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Glenn Budzinski

Advanced Chess School, by Nikolay Zhuravlev, 2000 Convekta Ltd, CD-ROM \$26.00

Arguably, the most appropriate chess books for electronic media are those that can best utilize an interactive format. *Advanced Chess School*, instructional software published by Convekta Ltd., the Chess Assistant folks, falls into this category.



The software, which comes on a CD-ROM, includes a 23-page user manual. System requirements include an IBM-compatible PC with at least a 75mhz Pentium CPU, 12 meg of RAM, 4 meg of available hard disk space, VGA graphics, Windows 95/98 or NT 4.0 operating system software, a CD-ROM drive and mouse. Recommended but not essential hardware includes 24 MB or more of RAM and Super VGA graphics. I did not experience any problems operating the software on my PC, which barely exceeds the program's minimum requirements.

Installation from Windows 95 occurred as described in the manual and was uneventful. The program is stand-alone; you need no other program to run it.

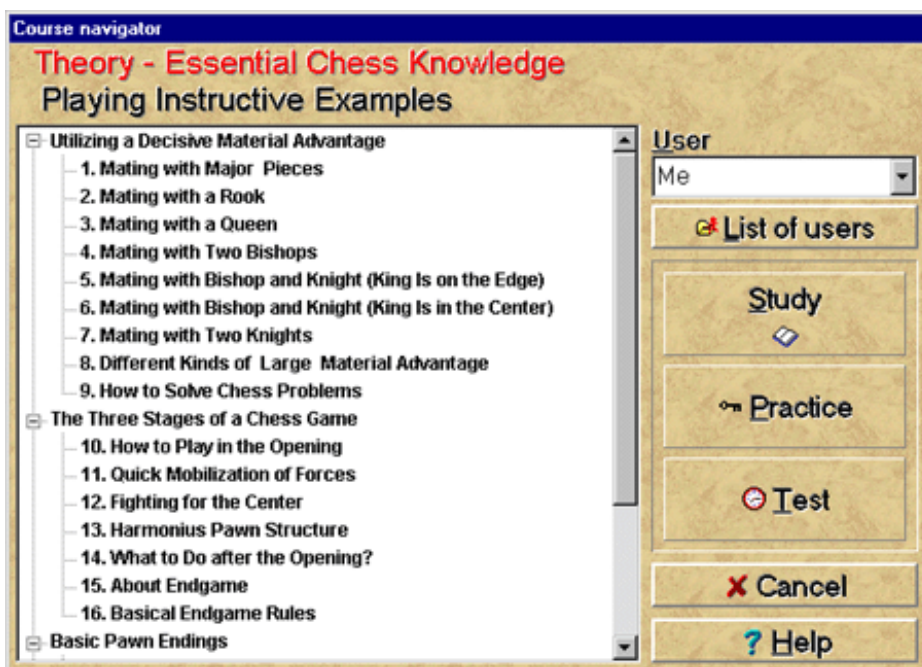
After the program is loaded, one is brought to the "Navigator" screen.



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Starting for the first time, a playing profile or “user” must be created, followed by selecting one of two general instructional formats, “Theory – Essential Chess Knowledge” or “Playing Instructive Examples”. The former contains 5 categories and is further separated into 55 individual topics. The categories are titled

