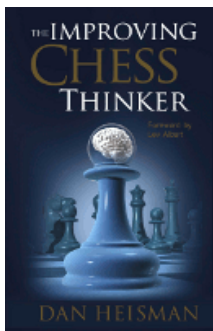




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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Spend Time on the Move Chosen

Quote of the Month: *Your opponent will spend 100% of his effort on the position given to him.*

In my recent book, [The Improving Chess Thinker](#), I observed that one of the common thought process errors of players rated below 2000 is that once they decide on a move they do not spend enough time figuring out what is going to happen if they play it.

This observation has several related issues:

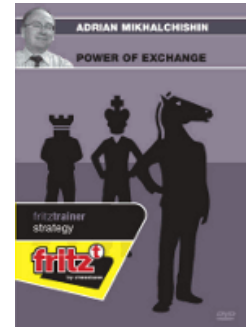
- For non-analytical positions spending a lot of time seeing what might happen after a candidate may be unnecessary (see [Critical and Principal Variations](#))
- This problem is especially noticeable when a move is decided by process of elimination.
- This problem is exacerbated when a player spends a lot of time on a highly critical candidate only to finally reject it and settle for another.
- The player may play Real Chess and attempt to see if the move to be played is safe; yet the determination of safety only creates a *minimum acceptance criteria* for a final candidate; it is not usually sufficient to actually play it. A move may be completely safe, yet the initial analysis or evaluation could be completely wrong, causing it to be clearly not best.

However, even in situations where the above issues don't apply, this problem is still prevalent. While performing "think out loud" exercises with class players, I often hear a player analyze several moves, never really identifying a King of the Hill (best move found so far). Then, after spending roughly the same amount of time on each, one is quickly chosen and played – sometimes with what seems to be random rather than evaluative criteria. In this common circumstance the player gives little or no special attention to the move played, even though the consequences of the moves not chosen are no longer relevant – the opponent won't even know what they were. In other words, the player ends up not giving additional consideration to the possible consequences of the move played. But this lack of special attention to the chosen candidate does not make much sense, because for the rest of the game this is the only move that will matter.

Once you make your move, your opponent should (and good players will) focus all of their attention on how to beat it, or at least how to best play against it. For example, if you spend fifteen minutes and then make a move, and your opponent also spends fifteen minutes, you should have ensured during your reflection time that your opponent cannot easily find a way to defeat your move. To do so requires that you spend at least a reasonable portion of your fifteen minutes asking, "If I make this move, will my opponent be able to just win with a tactic?" In other words, "Is there any forcing move – a check, capture, or threat – that he can make in reply that I can't meet next move?"

This leads to the following conclusion:

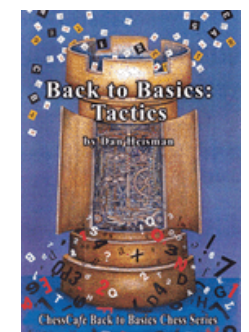
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by Dan Heisman

Once you start focusing on a candidate move and think that you are likely to play it, not only should you perform the minimal safety checks that constitute Real Chess (assuming you have not already in earlier analysis), but you should give some serious thought as to whether your analysis and evaluation that led you to believe that this move was "the best you could find in the time available" were really correct, and that the move you are about to play is as good as you first thought.

Obviously, the time limit and time remaining on your clock have a lot to do with how well you can do this. For players who play too fast this is not a problem – they should always take more time to play Real Chess and make sure their analysis is correct. But for players that play correctly – or too slowly – the amount of checking you can do is greatly limited by time. In a thirty minute game it may be impossible to check the analysis and evaluation to any satisfaction, while in a 40/2 game it is usually possible.

Based on my observations of errors made due to insufficient attention to the move actually chosen, I have arrived at the following guideline:

In slow games, when you have an analytical position spend at least fifteen percent of your time on your chosen move figuring out what is likely to happen after you play it.

For the purposes of this guideline, assume an analytical position is one where there are non-trivial forcing sequences (checks, captures, and threats) to calculate. The opposite of an analytical position is a one where you make your decision completely on judgment and principle, such as early in the opening before the opposing forces are clashing.

For example, suppose you are in an analytical position, take five minutes for thought and decide to play move A. You should have spent at least forty-five seconds of those five minutes seeing what might happen after move A. If you only spent thirty seconds thus far, another fifteen seconds or more would probably be helpful.

