

CHESSLIFE



THE
NEW CHESS BOOM!

THE NEW



CHESS BOOM

“Chess streamers” are taking over Twitch.

Wondering what that means?

IM Eric Rosen explains.

Before unpacking the meteoric rise of Hikaru Nakamura as a leader of the “new craze” of chess streaming on Twitch, I would like to ask a simple question.

When was the last *chess boom*?

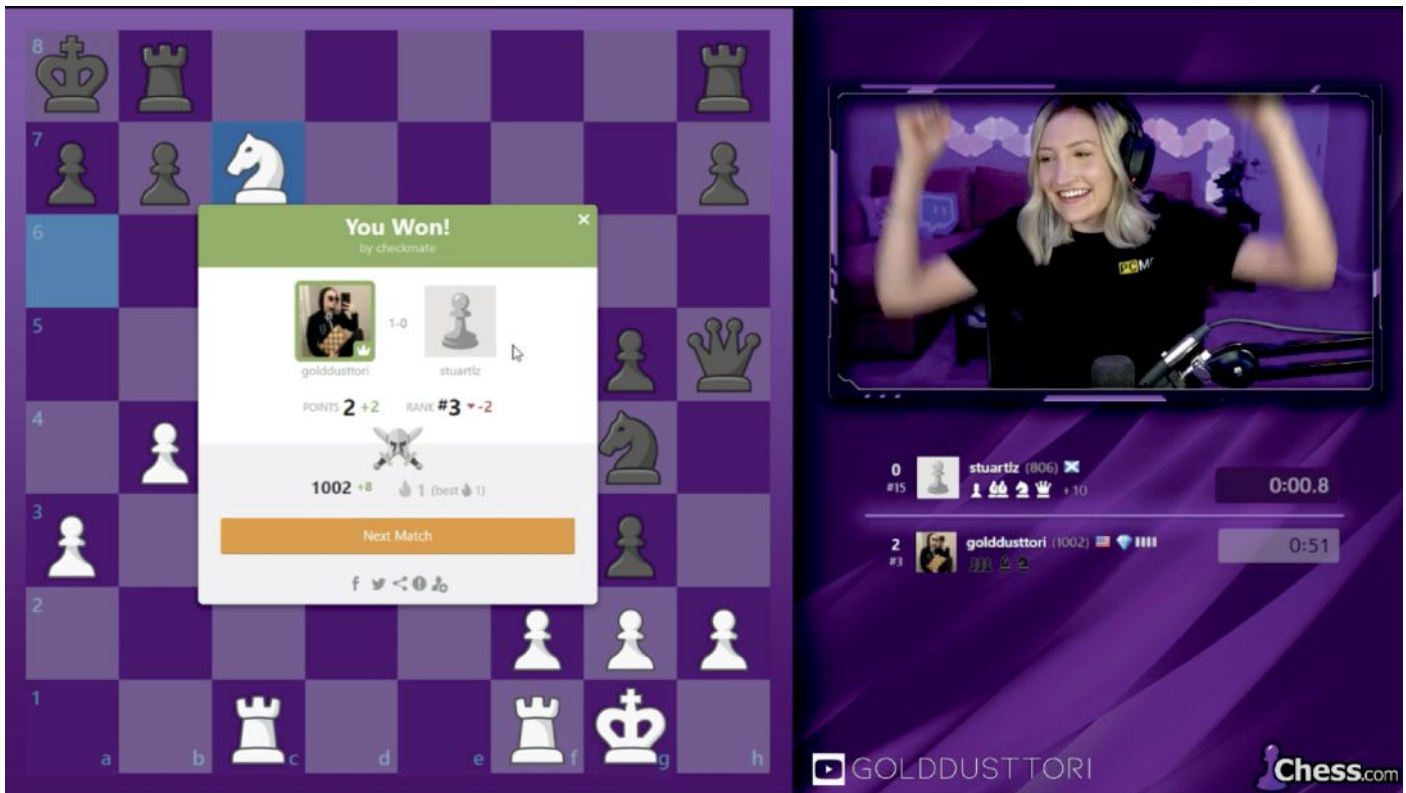
I would guess that most readers immediately thought of the era a near half-century ago. Even if you, like me, are too young to have lived through the 1970s, chances are you know the story of the Fischer Boom.

GM Robert J. (“Bobby”) Fischer challenged and defeated GM Boris Spassky in the 1972

World Championship, casting chess as a key battle in a global Cold War and bringing home a big win for the “good guys.” Fischer’s saga captivated the mainstream media here and abroad, and with the voice of Shelby Lyman delivering move-by-move commentary, the drama was broadcast to millions of living rooms across the country. Through this spectacle a vast new audience encountered our game.

It isn’t easy to find precise data quantifying the extent and impact of the Fischer Boom. We lack the luxury of *YouTube* or *Twitch*

analytics—this was, after, before the internet and tracking cookies! But anecdotal evidence is more than enough to prove that chess prospered. In the documentary *Bobby Fischer Against the World*, Shelby Lyman surmised, “After the match, he [Fischer] was supposedly better known by the population of the world than anyone except for Jesus Christ.” I think it’s safe to assume there were more people enthralled with chess in 1972 than people who hoarded toilet paper and hand sanitizer in March of 2020. (Okay, maybe it’s a close call...



