

MAY I HAVE THE ENVELOPE, PLEASE

The Lost Art of Adjournments

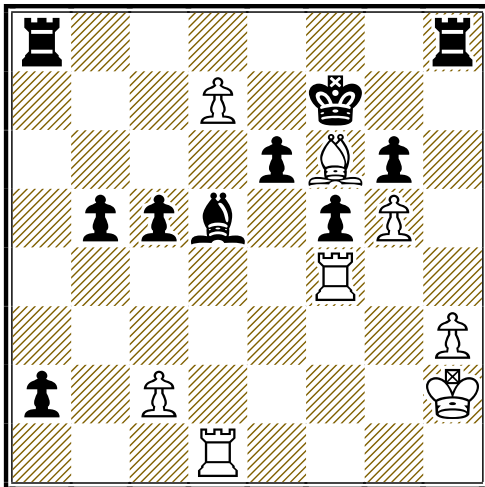
By GM Lev Alburt and NM Jon Crumiller

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August 10, 1972: a decisive moment in chess history. The “Match of the Century” was unfolding with ever-increasing drama. Boris Spassky had scored a big win over Bobby Fischer in Game 11 by refuting a critical line in Fischer’s Poison Pawn Sicilian, and was striving to reclaim momentum coming down the home stretch.

<i>THE PAST</i>	<i>THE FUTURE</i>
<i>A close look at the grand history of adjournments</i>	<i>Could adjournments still work in today’s computer era?</i>

Which leads us to Game 13: the wildest game of the match. Fischer shocked the chess world by playing Alekhine’s Defense, 1. e4 Nf6, and soon won a pawn against his startled opponent. Spassky responded as champions do, and built up strong positional pressure as compensation. The two heavyweights battled furiously as their precious time ticked away. Finally they reached move 40! The time control. One additional move was played on each side, and the following position was reached.



Position after 41. ... Bd5

Let’s take stock of the moment. If the Match of the Century were magically teleported into today’s world, this game would have continued unabated. And the rest of the game would still have been exciting, sure, but just to be realistic: with very limited remaining time available to each player, then as Savielly Tartakower once quipped, “The winner of the game will be the one who makes the next-to-last blunder.”

But that’s not what happened. Instead, Boris Spassky deliberated carefully, then wrote down his next move, a secret move, and inserted it into a specially-prepared envelope. The extreme tension has not been released, but merely postponed: the game is adjourned and will resume tomorrow!

The time between adjournment and resumption has always been a hectic mixture of adrenaline, euphoria, and panic. The two combatants (and their teams) worked through the night, trying to decipher the hidden themes, tactics, and surprises in this wildly complex position. Meanwhile, chess fans around the world spent countless hours trying to predict the upcoming moves of the game, trying to uncover the truth, or at least a small fraction of the truth, within the position. Variation after variation, each with brilliancies and blunders, were analyzed on thousands of chessboards across the globe.

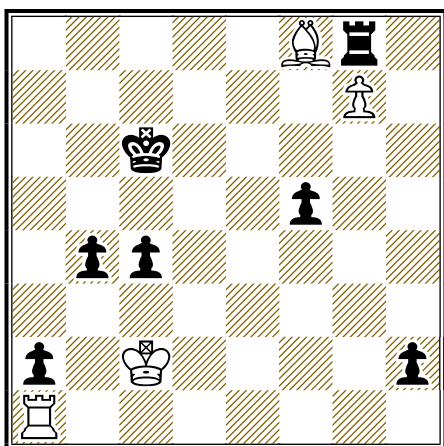
GM Lubomir Kavalek recalls the tense analysis: "The adjourned position was a minefield, requiring utmost care. One line emerged as the most practical in our analysis. The play was straightforward, but there were a few roundabouts. We reached the position with Bobby's rook arrested on g8 by White's pawn and bishop. Spassky's rook had to cope with Fischer's five pawns, but it seemed that Boris would be able to do it. The black king could be cut off from crossing the d-file. Did we hit a snag?"

'Bobby...' I began. He got the whiff of what I was about to say and intercepted me: 'Don't worry,' he said confidently, 'I just push the h-pawn and get in with the king. Anyway, we are too far.' We had already strayed some 20 moves away from the adjourned position and there were many branches and trees of variations we had not covered. So we looked back and checked as much as we could. It was daylight when I went back to my room."

But time runs short: the bell sounds, and the hour of resumption has arrived.

Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer take their seats. The envelope is torn open, and at last, Spassky's secret sealed move is revealed and played on the board: 42. Kg3. The clock is pressed; now it's Fischer's move.

The rest is history. Fischer played 42. ... Ra3+ and the players soon reached an unprecedented ending: White's rook battling against Black's five advancing pawns. Spassky stumbled—a "fatal check," as it was called by his Soviet colleagues—and Fischer's pawns broke through to win the game.



Position after 62. ... Kc6. Spassky played 63. Rd1! to cut off the Black king, but Fischer broke through with 63. ... b3+ 64. Kc3 h1(Q)! 65. Rxh1 Kd5, although Spassky could still have drawn with accurate play.

century. From local tournaments and club championships all the way up to the Candidates' matches and World Championship matches, any lengthy games were adjourned as a matter of course.

Spassky Seals Move No. 42 In 13th Game With Fischer

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG
Special to The New York Times

REYKJAVIK, Iceland, Aug. 10—Perhaps refreshed after writing a sizzling letter of complaint about playing conditions, Bobby Fischer today played a strong game against Boris Spassky in their world championship chess match.

The position was adjourned with Spassky, playing the white pieces, sealing his 42d move of the 13th game in the match.

In the opinion of most experts, Fischer had a victory again, though there were some who maintained that Spassky still had drawing chances.

plaining today, but after yesterday's game he sent a letter to the referee, Lothar Schmid, complaining about noise and distractions. The text of his letter, dated Aug. 9, is as follows:

"Sir: I most vigorously protest the excessive spectator noise in the hall today, and your failure to take proper action about it when I complained about it to you, and the failure of the organizers to heed several earlier complaints

New York Times coverage of the Game 13 adjournment

Years later, reflecting back on Bobby Fischer's career, Mikhail Botvinnik stated that Game 13 was "the highest creative achievement of Fischer." David Bronstein was equally effusive: "When I play through the game I still cannot grasp the innermost motive behind this or that plan or even individual move. Like an enigma, it still teases my imagination."

This grand and historical display of chess fireworks was made possible by the game's adjournment and resumption. But the excitement and importance of this moment were not unique. Adjournments were standard practice—indeed, they were the *only* standard practice—for virtually all matches and tournaments played from the mid-19th century up to nearly the end of the 20th

The Genesis of Adjourments

Back in the nineteenth century, chess was bold, daring, swashbuckling—and often extremely slow. Sometimes a player would cogitate for an hour or more on a single move. Such lengthy games would drain the stamina of both combatants, and a practical solution became necessary: to adjourn the game until it could be resumed with renewed vigor. So the players would take a time-out, sometimes for a few hours, sometimes until the next day, until their chess batteries were recharged.