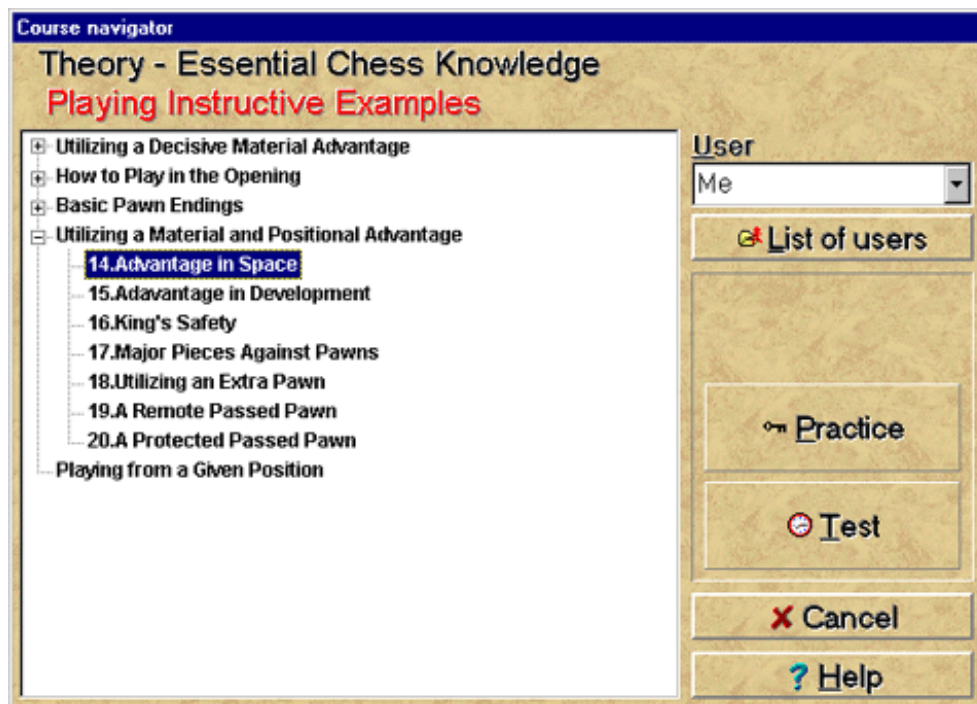
- Utilizing a Decisive Material Advantage
- The Three Stages of a Chess Game
- Basic Pawn Endings
- The Fundamentals of Chess Tactics
- Utilizing a Material or Positional Advantage.

The individual topics cover the gamut of areas that one would expect to see addressed in a comprehensive chess improvement manual, from the general to the esoteric:

- How to Play the Opening
- Basic Endgame Rules
- Fighting for the Center
- Tactical Methods
- Discovered Attack
- Discovered Check
- Play for a Stalemate
- Powerless Extra Pieces, etc.

“Playing Instructive Examples” also includes five general categories, similar to the “Theory” section: Utilizing a Decisive Material Advantage; How to Play in the Opening; Basic Pawn

Endings; Utilizing a Material and Positional Advantage; Playing from a Given Position.



In this format, however, there are only 20 separate topics.

In addition to choosing a course of study, the user must also select a mode of action: Study, Practice or Test under “Theory” or Practice or Test under “Playing Instructive Examples”. As if these weren’t enough options, one gets the choice of yet two more, available through the Navigator menu: Statistics, which computes an ELO-style rating for each user and plots it on various charts, and Options, which offers the opportunity to change move animation speed, font highlighting color, language, etc.

To get the most from this program, one also needs to understand a bit about how each course and mode function both together and separately. The Study mode is only available under “Theory” and contains usually a brief narrative discussing the one topic (of the 55) that has been selected. Both “Theory” and “Playing Examples” contain a “Practice” mode which, as the name implies, normally consists of a few sample positions of the selected topic. The only noticeable differences between each “Practice” mode is that for identical topics, in general, more examples are available under “Theory” than “Playing Examples” and, of course, “Theory” offers more topics (55 versus 20). In “Test” mode, there are 752 total exercises to be solved under the “Theory” course, while “Playing Examples” offers 74. Under “Theory”, there

usually is only one correct solution for each exercise, whereas “Playing Examples” often contains multiple acceptable responses since the user is pitted against *Advanced Chess School*’s playing engine. Exercises under both “Practice” and “Test” appear to count towards one’s Elo rating as calculated by the software.

The big question about software such as *Advanced Chess School* is whether something can be learned from it. Can a player actually improve his game by using it? The answer to this question becomes less affirmative, the closer one looks at what *Advanced Chess School* has to offer. For instance, the explanations provided for certain topics under Study mode doesn’t always correlate to the test positions for the topic. An example is lesson #49 under “Theory”, Advantage in Space. It is written in the brief Study narrative that “Possession of bigger territory is the more stable the better it is supported by the pawns.” Putting aside the issue of a rocky translation (more on this later), this statement appeared to be the “guts” of the proffered teaching for this topic. As a result, one would assume that at least some of the resultant test positions would, in some way, be linked to the Study theme and involve a pawn or pawn chains, etc. Of the 11 test positions attributed to Advantage in Space under “Theory”, all involved a tactical solution and only one remotely concerned a pawn.



