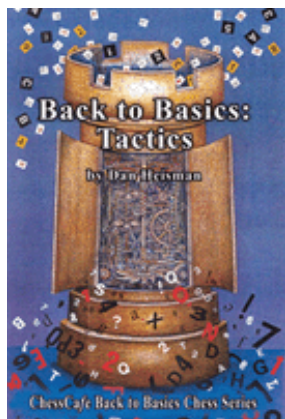




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



Acquiescing

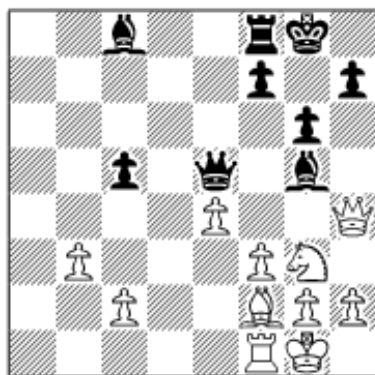
Quote of the Month: You can't be really good at chess unless you are a good analyst and, in practice, you can't be a good analyst unless you are good at time management.

There is a very interesting time management mistake that occurs fairly frequently in the slow games of weaker players, but of which I have never seen anything written. I call it acquiescing:

Acquiescing is allowing the opponent to execute a winning (or drawing) threat without taking a reasonable amount of time to make sure that the threat cannot be stopped.

In almost all cases of acquiescing, Trigger Two (See [The Two Move Triggers](#)), which determines the reasonable amount of time for each move, will indicate a relatively long time period should be taken. This makes sense, since a powerful threat necessarily dictates taking whatever time is necessary to find the antidote and save the game, while still leaving enough time to finish the game and avoid loss.

Let's start with two simple examples and then provide further depth with a more complex situation. In the following position assume both sides have forty minutes left on their clock:



Example 1: White to Play

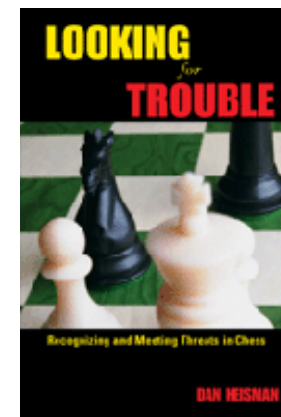
White's queen is in serious danger, so the question is whether White can find a sequence that saves the queen and avoids ruinous loss of material. The lesser alternatives are to resign or to play on down a bishop for a queen. However, since both choices leave White as a clear loser, they are equally unacceptable until White is completely sure there is no other solution.

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If White looks at this position for a short time (say a minute or three) and can't find a way to save the queen, then the alternatives should still be rejected. If White were to move after such brief consideration and play 1.Qxg5, that would be acquiescing. At the other extreme, if White thinks the queen is hopelessly lost and just waits for the clock to fall, that is not only rude but against the rules (for more on that see the second example).

The correct solution is something in-between: continue to try “tricks” – or moves that you might ordinarily not play – to see if you can avoid those alternatives.

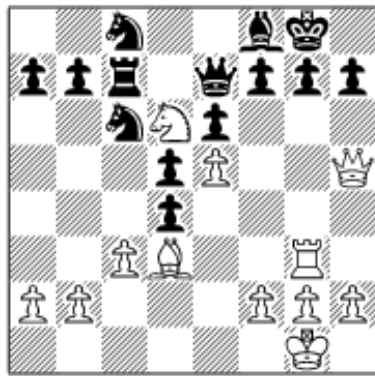
White should think as long as is reasonable to try to extricate the queen, because if the solution is there, a player has an obligation to find it. With forty minutes left, theoretically the search could take as long as White has remaining on the clock but, in practice, if White thinks long enough and fails, he should either resign well before letting the clock run out or play 1.Qxg5 and then finish the game relatively quickly.

