswanathan Anand prepare for his match with Vladimir Kramnik.

Kramnik is figuratively and literally a Russian giant who dethroned Garry Kasparov after his twenty years at the top. Anand won the official World Championship in a tournament format around the same time, but years of tedious chess politics meant that these two players had never met in a match. When it became clear that the chess world was going to get the contest it wanted, I offered my services to Anand. I was a strong middleweight Grandmaster rather than a heavyweight, but analytical help is about more than chess strength. Unlike many hired guns, I had some lateral perspectives on chess, an easy rapport with Vishy, and I genuinely wanted him to win. The plan was to offer a few opening ideas for him to develop and some speculative psychological insight for him to ignore.

I was also eager to participate in preparation at the very highest level. I had no experience of World Championship preparation, but I had read descriptions of other matches from the seventies, eighties and nineties. Most of those matches were in pre-computer or early computer days, and what I assumed might be a slight shift in emphasis was much more fundamental. I imagined that the training would be part over-the-board analysis session, part inquiry into the psychodynamics of competition, and part *Rocky IV* training montage, where Sylvester Stallone lifts huge blocks of wood and runs through the snow. I expected the training to be roughly 20 per cent physical, 20 per cent psychological, 30 per cent joint analysis over the board and 30 per cent on the computer.

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In fact, the work was about 95 per cent on the computer, and virtually all of that time was spent trying to help Vishy form new ways of achieving good positions in the opening phase of the game. Just as finding a needle in a haystack is easy, if you have a metal detector, finding an important new chess move is easy, if you have the right software. Analysis engines can give an immediate numerical assessment of what is happening in a position, including which move is best, who is better placed and by how much. These engines are our guide, and Grandmasters are like knowledgeable and eager tourists, asking informed questions to yield unconventional insight.

The camp, as chess players call their training venues, was Vishy's main European base, a smallish two-bedroom apartment just outside Frankfurt in Germany. The only sign of chess as such was a half-forgotten set on a coffee table near the window. I was accompanied by the Danish Grandmaster Peter Heine Nielsen – Vishy's long-term adviser, now working for Magnus Carlsen, and the former FIDE world champion Rustam Kasimdzhanov, who hails from Uzbekistan but had been resident in Germany for several years. The three of us got on well and stayed at a nearby hotel.

In general the morale of the group was high, and during breaks we watched comedy clips on YouTube. On most days there was a group jog in the morning including some steep stairs, but it was a little ad hoc, and then there were some musings about



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In chess circles, Rowson is probably best known as the author of the modern classics *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins* (2000) and *Chess for Zebras* (2005). His new book, *The Moves that Matter*, is not a chess book, although it is clear from the subtitle, *A Chess Grandmaster on the Game of Life*, that chess plays a prominent role in the sociological and philosophical ideas that he expounds.

match strategy over lunch, which we usually ate in a Thai restaurant about ten minutes away. *The work* however, happened as the four of us sat around the same table in our own worlds for several hours in a dimly lit room late into the night. The scene was like a Silicon Valley incubator house: humanoids with transfixed faces lit by the glow of computer screens. Onlookers would not have been able to guess what we were doing in that room.

We typically listened to Coldplay from Peter's computer, a benign cheering hum with occasional blasts of euphoria, which grew on me. I introduced the Israeli vocalist Yael Naim to Kasim's delight, though Vishy protested when I tried to play Tracy Chapman for the second time. I made just enough warm drinks for the team to remind ourselves we had bodies, but stopped short of being a *chaiwala*. I noticed that at the end of each day Vishy would eagerly go to the kitchen to clean up and thereby unwind from the chess and his computer screen, which I came to realise were more or less the same thing for him.

Mostly we followed the best ideas according to the analysis engines with what Vishy joked was 'space-bar preparation' – when the analysis engines are synchronised with the position you are navigating, rather than move the pieces on the screen with your mouse, you press the space bar to keep the engine going down the line it deems to be most accurate for both sides, while watching it unfold on the position on the screen. It is a kind of thinking, I suppose.

You do pause occasionally to consider alternatives the computer might have mis-assessed. Humans are much weaker than computers now in general, but they operate differently, so you develop a feeling for where the computer's evaluation function (who has the better position, by how much) or horizon (how far ahead it looks) might not

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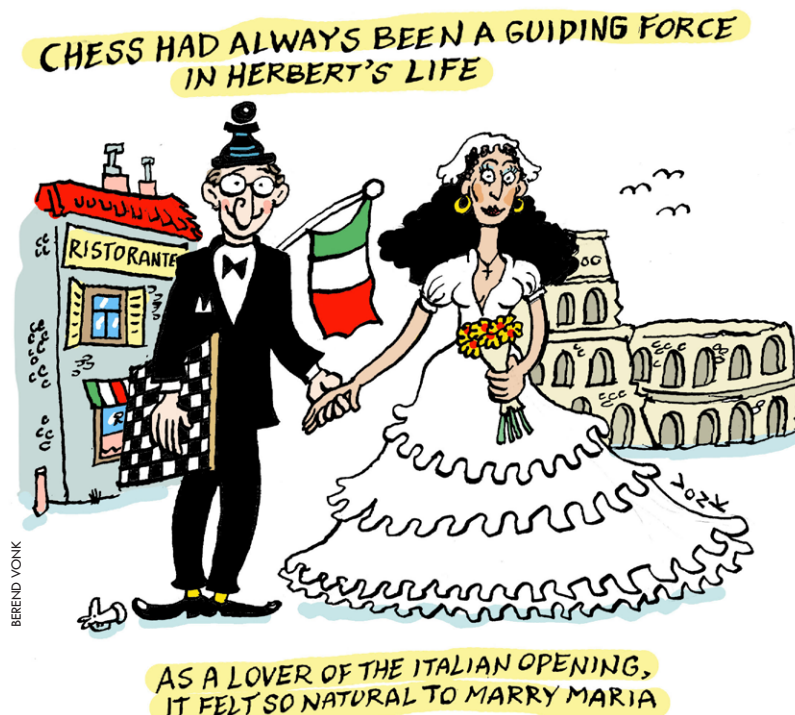
capture something a Grandmaster can. Periodically you add a little textual comment for the next person who may build on your work and then email the analysis to the group.

