

# Stealing Time

By Aayush Gupta

Chamiq smoothed his white robe to obscure his beard and adjusted his seat back, amused by the seat's fluid contraption. Even now, after spending decades mastering Autoverse physics from within the ring and outclassing everyone else, Chamiq was still enthused by the skills of the young swordsman he'd come to watch.

Before Chamiq had a chance to glance back at the stadium, the crowd rose to their feet, and erupted in deafening applause. The replays showed what he missed: Sargol, weighed down by his beefed up legs, paused in the corner. On turning around, he charged, his silver earrings glinting in the lights. A fake left before a thrust. His lighter rival, Memet, had pulled out his shield. A fake block right, then... a backflip! And he landed the final block with his silver studded boots instead, mid-flip.

Their primitive clothing starkly contrasted the audience and the city, but that made the games all the more primal and entertaining. Chamiq, hardly identifiable in the huge stadium crowd, slowly uncrossed his arms to clap at Memet's elegant

move. Sweat dotted his face, and his eyes focused in rapt study as he craned forwards to keep watching the replays. Even from his distance, he knew Sargol should have faked right instead, and that surely would have stopped such an embarrassing show of nonchalance from his opponent. But Chamiq wasn't worried about Sargol. Memet's run in the stadium had smashed applause records since he began, and his streak was coming unnervingly close to Chamiq's legendary run. Chamiq enjoyed the novelty of Memet's show-offish moves, but his interest was stained with dread.

Both players froze before the next string of moves, as if deaf to the crowd's cheering. This was the third time this match. Good. Chamiq untensed his shoulders, knowing that the restless crowd would shrink a bit, and wouldn't be cheering as loud come the end. Chamiq knew the fighters weren't just waiting around – not in such a high-adrenaline match. They were exactly pixel-perfect frozen. As far as the whole audience could tell, nothing was happening. But anything or anyone within the fighter's causal field, usually around five meters given their current environment, would know the truth. In fact, the swordsmen themselves had never stopped moving – but each touch of blood or fatal blow reset them to the freeze point, until they could nail a minute of perfectly balanced moves.

Memet's moves felt fluid, and Chamiq for a fleeting moment considered exiting retirement to try a sword match with him. Wouldn't he relish the delicate improvisation again? Yet, how absurd -- he had left at his peak: his smooth Autoverse skin betrayed nothing about his body's 60 Earth years, yet this invisible truth disqualified him. Without radiation to corrupt DNA copying, he and Memet, and everyone else here, looked at most 25.

Memet presented a strange opportunity, perhaps a challenge. Few fighters were naive enough to challenge Chamiq in his prime, he boasted to himself -- he would lure and trick them into humiliating themselves, and always end up the fan favorite with his antics. Yet, In the heat of the stadium, Chamiq felt that confidence drip away. A nagging doubt remained that perhaps Memet would continue his streak, and blaze a name for himself past Chamiq's records. It would be the end of the commemorative busts, the historical acknowledgements between bouts, and whole stadiums whispering his name in legend: he would become a relic, an annoying artifact from an irrelevant past.

Chamiq knew the quick Memet was probably bored, likely simplifying his attacks over time to let Sargol respond, then move on together. It felt like a waltz between a rhino and a dolphin: each the potential to be elegant, but utterly

mismatched together. The fighters would hear the crowd's applause a minute after it really occurred, and by that point likely forgotten what move the cheers were for. The cheers didn't matter though: the challenge of understanding a new opponent in real time kept them going, in a game made fair by its ultimate lack of resolution. In a sense, they were more dancers than fighters, weaving an intricate tapestry together.

Before the duo could unfreeze again, Chamiq descended down the quartz stairs of the stands. He stood just behind the stadium's exit, hood slightly over his right eye and hidden in the shadows. At this point, Memet was parrying just a few causal spheres away. By now, Chamiq had watched Sargol and Memet play a few more childish acts (and freezes) of their awkward tango, but it had been downhill since the backflip. The crowd was getting bored -- the pair could have continued ad infinitum, but Memet's flattening mischievous smile revealed his boredom too.

From a frozen fighting stance, both of them suddenly spun out to face the audience. Sargol raised his sword first, and some of the crowd rose to their feet and clapped. He held it there for a minute, nodding his head left and right till he could observe their applause, then lowered his arm. Then, Memet raised his sword instead. A minute later for him, the stadium sounded as if a stampede had run through: the

decibel counter in the arena's center rose, and it was clear who had tallied more points that day.

As the crowd began to disperse and Memet headed for the exit, he immediately recognized Chamiq in the shadows. Chamiq only saw Memet glance at him, and within less than a second, he was in Chamiq's causal sphere – a travel distance of about a minute for Memet. So for the next minute, Chamiq of course saw two Memets – the finalized stream of Memet from a minute ago walking towards him, and the Memet in real time, standing right in front of him.

Chamiq blurted to the stranger. "That was an impressive run."

Memet's silver hair flowed to the right side of his body as he locked eyes to respond to the pained compliment, as if they had been friends for a long time. "I haven't seen you this close to a ring in years."