GOLDDUSTTORI CELEBRATES HER FIRST SMOTHERED MATE ON STREAM

but you get the point.)

In the years that have passed since the Fischer Boom, it's hard to identify a comparable period of sustained growth and prosperity for our beloved game. For several decades after Fischer abruptly vanished from the chess scene, chess' popularity stagnated. Of course, there have been moments where chess has been in the media spotlight: the "Man versus Machine" matches featuring Deep Blue and GM Garry Kasparov come to mind, as do the epic battles between Kasparov and his eternal rival GM Anatoly Karpov. The American press was captivated by the 2018 World Championship Match between GM

Magnus Carlsen and GM Fabiano Caruana.

Despite these blips, we have to be frank. Chess has suffered a from a marketing problem for a long time. While hardcore chess enthusiasts are loathe to admit it, chess is not inherently a spectator-friendly sport.

A traditional chess competition simply does not generate the same level of intrigue as do physical sports or even video games. For non-initiates, watching two grandmasters play a game of chess for hours in dead silence and solitude can be as dull as watching paint dry.

There is no cheering crowd. No live scoreboard. No visually enthralling motion graphics. Chess requires a significant

investment of time and dedication to fully appreciate the game's compelling beauty and addicting nature. In a 2015 segment of *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart half-jokingly pretended to fall asleep at the beginning of the segment covering chess, saying "I didn't realize how boring chess was until someone else started talking about it."

Let me make it clear that I am bringing up these points not with the intention of bashing a game that so many of us cherish. I'm simply trying to help readers better understand the hurdles and stereotypes that chess has faced in the past, and how a new shifting online chess culture is revolutionizing the game.

THE ONLINE CHESS EXPLOSION

When I was first asked to write this piece on the booming online chess ecosystem, the task seemed daunting. There are so many layers to unpeel and areas to address.

Unlike the Fischer Boom, the current chess renaissance we are living through is not defined by a single individual or event. Rather, it's the culmination of endless chess activity experiencing rapidly growth and evolution. There are multiple factors contributing to this new chess renaissance. While it is impossible to dig into them all, here are a few of the most important:

- ✱ A global pandemic causing lockdowns and the cancellation of sporting events, concerts, etc., driving more people to search online for new forms of entertainment
- ✱ Platforms like *Chess.com*, *lichess.org*, and *Chess24* creating an infrastructure where tens of millions of chess games are played on a monthly basis
- ✱ The \$1 million Magnus Carlsen Invitational tournament series on Chess24, hosting a series of elite online events and showcasing the world's top players
- ✱ Chess organizers across the country and the world hosting online tournaments featuring cash prizes
- ✱ The proliferation of online learning resources, including virtual chess camps, online courses, and *Chessable*
- ✱ Podcasts (including the *Perpetual Chess Podcast*, *Agadmator's Podcast*, and four different shows from *US Chess*) featuring long-form interviews with personalities in the chess community with various perspectives
- ✱ A large and active chess community on Twitter and Reddit with ongoing discussion

BEHIND THE SCENES

Much like chess, streaming on Twitch is a skill developed through continual learning, hard work, and dedication. Because Twitch is relatively new and constantly evolving, the learning process and best practices are not so well defined. You won't learn how to stream in a traditional educational setting. Many of us learn through trial and error along with YouTube tutorials (which isn't necessarily a bad thing!). Here are some tips for aspiring chess streamers and YouTubers to take their content game to the next level.

Don't be afraid to start

I had an ambition of starting a Twitch channel in 2015, but I didn't actively start streaming until late 2017. Of course there will be hurdles and challenges early on, but the best way to learn is by doing. Your first stream will not be perfect. It may take dozens of streams to find your comfort and rhythm. That's completely

normal. Start with minimal expectations and then to make every stream a little bit better than the last.

Equipment and Software

It's easy to get overwhelmed by all the tools needed to begin streaming. While getting started does take some effort in the beginning, not too much is required. At the bare minimum, you need:

- A Twitch account
- A decent laptop (Twitch recommends at least an Intel i5 processor and 8GB of RAM)
- A steady wifi connection
- Streaming software—I recommend *Streamlabs OBS* for Windows and *OBS* for Mac. Both are free to download!

Additionally, an external microphone can drastically improve the audio quality of your stream. For starters, I recommend the Samson Go Mic, a small and portable condenser microphone (good for drowning out background noise) available for less than \$40.

Don't worry about the numbers

In the beginning, viewership and growth can be slow. Don't get too wrapped up over your viewership and follower numbers. It's most important to enjoy what you're doing and build meaningful relationships with your viewers. If you provide value and stay authentic to yourself, the audience will come!

Set up a streamer profile

Create a streamer profile on *lichess.org* (<https://lichess.org/streamer>) or *chess.com* (<https://www.chess.com/streamers>). Both sites provide resources to get your stream started.

Anyone can set up a streamer profile on *lichess.org* and have their stream promoted on the streamers page when you mention "*lichess.org*" in the title. On *Chess.com*, you can apply to become a partnered streamer and receive various promotion benefits.