On the highest levels, the practice of adjournments can be traced back to the Staunton–Saint-Amant match (Paris, 1843), which is still considered in some chess circles to have been the first, albeit unofficial, World Championship match. The time control was a maximum of thirty minutes allowed for a player to make a move; obviously this concept needed revision, as a 50-move game could have theoretically lasted for more than two full 24-hour days!

Adjournment of the final Staunton–Saint-Amant game is described in *Le Palamède*, the French chess periodical (as translated from the original French):

It was half past twelve. The spectators requested the halting of the game until the following day, with the Circle in the habit of closing at midnight. The second day had begun again for this laborious game, continued under the sun after a tiring night for all. The game was even abridged: the silence of meditation having shown that the game of White was entirely lost, even equal in pieces and pawns. (Le Palamède, 1844-Feb-15, p. 81)

Le Palamède's description of the time between adjournment and resumption is apt: "...after a tiring night for all... the silence of meditation having shown that the game of White was entirely lost..." Clearly, the players had worked through the night, fervently analyzing the position. Upon resumption, Howard Staunton won game-and-match, and cemented his reputation as the world's top player. All told, the game lasted 66 moves and 14½ hours!

The first major International Tournament in chess history, London 1851, also prescribed adjournments



An official prepares the adjournment envelope during the 1894 Steinitz-Lasker World Championship Match

in its Rules and Regulations: "One game at least to be played by each pair of combatants at a sitting, unless it be protracted above *eight hours*, when by mutual consent it may be adjourned to the next day."

Chess clocks and time controls would not be introduced for several more years. Only in 1856 did time controls begin to take on the format that we see today: a player has an allotment of time to make a specified number of moves. Howard Staunton, in his *Illustrated London News* column of October 18, 1856, applauded this new convention: "...[T]he plan adopted in the games by consultation at the St. George's Club is the best yet devised, which is to allow to each side a

certain time for a certain number of moves, leaving them to distribute this time as they think proper..."

Even with the gradual advent of time controls, the practice of adjourning games became standard convention for chess competitions on all levels, from local championships up to the highest-level tournaments and matches, including the World Championships.

How Adjourment Works

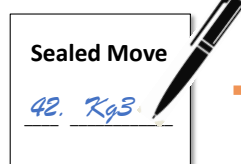
The process of adjournment and resumption consists of a well-defined sequence of steps, which are illustrated here in a simplified version:



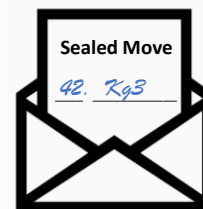
The time control has been reached; the game may now be adjourned.



An adjournment envelope is prepared with the game information and clock times.



One of the players decides his/her next move and writes it down in secret.



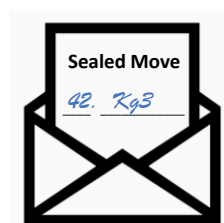
The move is placed in the envelope, which is then sealed.



The game resumes!



An official plays the sealed move on the board.



Upon resumption of the game, the envelope is opened.

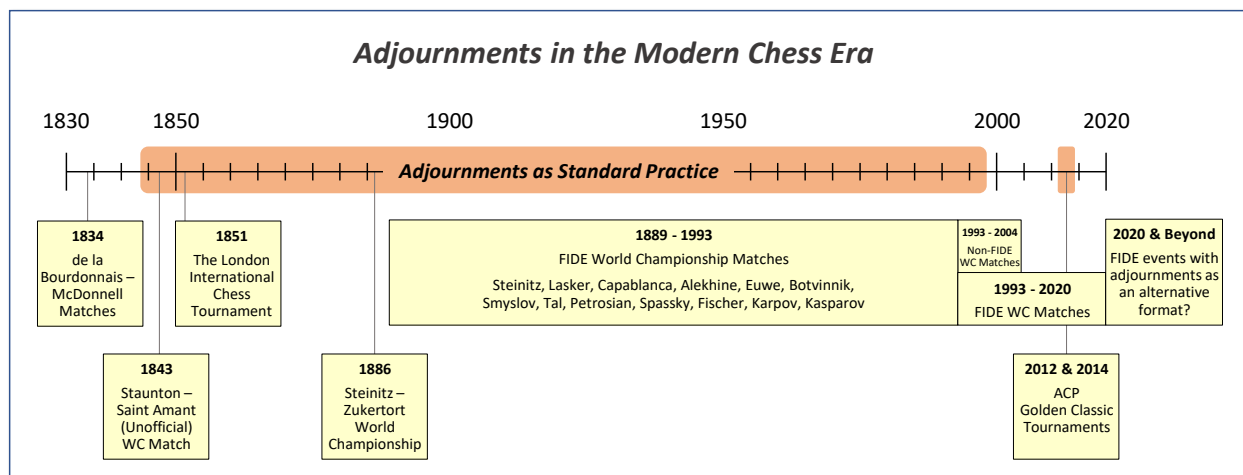


The sealed envelope is stored in a secure place until it is time to resume the game.

The complete set of rules for adjournment included conditions for both the number of moves and the time elapsed during the playing session, but the sequence of events shown above is sufficiently accurate to describe the adjournment process.

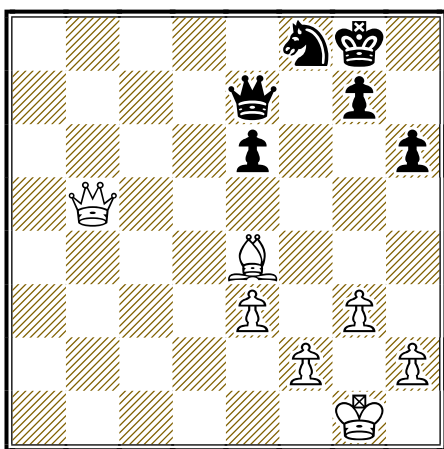
During Its Heyday

Across space, across time, and across all levels of chess strength, adjournments were woven into the fabric of tournaments and matches. Of course, it was on the highest levels that adjournment positions received worldwide attention. From Howard Staunton to Garry Kasparov, and all of the outstanding champions in between—Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine, Euwe, Botvinnik, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Spassky, Fischer, and Karpov—the contestants adjourned their games and studied the adjourned positions with fervor. Then upon resumption, they played according to their well-considered analysis, for a few moves anyway, unless and until their wily opponent had managed to steer the ship in an unexpected direction.



