

CARLSEN  
vs.  
NEPOMNIACHTCHI  
WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP 2021

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Douglas Griffin  
Goran Arsović  
Igor Žvegljić



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# Contents

Foreword .....	6
System of Signs .....	8
Part I – <b>PREDECESSORS</b> .....	9
A History of the World Chess Championship by Douglas Griffin .....	11
Part II – <b>RIVALS</b> .....	41
The best of Carlsen and Nepomniachtchi by Goran Arsović .....	44
Part III – <b>DUEL</b> .....	95
World Championship Match 2021 commentary by Daniel Gormally .....	101
Part IV – <b>AFTERMATH</b> .....	233

## Foreword

The World Chess Championship 2021 was an eagerly-expected event after two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The whole cycle for the crown was stopped at the Candidates Tournament stage in 2020 only to be resumed a year later in spring of 2021, thus postponing the World Championship match for a whole year. Quite naturally, the chess audience – both players and fans, had huge expectations, so the Champion and his challenger had a paramount task and great responsibility laying on them. They managed to entertain and teach us with their fierce over-the-board battles, and managed to achieve that in exceptional style!

Dear readers, we tried to offer you more than just a brief review of the World Championship match in Dubai, but instead to create a book which may become one precious jewel in your chess library. However, the material needed to be informative, entertaining, and also well-researched chess wise so we gathered a small team of authors who could deliver the goods most efficiently.

The book begins with a comprehensive overview of all the World Chess Championship matches since 1886 written by Douglas Griffin, distinguished chess historian and researcher.

The second part of the book sets the tone for the Carlsen vs. Nepomniachtchi match by presenting their profiles and selection of best games with detailed annotations by IM Goran Arsović.

Naturally, the largest part of the book is focused on the World Chess Championship 2021 and brings you the complete coverage of all the games, meticulously annotated and commented by GM Daniel Gormally. Daniel took into consideration all the online commentaries adding his usual dry humor and wit in superb fashion.

Finally, the book ends with post-match conclusions, interviews and even some intrigues.

We would like to take this opportunity to express sincere gratitude to FIDE and IM Eric Rosen for providing magnificent photo material. Kudos to all the organizers and sponsors of the World Chess Championship 2021.

Of course, this book would not be possible without great army of chess enthusiasts and Informant aficionados whose support and devotion have been our most cherished treasure and source of motivation over the years.

Igor Žvegljić

January 2022



## Predictions, thoughts, feelings...

Player's predictions before the 1st game of the match were both brief and entertaining, offering some insight into their preparation, mindset and level of confidence. Of course, they remained secretive about their teams and seconds... Apparently, both players were anxious to start the match after long preparations, and got slightly fed up with interviews over the last few weeks...

- **How does it feel to finally be ready to start in just two days, after months of preparation?**

*Nepomniachtchi:* "First of all, thank you! It feels great! Because that's why I really prepared for the whole cycle, the Grand Prix, the Candidates and now the match. I can't wait for it to actually start."

*Carlsen:* "It's going to feel better in two days!"

- **Why are you going to win this championship?**

*Nepomniachtchi:* "Well, normally I think the best player wins!"

*Carlsen:* "I predict that the person who scores the most points over the next three weeks is going to be the winner, and hopefully that's going to be me. And if I do win it will probably be because I made a lot of good moves and good decisions under pressure."

- **Does it get any easier, with nerves and pressure, as this is your 5th match?**

*Carlsen:* "I think some parts may get easier as you get more experienced, but after all it comes down to what you do over the board, and I think also Ian has experience now from the Candidates, which is really the best preparation that you can get for the match, since it's so intense. And he also has lots of people in his team that have World Championship experience, so it remains to be seen if the experience of being here before helps, but in terms of your question, if it gets any easier, yes, I would say it gets a little bit easier in the sense that you probably are a little less nervous than you are the first time."