The key words are "happen after" – I am *not* referring to time spent *evaluating* the position caused by move A – I am talking about *analyzing* what is likely to happen – analysis of what you could do about your opponent's most dangerous replies: checks, captures, and threats.

In *The Improving Chess Thinker* one of the key positions is de Groot A.

White to play



In this position, like many others, the opponent has threats (1... Qxb2, but even grandmasters analyzing this position in de Groot's seminal work *Thought and Choice in Chess* usually missed the unusual reply 2.Nc4!), but the player on the move also has possibilities. For example, White has possibilities to force favorable capturing sequences starting with 1.Nxc6, 1.Nxd5, 1.Bxd5, or possibly 1.Bxf6.

Many intermediate players decide there is no "aggressive" play and settle for defending the "threat." The only problem is that once they settle on a defensive move like 1.b4 or 1.Rc2, they automatically assume it is safe and,

unlike their aggressive candidates, don't analyze it thoroughly to make sure the defensive move is truly safe. In many, if not most, cases in de Groot A, a defensive move is not that safe! For example, after 1.Rc2? Black can play 1...Nxc3 and no one has figured out that the only way White can avoid losing material is 2.Nxc6!, when Black is better but disaster has been averted; e.g., 2.Qxc3? Ne4 wins a piece. Similar dangerous sequences must be checked after 1.b4 Nxc3!, but most students don't. They often spend a lot of time trying to win material with a move such as 1.Nxd5 – hoping to get Black to abandon his defense of the d7-square and allow a fork – but when that fails, they quickly "settle" for a dangerous move like 1.b4 or 1.Rc2.

We can illustrate this with other examples:

Black to play



In this position, Black was not sure what to do and spent several minutes trying to find a good plan. Finally he settled on **1...Qc5** without really checking if White could do something dangerous. White simply responded **2. b4**, putting the question to the queen; even better was 2.Qb3, with a double attack on f7 and b7. Black incorrectly assumed that taking back his move with 2...Qe7 or "even worse" 2...Qf8 was not logical, so he fairly quickly decided the queen must be better off of the queenside with 2...Qb6. Of course, his logic was not correct, as the queen is rather awkward on b6 – this is not the kind of move you should quickly "settle on" without sensing some danger. White replied **3.Bb3**, clearly vacating c4 for a piece – in this case the knight – with a future double attack on b6 and e5. Now Black recognized the threat and again slowed down, but it was too late. After **3...Re7 4.Nc4**, he was reduced to the desperate **4...Bf5**, and after **5.Rxd8+ Nxd8 6.Qxf5! gxf5 7. Nxb6 cxb6 8.Bxe5**, he lost a pawn and his position was a wreck, although later his opponent made a couple of weak moves and Black won anyway!

I made this mistake in a more minor fashion in my game with FM Matt Bengtson:

NM Dan Heisman – FM Matt Bengtson

Main Line Chess Club Championship 2004, Final Round, G/75

White to play



In this dynamic position, I had saved my time and now began to use it in gobs analyzing the discovered attack 23.Bd6, hitting the rook and the b-pawn. It seemed clear to me that this move was the one I should play – until I tried to

back it up by analysis. Unfortunately, I could not see how 23.Bd6 worked after 23...f5 24.Nxe5 Rxc1+ 25.Rxc1 Qe8, when 26.Bxb8 could be met by 26...Qxb8 and both knights are hanging. Apparently I also thought that 23...Bxc4 24.dxc4 f5 25.Bxb8 fxe5 might trap my bishop. So after spending an inordinate amount of time and failing to make this move work, I settled for the more safe-looking 23.Ned6. Regrettably, this knight move is a complete waste of time, as Matt simply moved his attacked rook with 23...Rd8 and I could find nothing better than to admit my error and play the sorry retreat 24.Ne4. The game remained inordinately complicated until the end, when in mutual time trouble we agreed to a draw, which secured me the second place silver bowl.

After the game Matt asked me why I did not play 23.Bd6, which he also thought was clearly best, and I showed him my concerns. He admitted that he had not seen those ideas either and could not find an answer. After I got home, I gave the game to the computer and it indeed verified that Matt and my intuitions were correct and that 23.Bd6 was the best move. It showed I was easily winning in my "problem" line with 23...f5 24.Nxe5 Rxc1+ 25.Rxc1 Qe8 26.Ng5!, instead of 26.Bxb8. And 23...Bxc4 24.dxc4 f5 25.Bxb8 fxe5 can also be met by the hard-to-see 26.Qd1!. I did not feel too bad about missing these lines, as they were very difficult to visualize and I could not have possibly spent more time, not knowing that they were there. At G/75 one can only analyze so much before diminishing returns sets in.