Some of the most famous and memorable moments in chess history were borne out of adjournments and their resumptions, especially when the World Championship title was at stake. And indeed the title was often at stake during the adjournment session(s) of the final game of the match. Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine, Spassky, and Fischer each won their World Championship titles coming out of adjournments in their final games. And retaining the world title can be as difficult as winning it in the first place. Karpov defeated Korchnoi in the 1978 World Championship match when the challenger resigned during the adjournment period without resuming the game; but Garry Kasparov faced the ultimate challenge during the final game's adjournment session in his titanic 1987 match with Karpov: he needed to win the game in order to tie the match and hold onto his title. And the position was very much in doubt. Could he win, or will Karpov be able to draw and regain the title?

Kasparov relives this critical moment. "The time scramble came to an end, and here the game was adjourned. White's extra pawn promises him winning chances. But is it possible to breach Black's defenses with the play on a narrow sector of the board? (Taimanov). My trainers and I studied the various possibilities of attack and defense, but we were unable to reach a clear verdict. The chances of a win and draw seemed roughly equal, although in practice it is far from easy to save such an endgame against a persistent opponent."



*The adjournment position
Kasparov sealed his move: 42. Kg2*

Of course the players didn't have access to strong computer engines in 1987, but it's an interesting and informative exercise to turn on a top computer engine and let it run for hours in this position. It turns out that the computer is not nearly as helpful as is generally believed. (We'll return to this observation later in the article.) Many positions, including this one, require deep strategic assessment—e.g. which pawn structure would provide Black with maximum drawing chances? How to attack and defend such structures? How can Black maintain his resiliency? It turns out that each pawn move, for either side, is highly committal and forever alters the dynamics of the position. But the computers assess each key variation, and there are hundreds of them, with a number such as +1.94,

indicating that “White is clearly better,” but often without any clear strategic guidance as to how to convert an advantage to a win.

In this historically critical position, after analyzing the plethora of available defensive setups—where should his pieces go, where should his pawns be placed?—Karpov chose to situate his pawns on g6 and h5. (The top engines prefer the pawn placement h6+g5, with an eventual assessment of +1.90, or an improvement of approximately .25 over the pawn placement g6+h5.) But the long-term strategic disadvantages of Karpov’s chosen formation outweighed the positives, and Kasparov was able to break down Karpov’s position, slowly but surely, to secure the win and retain his title.

Some adjournments from tournament play have also reached legendary status. The chess world held its breath to witness the adjournment and resumption of Bobby Fischer’s game against World Champion Mikhail Botvinnik in the 1962 Chess Olympiad, held in Varna, Bulgaria. Our man-on-the-spot Mikhail Tal describes the action:

“The most memorable event of the Olympiad was the resumption of the Botvinnik-Fischer game. The question of which team would take first place was already decided, but for this game chess fans gathered from literally all over Bulgaria. Everyone remembered the recent interview given by Fischer, in which he had said he could beat Botvinnik in a match, and the game therefore held exceptional prestige interest.



Botvinnik-Fischer, 1962 Varna Olympiad. The game was adjourned on move 43; in the photo, Fischer has just played 59. ... Kc7. The position on the board is already drawn.

The analysis went on for almost the whole of the night. The three of us [Boleslavsky, Spassky, and Tal] worked together, as did Botvinnik, Geller, Keres and Furman on the floor above. Towards five o’clock in the morning, Geller’s fantastic idea—to battle with two isolated pawns against two united pawns in a rook ending—had been fully worked out, and we decided that there were considerable drawing chances. And when, for the last time, we set off downstairs—to sleep—Mikhail Moiseyevich [Botvinnik] said to us: ‘Please, if anyone asks, tell them my position is hopeless!’

We overslept, and missed breakfast by a long time, but when we arrived in the restaurant we found there... the Americans. They looked sleepy, but contented: they were in no doubt that Fischer’s position was won. But when we arrived at the overcrowded tournament hall, we found the following picture: Botvinnik walking calmly up and down the stage, Fischer sitting with his head in his hands, and already on the board a theoretically drawn position...”

The lengthy history of adjournments is replete with such anecdotes, curiosities, quirks, and quagmires!

The chess world's philosophy of the adjournment intermission evolved during its heyday. Early on, the organizers of top-level matches were concerned that adjournment might enable the two players to analyze the position prior to resumption. (This mindset prevailed in the latter 19th century and then much later, in the 21st century; ironically, the exact opposite mindset—that deep adjournment analysis would benefit both the game and the players—held true for almost the entire 20th century.) To prevent adjournment analysis, the rules and regulations for several 19th century matches had strict conditions for the adjournment period: the competitors must stay together to ensure that neither one would undertake analysis! Other matches, such as Emmanuel Lasker vs. Siegbert Tarrasch in 1908, relied on word-of-honor of the players that they would not analyze the adjourned position “in the presence of a third person.”

At this point, the time for adjournment, 6.30 P. M., having arrived, Rosenthal sealed his next move, and he, together with Zukertort and Steinitz, adjourned to a West End restaurant for refreshments. It is one of the rules of the match that the players must not separate during the hours of recess; but we are told that both combatants can analyze a position blindfolded almost as well as they can over the board, so they no doubt endeavored to distract each other's attention by a running fire of brilliant conversation. At 8.30 P. M. play was resumed.

Coverage of the Zukertort-Rosenthal Match, St. George's Chess Club, London in The Times-Philadelphia, March 23, 1880

Mikhail Botvinnik was renowned as a premier chess strategist, and not just on the chessboard itself. His game preparation, choice of openings against specific opponents, adjournment analysis, and everything else in his chess arsenal was well-thought-out in order to maximize his results. Lev Alburt relates a personal story that upholds Botvinnik's reputation as a master logician:

There were times that I, as well as many other masters, would play an extra move beyond the time control just to ensure that forty moves had been played. When Botvinnik noticed this habit of mine, he suggested to me: “Lev, when you get home, take a look through your scoresheets and see how often you had accidentally skipped a move and lost on time. And then count up the games where your position was damaged with that extra move.” So I did! I went home and followed his advice, and it turned out that the difference was completely obvious: it is much more likely that you will damage your position with a hasty move than to miss a move and lose the game on time. Although Botvinnik's advice was directed mostly to adjournment situations, it applies just as well today, whenever the time control is reached in your own games.



Grandmasters Lev Alburt, Art Bisguier, Sammy Reshevsky, and Mikhail Botvinnik in a historic photo from the March 1984 issue of Chess Life. On the right are Neil McKelvie, Bruce Pandolfini, and Stanley Grayson. At least ten tournament games were adjourned within the careers of these four grandmasters when playing against each other.