- about current events within the chess world
- ✱ An influx of chess streamers creating regular content and realizing the joy of building a community
- ✱ The success of *Chess.com's* PogChamps, a tournament featuring some of the top streamers and personalities on Twitch, which is consequently driving a vast new audience to the game.

Chess is more accessible than ever. Anyone with a mobile device and an internet connection (which is everyone, right?) has a plethora of ways to play, watch, learn, and enjoy the game. Regardless of one's chess ability, learning style, or entertainment tastes, there is something for every chess fan in today's age.

We are currently living through one of the greatest chess booms since the Fischer era, and

very possibly far greater. I do not think that this is just a short-lived fad; rather, I believe it is very likely we will continue to see sustained growth and a golden age for years to come.

To illustrate the unprecedented growth and potential for sustaining it, one need look no further than Twitch.

Since its founding in 2011, Twitch has revolutionized the live streaming of games.



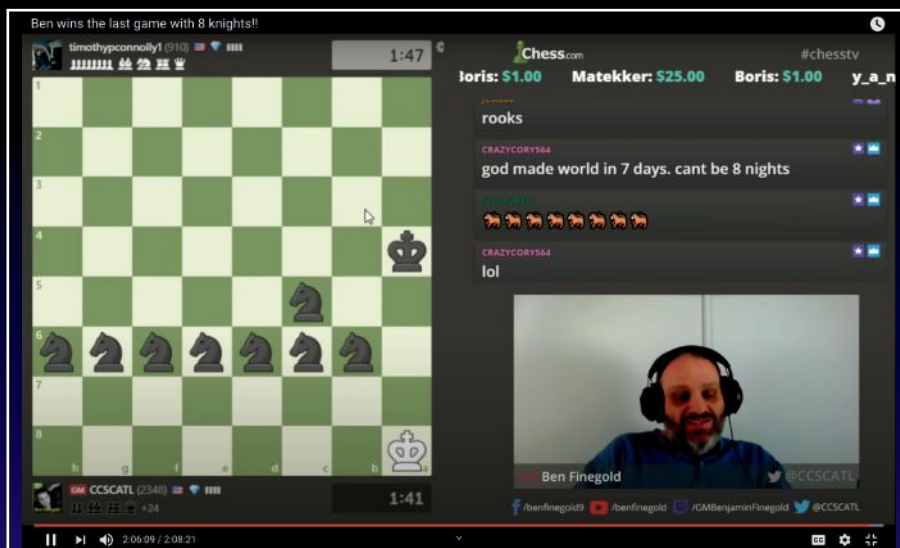
chess streamers! *PogChess.com* has an extensive list of the chess streamers on Twitch. Pay attention to what they do and what you can potentially emulate. Here's a brief list of some go-to stream ideas: play viewers, conduct a simul, join a tournament, puzzle rush, Q&A, hand & brain collaboration, commentate top level games, host a viewer tournament, learn/teach an opening, and even four-player chess. I encourage you to keep your own list of stream ideas and continually add to it!

Develop your brand

Not everyone is Hikaru Nakamura. However, if you look at any established chess streamer, they each have a unique style. GM Ben Finegold is known for his edgy comedy and famous catch phrases. (The truth hurts!) The ChessBrahs are known for their high energy techno and occasional rages. GoldDustTori features exceptional stream quality, purple branding, and adorable cats. GothamChess and GMNaroditsky are famous for doing hilarious impressions of famous chess players. GrandmasterGauri can burst into song at any moment. Over time, try and figure out what makes your stream and your personality unique, and work to embody it!

Seek continual feedback

What resonates with your viewers? What do viewers want to see more of? These are questions to constantly be asking as you grow. Don't be afraid to experiment with new ideas and observe what works and what doesn't work. You can create a poll in the Twitch chat by typing "/poll" to get quick input. Creating a survey using Google Forms is also a great way to get more detailed feedback from viewers.



Leverage other social media

If you have any following on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Discord, or even TikTok, use these platforms to drive traffic to your Twitch stream when you go live. You can also repurpose content from a Twitch stream for other platforms. A dramatic 30-second clip can be great content for Twitter. A single interesting blitz game

with commentary can make a great YouTube video. Many chess streamers (Hikaru Nakamura, the ChessBrahs, the Botez sisters, and myself included) grow their YouTube channels with content that is predominantly first streamed on Twitch.

Get inspired

If you're unsure about what exactly to stream, take inspiration from other

These days, it's becoming increasingly difficult to look at anything chess-related online and not be driven to its website. Unless you have been living under a rock, it's likely that you have heard of Twitch and have probably watched some chess on it at some point.

At its core, Twitch is a live streaming platform. Since Amazon acquired it in 2014 for approximately \$1 billion, Twitch has

dominated the market share of online live-streamed content. It boasts more watch time, broadcasters, and unique viewers than the combination of YouTube Gaming, Facebook Gaming, and yes, even Mixer, the failed Microsoft-owned competitor that, almost literally, dissolved as I wrote this sentence.

Unlike traditional video content that you may consume on YouTube, all of the content

on Twitch occurs in (near) real-time. This means there are no pre-recorded or heavily edited videos. When you tune into a Twitch stream, instead of just passively watching a video, you can interact in real time with the streamer and others in the audience, and you get to witness the streamer's raw emotions and genuine reactions as they're playing.

