

Draughts > Chess > Checkers – A logical path

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As known, checkers is the American word corresponding to the English word draughts; here I would like to use both terms, reserving draughts for varieties which are usually played on an unchequered board, such as the Turkish variety. Avigliano begins his book with the statement that checkers is certainly a simplified form of chess, the only problem being which of these two games is the parent of the other. Similar ideas can be found earlier and later. In his work on board games other than chess, Murray concludes that both chess and alquerque were the parents of checkers. In his recent work on the history of draughts Van der Stoep has instead stressed the alquerque-checkers relationship, indicating that most earlier suggestions of chess taking part in the evolution of checkers were really unnecessary.

The argument here is that the evolution of checkers and chess is closely connected, to the point that chess can be considered a parent of checkers and vice versa. Or, using the words as indicated above, draughts is a parent of chess while chess is a parent of checkers.

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Most people learn chess and checkers, without realizing that the games which they have become acquainted with, exist in many varieties. Different varieties are played in other countries, such as Chinese and Japanese chess. Thus, a review of chess-checkers interactions cannot be limited to two single games, but must take account of a number of varieties.

For checkers several forms still exist, often played at a national level. In order to follow a logical path, going more or less directly backwards in time, we can start with the complex Canadian 12x12 checkers, a development of the French 10x10 game. The origin of this relatively recent game is not very clear, even if supposedly related to the stay of the regiments of Meuron and Watteville (Massicotte) in Montreal; no surprise that older varieties will be of a still more uncertain origin.

If Canadian checkers can be considered as a curious and isolated variety, the 10x10 Dutch-French variety, traditionally known as Polish, has gained the greatest international success in the course of time. Only in this game are now world championships being played, attracting players from several continents. Again, its origin has been the focal point of strong debates, particularly since the reports of a Parisian origin of about 1725 (as defended by Kruijswijk) are in contradiction with the boards and related evidence discovered in the Netherlands (Van der Stoep, Bakker).

In any case, even the 10x10 Dutch-French variety is not the original one. Early checkers has been played on the 8x8 chequered chess board. Given that the introduction of the chequered chess board occurred in about the 10th century, we may expect experiments with old board games on this new chess board, possibly leading to modifications of these old games since then.

Even restricting to checkers varieties played on the chequered chess board, it is not easy to distinguish their historical development. A first approach is to divide the checkers varieties into kinds with and without a long move of the king. The assumption that the varieties with the short leap of the king are the earliest seems plausible. Thus, in our backward path we first encounter both the largely played Russian variety and Spanish checkers with its wonderful literature. The main difference between these two games is that the men in the Russian variety can also take in backward directions.

In the final stage of our backward review, we find the Italian and the French varieties. It seems very unlikely and illogical that these two varieties could have been derived from the previously mentioned forms. To people accustomed to a powerful long leap of the king, “new” varieties with a short king leap cannot have been attractive at all. There is a problem here, however. The extant documentary evidence seems to show that Spanish checkers was the first checkers played in the Netherlands (Bakker).

The Anglo-French variety still exists as British and American checkers. In the course of time only some laws of capturing may have been modified. Italian checkers is often mentioned for its strict capturing rule, “*il più col più*”, the taking of the most pieces by the most powerful ones. There is a consolidated theory that initially there was full freedom as to which pieces could be taken by which pieces, and that even taking itself was not compulsory at first. Then taking became compulsory, and

huffing was introduced as a consequence. From this viewpoint, Italian checkers should be one of the younger versions.

However, there are some hints that Italian checkers may be older. The fact that an Italian checkers king is the only king that cannot be taken by men seems to be important. There is early evidence for some difficulties in the application of this rule, as the statement of Aldrovandi, near the end of the 16th century, that a king could be taken when two men aimed together to capture him. In this context, the English name of the most powerful piece, otherwise rather difficult to explain, is completely at home: of course no common piece can take a chess-like king! (What appeared as a pawn-queen battle, now becomes a queen-king battle. The game may also be considered as a pawn-king battle, but in checkers the most powerful piece resembles more a queen than a king.)

In chess the only piece which cannot be taken is the king. The only checkers-king which cannot be taken is the king in Italian checkers. To be the sole example seems rather to be a residue of an older habit than a new rule, introduced in a well-spread game. Thus the name of the king in English checkers and the invulnerability of the king in Italian checkers seem to point to some original form. Even if a direct correspondence of checkers and chess kings is not accepted, there are further possible hypotheses for a very old origin. For instance, the board games of the fox and geese kind, also have the rule that the powerful fox cannot be taken by the common geese.

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Up to now, only the national varieties of the Western European countries have been considered. Now we turn to the Eastern varieties, using the word draughts for these games, usually played on an unchequered board. In this way draughts may be older than checkers, since checkers cannot be older than the European chequered chess board, invented in the 10th century.

Here we certainly encounter an even greater lack of documents and also a problem of definition. The demarcation boundary of what can be called draughts is not very sharp. On the other hand, the information preserved on the rules of most ancient board games is very scant; in particular, the typical method of capturing used in draughts has not been found in the ancient world, even if the broad diffusion both in Europe

and Asia of games of the fox and geese type is hard to explain without assuming an ancient origin.

Starting from Armenian and Turkish draughts, we may thus come across some board games of the ancient civilizations, played well before the introduction of chess. In this sense draughts may be considered as much older than chess.

Thus chess may have been a child of draughts. In order to understand this derivation, we have to realize that early chess was not played like the modern game with its several far-reaching pieces that allow defence and attack at distance. In old chess, the pawns had the forward move, but always only one square at a time; the kings moves just as now; the viziers moved only one square diagonally, either for moving or capturing. Given their quantity (pawns) and their power (kings and viziers), these pieces were the most significant in old chess, and these pieces all moved as may have been the case in old draughts. It may also be noted that in most abstract chess sets these three kinds of pieces are of a simple and almost identical shape, differing only in dimensions.

It is important to know whether the other pieces of old chess, the chariot, the elephant and the horse, originally had the long move. Certainly the elephant and the horse had not, but it is uncertain whether the chariot, the most powerful piece in old chess, had the long move.

Starting from ancient forms of draughts, a sort of chess may thus be obtained simply as a result of mixing two different games or by experiencing with the allowed moves in order to acquire a better simulation of a battle. It may be noted that the pieces that differed most from the draughts pieces, also changed the most, except for the horse of course.

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Here the illustration of my argument is reaching its end. The family of checkers and draughts is rich of varieties which may be divided into more ancient Eastern and more modern Western ones. The two groups seem to belong to different evolution stages, both in their own history and in relation to chess. Western checkers games are played on half the squares of the chequered board and consequently should be considered as chess children or, at least, if a direct filiation is not agreed upon, as games born after the introduction of chequered boards for chess. But Eastern draughts games, including Armenian and Turkish draughts, played on an unchequered board, may be considered as chess parents.

Distinguishing Western and Eastern varieties has thus proven to be useful. However, Eastern varieties are known in the West too such as Old German draughts (Thiele, Van der Stoep) and the varieties played in Frisia and elsewhere (Van der Stoep). Since only the draughts kind can antedate the chequered chess board, Frisian draughts may thus appear older than what is known as the Polish kind. However, the first evidence of Frisian draughts appears to be contemporary with the first traces of Polish checkers (Bakker).

Connected with this distinction, chess may have been an intermediate form between draughts and checkers, at least in some cases.

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