Sophisticated Strategies of Adjournment

Chess strategy is not confined to the thirty-two pieces on sixty-four squares. Adjournments have their own vital elements of strategy. The late, great Mark Dvoretsky, a world-famous trainer of Grandmasters, devoted fourteen(!) sections of his book *School of Chess Excellence 1: Endgame Analysis* to the

strategies and subtleties of adjourning the game, analyzing the adjourned position, and then conducting the game's resumption.

Spassky-Fischer Game 13 (given above) is a prime example of psychologically-motivated adjournment strategy. The time control was fulfilled at move 40, but then one additional move was made by each player. Perhaps Spassky didn't want to seal an obvious move? Or was it due to inertia? Not so! Garry Kasparov reveals the rationale that led Spassky to quickly play his 41st move: "The time control was reached, and White could have sealed this obvious move and adjourned the game. But Spassky exploits a practical chance!" Kasparov then describes how Spassky had noticed that Fischer's logical reply 41. ... Bd5 would actually be a mistake. So instead of sealing the obvious move, Spassky played it on the board, thus subtly exploiting Fischer's tendency to move quickly—sometimes too quickly. Adjournment strategy!

Adjournment-to-resumption strategies included elements of psychology as well as pragmatism, such as:

- ***Should I seal a move now, or should I try to let my opponent seal?*** This is an on-the-spot decision with important ramifications. If the next move is obvious, such as a recapture, then the opponent will have the advantage of the "first unknown move," as well as plenty of time during adjournment to look for the best move.
- ***It's better to seal when there are several possible good moves.*** Mark Dvoretsky explains: "If there is a wide choice of 'candidate moves', it is useful to adjourn the game at this point. You will know which move you have sealed, whereas your opponent will have to analyze all the possibilities."
- ***Should I seal a move that my opponent won't expect?*** The upside is that the opponent may spend little or no time analyzing the actual sealed move; the downside is that an unexpected move might also be a second-best move... or worse.
- ***During adjournment analysis, can I find a surprise move in one of the variations, or a surprise plan, that will give me more practical chances upon resumption?*** Players are always seeking ways to throw off an opponent in order to increase chances for a win (or a draw, in a worse position). Dvoretsky's advice is "[a]n unexpected idea, prepared for the resumption, may have a great practical effect. When choosing between several roughly equivalent possibilities, consider which of them the opponent will least expect." And it happens frequently in chess that there are several roughly equivalent possibilities. (This fact is one of the reasons why computer engines are not nearly as helpful for adjournment analysis as is commonly believed.) In his magnificent autobiography *The Life and Games of Mikhail Tal*, the soon-to-be World Champion remembers a crucial moment in the Interzonal tournament in 1958: a last-resort adjournment strategy that helped him save his game against GM Fridrik Olafsson. We pick up the action just before adjournment:

I offered a draw immediately after this. Olafsson declined. Only then did I look more deeply into the position, and realized that my offer of a draw had been somewhat tactless. In short, my opponent adjourned the game in a completely won position.

We began looking through the possibilities in the quiet, dull rook ending against the Icelander, every minute becoming more and more convinced that things were very, very bad. In the end we hit upon an idea which at first sight seemed completely absurd, whereby

I simply moved my king away from the enemy passed pawn, but where we found some ways for my opponent to go wrong. Employing my not very great acting talent, I resumed my game against Olafsson. And when I led my king away from his pawn, he sank into thought, and used up a further six minutes. His first move was correct, his second also, but on the third move he went wrong, and a drawn position was reached by force. After this the question of first place was essentially decided.

- **Which key plans, positions, and variations must I remember for the resumption, and which are superfluous?** Chess is a complex game, and players can absorb and remember only so much. Mark Taimanov, in the fifth game of his 1971 Candidates Match against Bobby Fischer, arrived to the resumption with his head crammed full—too full—of variations, only to blunder away a rook in short order!

When the Clock Ran Out on Adjournments

The game of chess has enjoyed a long and stable history. The rules have remained relatively static as the years (and even centuries) pass by. Prescribed movements and powers of the pieces have been in place since the late fifteenth century, and other important rules such as castling, stalemate, and pawn promotion were fully standardized in the 1800's. Yet there has been one major change to chess catechism over the past one hundred and fifty years, and perhaps surprisingly, this transformation has taken place relatively recently, less than a quarter-century ago. That major rule change, while not on the board itself, is almost as significant as the movements of the pieces: it is the aggressive acceleration of official time controls.

Prior to the 1990's, longer time controls were required by FIDE for purposes of ratings and titles. Grandmaster tournaments typically used a first time control of 40 moves in 2.5 hours (per player), or 3 minutes 45 seconds per move on average; but in any case, FIDE would not accept games with a time limit that averaged less than three minutes per move. Nor, of course, were sudden death formats allowable. Players and organizers had experimented with faster time controls, including blitz, and such events were considered entertaining, but they were not serious chess events. Lev Alburt recalls one such high-speed event: the 1971 Soviet Cup, a brainchild of David Bronstein, with a time control of one hour per game. Sixty-four strong players participated, including Tal, Savon, and other top grandmasters. Lev diligently fought his way into the Final Four; ultimately it was David Bronstein himself who triumphed and won the Cup. But the event wasn't viewed as the real McCoy, and was never repeated.

The contrast between popular opinions of fast time controls, then and now, is stark. Today's top-level matches rely on increasingly faster tiebreaks, as necessary, to determine the winner: rapid games followed by blitz games, and even (heaven forbid!) an Armageddon game might be needed to decide the classical World Championship. But back then, the disdain for fast time controls was so great that it was considered more reasonable to use a spin of the roulette wheel to break a tie—as actually happened in the 1983 Smyslov-Huebner Candidates Match!

Towards the end of the 20th century, the times were changing, and time controls began changing with them. Lev recalls a pivotal moment in US Chess, when the majority of players in the US Championship voted to add two hours to the playing session, with the intent of reducing the number of adjournments. Technological advances also played an important role; not the chess computer engines, which were still relatively weak at the time, and didn't rise to scary prominence until the late 1990's. The technological advance was in the chess clocks themselves. Digital timers became commonplace, thus introducing the

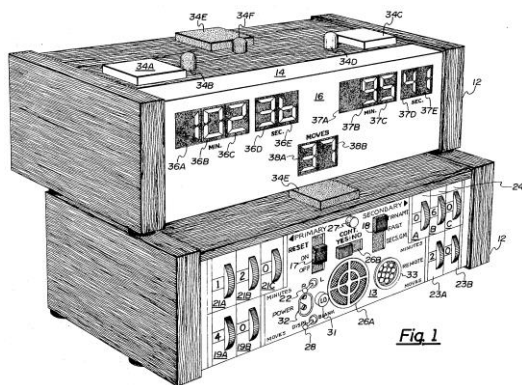


Illustration from Joseph Meshi's 1975 patent for a digital timer, soon followed by his patent for a timer with "accumulation" (increments).

option of having time increments or time delays for each move. This important capability helped legitimize shorter time controls, because it precluded some rather unscrupulous time-trouble scenarios such as K+R versus K+R where one player continued the game in order to force the other player to lose on time.

