

Chess Sucks!

18 reasons based upon sound, universal game-design principles

Suck = slang : to be objectionable or inadequate.

[Merriam-Webster Dictionary]

Foreword

In my opinion, chess is the very best, popular board game in the world!

Unfortunately, all of the best chess variants in the world aren't popular enough to be described as popular without exaggeration. Typically, they are little-known chess variants we invent (or others who lived before us have invented).

With reference to the rich number and variety of quality chess variants that have already been invented and the infinite possibilities for chess variants that have not yet been invented (either by today's technology or imaginable in the future where better AI programs will probably be commonplace), chess definitely sucks. I no longer am willing to play chess ... even socially.

If I had somehow forgotten everything valuable I have ever learned about quality game design, invented chess and (irreversibly) released it to the world, I would have been so ashamed after coming to my senses that despite its newfound popularity, I would have desperately hoped noone ever found-out I was responsible for it.

On the scale of A-F, I charitably grade chess as a D for the following 18 reasons:

- 01. Asymmetrical Opening Setup**
 - 02. Gameboard- Too Small**
 - 03. Pieces- Too Few**
 - 04. Pawns- Too Weak & Too Weird**
 - 05. Knights- Unfit For Square-Spaced Boards**
 - 06. White-Black Turn-Order Benefits White**
 - 07. Fewer Moves Per Game By Black Benefits White**
 - 08. Captures Possible Too Early (3rd move) Benefits White**
 - 09. 2-Space Pawn Move Benefits White**
 - 10. Excessive Drawishness Due To Excessive King Mobility**
 - 11. Excessive King Mobility Vital**
 - 12. Stalemate Unfair**
 - 13. Zugzwang**
 - 14. Overcomplicated Game-Ending Rules**
 - 15. Insufficient Aggression**
 - 16. Poor King Safety**
 - 17. Weak Bishops**
 - 18. Unnecessary Special Move- En Passant**
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18 Serious Design Flaws Within Chess

01. Asymmetrical Opening Setup

The opening setup of pieces is unnecessarily asymmetrical from the left-right (E-W) reference. This enhances the first-move-of-the-game advantage (for white), at least where a white-black turn-order is in effect. The need for left-right (east-west) symmetry within each player's pieces is much more subtle and less effectual than the need for up-down (north-south) symmetry between the 2 opposing forces. It is not so trivial as to be safely disregarded, however.

A L-R (E-W) asymmetry [comparable and equal to the greatest extent possible to a similar strength L-R (E-W) symmetry] makes possible to a greater extent than otherwise with incisive gameplay, an absolutely unavoidable defensive, disadvantage for the player who does NOT hold the first-move-of-the-game advantage [traditionally, black] to materialize within a reasonably small number of moves.

A L-R (E-W) asymmetry entails differences in pieces filling starting positions across the entire structure (instead of just half of it). No matter how they are arranged, there will exist more and better offensive options theoretically available to white for devising an irrefutably-effective attack against the defensive structure of black. Specifically, there will exist greater contrasts in weak and strong pieces and positions, offensively and defensively, for both players, in relation to one another where L-R (E-W) asymmetry exists.

Offensive strengths which can be developed rapidly and/or irrefutably against defensive weaknesses or vulnerabilities dictated by the opening setup work decisively and exclusively to the advantage of white for controlling the tempo and gaining positional advantages during development. [This is regardless of how well black plays as long as white plays equally well.] Eventually, they usually lead to material advantages that usually lead to victory. To be sure, an advantage for white also exists with L-R (E-W) symmetry but to a lesser extent.

The first-move-of-the-game advantage for white is generally the greatest enemy to perfect fairness, balance, equality, stability, etc common to ALL turn-based chess variants. Everything that can be done to minimize it should be done. Nothing unnecessary that increases it should ever be done.

The temptation to double the theoretical depth or complexity of a game by intentional designing a L-R (E-W) asymmetry instead of a (nearly) similar L-R (E-W) symmetry is reckless to the extreme. The human mind or computer can be twice as incisive strategically and tactically within a symmetric game than within a similar asymmetric game in compensation to the fact that twice as many distinct openings exist within an asymmetric game. Besides, there are ways to increase the theoretical depth or complexity of a game by one or two orders of magnitude, if needed, without introducing any asymmetries whatsoever into a game.

