

The Curse of the Ear – Uncle Chestnut’s Table Gype

written by Rob Stephens | November 22, 2015



Being such a hypercompetitive jerk that I’ve driven most of my friends away, I’ve starting playing games mostly on [Board Game Arena](#) (BGA), an online gaming site where I’ve logged 600+ hours over the past three years. And my most consuming obsession has been a game called [Uncle Chestnut’s Table Gype](#).

Designed by Christopher and Paul E. Nowak, *Table Gype* uses mechanics similar to Chess and Chinese Checkers to imitate a game that Uncle Chestnut, a.k.a. G.K. Chesterton, claims to have created in his [autobiography](#): “It was we who invented the well-known and widespread national game of *Gype*.” The “we” refers to Chesterton and H.G. Wells, who created the supposed game together. However, outside of the autobiography, there is no evidence that the game actually existed.

To Chesterton, play was essential to life: “I for one have never left off playing, and I wish there was more time for play,” he wrote, a quote that appears on the *Table Gype* board. However, Chesterton believed games should not be taken too seriously: the word “Gype” literally means “nonsense”; Chesterton’s name for the game could either reference the fact that the game never existed or the fact that it was light-hearted. But I can only take games too seriously.

One reason I am so addicted to BGA is because I’ve worked so hard to reach the top. A system awards trophies based on players’ ELO (based on the Arpad Elo Rating System). Right now, I’m 35th out of over 100,000 players. I even pay a yearly fee to access detailed game analysis statistics. Advancing up the ladder means I frequently play with other top-ranked competitors, players I know by screen name, from places as diverse as Croatia, Finland and Taiwan. The chatboxes can get awfully heated—using Google translate, I’ve caught two Japanese guys calling me 白痴, or “doofus,” through an entire game of Hearts.

But no gaming relationship I’ve ever had, internet or otherwise, compares to the level of contest I had in *Table Gype* with a Slovakian I know only by the moniker **slam_factory**. My relationship with **slam_factory** started in April 2012 over a game of *Gype*. I was new to the game but rapidly improving. I can’t grok much about a player on BGA in a single encounter—we greet with “Hi gl hf,” which translates to “Hi, good luck and have fun,” and there isn’t much talk during games. A screen name and avatar photo may or may not say something about the player (**slam_factory**’s was a growling bear). But in the very first game with **slam_factory**, my mental image of him grew so much bigger than this ursine avatar.

In *Table Gype*, players advance dice across a checkerboard. Occasionally, you can hop over another player’s dice. When a die is hopped, it is rolled, and each face of the die makes it move differently. A Flame, for example, is the

best face because it allows the die to move in any direction. *Gype* players fear the Ear. Based on Chesterton's "Gype's Ear," the Ear means the die cannot move. Even my wife has learned the horror of the Ear as she lies awake listening to me murmur "Not the Ear!" in my nightmares.

After the standard gl/hf greeting in that first match with **slam_factory**, there was a bout of silence, during which I figured he was focusing on the game. When he jumped one of my pieces, trying to make it an Ear, I rolled a Flame.

"Fucking lucky, that's what you are," he complained. "Flame flame flame."

"What?" I typed in response.

"Lucky lucky."

"You're lucky, asshat," I said.

Things did not get much better than that. "Fucking ears, too much ears," he said every time he rolled an ear. "AHHH...FLAME, ASSHAT!" he rejoiced over a good roll. I had taught him a new swear.

I would goad him back. "Ha! Another ear for you," I typed, jumping another of his pieces. At the end of the game, I had barely won, at which point **slam_factory** demanded a rematch.

And we played again. And again. And again. It didn't matter how great or how poorly either of us played; when I won, it was always the fucking ears that had cursed **slam_factory**'s game, and he would propose an infinite number of rematches until he won. When he won, I threw things off my desk and said fuck-words at him. It was a match made in competitive heaven—two nasty, trash-slinging, win-hungry assholes thrashing each other over an obscure game. It was probably for the best that we were playing on the internet, or else our relationship might have ended when one of us shoved an Ear down the other's throat.

