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A Super-Villain Meme Takes Center Stage in the Chess Cheating Lawsuit

Recent legal filings have zeroed in on a tweet featuring Thanos, from the 'Avengers' franchise, adding another layer of peculiar drama to the saga

**By Andrew Beaton and
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It was stunning enough when explosive allegations over cheating in the world of elite chess turned into a \$100 million lawsuit. But now that lawsuit involves an even stranger dispute: how to interpret a meme from a superhero movie.

The lawsuit, which was filed by 19-year-old American grandmaster Hans Moke Niemann last year, now includes extensive briefs on a character that first appeared in a comic book a half-century ago.

Niemann's lawsuit alleged that five-time world champion Magnus Carlsen and Chess.com, among others, had defamed him with claims that Niemann had cheated more than he let on. Niemann had previously admitted to cheating in limited circumstances in online competition, but denied any impropriety in games played in-person.

Not long after he said that, however, an investigation by Chess.com found that Niemann had likely received illegal assistance in over 100 games on its

platform, The Wall Street Journal first reported. The company's probe said that he was subsequently banned from the site after he privately confessed to the allegations at the time. Lawyers for the defendants have moved to have Niemann's lawsuit dismissed and called it baseless.

Now Niemann's lawsuit has produced a surprise twist. One way that he claims powerful forces in the chess world colluded to ruin his career was through a meme involving Thanos—a supervillain from the "Avengers" franchise—that was included in a now-deleted tweet by Play Magnus, a company co-founded by Carlsen that has since acquired by Chess.com.

The tweet, which doesn't name Niemann or accuse him of cheating, said: "Let's trip down the memory lane and relive the most outrageous cheating scandals in chess!" It included a link to a post on playmagnus.com, along with the meme of Thanos, a purple-headed bad guy.

The meme adapts a scene from "Avengers: Infinity War" in which Thanos accomplishes his goal of eradicating half of the world's

population. But in order to acquire that immense power, he had to sacrifice something he loved: a daughter named Gamora.

In the movie scene, the ghost of Gamora's soul asks Thanos at what cost his power had come, to which Thanos solemnly replies "everything," alluding to her death. The scene has become a popular reference in pop culture on social media, and Play Magnus adapted it at the height of the cheating scandal:

Gamora: "How did you beat Magnus Carlsen?"

Thanos: "Chess speaks for itself."

Gamora: "What did it cost you?"

Thanos: "Everything."

The line "Chess speaks for itself" could be interpreted as a reference to Niemann's quip after beating Carlsen in a game last year. Later, when Niemann

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beat Carlsen last September at a prestigious tournament, Carlsen resigned from the tournament, which first ignited speculation that the Norwegian thought Niemann was a cheater.

In an April filing, as part of Play Magnus's move to dismiss the case, lawyers for the defendants broke down the meme in granular detail and argued that the "meme-based defamation claim" was without merit.

"This scene is about sacrifice, not lying or cheating," the filing says. "Niemann's claim rests on a blatant distortion of the meme itself."

A response this month by Niemann's lawyers disputes this, dubbing it a cryptic attempt by people associated with Carlsen

to accuse him of cheating. "By portraying Hans as the villain, as opposed to the hero, the Defamatory Tweet conveys that Niemann committed a nefarious act in order to defeat Carlsen," the filing says.

An additional filing by the defendants replied that "portraying someone as a villain rather than a hero is not an objectively false statement of fact."

"Hans Niemann's extensive focus in his complaint on an Avengers 'meme' that doesn't even mention his name merely highlights the fact that he doesn't ground his claims on serious allegations," said Nima Mohebbi and Jamie Wine, lawyers representing Chess.com and Play Magnus from the firm Latham & Watkins.

"Chess.com and Play Magnus will continue to strongly defend against Mr. Niemann's claims because those claims lack merit."

Terrence Oved, the attorney representing Niemann, said that "arguing that this tweet has nothing to do with cheating, when it is specifically captioned 'outrageous cheating scandals in chess' reeks of desperation. Given the context, any reasonable reader immediately understands it is yet another direct and defamatory accusation by Carlsen and co. that Hans only beat Carlsen at the Sinquefeld Cup because he cheated."

Thanos, the villain who first debuted in Marvel comic books in 1973, couldn't be reached for comment.