We did debate contentious ideas and assessments of particular positions over the table, but mostly this was a prelude to stresstesting ideas in more depth with the computer. We would go back and try a range of plausible ideas and watch to see if the evaluation changed; a signal to look further for hidden details. At one point, feeling frustrated with my inability to make a dent on a particularly solid line, I got up to consider an idea on the actual chess set at the far end of the room under the main

window. I remember Peter smiling at me sympathetically but also incredulously, as if to say: 'If only it were that easy.'

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I witnessed the monotonous practice that precedes the magical performance. I was there when the groceries were bought and the dishes were washed. There was no heightened drama, just slow-burning determination, gentle discipline and professional friendship. The experience was precious in the way that



going on a pilgrimage or running a marathon can be precious. It was a short pause in everyday existence, and a memorable plunge into another stream of life.

As for my contribution, I'm fairly sure I did not do any harm, and may even have helped a little. Vishy won the match decisively, not least because

It felt like work and it felt like the future, but not, I hoped, my work, or my future.

To give an illustration of how far the experience deviated from my expectations, I was in two minds about whether even to bring my computer to the training (a basic Sony Vaio laptop I had used for

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the team as a whole (which included some other Grandmasters from India and Poland) succeeded over several months in developing a completely new repertoire for Vishy as White, based on a different first move – 1.d4 rather than 1.e4; the queen's pawn two squares forward rather than the king's pawn. That small difference entirely changes the nature of the game, creating different pawn structures calling for different strategies, and circumventing much of the opponent's preparation. An analogy would be a tennis player going into training for several months and emerging capable of serving well with either hand; a capability he only reveals in the final match against an unsuspecting opponent.

We succeeded in keeping that crucial first-move surprise a secret on the basis of personal trust, without any heavy-handed non-disclosure agreements, which is impressive given the high stakes. It was also clear to me that Vishy is impressively organised, and manages to generate an arsenal of chess information that is codified, relevant and valuable. So I was transfixed and impressed, and intrigued by the whole process. But at a professional level I was more alienated than inspired. This screen and data-intensive process was not chess as I have come to know and love it.

years). Very soon after arrival, before a pawn had been pushed, Vishy asked me: 'How many cores do you have, Jon?' (I prefer being called Jonathan, but had never told him this.)

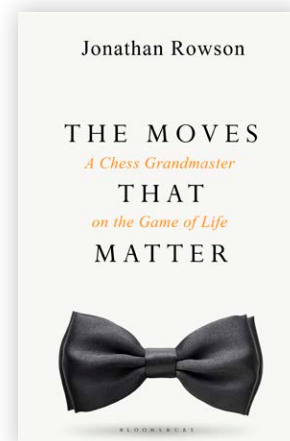
'Oh, I'm not sure,' I said, which was clearly not a reassuring answer. Vishy talked me through finding the relevant details on my computer. When he saw it on my screen he paused ruefully and said: 'Oh, Jon has only one core.' Kasim and Peter looked at each other, a little troubled. I had no idea what was going on, but it was as if I had arrived at the border to a new country, only to learn that my passport was not valid.

Vishy looked mildly ruffled but said it did not matter, because it was possible to connect to online analysis engines – a mysterious notion at the time because I had never done that before, but it was a source of hope too. Alas, I then had painfully mundane problems relating to getting the wi-fi to work, and realised I was slowing the team down. I maintained a professional face, but inwardly I was approaching one of those childlike moments of absolute humiliation.

Mercifully, everything was soon sorted, and it was like finding water in the desert. For the first time I started looking at positions with a four-core analysis engine (which, at the time of writing a decade later, would be

considered pretty slow). Your cores are about your processing power, and speed matters because it saves a lot of analytical time. The faster the engine the quicker it can search ahead and determine which lines are good and bad before you get there manually. That filter helpfully narrows your own search process down to only those lines that are worth pursuing, and before you know it you can tell which opening lines are critical and ripe for analysis, and which are in some sense solved. That's important for the team because you can all trust each other to be looking at lines that matter; you know that if you're asked a question about a position it won't be a waste of time. Tactical details that arise almost by force several moves downstream are often hard to see coming for a human, but they are spotted almost instantly by the computer, changing the evaluation of that line before you need to explore it. It was only because I was literally up to speed with the others that I could enjoy several productive days at the camp.

But I will never forget that feeling of being an analogue creature, floundering in a digital world. ■



*The Moves that Matter: A Chess Grandmaster on the Game of Life* by Jonathan Rowson, is out now, published by Bloomsbury Publishing. Hardcover, 352 pages.