ChessCube SA Open 2009

Tournament Report

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Background

The SA Open 2009 included FIDE rated online matches for the first time in chess history. Players based in Melbourne, Australia competed in the SA Open, by playing matches online against players in Cape Town, South Africa. This sets an exciting precedent for chess tournaments.

How it worked

Online matches present some unique challenges, particularly in terms of reassuring players and officials.

Chief challenges, and ChessCube's approach, are outlined below:

- Maintaining connectivity
    - Because games were online, 100% uptime was required
    - Games were played at a venue where Internet connectivity was best
    - The games were played on a server that had been carefully engineered to manage increased load

- Ensuring that no cheating is taking place
    - Perhaps the biggest challenge to FIDE rated games online
    - A FIDE arbiter at each venue monitored and arbitrated each match (thus, 2 arbiters per match)

- Mouse slips
    - A takeback request due to a mouse slip is a challenge unique to online games
    - Players were required to make their move on a board before making the move online, and then notate (though players had the option of playing without the real-world board). The board was used to verify mouse-slips for takeback requests. One of these occurred in the tournament.

- Communicating key actions
    - Onscreen clocks clearly communicated the time remaining for each player.
    - Players were notified when it was their turn to play.

- Providing for spectators
    - Spectators from around the world could view the matches as they were played online.
    - Online matches were projected onto a large screen at the OTB venue.

ChessCube made some adjustments to their playing software in order to manage some of the requirements of playing a tournament game online. Some examples:
- The software will not end the game automatically when
    - the flags fall

- o threefold repetition
- o 50 move rule
- o insufficient material
- The software will end the game automatically only on:
  - o Checkmate
  - o Stalemate
  - o Draw agreed
  - o Resignation
- A 'call arbiter' button is included which logs the exact time of the claim on both sides

The arbiter can also reset the times of one or both players at any time.

Players signed an agreement (attached to this report) outlining the additional rules and procedures for online matches.

The good

There were only two major glitches, and for the most part, players enjoyed the novelty of online participation.

The novelty of online FIDE rated matches secured interest and coverage from several chess interest websites and online publications. Future events can and should capitalize on this for increased interest and perhaps sponsorship.

The online matches ensured a stronger SA Open, as titled players were able to participate without having to travel to the venue.

Although some players mentioned feeling at a disadvantage as they could not see their opponent, stronger players actually preferred this as it helped them to concentrate better.

Glitches

There were only two major glitches.

On Wednesday 08-07-2009 in the Mirko Rujevic vs Solomons game (round 8) there was a mouse slip on move 21 by Solomons.

On move 21 Solomons, playing black, executed 21...Bxd5 on the physical board but then played 21...Bc6 on the computer. He immediately realized his mistake and called the attending arbiter while also using the online functionality (the online system notes the position and clock times of the players).

Unfortunately Rujevic also responded immediately to the move, obviously thinking he was winning and not seeing that Solomons had called the arbiter.

After the arbiters confirmed the situation between themselves, Solomons asked for a takeback which was accepted. However, for an unknown reason he could no longer move a piece after this - it could be because Rujevic already replied to his mistake. This left no other course of action but to reconstruct the position, using the player's notation sheets and noted position, and reset the clock to the correct time using the noted times.

Luckily this was easy to do and after about 5 minutes the situation was resolved and the players were playing again. Solomons made the move he intended to make as on the physical board and the game continued.

Game until that point:
1. e4 c5 2. Nc3 a6 3. a4 b6 4. Nf3 d6 5. d4 cxd4 6. Nxd4 Nf6 7. Bd3 e6 8. O-O Be7 9. f4 Qc7 10. Qe2 Nbd7 11. Bd2 Bb7 12. Rae1 Nc5 13. Kh1 O-O 14. b4 Nxd3 15. cxd3 Rac8 16. Rc1 Qb8 17. Qf2 Rfe8 18. Nc2 Ba8 19. Ne3 d5 20. exd5 Nxd5 21. Ncxd5
Clock times:
White - 32:35
Black - 19:22

Both players seemed slightly alarmed by the situation but calmed down and resumed the game with full concentration after the problem was sorted out. It seems that they refocused quickly again.