As might be expected, I picked this example because there is a clearly “saving” move. 1.f4! is the only move that makes the game a contest. By sacrificing a pawn, White reaches a playable game where Black has compensation for his pawn deficit, primarily because of the bishop-pair. The principal variation is 1. f4 Bxf4 2.Ne2 with a slight advantage to White, e.g. 2...Bg5 3.Qg3. The fact that White was ahead two pawns in the original position makes 1.f4 much easier to accept (see [The Margin for Error](#)). Normally a move like 1.f4 might not feel “safe” because it simply abandons a pawn, but when the alternative is giving up a queen that small loss is more than acceptable.

Let's apply the acquiescing concept to offense. Suppose you are in a tricky position and, as it turns out from later analysis, have only one winning move. If you fail to play this move, you are clearly drawing or, even worse, losing badly. If you think a winning move *might* be there, it would make sense to at least take some time to try to find that move, whether you absolutely know it is there or not (as I did in Example 3 of [Initial and Final Candidate Moves](#)). To move quickly and just accept that you can't find a win, as if to say “Oh well, I tried,” would not be optimum time management.

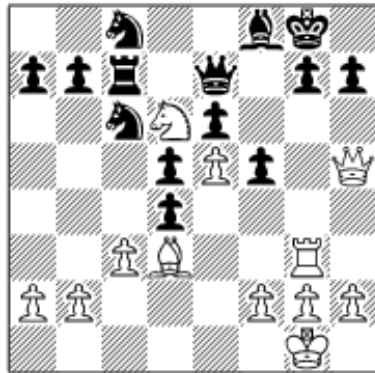


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Example 2: Black to Play

In this position Black unwisely prevents the threatened checkmate on h7 by playing 1... f5? Correct was 1...g6. Assuming White has plenty of time on his clock, what should he do?



White to Play after 1...f7-f5

White is winning easily if he finds the correct 2.exf6 (*en passant*), renewing the mate threat and also hitting the queen. For example, 2.exf6 Qxd6 3.Bxh7+ Kh8 4.Bg6 + Kg8 5.Qh7# or 2.exf6 Qxf6 Qxh7# or 2.exf6 g6 3.fxe7 (capturing on g6 also wins) winning the queen. However, White is losing horribly on any move other than 2.exf6.

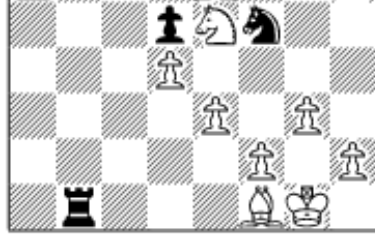
For White to quickly give up and play another move would be offensive acquiescing. Therefore, with a mating attack at stake and a lost game otherwise, taking a fair amount of time to attempt to find the right idea is justified. Of course, if White forgets about the *en passant* possibility, he will lose, and that sometimes happens to weaker players in the heat of the battle. *If you find yourself panicking and lost, that is a good reason to take time, compose yourself, and search for a possible solution, not a reason to play fast and terrible.* I often hear the excuse: “The reason I played too fast was because I panicked.” That may be true, but it is not very sensible.

Let’s consider a more complex and practical example from a student’s game. He was White and his opponent had an interesting decision to make:



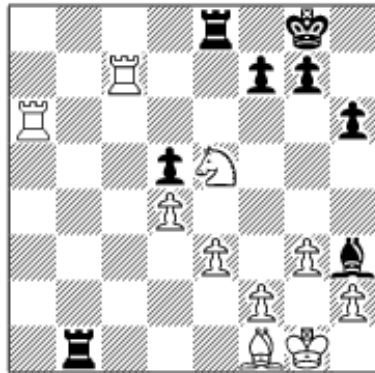
Example 3: Black to Play

Time situation: 45 second increment, Black has 50+ minutes remaining, White 11 minutes 45 seconds



Black correctly recognizes that if the bishop can safely get to h3, it will create an unstoppable mating threat. This is a common pattern and therefore a good one to know, so let's see what the board would look like if that happens (removing the f5

knight and playing 1...Bh3):

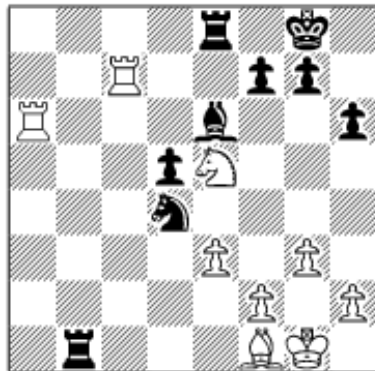


White to Play (analysis)

If this position could be reached, nothing could stop the threatened checkmate. For example if 2.f4, then 2...Rxf1#.