- **How do the lessons you learn in chess apply outside of chess?**

*Carlsen:* "That's a very good question. I would say that chess can teach you a lot of things, when you learn it, especially when you're young. For me, specifically, I think the most useful thing has been decision-making, to be able to make relatively quick decisions based on the data that you have, which I think is useful in almost any endeavour, and that is something that I've taken with me from chess. So far, I haven't applied it successfully apart from chess, but I think theoretically if I were to do something else professionally it would be very, very useful."

- **You have been friends before. Does it make this World Championship any different?**

*Carlsen:* "I would say not particularly. I knew Anand very well also before the first couple of matches. I'd worked with him as well, and I don't think it makes a massive difference. The top players know each other so well in general, especially those who have been on the circuit for a long time, so I don't think it really matters."



*Nepomniachtchi:* "As Magnus correctly stated, it's very hard to find an opponent you don't know. But yeah, about ten years ago we used to work together a little, but I don't really think it will have an influence towards how the match is going, because in general I think that once you sit at the board you have no friends."

• How has the technology and how you work with it changed over the last couple of years?

*Nepomniachtchi:* "That's a good question, but I can't say something revolutionary has happened, because we worked as usual — at least this applies to me. But of course, chess engines became more powerful, and now you can choose between different engines to work with, but I believe in general the level difference between the player and the engine was high enough 10 years ago already. People now use something that's called neural networks and this has changed the way you work a little bit, but I think it's more or less the same — just you try to grind out the best moves."

*Carlsen:* "I think things have definitely changed a lot over the last couple of years, since the last World Championship match, as Ian mentioned, because of neural networks. Computer engines have become a lot better and the way you work has changed a little bit, but I think generally the tools are available to everybody, so I don't think it makes a huge difference over the board. But in terms of the way you work, things have changed a bit."

- **Can you talk about your seconds and how you've prepared?**

*Nepomniachtchi*: "Thank you for this question. Still, I'm not going to introduce every member of my team, but at least part of the team which worked with me during the Candidates remains the same, and I guess that's all I can say on this part. Speaking of my work, of course you have to be prepared mentally, physically and chess-wise, so it's a never-ending process, basically, and you prepare as much as never before when you play a match."

*Carlsen*: "There's a team that have been working with me, and they're still working, and they're great! That's all I can say."

- **What's your advice for the young generation that want to be champions like you?**

*Nepomniachtchi*: "That's a big question, by the way. Normally if they ask me to advise something, or wish something, then I'll just try to say that you've got to enjoy what you're doing, and you should just enjoy what you do, if it's chess or science or sports or basically whatever. That's the main part, because if you don't enjoy the way you do and the thing you're doing probably you're doing something wrong."

*Carlsen*: "Yeah, that seems to pretty much echo what I would say. Apart from that... no, that's pretty much it! Enjoy what you do! If you're going to excel in a field I think at least my philosophy is that that has to be the main component."

- **What differentiates Ian from your previous challengers?**

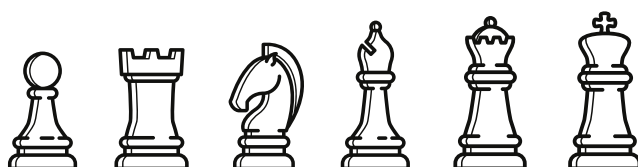
*Carlsen*: "I think there are a few key differences. The main one, in terms of style, is that Ian is a bit more aggressive. He's somebody whose play is faster, and I think he has a keener understanding of the concepts of king safety than previous opponents, so I would say that would be the main difference in terms of strengths, certainly."

- **At the drawing of lots what would you prefer, White or Black in Game 1?**

*Nepomniachtchi*: "The only thing I would prefer is not to play 14 games with Black, probably, but hopefully the rules are strict so it will be more or less balanced!"

*Carlsen*: "I would say that there are advantages and disadvantages to both, certainly, to start, and frankly I've had both and I have maybe a slight preference for starting with White, but I don't think your equity will be majorly different regardless. Overall, I think maybe slightly psychologically it's easier to start with White, but it's unlikely to shift the odds considerably."

