

# Project Syndicate

## Fast and Slow in “The Queen’s Gambit”

Dec 31, 2020 **KENNETH ROGOFF**

*Super-fast computer programs and massive databases have had a profound impact on professional chess in recent years. But, despite the threat of cheating, the game is currently in remarkable creative and economic health – not least because it is fantastically suited to the online world.*

CAMBRIDGE – In the brilliant and hugely successful 2020 Netflix miniseries *The Queen’s Gambit*, the chess prodigy Beth Harmon (played by Anya Taylor-Joy) polishes off her male opponents with style and speed. Because the story is set in the 1950s and 1960s, there are no cell phones, social media, or computer chess programs. Life was slower then, as it again seems to be nowadays during the pandemic.

In the 1960s, anyone who wanted to develop a deep knowledge of the game had to pore through tomes like *Modern Chess Openings*. To learn the latest variations coming out of the Soviet Union, where most of the best players were, there was no choice but to wait for *64* magazine to arrive on a slow boat from Moscow, and then navigate the Russian.

Based on a 1983 novel by Walter Tevis (author of *The Color of Money*, *The Hustler*, and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*), *The Queen’s Gambit* has a simple premise: What if the American chess player Bobby Fischer – one of the all-time greats – had been a woman? (Tevis, who prided himself on constructing characters from his own imagination, was lucky that his book came out just before the emergence of the amazing Hungarian chess-playing sisters Judit, Zsuzsa, and Zsófia Polgár, whose real-life story would make an even better film.)

Most of the Netflix series hews closely to the novel and strives to be faithful to both the period and the game. The director, Scott Frank, even enlisted former World Chess Champion Garry Kasparov and legendary chess coach Bruce Pandolfini to ensure that all the games in the series were authentic.

Whereas the novel describes Beth as winning with a spectacular queen sacrifice – a rare and exciting event in chess – *The Queen’s Gambit* portrays an actual game in which this occurred. The big game in the seventh and final episode of the series also follows a real match, except for a spectacular finish checked against a computer for accuracy.

Some have complained that it was unrealistic to cast someone as beautiful as Taylor-Joy to play Beth, and that no chess player would have worn such amazing outfits. But Fischer himself was quite good-looking as a young champion, and appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1971. He also took great pride in his well-tailored suits, partly to show off his success and partly to appear the consummate professional.

One area where the series does take artistic license is the speed of play. Theatrically, it is hugely effective, making the snippets of the games much more fun to watch. It helps also that Taylor-Joy taught herself to move the pieces with incredible fluidity and authority, as if she had been a professional chess player all her life. In contrast, real-life championship chess is incredibly slow. In their famous 1972 world championship match, Fischer and Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union used a time control that allotted just under four minutes for a move, with most of the games taking several hours per session.

Nowadays, the idea of such a slow and deliberate pastime seems anathema to many. Why think hard when you can just ask the computer? Why remember tedious variations if you can look them up? Super-fast computer programs and massive databases have had a profound impact on professional chess in recent years, but the game is currently in remarkable creative and economic health.

That is partly because chess is fantastically suited to the online world. The website chess.com has been enjoying a boom of [100,000 sign-ups](#) per day in the wake of the Netflix series. Play Magnus Group, a chess-focused technology firm founded by current world champion Magnus Carlsen, recently conducted an IPO that valued the company at [\\$93 million](#) – a far cry from the \$100,000 prize that Fischer and Spassky played for in 1972, even controlling for inflation. And tens of millions follow world championship matches online, compared to the modest hall at the US chess championship where Beth plays (influenced by the 1975 US championship in Ohio that [Tevis attended](#) and in which [I competed](#).)

The biggest problem posed by computers is that players can use them to [cheat](#). So far, chess organizers have mostly managed to stay ahead of the cheaters in what amounts to an arms race, using computer algorithms to check whether a player's moves match up too improbably to those of any leading computer program. But it is an ongoing challenge. One solution, which appears to be becoming a trend, is to speed up play sharply.

There have been calls for a second season of *The Queen's Gambit*, and Taylor-Joy has [suggested](#) she would do it. Unfortunately, there is no second book on which to base the script. Tevis, who, like his main protagonist Beth, suffered from substance abuse, died in 1984, soon after his novel was published.

In any case, a sequel is unlikely to be as uplifting as season one. Spoiler alert: the two greatest American chess players in history – Fischer and, a century before him, Paul Morphy – suffered breakdowns after decisively proving themselves the best in the world. Morphy mumbled to himself as he wandered the streets of New Orleans, while Fischer became a bitter recluse who spent his last years in Iceland, the only country that would let him in. I would rather just rewatch season one.