Chess politics were also a major driving force for change. The Grandmaster Association (GMA) came into existence in 1986, and was the first in a sequence of rival organizations that challenged FIDE's monopoly on power and authority within chess world. But when power is split, other things are split as well. Suddenly there were two sets of Candidates Matches and two World Championship matches, each of which had only

half of the attention, half the clout, and—most importantly—only half of the financial backing that earlier matches had received. The reduced level of financing led to reduced matches: fewer games, faster time limits, and discontinuance of adjournments. At the very top level, the 1993 PCA Kasparov-Short World Championship did have a provision for adjournments, but none of the games reached the adjournment stage. The next PCA match, Kasparov vs. Anand in 1995, did not allow for adjournments. On the FIDE side, Karpov-Kamsky in 1996 was the last World Championship match with adjournments. The long tradition of World Championship adjournments was then discontinued, and the practice of adjournments fell into disuse throughout the world, on all levels of play.

Meanwhile, the strength of the top computer engines continued to increase, up to (and soon beyond) the level of the top human players. A widespread belief arose that computers would "take over" the games after adjournment, thereby rendering the practice obsolete. But how does that perception match up with reality?

The Case for Adjournments in our Modern Chess World

In our opinion, the use of adjournments as an alternative format for tournaments and matches is not only possible, but would be beneficial and practical, even in our computer era. This finding is not based on nostalgic memories or yearnings for forgotten glory, but rather from circumspect analysis that started with an unexpected revelation:

whereas computer engines reign supreme at finding very strong moves, it turns out that their calculating prowess is of limited value in a middlegame or endgame situation *in which two human players will continue the course of the game without further computer assistance.*

THE FUTURE

Can adjournments still work in today's computer era?

Moment of Revelation: Computer Numeric Evaluations versus Human Decision-Making

The idea for this article was set in motion by the authors' lengthy analyses of complex middlegame and endgame positions while co-authoring the book *Carlsen vs. Karjakin / World Chess Championship / New York 2016*. [Editor's note: the book won the *Chess Journalists of America 2018 Book of the Year Award*.] Despite using several of the top-rated computer engines (including Komodo and Stockfish, as well as ChessBase's "cloud" computer analysis) and having taken days and sometimes weeks to analyze a single critical position, we were often unable to unlock the mysteries of the position in order to render definitive verdicts. Chess is a very complicated game, and the truth of a chess position can be far removed from a brute-force examination of moves. In many positions the proverbial "tree of variations" typically grew quickly into a vast thicket, with many of the variations having similar numeric evaluations. Nowhere to be found in the oft-fluctuating numbers was a blueprint for winning the game, nor much guidance as to *why* specific moves should be chosen (strategically speaking) over others.

This trend continued through our analysis of each game of the match—or more accurately, of many positions within each game of the match—and we soon recognized the trend as the 'rule' rather than the 'exception'. Eventually Lev asked a simple question, and our discussion went roughly as follows:

Lev: *Can you think of a position in which the computer would give decisive variations that grandmasters can understand and remember, but that they wouldn't be able to find for themselves during an adjournment session?*

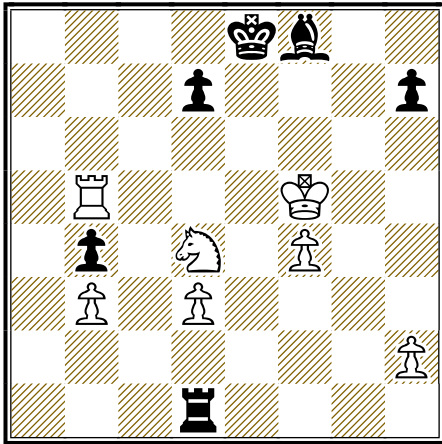
Jon: *Of course such positions exist. They must!*

Lev: *Could you show me just one such position? Take as much time as you need.*

Jon:

I (Jon) have to admit that Lev's challenge has proven to be unexpectedly difficult! Yet there continues to be a widespread belief that computers would "solve" the adjourned position. Lev's recent conversation with a longtime friend, who is a strong GM and respected coach, followed along those lines. Lev's friend asserted, "But Lev... after adjournment, the game would simply be over. Armed with computers, a player's team would simply provide a printout the following morning, showing all of the variations leading to a forced win or forced draw."

Yet our in-depth analyses of the Carlsen-Karjakin games have shown that such a "printout" (or electronic equivalent) is purely apocryphal. Case-in-point is the position from Game 3 of the match, before Carlsen's 42nd move, which is approximately the move count when an adjournment would have taken place in the "old days".



Carlsen-Karjakin, New York 2016, Game 3
Position after 41. ... Rd1

Carlsen played 42. Re5+. Most commentators voiced a strong preference for 42. Rb8+. In fact, here is what our special contributor, former World Champion Vladimir Kramnik, had to say about this position:

“42. Rb8+ Ke7 43. Ke4 looks like a fairly simple win—for example, 43. ... Re1+ 44. Kd5. Now the king is active, the rook is active, and the knight is active.”

Yes indeed. The king is active, the rook is active and the knight is active. And, lest we forget, White is up a pawn! The position is sharp and full of tactics; one might expect to see this diagram as a “White to move and win” puzzle. It’s a position that would be tailor-made for the top engines to be able to generate the proverbial “printout”.

But even with our top-rated computer assistance and a solid week of analysis, we were unable to demonstrate a convincing win, or anything close to a win. (Or conversely, to demonstrate a draw for Black.) An assessment of +1.40 or +1.62 or even +2.00 is certainly favorable, but how would a player be able to transform those numbers to 1-0? After all, Carlsen can’t say to his opponent, “The computer says that the evaluation is somewhere between +1.6 and +1.8, therefore you should resign.”

A computer engine evaluates a position by assigning numeric scores to moves and variations. But the top lines (including second-best line and third-best line, etc.) often reverse course and become much more unfavorable or favorable as the engine depth increases, even more so as the lines are played, half-move by half-move; and each assessment is always represented as a numeric “how much” rather than the all-important “why”. But “why” is the essence of chess understanding, and humans often decide on their moves based on their understanding of the position.