This "settling" error occurs frequently after a player takes time to see if a sacrifice will be successful, but then concludes that it apparently fails. At that point the player often settles for a quick "safe" move without fully checking to see if it is indeed safe. I think this error has happened to most of my students at one point or another. Let's make up a silly but, unfortunately, common example that typifies what happens:

White to play



White decides to check out the classical bishop sacrifice 1.Bxh7+, not aware that it rarely works with a queen-bishop battery on d8-e7 to double guard g5; often just a bishop on e7 too will suffice. Suppose after a while he sees that lines like 1.Bxh7+ Kxh7 2.Ng5+ Bxg5 3.Qh5+ fail to 3...Bh6 when Black is ahead two pieces. So after some thought White rejects this analytical line and decides to just play a developing move, quickly playing 1.Qe2?? Unfortunately, although Black had no serious threats before this move, 1.Qe2?? takes away the bishop's only escape square and Black can win a piece for two pawns by trapping the bishop with 1...c4. Another case where the "safe" move was not safe!

The solution to this "settling" problem is not difficult to find: no matter what your thought process was before you began to finalize a move that you intend to play, you should focus at least a minimal amount of time just on the safety of the final move. In certain circumstances, like completely innocuous positions early in the opening, this may not be necessary. In other circumstances, particularly severe time trouble, it may not be possible. However, in the most cases it is not only helpful, but possibly necessary, to spend this minimal time to avoid problems.

Let's lay out a typical theoretical time map. Suppose in a slow game you have a position with candidate moves A, B, C, and D. You spend the following

amounts of time looking at each candidate:

- A: thirty seconds
- B: ninety seconds
- C: three minutes
- D: sixty seconds

At the conclusion of the six minutes, you decide that move B is your best bet. At this point it makes sense to perform a *quick* re-visit of B to make sure it is really safe – and best – for the reasons previously thought. This revisiting would be even more important if you had chosen a move that had less time devoted to it than B. For example, if you had chosen move A, then additional time is more likely to be helpful. Following the guideline of using fifteen percent on the move actually played and, assuming the entire move will take about seven minutes, at least sixty seconds ($15\% \times 420$) should be devoted to the final move. Since you had previously only taken thirty seconds on A, here an additional thirty seconds checking out your opponent's possible forcing replies to A would probably be helpful. *You don't need to know the exact times you spent on each move – no one does – but you should have a feel on whether you have given the move you are going to play adequate treatment.*

We can restate the final guideline as: *No matter how much time you have spent thinking about a position, try to devote a reasonable amount of time to the consequences of the move you are intending to play.*

If this final check reveals that the move you are going to play is no longer best for any reason, you may be back to square one and your remaining thinking time will be diminished, but you will have avoided immediate disaster. When you reject a move at the last second, it is very tempting to make the same mistake you just avoided and quickly settle on another under-analyzed move! However, unless you are in time trouble, follow the same principle and re-check the new move as well.

For those readers who play too fast, following all the advice above should slow you down! For those who play too slowly, my advice remains the same: spend less time (for many slow-playing readers, much less time) thinking about judgmental moves and leave sufficient time for analytical moves, especially in critical situations.

Question I lost two out of three games the other day to 1650 players and won against a 1590. That cost me twenty-four rating points, which didn't make me flinch. I figured if I could care less about rating, then I would enjoy the game more, as long as I'm trying to figure out what mistakes were made and how to avoid them in the future.

One key aspect I am changing is that I am no longer analyzing my games in Fritz right away, but instead going over them manually (on a real board), examining the time I spent on each move and what I should have been thinking about on each move. Afterward I'm plugging it into Fritz to see if I'm even close.

I realize I was tired, but even so my games were illogical and poorly played. I miscalculated and went a pawn down against [Player A], which will certainly happen from time to time. The biggest mistakes were 1) helping him get a kingside majority; 2) missing a good chance at a draw after he made a poor move; and 3) allowing him to open another file while having complete control over the only open file.