From ArbiterAUS:
"Mirko appeared a little annoyed for a while ... he was psychologically preparing for a resignation, not a take-back request! ;-) But now he appears to have settled back down into the game. Phew."

On Thursday 09-07-2009 there was a glitch on the Australian side when Purchen was accidentally disconnected from the server for almost ten minutes. As soon as the fault was diagnosed, the times were reset to when the problem started and the game continued without any more interruptions.

What could be better
The main two issues players had were:
1.   Players felt it was not clear enough when it was their move.
2.   Players would prefer a larger clock in a more central location.

Suggested interface improvements include a larger clock. It has also been suggested that a sound (necessitating speakers) be used to indicate when it is a player's turn.

Due to connectivity concerns at the main venue, the online matches in South Africa were conducted from the ChessCube offices. In future, it would be better to have the players at the same venue as the OTB matches.

Again, due to connectivity issues, not all the matches were broadcast at the OTB venue.

Unfortunately some of the social elements, which make tournaments great, gets lost – there was no post-game analysis or socializing. Use of webcams could go some way to improve this.

The future

All participants agreed that online matches would be playing a larger role in chess tournaments in the future, and this was an exciting development. This tournament proved the concept, and also highlighted some key areas for improvement.

Online matches will open tournaments up to a far greater range of players, particularly those who find it difficult to travel to venues. For African tournaments especially, online matches could pave the way for wider participation.

Matches broadcast online also open tournaments to a greater number of spectators, who can view matches from anywhere in the world.

Increased player numbers and increased spectators present more sponsorship opportunities, particularly considering the increased coverage received by the SA Open due to the online matches.

One player expressed a strong feeling that DGT boards and clocks were the best way to implement online games. In his opinion the difference between a 2D/3D board is too big to play a whole game on a screen. An added benefit of such an approach is the reduction of mouse-slip problems that might occur.

Select player feedback

- Some players disliked not being able to see their opponent. However, the stronger players actually liked this claiming it helped them concentrate and gave them more courage. In general the view was that players will adjust to this but that a webcam would be a good intermediate step.
- Some players expressed the desire to have the online games at the tournament venue. This would allow them to still view the other games and not feel disconnected from the tournament. One player (IM Kobese) who did not get to play online stated that he would prefer either playing all games online or none at all, as he tends to build a rhythm through a tournament.
- Playing-wise there were two issues consistently mentioned. Players lacked an indication of when it was their move. This was partially solved by highlighting the opponents move squares in red, but still required players to look at the screen. They suggested using an audible sound as a solution (which requires computers to have speakers).
- Secondly, players expressed the desire to have a bigger clock in a more central location.
- While players were hesitant of having to move pieces both on the board and online most got used to this quickly and did not have any problems with it (only one mouse slip occurred).
- Players liked the size of the chess board, chess set design and general site layout. Most said the system worked fine and that they enjoyed the experience. Strangely only one player mentioned that it was like playing against a computer.
- One player was concerned about online cheating even though arbiters were present at both locations. However, all players thought it essential to have FIDE accredited arbiters present to watch over the games.
- In general players did not feel that situations such as threefold repetition should be automatically handled by the computer. The players and arbiters should always be in control of such situations, but perhaps the computer could provide assistance in verifying a claim.
- A major benefit players could identify with is the cost factor and they welcomed the inclusion of strong competitors in the tournament. They would also consider this a good option for a large continent such as Africa which is not always wealthy enough to allow players to travel much. However, FIDE endorsement remains an important factor for players.
- One player expressed a strong feeling that DGT boards and clocks were the best way to implement online games. In his opinion the difference between a 2D/3D board is too big to play a whole game on a screen. An added benefit of such an approach is the reduction of mouse-slip problems which might occur.
- Most players believed this is the way of the future and especially for the younger generation who are growing up with computers. Unfortunately some of the social elements which make tournaments great gets lost – no post-game analysis or socializing. Also, some players use chess as a method to travel the world. Although the older generation (GM Komarov) was not in complete favor of online participation he accepts that this will become part of the future of chess.