Later on, drawing of lots took place, and Ian Nepomniachtchi got the white pieces in the 1st game of the match...







# Game 1

## Video Games Fan Nepo a Match for Carlsen

Ian Nepomniachtchi as a fan of video games might have appreciated the irony of facing Magnus Carlsen in the final of the World Championship. Anyone who has ever played a platform video game will know the purpose of the game is to dismiss the lesser combatants before facing a level boss, and the last boss is the most powerful of all. In the video game "Final Fight", (Capcom) you are eventually confronted in a hotel room by a maniac in a wheelchair, gleefully firing a crossbow at your avatar.

Instead of facing said maniac, Ian was matched with Magnus Carlsen. Certainly the most formidable operator of recent times and bookmakers listed him as a 1–4 favourite. And yet Magnus had shown enough vulnerability in recent times to demonstrate that there was a route to victory for Nepo. A tormented video interview with Maurice Ashley in 2019 exposed the horrendous pressures that Magnus must often feel as World Champion and the best player in the world. According to his own admission, his game was in "crisis" despite continuing to gain results that would leave others smouldering in envy. No matter, because once all the pundits had their say and preparation is done, all there is left is to play.



# Ian Nepomniachtchi 2782 - Magnus Carlsen 2855

Dubai (wch-m/1) 2021

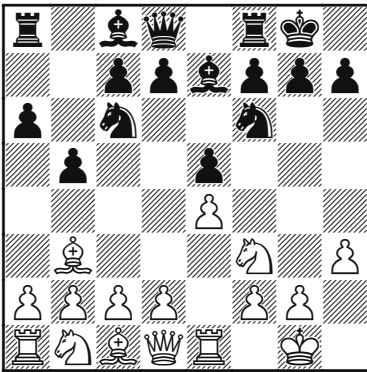
## 1.e4

New challenger - different approach.

## 1...e5

Instead of the Sicilian, Carlsen's trusted weapon against Caruana in 2018.

2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.0-0  
♙e7 6.♖e1 b5 7.♙b3 0-0 8.h3!?



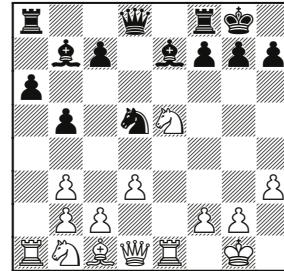
## 8...♘a5!

These guys are slick, very slick. Black gladly departs with the central stronghold on e5 to deprive White of the bishop pair and find active counterplay.

8...♙b7 9.d3 d6 10.a3 Otherwise Black will play 10...♘a5 and White will lose the bishop pair without even gaining a pawn for it. 11.♙a2 c5 is arguably the main line but Magnus has a history of avoiding theoretical debates in the World Championship games and therefore this "surprise" with ...♘a5 was presumably not much of one for his opponent.

9.♘xe5 ♘xb3 10.axb3 ♙b7 11.d3 d5  
12.exd5 ♖xd5

12...♘xd5



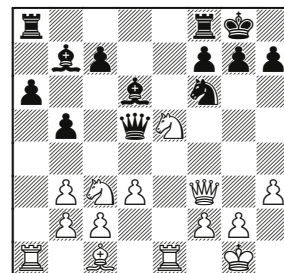
13.d4! and the knight on e5 will be brought back to d3 to keep a lid on ...♘f4 ideas while the knight on b1 can be floated around to f3.

13.♖f3 ♙d6 14.♙f1

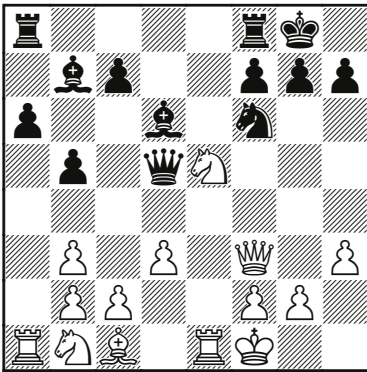
A weird looking move but the position is in some kind of mutual stand-off. Black doesn't want to exchange queens unless prompted to and neither does White want to take on d5 too early, so prepares to play ♘c3 in favourable circumstances.