Evidently I was not the only person getting cussed out by **slam_factory**. BGA allows players to rate each other for friendliness and sportsmanship by giving thumbs up or down; more than 20% of the 1400 or so users that have been matched against **slam_factory** have given him the thumbs down. His status on BGA is that of a "Devilkin," meaning, "This player displayed some bad behavior and therefore has limited access and functionality."

What drives people to this level of competition? Why the inflammation? Why the strong words? Certainly, Chesterton would not approve of what we turned his game into.

slam_factory and I play this game on the internet, 5000 miles apart, while I'm half writing poetry and half gaming, and he's (I imagine) eating Lokše and taking a break from his job as a legislator or barista. You'd think, by the way he talks to me, I cut off his sister's ear and left it on his doorstep. I occasionally ask him about Slovakia, but only surface-level questions to pacify his anger during games.

Except for one game. The date was Thursday, August 2nd, and **slam_factory** and I were in the middle of a bout of *Uncle Chestnut's*. "Pause," he wrote.

"What?"

"Pause. Turn on TV."

"Why?"

"Slovensko on Olympics, watch."

"What sport?"

"Canoeing. We are best at canoeing. Hochschorner brothers are good. Have two golds."

"Canoeing?"

"Yes, pause. Turn on TV."

Sure enough, when I flipped on the TV, there was Slovakia slalom canoeing, a sport I knew nothing about.

"I'm watching," I replied.

"Yes, we need gold. Our only chance. Hochschorners heroes."

For the next few minutes I immersed myself in competitive canoeing. The Slovak team, Peter and Pavol Hochschorner, were favorites to win—they had won gold in 2004 and 2008. But Great Britain had two formidable teams in the race, too. Google Hochschorners 2012 Olympics, and they look fierce—tanned arms, a pair of brotherly stares that look like they are the ones controlling the whirlpools. Never having watched canoeing, I was in awe at the sport, the way the Hochschorners were able to twist their canoes at sudden 45-degree angles to go around each pole, the turbulence of the water as they churned upstream, and the briefness of it all, so common among Olympic sports—a lifetime of preparation for a competition that lasts 110 seconds.

As a bonafide competitive jerk, I usually pull for the team opposite of whoever I'm in the room with. When I was watching the Olympics with **slam_factory**, though, something changed. My instinct to pull for anybody who wasn't Slovakia died, and I threw myself into cheering for the Hochschorners wholeheartedly.

The moment felt to me like a gamer's version of the Christmas Truce in 1914, during which the German and British troops started an unofficial ceasefire. Together, they celebrated Christmas, crossing the trenches to exchange songs, gifts, and other traditions. That was me and **slam_factory** during the Olympics: we stopped our battle to pull for Slovakia together, and I found myself yelling at the television for the Hochschorners and cursing the resulting bronze.

"No. No. Bitch. They messed up, not fair," **slam_factory** said.

"I know. I thought they had it."

" :/ "

That emoticon was the only time I ever saw my Slovakian foe show any emotion other than cutting competitiveness. I felt legitimately bad for him; the way he threw himself into his games, I could only imagine he had been rooting passionately for his country, for his two local heroes, only to be embittered by a third-place win—a true competitor never settles for bronze. After the race, we finished playing *Table Gype*, and although I won most of the games I've played against **slam_factory**, he kicked my ass that day. But he didn't jeer afterward.

I've since lost touch with **slam_factory**; he's no longer on BGA. I like to think that he got kicked off the site for being too belligerent.

What happened that day, I think, is that we both experienced a bout of Gype's Ear. In Chesterton's Autobiography, he mentions that he and Wells made a rule that "the over-assiduous player tended to suffer from Gype's Ear." And perhaps, though I know Chesterton said it in jest, perhaps Gype's Ear is a malady that can be lifelong, that some are born with, that truly has no cure. The real booger of a symptom associated with Gype's Ear is not the bitterness of loss; rather, it is that even in victory, victims of Gype's ear never truly enjoy themselves. "You never enjoy a game until you enjoy being beaten at the game," Chesterton said, another quote inscribed on the border of the *Table Gype* board. And for that, **slam_factory** has every right to curse when he gets the ear.

But the final of the Chesterton quotes inscribed on the board states, "It is only we who play badly who love the game itself." Unfortunately for me and my frenemy **slam_factory**, we'd rather hate the game than play badly.