

WHEN ONLINE CHESS COMES CLOSER TO OTB



Corona-virus times have shown us that chess can still be played also in unfortunate times of closed borders and restrictions to travellers. Several events have been run online since the beginning of the pandemic, using different platforms.

Four main international platforms have been broadly used over the past year to run online events: Chess.com, Tornelo, Lichess and, in a smaller way, Playchess.com. Each one of them has shown different qualities and point of strength, as well as different weak spots, but among them Tornelo gave some specific extra feature which enabled some events to get closer to OTB events than other platforms.

Let's consider some common features of the platforms for online chess:

- They normally award a threefold repetition automatically when the same position has come up three times in the board.
- As well as the previous point, they normally award a draw for fifty moves automatically once the fiftieth move has been done.
- There's no way to stop the clocks or ask the arbiter (check our previous article on the online arbiters) to intervene.
- Once a player disconnects, the platform automatically forfeits him.

Albeit as you know, these features, which are normal in the common practice of online events, they are clearly against the laws of chess.

In fact, in the laws of chess a draw can be determined for threefold repetition or fifty moves only upon a correct claim of the player and not automatically.

Although this probably doesn't constitute a very big issue in case of common friendly game, it is less acceptable in some official chess events, where a full respect of the laws of chess is more convenient as these events should be as more similar as possible to an over the board event, just played on the screen instead if the board.

And here comes up a feature which is currently available only in Tornelo, which lets the administrator of a tournament decide if the threefold repetition or fifty moves draw shall be automatically awarded or not. In a second case, in fact, exactly as in a regular over the board event, the player will have to summon an arbiter and ask him to check the game and determine the result accordingly.

How to do that?

With the second very important feature available in Tornelo (and not in other platforms) namely the "call the arbiter" button. This button, once clicked, immediately stops the clock of the game and rings a bell in the arbiter dashboard which notifies him his assistance is required (and who is requiring it).

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When the arbiter clicks on the call, he is then taken into the particular game and a chat box with the players opens up, hence the arbiter can talk to the player and ask why he rang the bell, exactly as he would do in an over the board game with a player rising his hand.

Of course, this button can be abused, and some player may decide to click it just to stop the time and gain some extra seconds in an unfair way. But, if you think about it, isn't it precisely the same that might happen in one regular event, having a player who unnecessarily stops the time to call the arbiter for a trivial reason?

The answer is: yes, it is.

So, even in this scenario, Tornelo brings one online events closer to over the board chess, and as well the arbiter will have to act accordingly, giving a penalty to the player who abused the possibility to stop a clock.

And finally, let's see another feature: generally, the platforms for online chess act in two ways once a player disconnects.

They either forfeit him at once, either they suspend a game until the player comes back.

Both these solutions are unsatisfactory: forfeiting a player just because he lost his connection, maybe for just few seconds, looks like too harsh and suspending a game for good isn't consistent with a tournament format.

And here we have another very interesting feature in Tornelo: once a player disconnects his time just continues to flow and he may come back, but only if he still has time in his clock, and continue his game, and this is also similar to any over the board tournament, where a player can just stand up from his board, and come back until he has time in his clock.

With this short summary of these innovative features in Tornelo, we don't want to say it's better or worse than other platforms for online chess, but just that it makes online chess closer to over the board events and is more consistent to the laws of chess.

Of course, to handle these features, there is also the need of having more arbiters than a normal online event, which can easily be run by a smaller number of people, or even by one, but for sure, this is also something getting us closer to over the board events!

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