While Twitch is best known as a platform

used by players of mainstream video games like Fortnite, Overwatch, and League of Legends, chess has found its place there. In just a few short years, chess has attracted a booming community on Twitch, one that has grown exponentially over just the last few months.

In my youth, I dreamed of a television channel dedicated to chess, one that would broadcast a variety of shows, at every hour of the day. It seemed far-fetched then, but this is the new reality with Twitch. It is a chess fan's nirvana. Dozens of Twitch streamers are broadcasting chess around the clock. Many are titled players who play and commentate on games while generously sharing their knowledge with the community. Others are relatively new to the game and use live-streaming as a method of documenting their journey towards chess improvement. The diversity of content is truly impressive. Here is just a small taste of some of the chess streamers you can observe on Twitch:

- ✱ **GM Ray Robson** ([twitch.tv/gmrrayrobson](https://www.twitch.tv/gmrrayrobson)) absolutely crushing *Chess.com's* Puzzle Rush, routinely scoring over 50 points in the three-minute challenge.
- ✱ **GM Ben Finegold's** (<https://www.twitch.tv/gmbenjaminfinegold>) absurd humor, famous catchphrases (like “still theory,”

“never play f6,” and “the truth hurts”) and occasional games where he underpromotes an unnecessary amount of knights to prove his dominance over beginner opponents.

- ✱ **GM Alejandro Ramirez** ([twitch.tv/littlepeasant](https://www.twitch.tv/littlepeasant)) solving insanely difficult chess studies and sharing stories from his experiences training World Championship Challenger GM Fabiano Caruana.
- ✱ **GoldDustTori** ([twitch.tv/golddusttori](https://www.twitch.tv/golddusttori)), who began streaming chess as a pure beginner and documented her improvement journey, reaching a 1500 online rating and beyond.
- ✱ **VideoGamePianist** ([twitch.tv/videogamepianist](https://www.twitch.tv/videogamepianist)) performing the Mario Kart theme song while flawlessly delivering checkmate with less than 10 seconds left.
- ✱ The ever-popular **Chessbrahs** ([twitch.tv/chessbrah](https://www.twitch.tv/chessbrah)) featuring the Canadian Grandmasters Eric Hansen and Aman Hambleton, accompanied by high energy techno music and the occasional raging, chair throwing, and mouse smashing.
- ✱ **GM Daniel Naroditsky** ([twitch.tv/gmnaroditsky](https://www.twitch.tv/gmnaroditsky)) and **IM Levy Rozman's** ([twitch.tv/gothamchess](https://www.twitch.tv/gothamchess)) hilarious impressions of Grischuk, Kasparov, Wesley So, and numerous other chess personalities.
- ✱ **GM Magnus Carlsen** ([twitch.tv/](https://www.twitch.tv/)

maskenissen) streaming various Banter Blitz sessions, lichess titled arenas, and even his infamous troll stream on *Chess.com* where he tried to pretend he was playing on Chess24.

It is easier than ever to interact with strong players in real time, ask questions, and get a glimpse into what goes through their minds while they play a game.

The major chess platforms like *Chess.com*, Chess24, and *lichess.org* all heavily promote content on Twitch in one way or another. Virtually every major tournament is covered with high quality commentary, often across multiple channels. These platforms also host regular events and shows including Titled Arenas, Speed Chess Championships, and Banter Blitz sessions with top players. Streaming on Twitch has become a significant source of side income for some of the most watched streamers, and in some cases, it has become a full-time career.

GM Hikaru Nakamura is undoubtedly the most prominent beneficiary of this new chess surge. Not only has his personal brand skyrocketed in recent months, but it has introduced the game to and ignited a passion for chess in a whole new audience.

THE RISE OF HIKARU

Hikaru Nakamura has been a big name in the chess community for as long as many of us can remember. Since breaking Bobby Fischer's record by becoming the world's youngest grandmaster at the age of 15, Hikaru has racked up five U.S. Championship titles and is currently the top-rated blitz player in the world. Known for his dynamic play, tactical precision, ridiculous speed chess skills, and occasionally whipping out a wicked King's Indian Defense, he has been a long-time staple at elite chess events.

But Hikaru has evolved beyond being just a professional player in recent years, building his social media presence and becoming one of the world's foremost chess ambassadors. By leveraging his chess wizardry and outgoing personality, he has built a massive online following. Let's take a look at a few dazzling statistics, all current as of June 2020.

- ✱ **Followers on Twitch: 400,000+**
- ✱ **Average concurrent viewers per live Twitch stream: 15,000+**
- ✱ **YouTube Subscribers: 300,000+**
- ✱ **YouTube Views: 40,000,000+**
- ✱ **Paid Monthly Twitch Subscribers: 10,000+ (equates to over \$25,000/month in revenue)**

While it's not necessary to get into the exact finances of Twitch streaming, these stats translate into a lucrative business. When you combine subscribers, donations, and ad revenue alone (thus excluding potential sponsorships), it is likely that Hikaru earns a lot more from Twitch than from tournament winnings.

How exactly did this happen? How does someone who grew up playing chess, and not specifically trained in public speaking or digital media, become one of the most prolific entertainers and influencers on Twitch?