Chamiq nodded, having partially expected the comment. "Well, I wanted a.. change. My simulator gets boring sometimes, advanced as it is. I was, say, curious, to see if the combat has changed much. The first few bouts nearly convinced me it was a waste of time, but I was pleasantly surprised by some of your moves." Chamiq stopped short of asking Memet to explain where he learnt them – he was speaking to a kid, and it didn't seem right.

Memet responded with admiration. "And I think I'd be surprised by some of yours. What do you say, a bout at the training grounds, tonight? No one will be around."

Chamiq raised his eyebrows in surprise, and thought for a moment. "Well, it's been a while since I last donned my armor." Memet nearly rolled his eyes. Chamiq continued, "But I've been practicing," he smirked, "so you're on."

Memet smiled and nodded, then departed with a crisp turn out of Chamiq's causal sphere. It seemed like he had vanished into thin air, but Chamiq knew it would be just a minute till Memet's motion finalized outside his immediate purview. This nature of interaction took most humans a few months to adapt to, but Chamiq found it instinctive now.

The exchange happened so fast that it took a few minutes for Chamiq to understand what he'd agreed to. A session with a stranger, at a ground tattooed in fools' mistakes, for a skill that he'd been perfecting only in his own simulator. Why had his pride spoken so hastily? Imagining the bout, he wondered: could he eliminate Memet from the running? He couldn't harm or kill, even if he wanted to. Maybe he could try to loop Memet forever, keep them frozen till Memet was too old to ever compete again. No, no, that was also absurd; he too would spend whole

years looping, and Memet would surely have figured out how to escape the freeze by then. Besides, Chamiq's reputation would be decimated if word got out. Perhaps he would dominate Memet so thoroughly that Memet would give up on stadium battles as frivolous, and seek greater challenges elsewhere. Chamiq turned over all these possibilities and more, and decided that perhaps he would indeed show up tonight.

Chamiq vividly remembered nearly every one of his freezes, and was terrified that Memet might send him into one tonight. The entire physics of the virtual reality had been built around this single, terrifying rule, and Chamiq felt its pressure.

That evening, Chamiq trudged to a smaller, nearby empty stadium in identical garb, supplemented with his usual sleek, all-metal ax. Chamiq found it humorous humans had so easily replicated the institutions that had destroyed Earth – humans sought uniformity and entertainment from nature, so of course never-ending three dimensional spectacle was constantly interesting.

He saw Memet with the same needle-like sword he'd used in the morning. They entered each other's causality spheres, and drew their razor sharp weapons. Chamiq felt the wilting grass that bathed the ground was an unworthy audience for this battle. Chamiq expressed, "No one to watch! What a pity we won't have a

judge.” But he felt relieved at the emptiness; his simulator was challenging, but he hadn’t practiced on a consciousness in a long time.

The harsh shadows of the empty stadium were unfamiliar to Chamiq: he’d only ever performed in packed stadiums for those wanting to witness the champion. His simulator and keen observation had kept his reflexes sharper than his sword, and if only the flawless combat was shown to an observer anyways, why not always invite a crowd to judge? As they began to parry back and forth, he realized Memet was mostly darting back and forth, eyes on Chamiq: no fancy tricks or flips yet, and no freezes yet either. Chamiq, for a moment, bathed in a smug and warm feeling, almost proof that this Memet was powerless, as if defanged by Chamiq simply standing there. Soon, Memet began to attack more aggressively, and Chamiq glimpsed the daring Memet from the stadium again. They were still both cautiously defending, as neither wanted to end the no-freeze streak. Chamiq tried his classic upwards lunge: the axe head would be just above Memet’s causal sphere for a split second, then re-enter and strike inside out, as if from out of the void. It always used to get cheers from the crowds. But Memet was ready, and jumped left in time. Chamiq was shocked -- it was as if Memet had never seen the ax leave the spheres. He looked up at the dust surrounding them and realized; Memet’s sphere was just a little bit taller than his own. Had the Autoverse changed somehow, to give this



younger player an advantage? Chamiq looked down, and realized the truth: he was on lower ground, and just hadn't noticed. There was no trick of technology here. As he looked back up, Memet dove and struck Chamiq's feet -- immediately, a reversion to a minute prior followed.

In that moment, Chamiq's eyes flashed to their fighting a minute prior, and he immediately and instinctively repeated a dodge he'd performed a minute earlier. The world beyond their spheres had continued to play to them, a minute-old reproduction of flashing lights in the distance and leaves wafting beside them: but if the trees could see, they would only see a frozen still of his last parry. At the precise moment Memet's blade drew blood from his skin, both of their perspectives snapped to the frozen point, and the combat began again. For their frozen state to start streaming again to the world, offense and defense needed to be perfectly matched for a whole minute.

Sure, Chamiq thought, a freeze was probably inevitable; Chamiq had never seen such a dive attack succeed, and Memet had surely just been lucky. Yet, he was shocked at the deftness of the response, and impressed at Memet's preparation. Though they had frozen, the barrier they had broken was liberating; with no one to disdain a lengthy freeze, Memet felt the liberty to keep repeating the move to

different defenses: upon reproduction, Memet's strike was clearly no act of luck.

