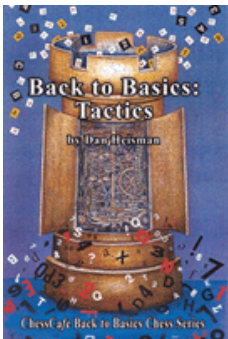




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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The Three Types of Reasonable Threats

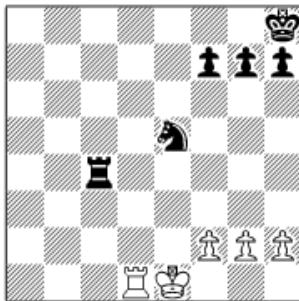
Quote of the Month: *In the opening, don't move any piece twice until you have moved every piece once, except when there is a tactic.*

Our quote of the month is the key opening principle for efficiency, but what constitutes a tactic? A good definition is "A *tactic* is a forced sequence of moves that leads to material gain or checkmate." We can consider moves that fit that definition an offensive tactic and extend tactics in general to include defensive tactics. Defensive tactics are forced moves that prevent material loss or checkmate.

In contrast to tactics, threats are *moves that allow a player to do something positive next move, unless it is prevented*. A check threatens the king, so technically qualifies as a type of threat. Unlike other threats, by rule, a check *must* be met.

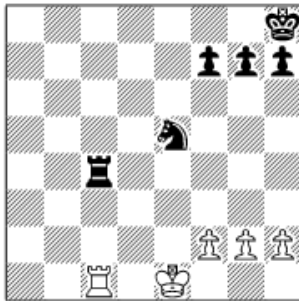
From the above definitions we can make the insightful deduction that *threats are not tactics unless there is no defense*.

It is understandable that players are sometimes confused about the difference between tactics and threats. Indeed, the line is sometimes fuzzy and differentiated by semantics. I would like to use the terms consistently, so let's make it clearer with three simple examples:



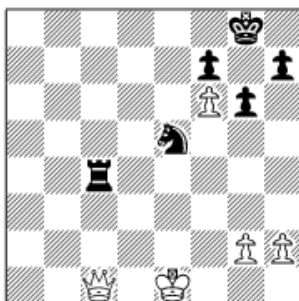
Example 1: White to play and win with a tactic

1.Rd8# is a tactic.



Example 2: White to play and make a threat that is not a tactic

1.f2d1 (or 1.Ra1 or 1.Rb1) is a dangerous threat to mate on the back-rank, but is easily parried by *luft* moves like 1...g6, so it is not a tactic.

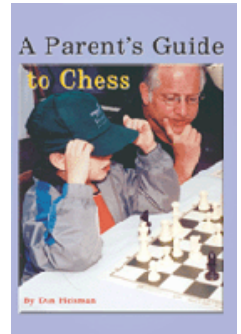


Example 3: White to play and win via a threat that cannot be met

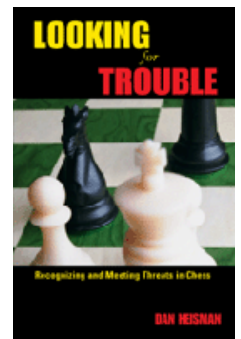
1.Qh6 is a threat (2.Qg7#) that cannot be met. Black has a couple of checks, but, if White parries the checks correctly, the mate will be executed, e.g. 1...Re4+ 2.Kd2 (2.Kf2?? Ng4+ wins the queen and the game – it is never too late to be vigilant. *On most moves it is possible to throw away your gains with quick and/or inattentive play.*)

2...Rd4+ 3.Kc3 Rd3+ 4.Kc2 and then mate. Therefore, 1.Qh6 is a threat that

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initiates a tactic in the form of an unstoppable mating sequence.

A fourth example provides insight into the more subtle area of the definitions:

1.e4 e5 2.Bb5 a6



Example 4: White to move and avoid loss of material

Black's second move is clearly a threat, but is it a tactic? It is not an offensive tactic, since 2...a6 is clearly not a forced sequence leading to a material win or checkmate. However, the fact that there is no forced material win is from Black's point of view!

Let's consider this from *White's* point of view. Moving the bishop is clearly forced or else White *will* lose material. Therefore, White's third move, say **3.Be2**, can be considered a defensive tactic!

Why is this semantic issue even worth considering? It helps explain why White's third move does not violate the principal "Move every piece once before you move any piece twice, unless there is a tactic": he had to move the bishop or lose material.

The above discussion is preparation for the key question, "When is it reasonable to make a threat?" This important consideration was first touched upon in one of my favorite Novice Nooks, [It's Not Really Winning A Tempo!](#) and in the book [Looking for Trouble](#). Understanding when a threat is reasonable is at the very heart of chess improvement for beginner and intermediate players.