Let's rewind a bit to find the answer.

Hikaru's first stream on Twitch took place on July 14, 2017. Thanks to promotion via a Reddit post and at [chess.com/tv](https://www.chess.com/tv), his streaming debut was well attended. The three-hour stream attracted over 3,000 unique viewers with a peak of 912 concurrent viewers. This was an auspicious start—in a recent conversation with Devin Nash (an industry guru on Twitch streaming and esports), Devin told Hikaru that in “the very first stream you ever did on Twitch, you were in the top .01% and you never declined from there.”

While Hikaru streamed sporadically over the year following his debut, it wasn't until late 2018 that he began to take streaming

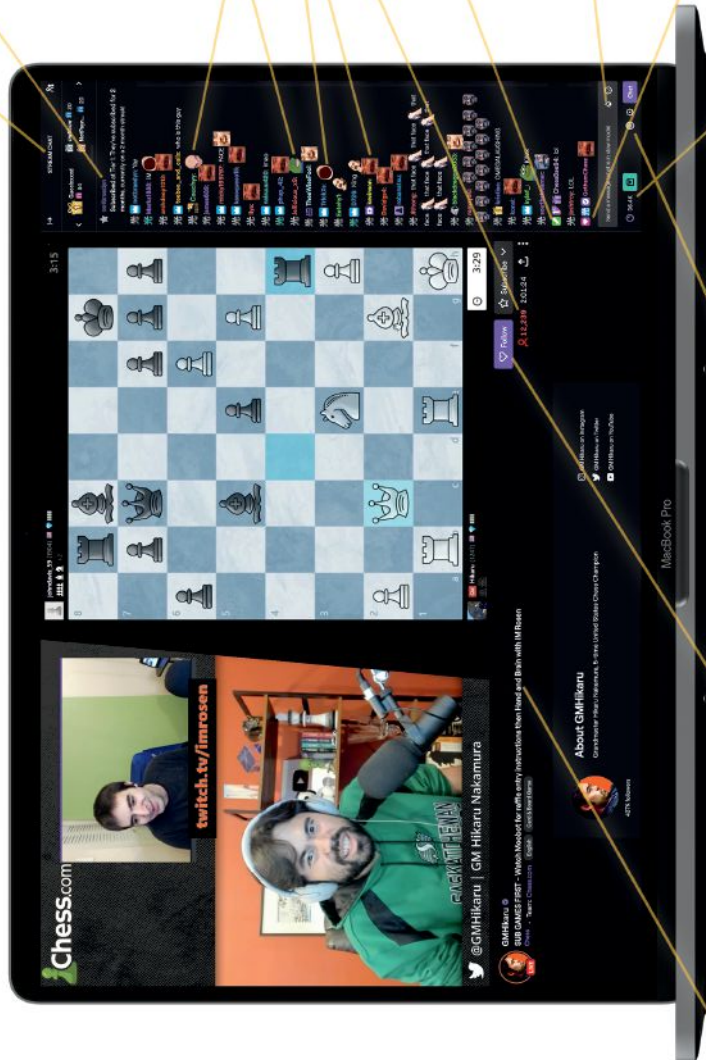
more seriously. The Carlsen-Caruana World Championship match catapulted chess to one of the most watched categories on Twitch for the month of November. *Chess.com's* commentary with IM Danny Rensch and GM Robert Hess hit a peak concurrent viewership of over 70,000, and the chess category as a whole surpassed 110,000. Hikaru took notice of the potential chess had on Twitch and made the commitment to stream more consistently.

Over the course of 2019, despite juggling a busy travel and tournament schedule, Hikaru streamed remarkably consistently. While traveling all over the world for events like the World Cup, Isle of Man, Sinquefield Cup, U.S. Championships, World Rapid/Blitz Championships, and the FIDE Grand Prix and Grand Chess Tour series, he managed to have 182 separate streams that year, equating to a whopping 634 hours of content.

Surprisingly, he discovered that streaming did not detract from his performance in serious events. This was perhaps most evident in the 2019 U.S. Championship, where Hikaru streamed his game analysis after completing most rounds, and replays of which are now archived on YouTube. With each game review, he generously explained the reasoning behind his moves and the various insights

TWITCH FOR NEWBIES

I understand that not all *Chess Life* readers spend a hefty portion of their livelihood consuming content on Twitch. Because of this, there may be a bunch of jargon that is unfamiliar or that may scare you away from the platform. As the old saying goes: Every grandmaster was once a n00b. Here's a breakdown of some common terms that will hopefully make the viewing experience a bit more understandable for the Twitch newcomer.



Chat

The chat is an integral part to the viewing experience on Twitch. This is where viewers can interact amongst each other and with the streamer. Depending on the overall viewership and engagement, the vibe in a chat can vary drastically between channels. Some stream chats will feature slow and sophisticated discussions, while other chats (like Hikaru's) move so quickly that the chat turns into an intelligent organism, emitting a flurry of emotes, memes, and high energy blabber.