Alexander Kotov recounts a real-life anecdote about the importance of understanding the position, the importance of “why”. During the 1935 Moscow International Tournament, a group of masters were bickering about how to handle a difficult ending. Kotov tells the story:

They could not find the right way to go about things and there was a lot of arguing about it. Suddenly Capablanca came into the room. He was always fond of walking about when it was his opponent’s turn to move. Learning the reason for the dispute, the Cuban bent down to look at the position, said, “Sí, sí,” and suddenly redistributed the pieces all over the board to show what the correct formation was for the side that was trying to win. I haven’t exaggerated. Don José literally pushed the pieces round the board without making moves. He just put them in fresh positions where he thought they were needed. Suddenly everything became clear. The correct scheme of things had been set up and now the win was easy. We were delighted by Capablanca’s mastery, and soon had further proof of the need to think schematically about the ending.

Long before computers, Capablanca was known as “The Chess Machine” due to his precise calculations and lightning-quick understanding of what was required within a position, as he convincingly demonstrated on that occasion. “Neither before nor afterwards have I seen such flabbergasting quickness of chess comprehension,” attested Alexander Alekhine, himself one of the all-time greats. But by contrast, the *modus operandi* of today’s computer engines—identifying strong individual moves and variations in a vacuum—isn’t as effective within the context of an adjournment session.

To illustrate the inherent paradox of trying to use a computer engine to understand the nuances of a position, let’s use a computer engine as though the Carlsen-Karjakin game were adjourned at that moment.



After running for hours, the computer settles on 42. Rb8+ as its preferred move, with an evaluation of +1.65, “White is clearly better.” Earlier it had favored 42. Ke4 for quite a while, but eventually reverted to Kramnik’s preferred choice. The engine now expects Black to play 42. ... Ke7 (but White must account for 42. ... Kf7, with its myriad of winning-or-drawing lines) followed by 43. Ke4 Re1+. Now the evaluation after long “thought” is +1.3; what happened to the +1.65? And will White know how to respond if Black instead plays a valid alternative move such as 43. ... Rb1 (+1.64)?

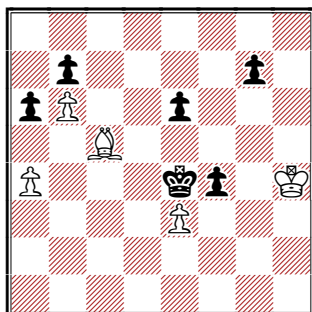
Even after blithely following the main line, 42. Rb8+ Ke7 43. Ke4 Re1+ 44. Kd5 Rf1 45. Nf5+ Kf7 46. Ke4, a major multi-pronged fork is reached: Black can play 46. ... Re1+ (+1.62) or 46. ... Rh1 (+1.65) or 46. ... Be7 (+1.84) or 46. ... Rb1 (+1.95) or 46. ... h5 (+1.99). At least five possible moves, none of which are shown to be a clear win for White or a draw for Black. These lines lead to entirely different plans of defense, with different pawn structures and piece placements. But the engines are prescriptive, not predictive, and Karjakin can decide to veer off into any of the hundreds of variations and sub-variations; as always, the verdict remains somewhere between +1.4 and +2.0 for White.

The problems assessing the positions and remembering the variations are even more glaring when the position is viewed from Karjakin’s perspective: “...But what if Carlsen has sealed 42. Re5+ instead of 42. Rb8+?”

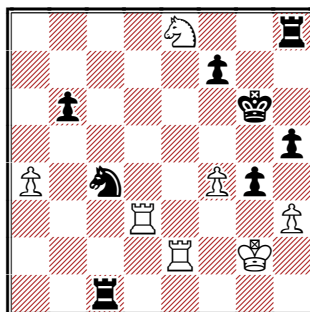
Our conclusion is that trying to make sense of numeric evaluations during an adjournment period would be nearly impossible. Without understanding the “why,” or at least without an infallible memory, the human player cannot readily refute any alternative move, and the game continues into uncharted

territory. Yuri Garrett, who co-organized two recent grandmaster tournaments with adjournments (discussed later in this article), sums it up: “It is highly unlikely that players will follow a computer line for more than five moves, unless it is forced. And after that, they will be again swimming in the deep waters of chess.”

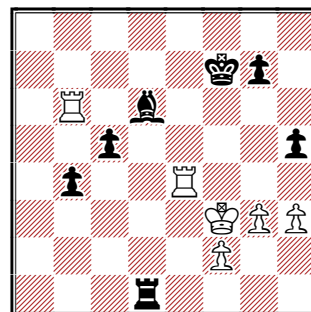
The comparison of computer analysis and human analysis can also be done with historical positions, to confirm that even today’s computers would not have overly affected the outcome of adjournments and resumptions. Spassky and Fischer adjourned eleven games in their 1972 match; five of those games were adjourned with the game verdict already assured (games 3, 15, 17, 18, and 21). Here are the six “unclear” adjourned positions, with a question: which game continuations would have been affected by the assistance of today’s computers? Probably none of them.



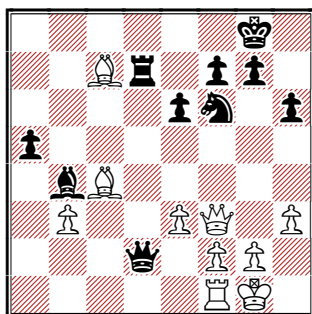
Game 1, July 11, 1972
Spassky-Fischer [1-0, 56 moves]
40. ... f4 41. exf4 (sealed)
Computer assessment: +-



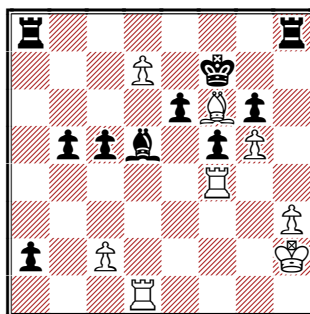
Game 7, July 25, 1972
Spassky-Fischer [½-½, 49 moves]
40. ... Kg6 41. h4 (sealed)
Computer assessment: =



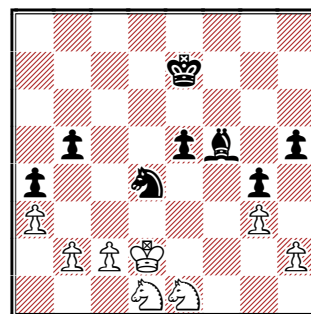
Game 10, August 3, 1972
Fischer-Spassky [1-0, 56 moves]
40. ... Kf7 41. Ke2 (sealed)
Computer assessment: +-



Game 12, August 8, 1972
Fischer-Spassky [½-½, 56 moves]
40. ... Rd7 41. Qc6 (sealed)
Computer assessment: =



Game 13, August 10, 1972
Spassky-Fischer [0-1, 74 moves]
41. ... Bd5 42. Kg3 (sealed)
Computer assessment: +-



Game 20, August 29, 1972
Fischer-Spassky [½-½, 54 moves]
41. Nd1 Kd6 (sealed)
Computer assessment: ±

With the insight that the use of computer engines would not render adjournments obsolete, our attention turns to the historical benefits, as well as some important objections, to this long-standing practice.