Intriguingly the stats heavily favour White from this position in the few games that were played before this one, which would have sent many players holding the black pieces in another direction. Magnus, however, is made of sterner stuff and would have believed in the long-term purpose of the bishop pair and sensed that this offered serious compensation.

14.♘c3??



14...♖xe5! is precisely why White starts with ♙f1. 15.♖xb7 ♖xe1#



**14...♖fb8!**

Played quickly and it is hard not to be awed by the depth of preparation.

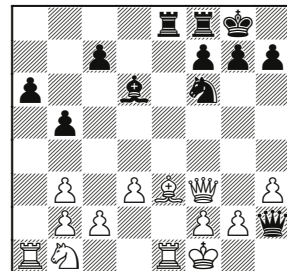
There's no doubt this is one of the key things that separates players of this level from lesser GMs like myself - the level of accuracy both in preparation and in general play. In truth, there is a whole smorgasbord of attributes that distinguishes Magnus from myself and in reality we are as far apart as players, as the Milky Way is from the Andromeda Galaxy.

Why though ♖fb8, and not ♖fe8, or ♖fc8?

The truth lies in White's threat which is to play ♘c3. Now the bishop is defended, Black has the opportunity to move the queen instead of agreeing to the exchange.

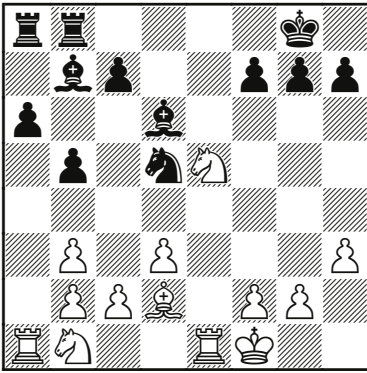
14...♖fe8? 15.♘c3! ♙xf3 16.♘xf3 ♕xf3?! 17.♖xe8+ ♖xe8 18.gxf3 ♖a8? (18...b4) 19.♘xb5+- would not be a good way to start a World Championship match from Black's perspective.;

14...♙xe5 15.♙xb7 ♙h2 16.♙f3 ♖ae8  
At first sight this looks fairly pedestrian for White who will surely soon convert his extra pawn. However, chess is not that simple and when we dig deeper especially with the help of engines, interesting attacking ideas start to turn up. 17.♕e3



17...♘h5! Who would find this in a game though? Probably these guys, they seem to find everything else... 18.♖xh5 f5 19.f4 ♕xf4 20.♖f3 ♕xe3 21.♗xe3 f4 22.♗e4 ♗xe4 23.♖xe4 f3! 24.gxf3 ♖xc2 25.♖e6+ ♔h8 26.♖e2 ♖c1+ 27.♔g2 is one particularly murky variation. But there was no real reason for Black to go down a line where he has to find only moves to stay in the game.

15.♖xd5 ♘xd5 16.♕d2



16...c5!

Possibly still preparation but this also feels like a move that Magnus could find over the board. He is alarmingly good at finding natural, space-gaining moves.

17.♘f3 ♗d8 18.♘c3

There are many ways here for White but the usual problem during a game is that you can only choose one. 18.♕a5! was also fairly promising. 18...♗dc8! - so that in some variations later if White takes on b4 after ...♘b4, then ...cxb4 and Black will hit the pawn directly on c2. 19.♗d1 ♘b4 20.♘e1 ♘c6 21.♕d2 although White's position remains excellent, it is not clear that this is any better than the game continuation for him.

18...♘b4

This position reminded me of the decisive Armageddon game between these two players

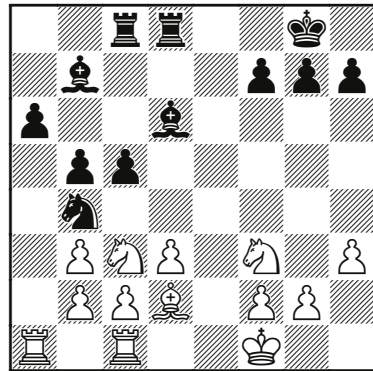
in the recent Stavanger Norway Chess.

