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When You're Not Scrolling Social Media

In my junior year, I attended my school's first chess tournament. While the initial games were a breeze, my skill level eventually took its toll. Still, I stayed behind to watch the final match (it was the first tournament after all, and I wanted to see what was out there). With my mouth wide open, I watched this new sophomore completely bamboozle a senior who I considered as one of the best players in the school. The sophomore was calm, collected, and casually dropping game-winning moves—I couldn't help but be impressed. A year later, my psychology teacher pulled up Wordle on the projector. Everyone's heads turned. As he tackled the puzzle, everyone shouted what he should guess next. After he solved it, the room erupted in applause. These moments, whether watching a surprising chess match or collectively solving a Wordle puzzle, are among my most cherished high school memories, and I wish I could relive them. With the added checkmark of being school-appropriate, it's no wonder everyone is playing strategy games now, especially in educational spaces. As civic artifacts, chess and Wordle demonstrate the tendency for humans to educate themselves in competitive and addictive ways.

Chess, a centuries-old game, boasts a long history of significant events and strategic thinking. In brief, two players go head-to-head, each trying to guess their opponent's move and outsmart them. One of the game's most notable moments dates to the Cold War when two prominent players—Anatoly Karpov of the Soviet Union and Bobby Fischer of the United States—prepared to face off in a championship game. Unfortunately, due to disagreements and

tensions, the game never happened. Nonetheless, it reflects the global tensions of the time, illustrating how chess mirrors critical aspects of our society. The United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a high-stakes strategy game, with each side actively trying to outsmart the other without triggering open conflict. In this way, chess was more than a game; it was a metaphor for survival and dominance.

The ethos of chess too has evolved. In the past, grandmasters were the talk of the town, with matches broadcast on television and printed in newspapers. Today, the rise of social media has revitalized the game, with figures like Magnus Carlsen, Hikaru Nakamura, and the Botez Sisters exposing chess to new (especially young) audiences through streaming platforms. Hikaru's sense of humor in particular has made him the perfect meme material, as he often blurts catchphrases like "takes, takes, takes" while he calculates his next sequence of moves. The credibility and appeal of these modern chess ambassadors play crucial roles in promoting the game and encouraging intellectual engagement.

Most importantly, chess highlights the American spirit of competition. Back when I played in tournaments, my younger brother and I had a bet to see who could win more trophies. Determined to come out on top, I memorized openings, solved puzzles, and learned traps to be unstoppable at the next competition. Yet, for some odd reason, my brother retired with more trophies (I still think it was because he had easier opponents). Jokes aside, this friendly rivalry demonstrates how competition drives us to improve. It is this competitive spirit that advances a capitalist society, encouraging us to be our best selves. Competing in tournaments not only fueled my desire to win but also pushed me to study and practice—fundamental components of education.

Wordle, an online puzzle that gained immense popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, represents a modern twist on strategy games. Players have six attempts to guess a five-letter word, receiving subtle feedback after each guess. Wordle's simplicity and accessibility caused it to spread like wildfire, as entertainment got the best of people during those dreaded periods of quarantine. Back when I was addicted, I played the game for months straight. However, what surprised me most was finding myself sitting on my bedroom floor, flipping through a dictionary! Who does that? Did I really need that vocab boost, or was I fixated on something else? Truthfully, I would never read a dictionary for no reason, but hey, maybe that new word I learned might be the key to solving the next Wordle in two attempts, and I certainly didn't want to lose my streak by exhausting all six. The thought of succeeding made me addicted. Since humans operate on pleasure, the Wordle developers knew beating games quickly and setting new records would boost players' dopamine levels. This shows that humans will go out of their way to achieve that dopamine rush, even if it means poring over pages of words.

From a rhetorical standpoint, Wordle illustrates pathos by making players feel excited (e.g., getting a green square) or disappointed (e.g., repeatedly getting multiple gray squares) after each guess. Furthermore, the concept of a daily puzzle creates a shared experience among players worldwide, creating a community amidst isolation. Browsing through social media, I frequently see posts about someone's attempt at the daily Wordle. In fact, there are whole communities dedicated to sharing Wordle journeys. Emotion keeps us hooked. The game also demonstrates logos by requiring players to use deductive reasoning and pull from their cabinet of vocabulary words to guess the word. Suppose you just found out the last four letters are "a-n-d-y." Now you have a couple of options. Is the word, *candy*, *handy*, *dandy*, *sandy*, or some other exotic term? This is where it gets challenging—and fun too. Moreover, the kairos of Wordle's

rise cannot be overlooked. During a period when nearly everyone was quarantined, Wordle filled a void by offering an easily accessible mental exercise that connected people in the digital space.

Both chess and Wordle serve as brain exercises that emphasize the value of education and intellectual engagement. They require players to utilize critical thinking and problem-solving skills, reinforcing the importance of mental agility in personal growth. However, the two games differ significantly in the social and temporal contexts. Chess is inherently a two-player game; it requires players to interpret and anticipate another's moves, adding a layer of psychological complexity. As a result, it's often difficult to tell whether you're winning until you're halfway in the game. Wordle, on the other hand, is played alone, appealing to those who may prefer individual challenges over direct competition. With immediate feedback after each guess, you quickly know which words to try next, reducing the playing time significantly. Another sharp contrast lies in the temporal scope. Chess has stood the test of time, evolving over centuries (invented in 6th century India) and maintaining its relevance across generations. Conversely, Wordle is a product of the digital age (released to the public in 2021), illustrating the rapid consumption and viral nature of modern online content. This difference shows just how much gaming has evolved to meet society's changing needs and preferences.

Both games highlight the value of achievement. In chess, victory comes from outsmarting an opponent, while in Wordle, it's through solving a puzzle in the fewest attempts. In addition, both center around entertainment—they're games, after all. The kairos of their popularity is also worth mentioning: chess experienced a resurgence when Netflix released *The Queen's Gambit*, which introduced the game to a new audience (those who've never played chess) and highlighted its cultural significance. Wordle's rise during the COVID-19 pandemic shows how external circumstances can influence us to enjoy certain games. The audience for both games includes

active players and gaming enthusiasts seeking intellectual stimulation. However, there are constraints related to the audience's familiarity with the games, which can vary due to generational differences. Older generations may have a deeper appreciation for chess, while younger individuals might be more drawn to digital games like Wordle. This disparity affects how different demographic groups perceive and value each game.

Chess and Wordle, as civic artifacts, reveal a lot about human nature and societal values. They demonstrate our enduring desire for education through competitive and addictive means, bridging the gap between the historical past and the contemporary present. Chess represents the importance of strategic thinking and direct human interaction, mirroring complicated real-world conflicts and the pursuit of intellectual growth. Wordle exhibits the immediate and individualistic nature of the digital age, satisfying us with mental challenges accessible anywhere in the world. Both games highlight the significance of achievement and pursuit of knowledge, supplying much-needed mental exercise in an ever-changing world.

Works Cited

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