Soon, Chamiq began diving too, and there was a grin on his face. He'd forgotten his vindictive plots in favor of an almost-admiration: fleeting glimpses of his own, young self, learning by studying the greats. They danced that sacred, dangerous dance deeper into the night, each trading skills they had crafted alone and mastered together. Two shadows, masters of different times, choreographed a dance only they would ever see.

Breathless and short of words by the end, Chamiq uttered a single word.

"Tomorrow?"

Memet grinned, and laughed. "Tomorrow!"

They departed from each other's causal zones, each immediately invisible to the other for a moment -- and Chamiq already wanted to see him again. Their bout was chaotic yet familiar, and Chamiq walked pensively back home, in awe that such a world could allow such art to exist. His real body was nearly forgotten, hurtling through space in a ship's vat, kept alive by targeted molecular infusions. Most people made the choice immediately: the deadened metallic hallways of the ships, or a doubled lifespan in the freeing comfort of the Autoverse?

Unlike the other virtual worlds, this Autoverse caught people's hearts: a utopia based on forgiveness, where free will and mutual consent were balanced. To

Chamiq, it felt equally opportunistic, not a 'metaverse' where creators granted themselves undue power. Advances in physics and computation had unlocked credibly neutral world seeds out of anyone's control, but it took far longer for the culture to accept them. Humans had to desire, *crave*, this freedom enough, to acknowledge its superiority to a short atom-based life. The lack of control made these worlds feel real: no one had the power to summon anything from anywhere without real work, and just a few simple, invariant rules ensured fairness. As long as the fleet's lattice of chips could store and transmit sphere data within a minute, this distributed world continued smoothly -- and for hundreds of years, it hadn't stopped.

Though darkness covered his lonely walk home, Chamiq felt safe. He knew his suit monitored for trauma signals, even outside the stadiums – after some threshold of fear, a body-damaging substance, or physical harm, he and his causal field would simply snap to its position from a minute prior. Chamiq had learned to modulate his own fear repeatedly, to keep undoing any possible ambush until he escaped (unless he was pickpocketed, a triviality in a post-scarcity utopia). To avoid paradoxes with time, he and his surroundings would stream to the world a minute later upon finalization, after any chance of redos was gone. As expected, Chamiq

entered his house without event, and headed to rest without even glancing at his simulator.

The next day, Chamiq and Memet both arrived back at the empty grounds and continued. Although an audience could never react, it was still frustrating to be hit and reset to the freeze point -- given his skill, Chamiq had rarely worried about that. In these grounds though, freezes felt liberating instead. "Try left!" "Dodge faster!" Chamiq tried out more new moves, and Memet, initially fumbling to react to the untraditional style, soon responded with imitation, forcing Chamiq to improvise himself. As their freeze count reduced, each emerged the session glowing: Memet could finally perfect his moves against an opponent who could block them, and Chamiq could share his simulator-tested strikes with someone who could wield them fully. They were both masters of an art equal parts physics and finesse, and they both knew it.

Memet chuckled at Chamiq. "This was... pretty fun! I'll be at the stadium this weekend again, want to come? You don't have to sit all the way up there, I can save a courtside seat for you." Memet surprised himself with his demeanor, so casually addressing a man who had been just myth to him a few days back.

Chamiq beamed, and responded between heavy breaths, "I enjoyed myself. I don't particularly like being so, *visible*, but, I accept."

Memet radiated his usual positivity, "All right! See you there, old man!" He sheathed his sword and bounded into the distance, as if he had somewhere to be.

Chamiq's smile broke into a grin once Memet had left, excited to root for someone again. Of course, no one really won such games: a blade touching skin would just revert both fighters to a snapshot up to a minute prior. Their freezing and unfreezing, important to them but a triviality in an uncaring universe, reminded Chamiq of a single smoke particle in a sea of chaotic particles. Just staring at one, you cannot tell if time is going backwards or forwards. But physics only works if macro entropy increases with time: you can force a single particle to follow a specific path, but such local micro-redos couldn't stop a whole cloud of steam from dissipating. And so it was here – the gaffes and redos of their interaction were easily balanced by the vast chaos of the universe.

That weekend, Chamiq sat shrouded by his hood again, but this time at the very base of the packed stadium stands. He watched Memet not with the eye of a vengeful champion, but with the care of a father figure. Memet presented a rendition of a thrust from their sessions together, and the crowd erupted. Chamiq motioned to clap too, but Memet shot him a glance, as if he'd known a minute in advance that Chamiq would try to cheer. Chamiq lowered his palms and removed his

hood, and felt the applause permeate his body. He hadn't felt like this since his last match: they weren't cheering for him, but for his style, technique that would far outlive him anyways.

The game neared its end, and the duo had only frozen once the entire match. Memet was surely on track to pass Chamiq's records, but Chamiq had already forgotten about that -- he even embraced the loss. The crowd roared at Memet's dives, and Chamiq simply smiled, knowing they would be even smoother after they practiced again tomorrow.