Participant feedback

Dear ChessCube and SA Open organisers,

As requested, I would like to provide some quick feedback on the SA Open and the concept of organising more FIDE rated tournaments online, via the internet, in general.

I think the idea makes excellent financial sense and provides a good opportunity to facilitate increased international tournament activity.

It is good for tournament organisers because it is cheaper and easier to get strong international players to participate. There is no need to pay for titled players' airfares and accommodation. As long as there are several players competing from the same off-site locations, the cost of an additional arbiter can be offset by the savings in appearance fees, particularly if additional paying entrants are allowed to compete remotely as well. Tournament organisers can potentially use a smaller venue as well, sometimes an important cost factor when hosting large tournaments.

It can be good for players given that it limits the need for travel. Competitors can take part from their local chess club, in more events, without visas, jetlag and hassles. This is a huge attraction for club players in particular, who might not normally get to play in many international chess events.

It is good for the international chess community. Internet tournaments are particularly useful in smaller, less developed, or isolated chess federations which might not otherwise attract strong international players, or be able to send participants to many international competitions, due to lack of funds or geographical isolation.

It is good for sponsors and spectators because these tournaments are more accessible to spectators around the globe and receive a greater level of online publicity than other events. This is because the tournament will have more international players than usual, and given that the games are being played online, more spectators will be following the games directly. For example, the games and results of the South African Open were reported on several online forums including Susan Polgar's BlogSpot http://susanpolgar.blogspot.com/2009/07/sa-chess-open-includes-internet-play.html, http://susanpolgar.blogspot.com/2009/07/chess-revolution-in-south-africa.html, local forum sites such as http://www.thechessdrum.net and www.chesschat.org, and international sites such as http://www.e3e5.com/.

Given the travel and accommodation costs saved, it is typically much easier and more convenient for club players to compete in this type of event. Many Australian club players who I spoke with during the 2009 South African Open expressed interest in playing in the event next year if possible. This would open up the possibility of establishing additional income streams for tournament organisers and more than covering any additional arbiter fees or IT costs.

There are, of course, some technical requirements and trade-offs. Players competing via the internet must have access to a fast and reliable internet connection in a suitably supervised environment. This means additional equipment, arbiters, and technical support staff are required. Players must be made aware of additional regulations that might come into effect in the event of a disconnection or mouse-slip, and be accommodating of the possible disruption that such events may cause.

There is also the human aspect. Players also have to contend with playing across different time zones, having limited or delayed communication with the tournament organisers, any potential language barriers (much more difficult without face-to-face interaction), not being able to "read" their opponent's expressions or body language during the game, and of course the unfamiliarity of playing via an online interface. Many of these hurdles can be minimized through good organization and technical support, combined with regular emailed or online photos,

pairings, and other communication updates. Additionally there is the lack of personal interaction, in-depth game analysis, and cultural immersion and exchange that take place when players participate in such events in person. By and large, however, I believe the event was successful and played with good spirits and sportsmanship. I am sure that it will be a forerunner of many similar events in the future.

I hope that the players who participated in the event may like to add a few comments as well.

Warmest regards,

IA Gary Bekker

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Poll

Players were asked the following questions following their online games:

Q1. Do you think having online players is a good idea?
Q2. Who should be allowed to play online from a remote location?
Q3. How do you feel about not seeing the online players "in the flesh"?
Q4. Do you play chess online?