I believe that there are only three circumstances, *with relation to the possible outcome of the threat*, where a threat is justified:

- When the threat cannot be met (as per the tactic discussion above),
- When the threat can be met, but the tempo the opponent uses to meet the threat is less (or equally) useful to the opponent as was the tempo spent making the threat, or
- The final case occurs when the threat can be met, but the opponent's tempo meeting the threat will be more useful than the tempo spent making it. Normally you would not make this kind of threat because, with best play, your position will get worse. So what is the only situation where making this "bad threat" is correct? The answer is *when the position is dead lost and resistance by good play is futile*. In this "desperate" case it makes sense to complicate the game and hope to swindle your way back into the game.

An important point: *just because a threat is justified or even unstoppable does not mean it is the best move*. For example, suppose we have an unstoppable threat to win a pawn on the queenside, which satisfies criteria #1. That does not mean winning the pawn is best; there could be a win of bigger material somewhere else, or the tempo spent winning the pawn might be better spent elsewhere. So a threat that meets any of the above criteria may be worthy of consideration, but should not be played just for that reason.

Example 3 above, with 1.Qh6, threatening unstoppable mate, is an excellent example of Category #1.

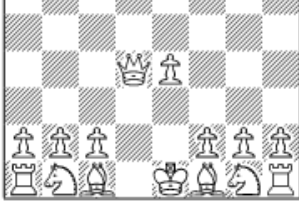
Category #2 Threats that can be met but the threatening tempo does more

1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.Qxd4



Black to move

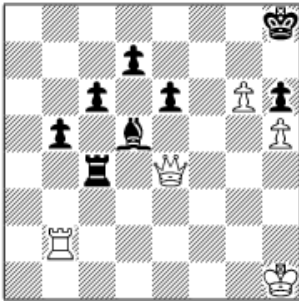
Here 3...Nc6 is a threat where Black, the maker of the threat, gets more out of the tempo than White gets from defending.



White would love to leave his queen on the dominant d4-square, but it must be vacated, thereby “losing a tempo.”

Category #3 Threats that can be met but the threatening player is desperate

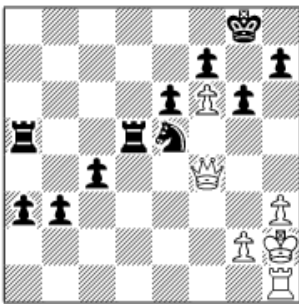
Reasonable threat #3 is easy to understand. Although the threat can be met – and is even “detrimental” – *the fact that the game is lost anyway theoretically makes any move equally good* (because they all should lead to a loss), so one may as well make a move that allows the opponent to go wrong, no matter what its optimal evaluation.



White to play

In this position, White is dead lost and is searching for a way to get back in the game. The theoretically best move is 1.Qxd5, leading to a completely lost endgame. However, the best practical try is 1.g7+?!. Strictly speaking, after 1...Kg8!, the endgame is an even easier win for Black, since the g-pawn will easily fall, too. Yet, since White is lost anyway, 1.g7+?! is a better practical try, because the apparently

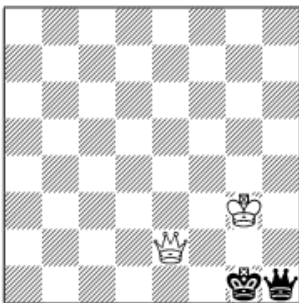
reasonable 1...Kxg7?? allows 2.Rg2+ unpinning the queen. If Black allows that swindle, then White is better! For example, 2...Kf6 3.Qg6+ Ke7 4.Kg1 Bxg2 5.Kxg2 and the h6-pawn falls, leaving White a dangerous pawn on the h-file. Since there are few ways for White to cause problems, it makes sense to try 1.g7+?!, even though the threat is easily met and the tempo 1...Kg8 helps Black more than 1.g7+?! helps White.



White to play

Here again White is in desperate straits. So he may as well try 1.Qh6?!, threatening mate on g7. Even if White sees that this fails to 1...Ng4+! 2.hxg4 Rh5+ 3.gxh5 Rxh5+ 4.Kg3 (or 4.Qxh5 gxh5 5.Rd1 h6) 4...Rxh6 5.Rd1 (5.Rxh6 a2 6.Rh1 b2) 5...Rh3+! 6.gxh3 h5, when Black's passed pawns beat the rook. If Black does not take the time to find that defense, then he is [Acquiescing](#).

Finally, a common amusing example:



Black to play after 1.Kg3

In this common endgame problem White has allowed Black to promote, but has an unstoppable mating threat. Therefore, Black is desperate and may as well try 1...Qf3+, since he has nothing to lose. Of course, if White plays too quickly, he may fall for 2.Qxf3?? stalemate! But, by playing carefully, White should find 2.Kxf3 winning.

Unreasonable threats: those that should not be made

The above categories include only reasonable threats. It follows that you should not make threats that do not meet any of three criteria – we could call these unreasonable threats.