By very deep and abstract ramification theories, asymmetries always introduce instabilities into a system (a chess variant can be defined mathematically along such lines) that will manifest themselves with effect. Therefore, all detectable asymmetries should be avoided at all costs in every aspect of game design.

02. Gameboard- Too Small

Although westerners often consider chess the standard bearer of the average-sized chess variant, it is, in fact, a relatively small game by modern standards. Usually, small games have numerous, irreconcilable design problems. To be sure, chess is no lucky exception.

With respect to its design, it is utterly too small and cramped. Its rectangular 8 x 8 (64 square space) gameboard handicaps all sliders (esp. bishops) and forces half of its bare-minimal 16 pieces per player to be buffer pieces for the sake of needed game stability.

03. Pieces- Too Few

At 16, chess has too few pieces per player.

[Note- I recommend a minimum of 24 pieces per player to attain a reasonable, minimum level of game stability and fairness as well as increase the theoretical depth.]

04. Pawns- Too Weak & Too Weird

To keep its well-known game instability from reaching crisis proportions, its buffer pieces (i.e., pawns) must be complex, indirect, counter-intuitive and crippled (1-space, limited-range).

What I mean by indirect and counter-intuitive is that pawns:

A. move in 1 direction they cannot capture (forward vertical, 1-space)

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B. move and capture in 2 directions they cannot move without capturing (forward diagonal, 1-space).

If this convoluted explanation, made as clearly as possible, is confusing to you, then it exemplifies my point.

05. Knights- Unfit For Square-Spaced Boards

Essentially, all leaping pieces are out-of-tune, ill-fitted to their geometric environment as they waste or miss spaces and usually move at odd angles to contiguous, available board spaces upon square-spaced boards. Moreover, leaping pieces must be of limited range since counter-intuitively, royal pieces cannot be defended from leaping pieces of unlimited range even by totally surrounding a royal piece with other pieces. I interpret it as proof that leaping pieces are foundationally-defective since they can destabilize any single royal piece game if extended from limited to unlimited range.

06. White-Black Turn-Order Benefits White

The turn-order of white-black contributes significantly to the first-move-of-the-game advantage (for white) by allowing white to irrefutably dominate the tempo of the opening game. Consequently, it contributes to unfairness and game instability as well.

[Note- A turn-order of white-black-black-white would best diminish it ... to the extent possible.]

07. Fewer Moves Per Game By Black Benefits White

The "sudden death" nature of the game, ending immediately as a victory for the first player to trap the single royal piece (king) of his/her opponent, amplifies the first-move-of-the-game advantage (for white) since the game ends (50% of the time) with black making one move fewer than white. This also amplifies unfairness and game instability.

[Note- Not allowing the game to end as a win, loss or draw until the completion of its turn-order would NOT amplify it.]

08. Captures Possible Too Early (3rd move) Benefits White

Although the potential advantage in doing so can be refuted, the capture of an opponent's piece upon a player's 3rd move of the game cannot be refuted. The harsh limitations even the possibility of the exchange of pieces imposes upon appropriate tactical responses in the opening game due to the associated, forced lines of play clearly benefits the first player who has the opportunity to impose those harsh limitations- white. Thus, this also increases unfairness and game instability.

[Note- The possibility of the exchange of pieces should not occur until at least a player's 4th or 5th move of the game. This feature is evident within well-designed chess variants.

09. 2-Space Pawn Move Benefits White

The optional 2-spaces vertical forward allowance for the first move of any pawn unnecessarily amplifies the first-move-of-the-game advantage (for white) since it can obviously be chosen as the first move of the game by white. This also adds to the body of arbitrary, special moves that must be learned to play well.

The continued existence of this ill-conceived rule, despite its widespread acknowledgement as such, in modern chess is bizarre.

10. Excessive Drawishness Due To Excessive King Mobility

The mobility of the king (1-space, any direction) renders the game too drawish, often even when one player has earned a significant material advantage and faces the enemy king alone. This is unfair to the advantaged player.