Sub

Short for Subscription or Subscriber, a sub refers to a viewer who pays monthly to support a streamer. Subscriptions come in three tiers: Tier 1 (\$5/month), Tier 2 (\$10/month) and Tier 3 (\$25/month). When a viewer subscribes to a streamer, they get access to the channel's custom emotes, a badge next to their name in the chat, and various other benefits that are unique to the streamer. These may include access to playing games with the streamer, sub-only simuls, sub-only chat rooms, and more.

Emotes

Emotes are small graphics that users can use in the Twitch chat. Most channels have emotes that are closely related to the streamer's image and brand. There are also global emotes, which everyone has access to and can be used across any Twitch channel. Many emotes are linked to inside jokes that may require some understanding of meme culture. Here are some of the most commonly used emotes and what they mean:

5Head: Indicating high intelligence

PepeLaugh: Pepe the Frog is a family of emotes used to convey various emotions.

This one shows laughter. Note: While the Pepe the Frog cartoon was weaponized by the alt-right in 2016, it is an innocent and non-political symbol on Twitch.

OMEGALLU: Intense laughter (a stretched version of the LUL emote)

KEKW: Yet another way to express laughter. The face comes from an iconic video of Spanish Comedian, El Risitas.

Concurrent viewers

This number in red indicates how many viewers are watching a stream at any given time. In the month of June, GMHikaru averaged over 15,000 concurrent viewers on his channel, meaning there is a stadium full of people watching him play chess on a typical day.

Mod

Short for *moderator* and signified by the sword icon, a mod is a Twitch user with special privileges to maintain some sanity in the chat. Mods have the power to ban or timeout users in the chat for misbehaving. Every streamer has at some point or another encountered unwanted trolls or toxicity that is best kept out of the chat. A streamer has the power to make any user a mod that he or she chooses.

Bits

Bits are Twitch's virtual currency that viewers can purchase and donate to streamers. Every 100 bits is worth \$1 for the streamer. On many streams, when bits are cheered (the act of donating bits), a live popup appears, usually accompanied by a sound effect and message from the cheerer.

Channel Badges

The symbols next to each username are known as channel badges. In this case, GothamChess (IM Levy Rozman) has three channel badges. The leftmost diamond symbol indicates the VIP. The streamer can make a select number of users VIPs, and while they gain no special privileges, they do get elevated social status in the chat. The middle symbol is a subscriber badge. This specific badge means GothamChess has been subscribed to Hikaru's channel for over one year. The rightmost checkmark badge indicates the user is a verified Twitch Partner, something that is earned through tremendous hard work and dedication to streaming.

Channel Points

Channel points are virtual tokens (with no monetary value) that can be accrued simply by watching a streamer for an extended period of time. On most channels, viewers can redeem channel points for a highlighted message in chat, or various other benefits which are decided by the streamer.

BTTV

Better Twitch TV is a popular and free browser extension, which gives users a wider selection of emotes to use in the chat along with other features on enabled channels. In streams like GMHikaru or BotezLive, BTTV emotes are commonly used in the chat. When you see terms like OMEGALLU, KEKW, or PEPELAUGH, these are would be turned into images with BTTV installed.

Follow

Clicking "Follow" is a free way for viewers to show support for a streamer and makes it easier to find their stream when they go live. At the time of this writing, GMHikaru has well over 400,000 followers. This makes him the most followed chess channel and among the top 600 most followed channels overall on Twitch.

Hand & Brain

This is a popular variant involving two players acting as a team. For each move, the "Hand" says the name of a piece, and the "Brain" must move said piece. In this moment of the stream, I was acting as the brain and said "King"; Hikaru then made the face of utter disgust as any king move for White is losing.

For the purposes of this graphic, some elements have been modified to include terms that are commonly seen on Twitch.

he experienced during these high-level encounters. Many of these streams lasted over an hour, with Hikaru taking additional time to answer questions from fans and viewers.

During the midst of a competition, most chess players would prefer conserving precious time for rest and preparation...not streaming! But Hikaru simply wanted to provide as much value as possible to his online audience, and I think it's possible that streaming his post-game recaps motivated him to play his best chess. He proceeded to outperform fellow Super GMs like Fabiano Caruana, Wesley So, and Leinier Dominguez to capture his fifth U.S. Championship title.

Since the genesis of Hikaru's streaming career, he has been a partner and ambassador for *Chess.com*. Under the umbrella of the world's largest chess website, he has a small team to help him with the various aspects of streaming and content creation.

Hikaru's main accomplice is Twitch user Chessbae94, who prefers to remain anonymous. While many people who watch chess on Twitch know ChessBae as a popular supporter and moderator across multiple chess streams, she has also played a big role in Hikaru's growth as a streamer, helping with a wide variety of technical and administrative tasks. She also plays an important role in managing Hikaru's YouTube channel, handling the scheduling, titles, descriptions, ad placements, and content ideas.

Jaron is another team member who helps repurpose Hikaru's Twitch content into smaller, digestible YouTube videos, creating incredibly thoughtful and visually stunning thumbnails to accompany each video. Together, the Chessbae and Jaron duo have been responsible for Hikaru's incredible

consistency and visual appeal on YouTube. For well over a year now, the team has been releasing videos every single day and there are no plans to stop any time soon. Effective support like this plays a large role in growing the audience further, driving more traffic to Hikaru's live streams on Twitch.