Thus, in the previous diagram Black deduces that moving the knight – even sacrificing it – will create a very strong threat. Therefore, he correctly *searched for the knight move that creates the most havoc*. He finds the dangerous 1...Nxd4

(computer analysis shows that 1...Nxe3 is even better, but that is irrelevant to the discussion). How should White reply?



White to Play

Up to this point White's macro time management has been very good: he has 11:45 left on his clock. Keep in mind he gets 45 seconds added to his clock after each move.

After 1...Nxd4, the material is even, but Black has the winning ...Bh3 threat.

The practical question is "How much time should White take to look for a defense, not knowing that there is one at all?"

This is a very interesting question! In order to put it into perspective, let's consider a different but related ad absurdum case: Suppose instead a player has two hours remaining on his clock and clearly has no defense to a threatened mate? Should that player look for almost two hours in desperation? The answer is no – that is not only a waste of his time, but rude and illegal: the rules prohibit a player from using inordinate amounts of time in a hopeless position

just to annoy his opponent.

Yet, that is the “black” in a black-and-white situation (no pun intended). In most acquiescing situations there is a grey area where the threat might be stoppable and a reasonable amount of time should be taken. In the current example, White is not being rude if he needs to take almost all of his 11:45 to find a defense because:

- With a 45 second increment, finding a defense with even 1 second left is not hopeless, because with that time control a player always gets at least 45 seconds for a move. It is important to note that White’s intention is not to lose on time, but to find a playable move within his allotted time,
- If White does not play correctly he can be checkmated within two moves, which is about as critical as a move can get,
- It is very insulting (and against the rules) to refuse to move when there is obviously no defense. However, it is not insulting at all, but rather quite correct, to intensely search when it is not so obvious whether there is a solution, and
- 11:45 is not an inordinate amount of time to think, especially when compared to two hours.

Even if White did not want to take his entire time to find a defense, taking at least 7-8 minutes would be practical because the threat is mate and a simple, but drastic, solution such as 2.Rxe6? leaves him down the exchange with a lost game.

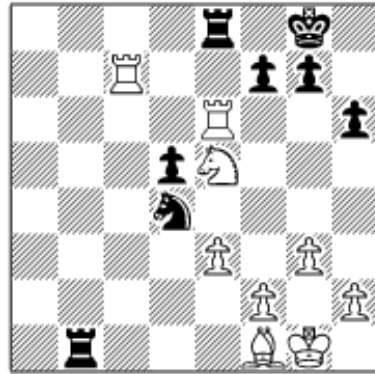
There is no sense saving your time for playing out a completely lost position.

As it turns out, White has two reasonable solutions: 2.Kg2 (the one I found when reviewing the game) and 2.g4. Computer analysis verifies that all other moves are insufficient.

In extremely critical positions such as this one, it is not unreasonable for White to take some time to look for reasonable solutions. Moreover, for the reasons stated above, even if the solution did not exist, White initially has no way of knowing that is so. Therefore, *White has to assume the best case and believe that a defense is possible until he can prove this assumption is wrong.*

However, in the game White thought for less than three minutes and played 2.Rxe6? After this move he had 9:51 remaining on his clock. To acquiesce in this way was wrong, because his position after 2.Rxe6 is lost and, with a little further thought, he might have found one of the two adequate defenses.

The humorous end of the story is that after 2.Rxe6? Black made an even more gigantic time management error:



Black to Play

With over *50 minutes* left on his clock, he quickly played the horrendous 2...Rxe6?? turning a won game into a lost one after 3. exd4. This is primarily a time management error, but on the board it can be classified as a Counting error (see [The Two Types of Counting Problems](#)). Of course Black should have played more deliberately and examined each check, capture, and threat. If he had done so, he would likely find the

correct 2...Nxe6, when he is ahead the exchange.