Historical Benefits... and Recent Objections

Our in-depth discussions with grandmasters, organizers, sponsors, and fans can be distilled into a dialogue that touches upon the most significant benefits and objections to adjournments. This dialogue is framed within a historical context, in order to better explain and envision what adjournments were like, back-in-the-day, but these topics of discussion can also be helpful while considering the feasibility of adjournments in today's world. It is worth noting that the objections to adjournments are recent and retroactive, because these objections were not typically raised until near the tail-end of this 160-year-old tradition.

What impact did adjournments have on the game of chess itself?

First and foremost was the improved quality of the games. The number of “blunderfest” games was significantly reduced. This was not just due to adjournments, but rather to the entire set of related conditions: slower time controls, adjournments, and no sudden-death.

Looking forward, another important impact is that the game returns to its classical roots. There has been a feeling of discontent throughout much of the chess world that the game has become too superficial, too reliant on fast action. The last two World Championship matches—Carlsen vs. Karjakin in 2016 and Carlsen vs. Caruana in 2018—were decided in the rapid tiebreaks. Many people have opined that classical chess requires a classical format, and adjournments have always been part of that classical format.

There must have been a chess impact on the players as well.

Certainly the players—and chess enthusiasts everywhere—gained a deeper understanding and appreciation for the game of chess. Players of all strengths learned the secrets of middlegame and endgame positions, even on the very top levels. Mikhail Tal fondly recalls a night of productive analysis with Paul Keres: “I never even suspected that such an apparently uninteresting ending—I was a pawn up, with rooks and opposite-colored bishops—could contain so many interesting and beautiful ideas.”

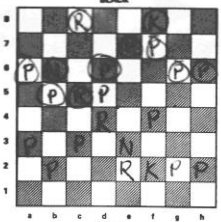

But perhaps chess fans' excitement and interest in the game waned due to the adjournment “time-out”?

From adjournment until resumption was a time of heightened—even obsessive—interest in the adjourned position by chess fans around the world. Adjournments are a prime example of the “thrill of anticipation.” Many of us can recall the frantic hours during adjournment, both as players and as spectators. Jon will always remember the heart-pounding adjournments in the Spassky-Fischer match; in Lev's opinion, the excitement of the 24st game of the 1987 World Championship match in Seville (Kasparov-Karpov, discussed earlier in this article) is unmatched in the history of chess.

Chess is supposed to be a game between two players, but adjournments don't seem to adhere to that principle.

The history books say that Petrosian beat Botvinnik to become World Champion, Spassky beat Petrosian, Fischer beat Spassky, and so forth; there has never been a sentiment that “Petrosian’s team beat Botvinnik’s team” or “Fischer’s team beat Spassky’s team.” The fact that many of the games in those matches were adjourned has never come into consideration, nor has it affected this historical truth.

Here’s another historical point that is equally valid today. In 1675 Isaac Newton famously said, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Chess is, and has always been, a near-perfect illustration of Newton’s epigram: each game contributes immediately to the chess knowledge base. In that sense, every game played is a culmination of the efforts of thousands of players.

U S C F SEALED MOVE ENVELOPE		THE POSITION IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THE SEALED MOVE (circle the initials of the black pieces)	
		Clock Shows	Time Consumed
"The player having the move must write his move in unambiguous notation on his scoresheet, put this scoresheet and that of his opponent in an envelope (carbon copies of the scoresheets need not be enclosed), seal the envelope, and then stop the clocks." (FIDE Article 15.1)		White 6:00	1:30
		Black 6:11	1:41
WHITE (printed) <u>Mary Kuhner</u>			
(signature) <u>Mary K. Kuhner</u>			
BLACK (printed) <u>John Braley</u>			
(signature) <u>John Braley</u>			
NUMBER OF SEALED MOVE <u>41</u>			
SEALED IN ROUND <u>1</u> SECTION _____			
BY <u>Mark (Braley)</u>			
GAME TO BE RESUMED AT <u>8:00</u> <u>P</u> M.			
ON <u>May 27th</u> 19 <u>83</u>			

Sealed move envelope from a USCF event in the 1980's, played under USCF rules. (courtesy of John Donaldson)

But even in the practical sense, chess is a game between two sides. Grandmasters have their teams and seconds for preparation and training; team events have captains who make real-time decisions about whether to offer or accept a draw; and correspondence players use all available resources to decide upon each and every move.

To avoid an adjournment, a player may have offered a draw; or a player may have postponed an attempt to win until after adjournment, to find the winning method during adjournment.

Indeed, those things happened occasionally, although there was a counterbalancing mindset as well: to avoid the adjournment, players would sometimes decide that they needed to muddle up the position before adjournment, or else take decisive action immediately.

Grand Opinions on Adjournments

Our thanks to the leading Grandmasters, International Masters, Organizers, Publishers, and Fans who weighed in on whether adjournments could still be feasible in today's chess world. Some opinions:

<p>GM Anna Muzychuk</p> <p>I feel I was quite lucky to have this experience as I am sure that players of my generation had never tried this. Writing down the position, my intended move, thinking about time, whether it is better to adjourn on my move or opponent's. All of that was very interesting and unforgettable. But it might be difficult to make the adjournment tournaments interesting nowadays. Probably if we had one top level tournament of this kind it could be interesting—at least worth a try.</p>	<p>GM Andy Soltis</p> <p>There are problems with a partial return to sealed moves. In many endgames, a key winning or drawing position can be found with a computer. Abolishing adjournments turned chess into more of a sport, a game of endurance, because there were no breaks. Some players feared adjournments so much that if they didn't get an opening advantage, they would offer a draw; other players liked adjournments because it was a lazy way of winning a game.</p>	<p>IM John Donaldson <i>Captain of six US Chess Olympiad teams</i></p> <p>Long ago a strong GM told me about how adjournments were critical in his development as a player, that this was how he learned to play endgames. He told me that in the Soviet Union there were many levels of tournaments that progressed ever upward to the Soviet Championship, and that the early ones involved one game a week with lengthy time to analyze adjournments.</p>
<p>GM Alex Baburin</p> <p>If organizers want to run tournaments with adjournments and players are happy, then it's fine by me, but personally I am against this idea. A game between two players should be decided without breaks and outside help. I remember when I was 15, I had a rook ending with three K-side pawns apiece, but I was an a-pawn down. My rook was behind the a-pawn, so I knew I should be OK. I analyzed that endgame for days, but still lost! So it certainly reinforced my interest in endgames!</p>	<p>GM Bartek Macieja</p> <p>The tournament in 2012 [with adjournments] was intriguing, nostalgic. Spectators widely followed it, wondering how it would go. It went really well! There was a huge interest, especially in relation to adjourned positions. They were discussed, people tried to predict the final outcome, and how players would continue once the play gets resumed.</p>	<p>GM Ron Henley</p> <p>I believe with computers today and the interactive aspect that long overnight adjournments are pointless. In earlier days, though, in Lone Pine '77 I won Q v Q+BP where I gave up a2 pawn because I saw I could get b3-b4-b5 by force....from there I was able to hide my King on a1! Karpov told me, "Against Kasparov it seemed we would always get the minimum result, while against everyone else—such as Timman, Gelfand, Kamsky—we seemed to get the maximum result." Very interesting!</p>
<p>GM Emil Sutovsky</p> <p>Obviously I like the idea, as I have not only participated, but rather initiated these events [tournaments with adjournments] in 2012 and 2014. However, I believe that the niche for such events is rather small. Once a year it could be attractive for a general public—provided the field is reasonably strong. I would rather see such an event as something nostalgic and warm rather than a real alternative to existing time controls. However, I would be happy if you find a patron to support such an event.</p>	<p>Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam <i>Publisher of New In Chess Magazine</i></p> <p>I understand the nostalgia, but I am afraid that commercial sponsors will not be attracted by a format that reduces clarity in the standings and is more complicated to organize.</p>	<p>IM Malcolm Pein <i>Editor of Chess Magazine (UK)</i></p> <p>Yes that's very interesting and I would love to see some events with adjournments. I had many games with adjournments in league chess during the computer era and it was helpful but hardly decisive. There's a certain part of me that would like to see them retained occasionally.</p>

Players with stronger teams for analysis must have had an advantage during adjournment.

The ability to maximize the effectiveness of adjournment analysis was as much a factor in a player's overall strength as the ability to mate with Bishop and Knight. Some players were renowned for their adjournment analysis skills, as Alexander Kotov points out in his homage to one of the best-ever champions in this facet of the game: "The ability to analyze adjourned games depends on one's general analytical ability. As a rule a grandmaster copes with the task without much trouble, but the finest master by far in this sphere is Botvinnik, whose remarkable superiority never failed to make me marvel. One has only to examine the collection of his best games to realize what 'machine-like' accuracy all his adjournment analysis shows and on top of that, what psychological nuances he took account of in that analysis. He had a deep knowledge of the character of his opponents, who included the world's strongest players."



Staunton Memorial, Groningen 1946. Vasily Smyslov fills in the adjournment envelope while Mikhail Botvinnik studies the position. He sealed his 41st move and won upon resumption.

Adjournment analysis with stronger players has traditionally been one of the most effective teaching/training techniques for up-and-coming players, including children's events, class tournaments, and team competitions.

Looking forward, ironically the use of computer engines during adjournment acts as a leveling force, because the top commercial engines are all of approximately equal strength (excluding the supremely strong AlphaZero, which isn't commercially available.) But the impact of computer analysis would typically extend for only a few moves anyway.

Is there any real-world evidence that adjournments would still work today?

Yes. The Association of Chess Professionals (ACP) held two grandmaster tournaments with adjournments, aptly called the ACP Golden Classic, in 2012 (won by Vasily Ivanchuk) and 2014 (won by Wesley So). Much, but not all, of the feedback from the participating GMs spoke positively about the role of adjournments in these two events. GM Bartek Macieja recounts: "That tournament was well-met by the chess community. It was intriguing, nostalgic. Spectators widely followed it wondering how it would go. There was a huge interest, especially in relation to adjourned positions. They were discussed, people tried to predict the final outcome, and how players would continue once the play gets resumed."

These recent experiences demonstrated that organizing and playing in tournaments with adjournments is certainly feasible, as it had been for the prior century-and-a-half of adjournment practice.

Even so, tournaments with adjournments must have been harder to run from the organizers' standpoint, as well as harder to play from the players' standpoint.

It depends on the tournament format. The two ACP Golden Classic events were round-robins, and proceeded smoothly, per Tournament Director Yuri Garrett: "From my standpoint, there was no difficulty at all. We had to check part of the regulations which are no longer there, but otherwise, the tournament itself was not problematic." True, the use of adjournments would be impractical for weekend Swiss System tournaments with two (or more) rounds per day, but it could prove to be workable for one-round-per-day events.

From the players' standpoint, it might not be possible to avoid late-night analysis sessions. However, per Lev, it's mandatory to avoid resumptions that occur prior to another round. One solution is to ensure that enough adjournment days are built into the tournament schedule.

Is the sporting aspect of chess affected if computers are allowed to help players with their moves, even for one moment within the game (the adjournment position)?

In response, let us consider another position in which it is fully accepted that computers should assist human players, as much as possible and for as deep into the game as possible: the starting position! Even more so, there are hundreds of opening position *tabiyas* (stemming well into the middlegame and even the endgame) from which the real work begins, aided by computer engines. So the concept is already well established in over-the-board chess practice.

Time for Adjournment...

We've all partaken of dramatic chess experiences: the frantic time scramble, the pawn breakthrough, the unexpected move, the mating attack. In similar fashion, adjournments and resumptions have fueled the adrenaline rushes and enriched the chess experiences of countless players over the course of 160 years. There is nothing quite like it!

Yet the allure of adjournments is not limited to its thrills and chills. Chess has always been renowned as a game of wisdom. But wisdom, by its very nature, takes time. Adjournments are a way to provide that requisite time, so that the wisdom in today's chess world can flourish.

Our recommendation is that sponsors would consider adopting the historic practice of adjournments into their upcoming events. New ideas are often tried in chess, and sometimes a legacy idea can be tried anew. Adjournments can provide a spark of both novelty and heritage into our collective chess experience.

About the Authors



Grandmaster Lev Alburt is three-time U.S. Champion, twice U.S. Open Champion, three-time Ukrainian Champion, and one of the world's most sought-after chess teachers. He has authored or co-authored over 20 best-selling books, and his popular Chess Life column "Back to Basics" teaches essential chess knowledge to aspiring players. Lev was inducted into the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame in 2003.



Jon Crumiller is a National Master in both over-the-board and correspondence chess. In the business world, he is Co-founder and Chief Operating Officer of PRINCETON CONSULTANTS INC., a world-class consulting firm that specializes in Optimization and Machine Learning. Jon has 25 years of experience and expertise using the top chess engines to analyze games and positions.

Lev and Jon co-authored the book *Carlsen vs. Karjakin / World Chess Championship / New York 2016*, which was recognized by Chess Journalists of America as Book of the Year. No surprise, as our main consultant was the 14th World Champion! The book is also available in a Russian edition.

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Time for Adjournment...

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