In that encounter Magnus also had two bishops for a pawn and a knight well placed on b4. I wonder if the very positive result and his play in that game influenced his decision to go for this variation? Perhaps Ian was sat there thinking, oh no here we go again...

19.♗ec1

Only this rook, so that the other one can keep an eye on a6.

19...♗ac8



20.♘e2!

An excellent move for many reasons:

1. The bishop on d2 now hits b4 directly.
2. The knight controls important squares like f4, which might prepare the bishop on d2 moving to that square and allowing White to carry out favourable exchanges.
3. The possibility of breaking out with d4 is increased.

I must admit I quite liked White here and was slightly surprised to hear that most pundits thought that Black was perfectly fine and had chances to be better later. A pawn is a pawn and at the World Championship level such tiny advantages are deeply cherished.

20...♘c6!?

An indication that Magnus would have been



unsure about the implications of the capture on b4. The engine feels that he can allow it; but over the board you can never be sure.

...♖c6 feels very "Magnus" in that you are re-routing the knight to greener pastures while keeping the play very fluid. It feels very human to play like this but it was precisely now that Ian had a chance to crank up the pressure and possibly make game one a memorable occasion for him and his team.

Black could have opted for a small improvement of the position with the line 20...♗e7 21.♗e1 g6 where the onus is very much on White to do something and Black given time will improve his position even further with ...f5 and ...♕f7. 22.♗xb4 Very concrete. (22.♗c3 - but what is this doing? 22...♗d5 and when I first looked at this I felt that Black has excellent play and ...c4 is on the cards. 23.♗a5 and in fact White is still pressing.) 22...cxb4 23.c3 is very direct and it is not at all clear if White wants to do this at all. ...♗d5 might solve all problems were it not for the

small matter of the pawn hanging on a6. 23...♗f6 (23...bxc3 24.bxc3 f5 is another approach where Black asks the question of White how to really do something with these pawns? 25.d4 introduces the idea of ♗d3-e5 when White is making serious progress.

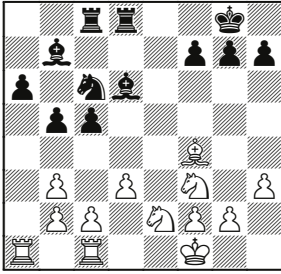
In general the more I look at these lines the more I understand why Magnus went for ...♗c6) 24.d4 bxc3 25.bxc3 b4 is tempting but perhaps faulty: 26.c4! ♗xd4 27.♗xd4 ♗xd4 28.♗a4 and White will gain a much more serious extra pawn this time;

20...♗xf3 21.gxf3 incidentally is rarely feared by White as it is difficult for Black to attack the pawns and a6 remains extremely weak.

### 21.♗e3?!

If normal chess tournaments are often about "grabbing the moment", then World Championship matches are even more so, given how tightly contested each game turns out to be.

### 21.♗f4!



This was the moment and this would have possibly lead Magnus onto a very difficult path; the main advantage of playing this over the game continuation is that Black is not quite in time with what seems to be crucial ... $\text{h}7$  counterplay.  $21... \text{g}8$   $22. \text{d}1 \text{h}4$   $23. \text{d}2 \text{c}4$   $24. \text{bxc}4 \text{ bxc}4$   $25. \text{dxc}4$  ( $25. \text{d}4 \text{ f}6$   $26. \text{c}3 \text{ d}3$   $27. \text{b}4! \pm$  also greatly favours White.)  $25... \text{d}2$   $26. \text{h}2 \text{d}2$   $\text{h}2 \text{xc}2$   $27. \text{c}1 \text{h}4$   $28. \text{c}3$  just feels like an extra pawn.