As so often happens, *the player who made the bigger time management error also made the bigger blunder and lost.*

To summarize: When you have plenty of time and your opponent makes a potentially winning threat, don't move too quickly and *acquiesce* to a losing position. Instead, take your time and see if you can find a move that at least keeps some drawing chances.

Footnote

I have noticed that many online players play too quickly during slow games, and get unjustifiably upset with their opponent for "playing too slow" by using a reasonable amount of time (which in most slow games is almost all the allocated time). Yet, if you didn't want your opponent to use proper macro time management by taking almost all his time, you should not have agreed to play at that time limit. *Never agree to play a time limit where you are not willing to take almost all your time.* If you are willing to give your opponent a handicap by playing too fast, then you should not be upset with him if he takes advantage of it!

Question While studying [Back to Basics: Tactics](#), I made a remarkable discovery: "counting" is not as simple as it seems. To my dismay I was unable to solve the first six problems correctly. And this is after studying all the available material written on the topic. If I've failed to master "counting," then I'm probably missing other tactics as well. While it's possible to use "pattern recognition" in discovering and solving many tactics, is there any other "general methodology" that is also applicable to resolving the task of "counting"? Also, would you consider writing a more detailed article on the

subject? I believe the “average” player takes “counting” for granted. I’m left with the feeling that there is much more to the subject to be addressed.

Answer Good points! Yes, most of my students think Counting is easy, until they discover it isn’t! One, during his first lesson, proclaimed “I never make Counting errors!” However, in the first two games we reviewed, he committed *four*, whereupon he proclaimed “Oh! *So that’s* what you call Counting!” Lack of Counting awareness is a primary problem among weaker players and even some intermediates. You are correct that these are very important skills to master early in your chess career, or you will end up losing (or not winning) material without ever allowing a fork, a pin, or removal of the guard! This is one of the underrated areas of chess training, to say the least. So don’t feel too bad about your lack of success with the problems.

I have written four columns about Counting. The first two were incorporated into the book, but the remaining two are: [*Is It Safe?*](#) and [*The Two Types of Counting Problems*](#).

You are correct that both “board vision” and “tactical vision” skills are helpful (both involve chess-specific pattern recognition). There are many books that focus on visualization, including my *Everyone’s Second Chess Book*. Also, many of my other Novice Nook articles are devoted to helping the reader develop Counting and related analysis skills.

Addendum

Shortly after I received this question, the following position occurred in a student’s game. Is 23.Bh3 safe?



White to Play

As an alternative to simply moving the queen, this counterattack might seem reasonable.

But 23.Bh3?? is not safe, because 23... Qxd1! wins a rook. For example, if 24. Rxd1 fxe3 or 24.Qd4+ Qxd4.

I have presented this typical multi-square Counting problem to quite a few

intermediate players and many overlook the win of the rook – very few solved it quickly. In the game, not only did White miss Black’s winning reply when playing 23.Bh3?, but Black did too, and replied 23...Qg5?.

Note that 23.Bh3?? is not only unsafe, it also violates my second principle of how to play when way ahead: "Keep it Simple" (see [Novice Nook's Chess Lists](#)). Although White is only ahead a bishop for two pawns, that is enough to be wary of unnecessary complications. When a queen is attacked by a pawn, it is usually best to just move the queen.

Tip 1: Counterattacking is a great defensive idea, but only wise if you are a very adept tactical player. Otherwise counterattacking is playing with fire! I see more errors as a result of counterattacking than almost any other tactical device. *In most positions where you are winning easily and are faced with a threat, a counterattack is usually unnecessary.*

Tip 2: Unless you are playing for an important prize, *when your move choice is between a speculative sacrifice and a move that results in an even game or worse, always choose the speculative sacrifice.* Two reasons: First, you hone your evaluation skills and learn which sacrifices may be good or bad (instead of forever leaving those evaluations unclear) and second, many players are much better on offense than defense, so your attack may be likely to succeed!

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

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