Against [Player B], I got myself into severe time trouble. Going over the game, I realized I had spent so much time analyzing whether a piece sacrifice (bishop for two pawns) will work. When faced with such positions, I should either 1) quickly determine the sacrifice doesn't work and move on to something else or 2) try it if positional pluses seem to be there even if I can't calculate it out all the way.

Do you think I'm on the right track?

Answer Yes, self-analysis is slow but steady. Of course, you have to put your fingers on the right areas and be able to do something about them, which is not always easy. In your game with [Player B], you are correct that you can only spend so much time on a move before it will be detrimental – or at least achieve diminishing returns on your time – no matter whether you play it or not (unless it just wins and ends the game). I would say eighty percent of my students either play too fast or too slow. It is difficult for intermediate players to play close to "just right," but that is a great goal.

If you can only play when you are not tired, that is great, but sometimes not too practical, given club meeting times, family and work schedule, etc. And finally, good attitude about your rating.

Question Here's a picture. The right hand side of the room is full; the left side is empty. The right side is the A tournament, which is mostly players 2000+, plus the top ten boards of the B tournament. The left side is the B tournament. Both sides played with the same time controls and started at the same time.



The picture gives a second metaphoric interpretation to the idea of [A Room Full of Grandmasters](#). Namely, after the U1600s rush through their games and go home, the grandmasters are still there, looking for a better move.

Answer Thanks! There is no doubt that proper time management is a big part of becoming a good chess player. I think a similar picture could be taken at any serious event midway through the time control, assuming players of all levels are playing in the same area.

Question I really appreciated your article about seeing tactics defensively. I've been looking for a book to use with the kids I teach. I've taught them tactics, and many are pretty good at spotting mistakes in a game and taking advantage of them. But I keep noticing that they often make moves that give their opponents those opportunities, and it's often because they're focused on one reply (the one that gives them an advantage) and fail to consider a broader range of moves that will get them into trouble.

I would like a recommendation for a book that isn't so much a "Move and win," but more like "Move and avoid losing."

Answer If kids are making moves that are not safe (as they always do), then you need, along with familiarity with basic tactics, a thought process that helps them to consistently ask if their candidate moves are safe each move (*a la* my NN [Is it Safe?](#)). From your question, I would bet this is really what you need.

On the other hand, if you want more advanced kids to practice defensive tactics (where you have to find a way not to lose material, say, while your opponent is attempting a tactic), then off the top of my head I know of two minor sources: One is my book [Back to Basics: Tactics](#), which has a chapter on Defensive Tactics (with problems) and the other is the fantastic intermediate level book [Winning Chess Exercises for Kids](#), which is not for kids at all, but on each page the seventh problem is a defensive problem.

Question I'm seriously considering getting a chess teacher/trainer, but I was

wondering if you wouldn't mind answering a sort-of devil's advocate question for me. If the primary teaching method is to go over a student's own games, what is the advantage of hiring a chess teacher over simply letting Fritz analyze the games and showing the tactical errors – especially since at my level my games are almost always decided by tactics anyway?

Answer I got asked this question about ten years ago by a passenger in my car and I laughed and replied "If I can't answer that one, I am out of a job!"

There are many good answers. The most important is that a good chess coach doesn't just point out tactical mistakes – that's a very small part of his job. The list of things he should do is long, but basically he is your guide to getting better: helping set homework, who and how to play (such as which section in the World Open would maximize your learning or whether joining a local club is pivotal), what your mistakes and misconceptions are and how to minimize repeating them in the future, etc.

But much more involved are good coaches who look at your thought process and time management. Eighty percent of my students either play too fast or too slow. Even a good instructor who looks just at your game scores by mail can't tell that unless your games are time-stamped.

No computer can say "You are trying to approach this position the wrong way" or "You played that move way too fast for the time control and position" or "whenever you get into a position that has this pawn structure, look for your pieces to go here" and many other things that computers can't (yet) possibly do. They can tell you that you made a tactical mistake, but they can't pinpoint if it was because you lack visualization, tactical vision, board vision, played too fast, did not look for all your opponent's forcing moves, or any other reason that this particular tactic was allowed, and how to minimize this falling into this tactic.

There's a lot more I could say, but I think you get the idea. See also my Novice Nook [Finding a Good Instructor](#).

Dan welcomes readers' questions; he is a full-time instructor on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.

[Yes, I have a question for Dan!](#)

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