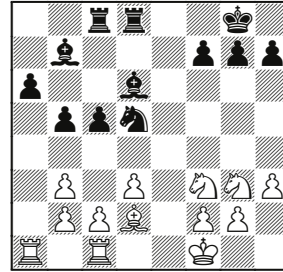
**21...  $\text{h}7!$**

Now Carlsen's legendary accuracy once again comes to the fore. Ian must have been regretting playing  $\text{e}3$  when he did as he now decides to play  $\text{f}4$  after all, even at the loss of a move.

**22.  $\text{f}4$**

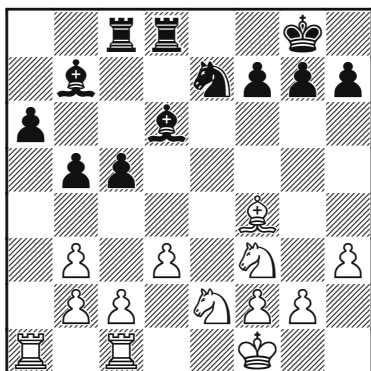
is an admission that White hasn't got much anymore.

**22.  $\text{g}3 \text{h}5$  23.  $\text{d}2$**



$23... \text{f}6!$  - intending to play the king to  $\text{f}7$  and the position is easy to play for Black.





**22... ♖xf3!**

For concrete reasons this is now good.

**23. gxf3 ♗xf4 24. ♖xf4 ♖c6**

Both defending a6 and threatening ...♗f6.

**25. ♖e1 ♗f5 26. c3 ♖h4 27. ♖e3 ♗f8**

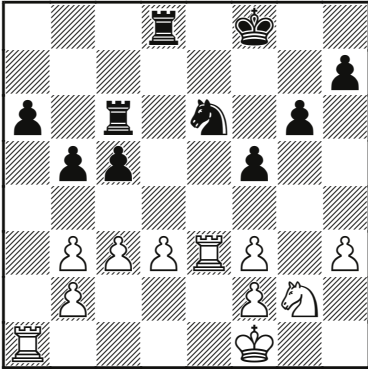
Given the awesome defensive technique of the players, it is also hard to win after 27... g5 and there is some slight risk involved in this, as you are weakening your own king-side. 28. ♖e2 ♖f6 29. ♖e5 (29. d4 ♖xf3 30. ♖xf3!? ♖xf3 31. dxc5 This is a very interesting sacrifice and the rook and knight co-ordinate well together. 31... ♖f6 32. ♖d4 ♗f8 33. b4 The engine is screaming equal but this seems easier to play for White.) 29... ♖xf3 30. ♖xc5 ♖xd3 31. ♖c8+ ♗g7 32. ♖g3 White is active enough to hold.

**28. ♖g2 ♖f5**

28... ♖xg2 29. ♗xg2 ♖d5 Would likely also suffice for equality, although Black did not feel the need to go for a pure rook ending just yet.

**29. ♖e5 g6 30. ♖e1 ♖g7 31. ♖e4 f5 32. ♖e3 ♖e6 33. ♖g2**





**33...b4!**

Taking advantage of the fact that White can hardly play c4, as this would drop the b3

pawn to ... ♖d4

**34.♔e2 ♜b8 35.♔d2 bxc3+ 36.bxc3 ♜xb3 37.♔c2 ♜b7 38.h4 ♔f7**

38...♜cb6 39.♜e2 Illustrates that the game is in a state of stasis. 39...a5 40.♔c1 (40.♜xa5?? ♜b2+ 41.♔d1 ♜b1+ 42.♔d2 ♜7b2+ 43.♔e3 f4+-) 40...♜d7 41.♜xa5 ♜xd3 42.♔c2 ♜xf3 43.♜a7 - and White is active enough to hold comfortably.

**39.♜ee1 ♔f6 40.♘e3 ♜d7 41.♘c4 ♜e7 42.♘e5 ♜d6 43.♘c4 ♜c6 44.♘e5 ♜d6 45.♘c4** **1/2 : 1/2**

SCORE 1/2 : 1/2