11. Excessive King Mobility Vital

The mobility of the king is essential, nonetheless, to keep the king from being trapped too easily that would totally destroy game stability. The counter-intuitive, special move of "castling" had to be introduced for a related reason. This also adds to the body of arbitrary, special moves that must be learned to play well.

By transitive logic, this means that excessive drawishness, generally agreed to be an undesirable quality, is oddly vital to chess. This is a dilemma intransigent to a badly designed game.

12. Stalemate Unfair

The stalemate rules can be outrageous in some scenarios, causing a game to suddenly end as a draw where one player was, by any rational measure, very close to winning although nothing drastic [nothing more than a forced, passed move] was required or appropriate to keep the game moving forward. This is unfair to the player with the earned advantage.

13. Zugzwang

Chess is highly-prone to causing zugzwang in the opening game and midgame, attributable mainly to the irreversibility of pawns and its gameboard being too small. Of course, the only moves that can be made [and a move must be made] are all bad.

Being forced to make a bad move against one's own will relatively early in the game (where the quality of moves are most important) is unsporting as it takes away the right of a player to fully control and appropriately choose the best possible moves in the spirit of his/her objectives. Games can be well-designed to all-but-rarely avoid such situations except at the end of the game where they have the legitimate purpose of determining the winner and loser.

14. Overcomplicated Game-Ending Rules

The web of check, checkmate and stalemate rules unnecessarily over-complicate the game without any redeeming benefits.

[Note- Allowing the actual capture of the king to end the game would greatly simplify the rules of king trapping without altering the result (except very rarely).]

15. Insufficient Aggression

Despite the fact that captures become possible too early in the game, it is also a fact that during the opening game and to some extent, during the midgame, chess is insufficiently aggressive as measured by the ratio of captures to moves and compared to quality chess variants with superior stability and theoretical depth. This is due to an over-abundance of pawns blocking the paths of power pieces. Of course, without the buffer pieces (i.e., pawns), chess would be radically unstable.

This is a dilemma intransigent to a badly designed game.

16. Poor King Safety

At the opening setup, the single royal piece (i.e., king) is poorly protected with no friendly power pieces interposed and most friendly power pieces being out of position to interpose in less than 2-4 moves. Unfortunately, the gameboard has insufficient height (ranks) to accommodate a more desirable opening setup without positioning many pieces in a mutually-threatening arrangement with extremely adverse effects upon game stability. The counter-intuitive, special move of "castling" had to be introduced for a related reason.

This is a dilemma intransigent to a badly designed game.

17. Weak Bishops

A minimum of 2 bishops per same spacing (light or dark)- total of 4 bishops- are required for bishops to "work together" offensively or defensively. Of course, the exercise of this exciting tactic is unknown to chess where a total of only 2 bishops, necessarily balanced on opposite spacing, exist. Since chess includes bishops, it should at least, include them in a manner conducive to their effective use.

18. Unnecessary Special Move

The en passant rule of pawn capture is yet another unneeded, arbitrary special move which must be learned to play well.

Afterword

I am not an expert on the game of chess but this does not invalidate any of my points since I am an expert on chess variants. This list of serious design flaws is probably incomplete to an unknown yet significant extent. Anyone reading this list who wishes to make valuable, new contributions to it is most welcome.

This leaves the open philosophical question:

"How many serious design flaws are required for a game to be irretrievably bad?"

In my opinion, 18 are more than enough. Any argument otherwise is untenable and strained for credibility.

Frankly, I think anything with cultural popularity benefits from an uncritical, quasi-religious worship AND anything which has existed for centuries benefits from a traditional reverence wherein its value is, oft mistakenly, considered long-since proven and thus, above question.

In both of these ways (as well as thru big-money tournaments), chess is still perpetuated. Notwithstanding, it should be recognized at its true value as "nothing special" by most knowledgeable, seasoned people within our chess variant community. Truth is not soundly determined democratically upon the basis of popularity in the modern age or much less, with deference to ancient ages.

No single or multiplicity of minor or major revisions to the game can possibly transform chess into a good game. It is beyond help and should be abandoned. If something called a "revision of chess" were invented which was indeed a good game, it would, in fact, only be a different, unique game dishonestly misnamed.