Having a small and dedicated team has been essential to Hikaru's success on Twitch and YouTube. Because so many different types of skills are necessary to be a successful content creator, delegating certain tasks has allowed Hikaru to focus on what he enjoys most: playing and streaming chess.

Let's fast forward to the spring of 2020. Up until this point, Hikaru experienced steady growth. His usual content—blitz matches, puzzle rush, and participating in competitions like in the PRO Chess League and Titled Tuesday—already appealed to a large audience. In March, he averaged 2,000-3,000 concurrent viewers per stream. With April came a key event, driving nearly exponential growth in viewership.

Beginning in April Hikaru collaborated with one of the most popular streamers on Twitch, known as xQc. By now, it's possible that many readers have heard of xQc, but for those unfamiliar, he is a former professional Overwatch player who streams a variety of games, routinely drawing crowds of 30,000+ viewers.

Despite being a complete beginner, xQc became fascinated with chess. His extremely competitive and unpredictable personality makes his streams fascinating to watch. In Hikaru's first collaboration (search YouTube for *I survived teaching xQc chess* to see it), Hikaru introduced xQc to some basic principles and what resulted was mesmerizing.

This content was much different from what is usually seen in chess streams. It was like

watching a math professor teach basic addition to a small child. Watching xQc marvel over simple tactics like pins, double attacks, and checkmating patterns reminded me of my early days, learning the foundations of the game. Hikaru not only helped inspire xQc to become a better chess player, but he surely also inspired a good portion of the thousands of viewers who watched that stream.

Over the following months, Hikaru collaborated with more than a dozen popular streamers and online celebrities who caught the chess bug. Among them were *League of Legends* pros, *Fortnite* sensations, variety streamers, and even Hafthor Julius, the "World's Strongest Man" who played "The Mountain" in *Game of Thrones*. These collaborations brought a whole new audience to chess who wouldn't otherwise be exposed to all the richness the game has to offer.

When Hikaru competed in Lindores Abbey as part of the Magnus Carlsen Invitational in May, GM Robert Hess and WFM Alexandra Botez took over his Twitch channel. They provided live commentary of the event to a crowd large enough to pack St. Louis' Busch Stadium. When Hikaru battled and defeated GM Magnus Carlsen, referred to as "El Magneto" by many members of the Twitch chat, viewership peaked at over 40,000.

Hikaru streamed nearly every day in April, May, and June, averaging about six hours per stream. In my June chat with Hikaru, I asked him where he finds all the energy to stream so consistently. He explained that:

"It's all about the people who are watching. When you know there's so many people who are watching and who are enjoying the content you're providing, that certainly gives a huge boost motivationally to stream."

POGCHAMPS

It would be almost criminal for me to write a cover story about chess on Twitch without mentioning one of the most viewed and historic chess tournaments in the history of the game. In June, *Chess.com* and Twitch hosted the inaugural "PogChamps," a chess event like none other in recent memory. Boasting a prize fund of \$50,000, the tournament featured some of the most prolific video game streamers and online personalities, all of whom are chess amateurs. The idea for the event was birthed out of fans in Hikaru's Twitch chat who wanted to see some of their favorite influencers compete against each other.

Internet celebrities like BoxBox, VoyBoy, MoistCr1tikal, xQc, and Fuslie, among others,

did battle over the course of two weeks. In between the daily matches, some big-name chess streamers like WFM Alexandra Botez, WGM Qiyu Zhou, GM Daniel Naroditsky, IM Levy Rozman, and IM Hans Niemann live-streamed coaching sessions with the PogChamps participants.

To give a taste of what the event produced I would like to share one of the most viral and hysterical games of the event. For anyone expecting a high quality strategic and complex battle between two grandmasters, brace yourself for a little bit of culture shock and please keep an open mind.

Playing the white pieces is the aforementioned xQc. With black is MoistCr1tikal, a YouTuber with over five million subscribers, and

known for his monotone voice and edgy humor. Commentating the action was Hikaru Nakamura and Alexandra Botez.

