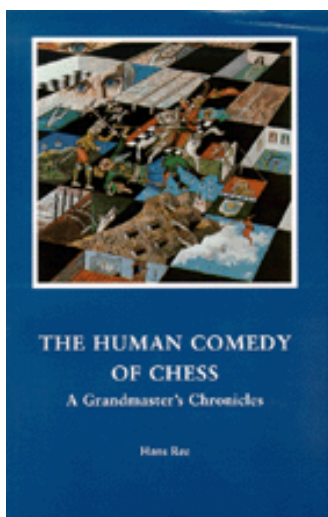




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree

*The Human Comedy
of Chess*

by Hans Ree

Big Fritz Is Watching You

The bookseller from the chess shop demonstrated the new program Fritz 9 to me. Of course, once again its playing strength is increased compared to its predecessors, but as those earlier versions were already strong enough for me, this was not the new feature that the bookseller wanted to discuss. He showed me Fritz's map of the world.

He was on-line and connected to ChessBase's Playchess.com server. On the map we saw red dots that stood for other people who had logged in. Zooming in one could read their names, the handles they were using at the Playchess site. As a bonus one could also see the temperature and the direction of the wind at their location, maybe to make it possible for visitors to chat about the weather after a game.

“Look, America is waking up,” I said. At the Eastern coast clusters of red dots had appeared, representing players who had started a game in the early morning. “Soon there will be more there,” said the experienced bookseller.

There were some isolated dots in the oceans, people playing chess on a ship. I noticed some players in the Antarctic region and this too had already been noticed earlier by the bookseller. He told me he had challenged one of those dots to a blitz game and afterwards he had chatted with his opponent, who turned out to be a French engineer involved in a scientific expedition. They were drilling long pipes through the ice near the Antarctic coast until they reached water. In the water, that had been protected through the ages by a massive layer of ice, small organisms could be found that had become extinct everywhere.

It was really impressive what one could learn from this map and also a bit uncanny. The dots on the map reminded me of movie scenes in the War Room of the Pentagon. I am told that – not in a movie but in real life – there is an American military project which has the aim to collect the physical descriptions of as many people as possible, so that in the ideal case the location of all the six billion citizens of the earth will be established by spy satellites at all times.

Here we were already seeing it on a small scale. We could only see the handles of the players who were logged in, but of course the people from ChessBase knew their real names.

With computers I have always followed the adage: new systems, new problems. I try to do my work as long as possible with the trusted old stuff, typing at this

moment in WordPerfect 5.1 for DOS, and I never had the feeling that I was missing anything important. But at the bookshop I did. What I saw there, I wouldn't be able to see at home with my old stuff. For the first time in my life I felt the desire for an up-to-date computer.

The trusted old stuff can enlighten us also, as I noticed while playing over a game from the recent Essent Open, which was held in the Dutch town Hoogeveen. Routinely I had a playing engine running. Normally one pays attention only to the move that is considered best by the computer, but it can pay off to look at its second choice also.

This is how Anand once found an important opening novelty. His machine indicated Qxh8, winning a rook. Anand had a closer look and found that Qxh8 was wrong. Then he looked at the machine's second choice: Qg7, with the idea that Qxh8 on the next move could not be prevented. Of course Qxh8 with a tempo less would have been wrong again, but then Anand realized that in fact Qg7 was the right move. Not to take the rook on the next move, but for other reasons of which the computer knew nothing because they were far beyond its horizon.

Paying attention to the second choice taught Anand something about an opening variation. Doing the same I learned something about myself.

Here is that game from the Essent Open.

Fred Slingerland • Peter Doggers

1. e2•e4 c7•c5 2. Ng1•f3 d7•d6 3. d2•d4 c5xd4 4. Nf3xd4 Ng8•f6 5. Nb1•c3 a7 •a6 6. Bf1•e2 e7•e6 7. f2•f4 Bf8•e7 8. 0•0 0•0 9. Kg1•h1 Nb8•c6 10. Bc1•e3 Qd8 •c7 11. a2•a4 Rf8•e8 12. a4•a5 A well-known pawn sacrifice

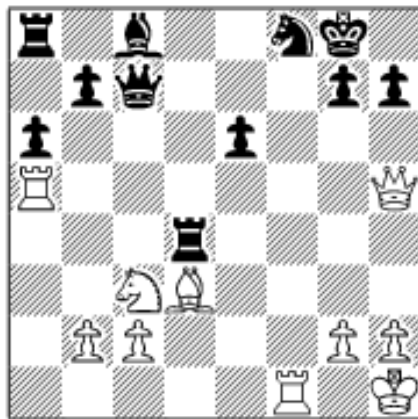
12...Nc6xa5 13. e4•e5 d6xe5 14. f4xe5 Nf6•d7 Usually the second pawn is taken also and after **14...Qxe5 15. Bf4 Qc5 15. Na4 Qa7 16. Bc7** an advantage for White has not yet been convincingly shown.

15. Be2•d3 Nd7•f8 Taking the pawn now seems very risky, but the passive move he makes is certainly bad.

16. Qd1•f3 f7•f5 Better, but not good enough would have been **16...Bb4**.

17. e5xf6 Be7xf6 18. Qf3•h5 Attacking Re8 and Na5. White is winning.

18...Re8•d8 19. Ra1xa5 Bf6xd4 20. Be3xd4 Rd8xd4



Here the computer indicates mate in 4 by 21. Bxh7+ and many humans would have found the same move. The computer's second choice however, is quite surprising: 21. Rxa6.

What kind of a move is that, blundering a rook? It really took me some time to realise that in fact it was the second-best move. If Black takes the rook, there is mate in 4 again and if he prevents the mate, White is winning a rook, not losing one.

Unholy feelings and thoughts took possession of me. I imagined myself having the diagrammed position as White. What would I play? Not the banal 21. Bxh7+ surely, but 21. Rxa6.

It was a purely sadistic fantasy. At first my opponent would be pleasantly surprised being offered a full rook for nothing. Then he would suspect that there might be a catch and slowly the awful truth would dawn on him that mate was threatened and that he wouldn't win but lose a rook. From a little distance I would watch contentedly how his initial joy would turn into desperation.

Those were far from noble thoughts; silly and childish to say the least. I was rather surprised that as a practically retired player I could still indulge in such fantasies. But that's what chess does to us. Nigel Short has said that in a winning position he likes to repeat moves, but only once, just to give the opponent the idle hope that he might escape with a draw.

Back to the diagrammed position. White didn't give mate, he didn't win the rook, but he played a move which is equally effective.

21. Nc3•b5 a6xb5 22. Ra5xa8 Of course there was mate in 4 again, but White settles for the exchange, winning easily. No mate, no rook, just an exchange, leaving Black in a hopeless position anyway. For a moment I wondered if this was an even more refined form of sadism than playing 21. Rxa6, but I think Slingerland was innocent and had honestly missed the mate.

22...Rd4•f4 23. Rf1xf4 Qc7xf4 24. Bd3xh7+ At last this move. Black resigned.



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