Why do beginners constantly make unreasonable threats that are easily met or clearly detrimental? The answer is that other beginners often ignore even the most obvious threats. So a beginner gets *positive reinforcement* from the fact that their opponents miss their threat entirely and thus deduce that the more threats they make, the more likely the opponent is to miss them. Plus, at that level, the likelihood of the opponent properly punishing the error is not very

great. So these beginners make as many threats as possible, good and bad, in the hopes of scoring that common, gratifying – and immediate – win.

However, as beginners progress they begin to notice a key point of this month's column: when their opponent properly answers a frivolous threat, it is often to their detriment. So as the level of their opposition rises, the percentage of frivolous threats decreases. If their progress is great enough, they may arrive at the understanding that threats should only be made if it meets one of the three criteria.

One common example used in an earlier *Novice Nook* is **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.O-O Nf6 5.Ng5?** – threatening f7:

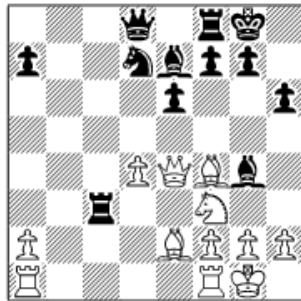


Black to move

Black can defend f7 by 5...O-O and the knight is not only looking silly on g5, but the tempo used to defend, castling, is very helpful for Black. For a more detailed explanation, refer to [A Counting Primer](#).

The following is a terrific example of an “unreasonable threat” from a young student who, as typical of many youngsters, wants to threaten mate as much as possible,

hoping his opponent will not see it. While this “big reward” strategy may work against the rawest beginners, the idea of making a bad move and hoping your opponent does not see the threat is a terrible habit. Here it is at its worst. No, I don't call this Hope Chess. How about Hopeful Chess? (See [Novice Nook Quiz](#), Question #3):



White to move

White sees he can threaten mate and, although he has fifty-four minutes remaining, takes only 18 seconds to play the suicidal **1.Bd3**. How should Black meet this threat?

In the game, Black played the adequate **1...Nf6**, not only stopping mate but attacking the queen and getting ready to remove the guard of d3 and fork f4; if **2.Qe3 Nd5**. But simpler and strong is **1...Bf5!** skewering the queen and the bishop, winning the latter. In this perfect example Black has two good replies to the threat and either one should have been enough to dissuade White from playing **1.Bd3??**. However, White was not looking to see how Black could stop the mate; he was trying to play quickly and win the game immediately. That's not how to play if you want to become a good player.

A student recently asked about the opening sequence. **1.c4 e5 2.g3 Nf6 3.Bg2 c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.Qxd4 d5 6.cxd5 cxd5 7.Nf3 Nc6 8.Qa4 Bc5**



White to move

His questions were “Why is 8...Bc5 a reasonable move? Why can't White just attack it with 9.Qb5?”

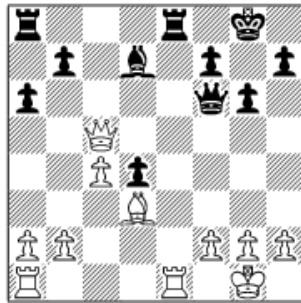
The first question is easy to answer: 8...Bc5 is a reasonable move because it greatly increases the mobility of the bishop and prepares for Black to castle. The downside of this move is that the bishop is loose.

So, does 9.Qb5 take advantage of the “loose” bishop? Since this is clearly not criteria #1 (the threat can be met) nor criteria #3 (White is not desperate), the answer depends on whether the move that Black uses to save the bishop can be more helpful – or less – than the tempo White used to attack it!

According to a 15-ply search with [Rybka](#), 9.Qb5 is the fifth best move for White. Best is the “book” move 9.O-O. After 9.Qb5, which violates our key principle, Black has the logical follow-up 9...Qb6. This efficiently defends the bishop by developing another piece. Rybka judges this tempo to be about a quarter of a pawn more useful for Black. Therefore, 9.Qb5 does not fall within the definition of a reasonable threat and should be rejected.

A practical example: a threat easily met but with some value

Here is a more subtle example from another recent student game:



White to move

White played 1.Qc7, threatening the pawn on b7 and the bishop. But Black has the simple and obvious 1...Bc6, which he played, not only meeting both threats, but activating the bishop on the long diagonal. Clearly Black's move to meet the threats makes the bishop a better piece, so 1.Qc7 can't be a good move in terms of the threats it created – *it can only be justified if White is using c7 as a jumping point to return to*

the kingside with, say, 2.Qg3. As it turns out, Rybka calculates that 1.Qc7 is a decent move just for that reason, although that was not my student's intention. At 20 ply only 1.Qb4 and 1.Qa5 are rated slightly better. I would probably have played 1.Rad1, which is rated close to the primary variations.

Conclusion

The next time you consider making a threat, make sure that your opponent does not benefit more in meeting the threat than you do in making it. If he can make better use of the defending tempo, then the threat is probably not such a good idea and you should look for a better move.

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

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