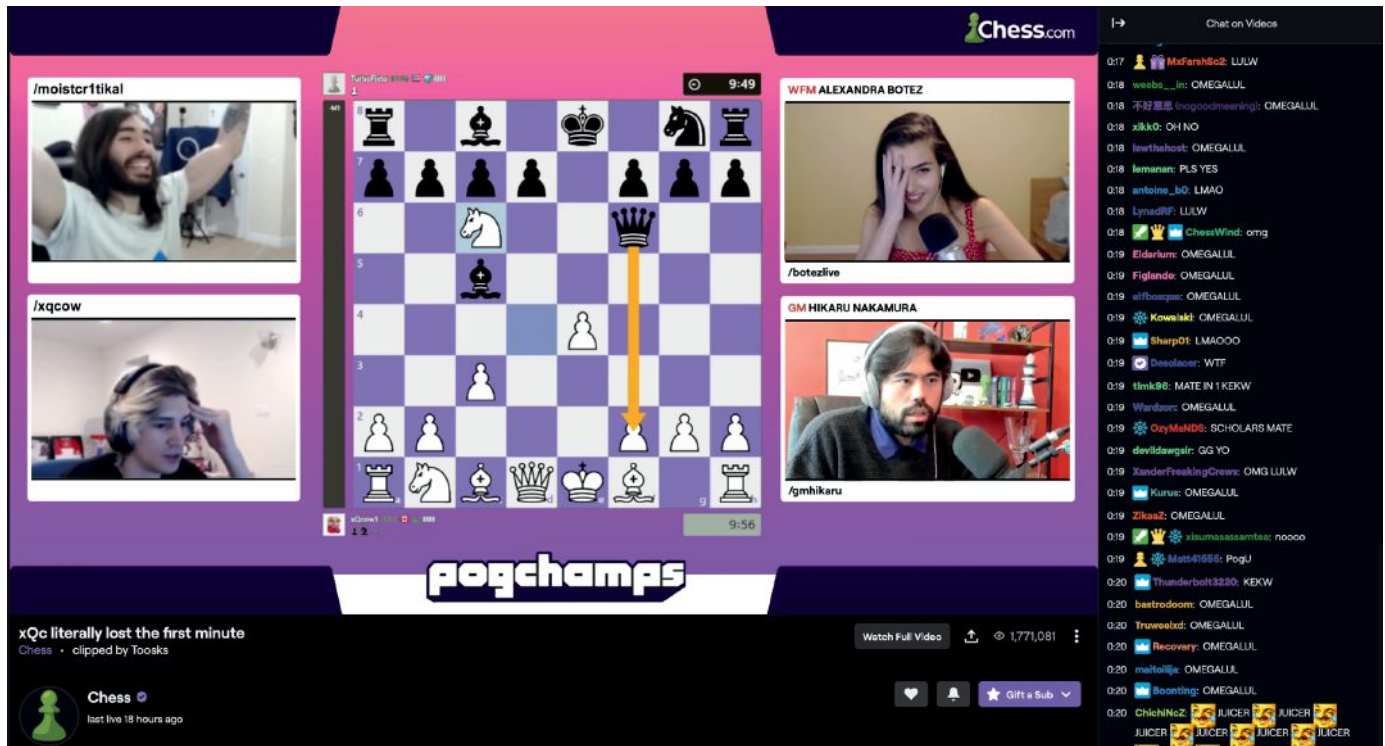
It seemed as if before the game even started...

UMM... (C45)

xQc
MoistCr1tikal
Pogchamps, 2020

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. d4 exd4 4. Nxd4 Bc5 5. c3 Qf6 6. Nxc6?? Qxf2, mate.

... it was over.



ABOVE: THE MOST VIRAL MOMENT FROM THE POGCHAMPS TOURNAMENT
 BELOW: SOME FLEXING FROM *Chess.com* OVER THE SUCCESS OF POGCHAMPS

Chess.com @chesscom

During #pogchamps...

- * #chess reached 150,000 concurrent @Twitch viewers.
- * A chess @YouTube video trended.
- * twitch.tv/chess reached 85,000 viewers.
- * A chess stream reached 1,000,000 unique views.
- * twitch.tv/chess gained 140,000 followers.
- * @Erobb221 got a W.

Up until his fateful blunder, xQc was confidently blitzing out the opening with the soundtrack of *Rocky* playing on his stream. And then came his disastrous capture.

Hikaru, who previously trained xQc for the competition, was speechless.

Alexandra Botez uttered, “It’s too soon!”

MoistCr1tical screamed “YES!!! YES!!! YES!!!” with vicious air punching for emphasis. He praised his prophet sensei, GM Daniel Naroditsky, for showing him the exact opening sequence just a day prior. Some vulgarities followed, which I won’t repeat here in an effort

to keep things family friendly.

A wave of OMEGALULs filled the Twitch chat from the tens of thousands of onlookers.

The six-move game subsequently went viral on YouTube, racking up a couple million views in just a few days. So much viral and entertaining content like this emerged out of PogChamps, proving the concept a great promotional vehicle for chess and for *Chess.com*.

Now, it is true that the games and spectacle of PogChamps may not have appealed to everyone in the chess community. But it did appeal to a more general audience,

introducing the game to many new fans. *Chess.com* recapped the success of the event in a now-legendary tweet, shown here on the left with some interesting statistics.

The fact that PogChamps had larger peak viewership on *Chess.com*’s Twitch channel than the 2018 World Championships shows the immense potential of chess on Twitch going forward. Hikaru hinted that we can very likely expect more events like PogChamps in the future.

I do understand that there will be critics of such a spectacle, but it is important to constantly experiment with new ideas and formats in order to appeal to a wider audience.

In a recent podcast interview with Antonio Radić, better known to chess fans worldwide as Agadmator, Hikaru explained how he sees this potential, and how he sees his role in growing it:

“Most people are beginners who have not played chess their whole lives. In general terms, I think if you have more events where you can make it more relatable to a general audience, then there’s a big chance to have more viewership which of course leads to sponsorship and more general interest. At the end of the day, I just want to see the game become more popular.”

In contrast to Bobby Fischer, who famously dropped off the map after forfeiting his title in 1975, it doesn’t seem like the craze of chess on Twitch will vanish anytime soon. We should be thankful to live in a time where there are so many opportunities to play, learn, and enjoy our beloved game. ♠