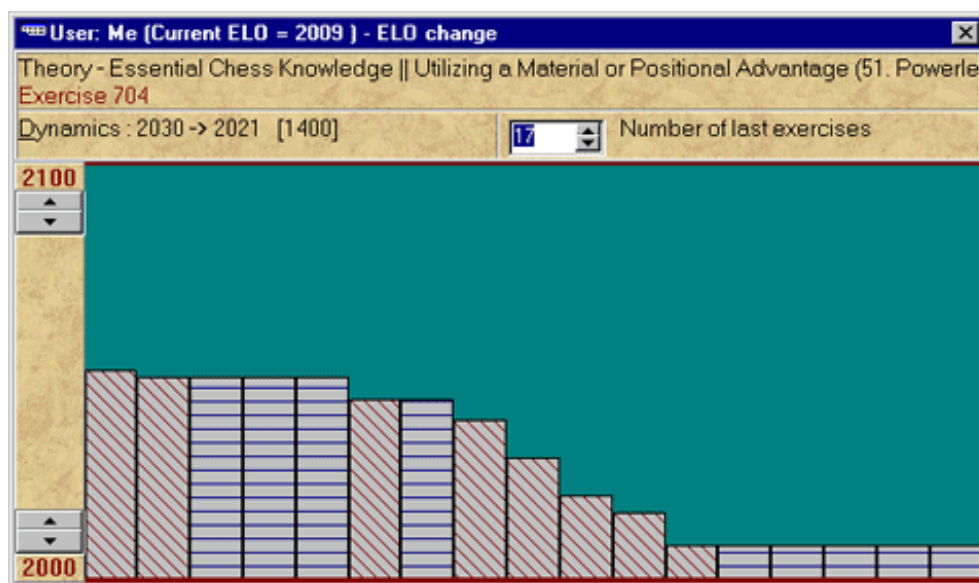
Given such a skimpy explanation of the topic and only one or two Practice exercises, it is unclear how an inexperienced player (or a player of almost any strength) might arrive at the correct solution for Exercise #678, also found under Advantage in Space. The user is told “White is Winning”. (The correct answer is Qxf7+.)

There are also those topics that are less substantive than one would have hoped. An example is “Theory” topic #51, Powerless Extra Pieces. One might logically assume that there would be a discussion and examples of various positions in which an extra piece proved useless. The reality is that the only positions covered are endings with a knight and a pawn versus the lone king, as well as a couple of endings involving a bishop (which, incidentally, was not even addressed in the Study material). I’m not altogether sure what I was expecting from this section, but it was certainly more than an illustration of the useless of a knight on a virtually

empty board, a concept that would seem to be too obvious to even warrant a detailed explanation to beginners.

It should also be noted that the focus of the exercises is heavily skewed towards tactical solutions, not otherwise apparent from the topic titles or Study mode explanations.

Although the graphs and charts contained in Statistics mode are impressive in appearance and help the user to evaluate his performance on test questions, the associated “Elo Dynamics” rating is often perplexing.



When answering Test questions under the “Theory” course, I was frequently given less than full credit, despite solving the exercise correctly on the first try. Another curiosity is that my rating never seemed to increase, regardless of the number of exercises correctly solved. However, when a wrong solution was offered, the decrease was quite evident. Incorrect answers also resulted in the less than amicable “Bad Move” comment.

Then there’s the translation, or apparent language problems. What is a beginner to make of the following, included in the Study portion of how to checkmate with a king and rook? “Kings disposition opposite each other at the edge of the board, when they bereave each other of three squares, leads to the checkmate.” In discussing the importance of the opening, one finds the amusing “Carrying out your plans remember that you also have a King, to throw which down your opponent is dreaming.” Then there’s “The Kings bereave each other of the three in-between squares. And the King which should make a move, is forced to

cede to his counterpart at least one of those squares.” Would a beginner understand the endgame concept of the “opposition” from this explanation?

The entire Chess Assistant line of products has been very well received. Reviews of CA itself as well as the stand-alone programs have been quite favorable. *Advanced Chess School* falls a little short of the previous standard set by CA products.

Although *Advanced Chess School* gets high marks for its effective use of the interactive format, especially in the Test exercises of the “Playing Examples” course, other areas don’t measure up. There is more to effective teaching than the mere presentation of the material. Beginners may have a difficult time grasping certain concepts, given the translation troubles. Intermediate players don’t escape unscathed, either. While many of the exercises were challenging, they often did not correlate to the topic under which they were proffered. Probably due to ineffective translations, explanations of certain middle game concepts were less than clear. In the end, *Advanced Chess School* shows some promise but needs to correct its deficiencies before it gets any more than a passing grade.

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