Rating	Q1		Q2			Q3			Q4	
	Yes	No	IM / GM	Any international player	Anyone	Broadcasts are fine	Webcam should be used	Don't care	Yes	No
1772	1		1				1			1
2550		1			1		1			1
2400		1			1		1		1	
2392		1		1				1		1
2244	1				1			1	1	
2235	1				1	1			1	
2222	1		1				1		1	
2216	1			1			1		1	
2200		1	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)		1
2169		1			1		1		1	
2157	1		1				1		1	
2145	1		1				1		1	
2100	1		1				1		1	
2029	1				1		1		1	
1950	1			1			1		1	
1941	1		1					1	1	
1924		1	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	1	
1914	1				1		1		1	
1828	1		1					1	1	
1800		1	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)		1
1798	1			1			1		1	
1753		1	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	1	
1711	(red)	(red)	1				1			1
1691	1			1				1		1
1218	1				1		1			1
1000		1	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	(red)	1	
TOTAL	16	9	8	5	8	1	15	5	18	8

SOUTH AFRICAN OPEN 2009

3 – 11 JULY

HTTP://WWW.SAOPEN2009.COM

This document specifies the conditions and rules that will apply for online participants in the tournament.

PLAYING RULES

1. GENERAL

   a. The time control for all games will be 90 minutes for the entire game with 30 seconds increment after each move, starting from move 1.

   b. Players in AUS must be logged on no later than 10 minutes before the start of a game. The arbiter in AUS will confirm that all players are present. The arbiter in RSA will do the same.

   c. **Any player arriving more than 30 minutes late after the scheduled start of a game will LOSE the game on default.**

   d. The times displayed on the server (Internet clocks) will be the official times.

   e. If any problems are encountered, the arbiter on the side where the problem originates must immediately contact the other arbiter. The two arbiters will then liaise with each other.

   f. In the event of disconnection, the arbiter in RSA will manually adjust the clocks (and position if necessary). The game will then continue.

   g. If it so happens that the two AUS players are paired, they will play their game as if they were remote from each other. In other words, they can play over-the-board, BUT must also make their moves on their respective computers. We must be able to follow the game online.

   h. If an RSA player cannot use the computer an assistant will be provided. **All players in AUS must play using the computer.**

2. PLAY

   a. Start of game: The arbiter in RSA will send the following message to all players "PLEASE START YOUR GAME". The white players will make their move and the clock of the player with the white pieces will automatically start.

   b. Players will make their moves via computer. Players will be allowed to have a physical board next to them. The physical board may not be used to analyze any position. **Players must decide whether they want to use a physical board in addition to the computer before the start of the game.**

   c. A player may play all games on the computer only. But, if using a physical board, the position must be at least the same as the current position or, if a couple of moves have been played on the computer without moving on the board, the board may be updated to reflect the same position as on the computer.

   d. **All notation rules apply (as if the players played a normal game).** After the end of the game, the AUS players must sign their score sheets. The arbiter must sign as well and immediately email the scanned copy of the score sheet (this will be required as proof for FIDE to indicate that all games were valid).

Initial here

e. The rules for executing a move. a) Using both a physical board and the computer – 1. Make the move on the physical board 2. Play the move on the computer 3. Notate. b) Using only the computer – 1. Play the move on the computer 2. Notate.

f. If a mouse slip occurs (the move made on the computer is not the same as the actual move), the player must immediately notify his arbiter. This arbiter must immediately notify the other arbiter to confirm the mouse slip. The erring player must then ask for a "take back" which must be accepted by the other player.

3. CLAIMS

a. If a player wants to claim a draw, or query something, the arbiter on that side will take charge of the situation and liaise, via the computer, with the other arbiter. The final ruling will be made by the arbiter on the side where the original claim/complaint was lodged.

b. Draw offer: Players may offer a draw by clicking the "offer draw" button. If the opponent accepts, the game will immediately end.

c. Flag fall: The server will not automatically stop a game when a player's flag has fallen (time on the clock has expired). The online clock will stop at 0:00 and it is the responsibility of the player to claim the game in accordance with article 6.8 of The FIDE Laws of Chess.

d. Checkmate and stalemate will automatically end the game.

SIGNED BY _____ IN _____ ON _____

SIGNATURE _____