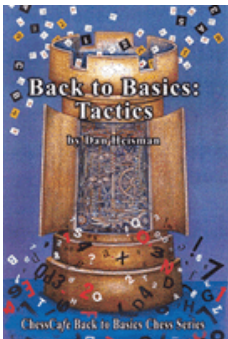




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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Similar Positions, Different Evaluations

Quote of the Month: *Sometimes a small difference can make a big difference.*

Two chess truisms are:

- It is possible to lose a game (or draw a winning game) with just one terrible move, and
- One little change in the position is enough to make the difference between a move being good or bad.

Taken together, it becomes apparent why players need to play slowly and carefully. I have noticed that many players make one of two mistakes:

- They either don't recognize similar positions where the evaluations are quite different, or
- Just quickly assume that analogous positions have similar evaluations, when this may or may not be true.

A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. You can sometimes find yourself in what you think is a good position, which unfortunately turns out to be bad (or at least not so good). Even worse, you may purposefully steer for the bad position without carefully considering the differences between the "good" position you know and the "bad" position you are about to reach.

Let's look at some examples to demonstrate how this problem occurs to help readers better recognize the type of differences involved. The following nine sets of opening sequences lead to similar-looking positions, but quite different evaluations.

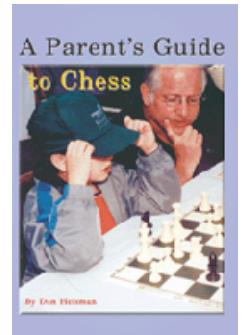
Set 1: Center Game vs. Scotch Game

Center Game: 1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.Qxd4

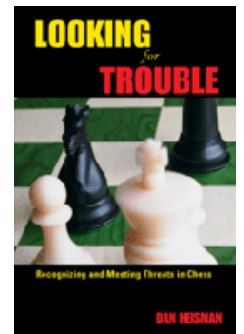


Scotch Game: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 exd4 4.Nxd4 Nxd4(?) 5.Qxd4

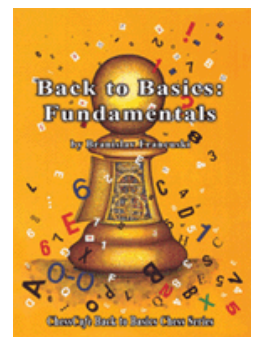
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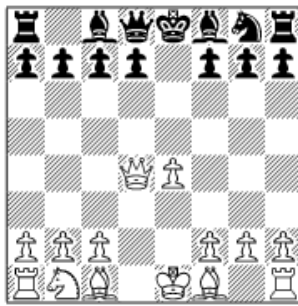
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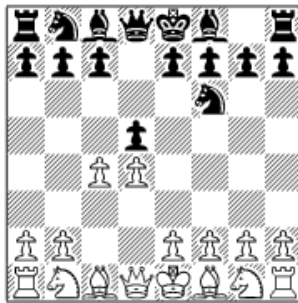


The Center Game is rarely played in high level play (2...d4 is the culprit), because it is not considered good for White; while in the Scotch Game, this similar position with 3...Nxd4 is also rarely played, because it is not considered good for Black! What is the big difference?

The Center Game is usually avoided because Black wants to place his knight on c6 anyway: 3...Nc6 attacks the queen, which then has to “lose a tempo” by moving from its nice spot on d4. However, in the Scotch the common beginner mistake 4...Nxd4 is considered dubious, because there is no knight left to attack the strong centralized queen, and a follow-up move such as 5...c5, to attack the queen, just makes the situation worse by weakening d5 and d6 and making the d-pawn backward. For further discussion about why moves like 5...c5 are bad, see [The Three Types of Reasonable Threats](#). Black’s best is 5...Qf6, but after 6.e5 Qb6 7.Qxb6 axb6 theory says that Black has an uncomfortable endgame, e.g. 8.Nc3 Bb4 9.Bd2. Also possible, according to Gary Lane in [The Scotch Game Explained](#), is keeping the queens on the board with 7.Qf4!?. Understanding the difference in these two positions is taking a big step in learning [Opening Principles](#).

Set 2: Marshall Defense vs. Grünfeld Defense

Marshall Defense: 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 d5



Grünfeld Defense: 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 d5



The Marshall (2...d5 or, transposing, 1.d4 d5 2.c4 Nf6) has a bad reputation; while the Grünfeld is a major defense! The difference is that with the white knight on c3, after an eventual e4, Black’s d5-knight can capture on c3; in the main line of the Marshall, White plays 4.Nf3 and afterwards usually 5.e4, when the absence of a knight on c3 causes an awkward knight retreat from d5. Although the difference is slight (Rybka

rates the evaluation of the Marshall at about -0.4, about 0.3 less than most popular Black defenses), it is enough to immensely affect the popularity of these lines at the master level. For a further discussion of 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 d5 see [The Most Common Opening Inaccuracies](#).

Set 3: Ng5 Two Knights vs. Ng5 Giuoco Piano

Two Knights Defense: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5



Giuoco Piano: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.O-O Nf6 5.Ng5(?)



In the Two Knight's Defense, the classical 4.Ng5 is justified by Black's difficulty in guarding f7. Black normally plays 4...d5, when, after 5.exd5, the natural recapture 5...Nxd5? is dubious, because of the Lolli 6.d4!. Instead of 5...Nxd5?, Black should play 5...Na5, 5...b5, or 5...Nd4. Alternatively, on move four Black could counterattack with the complex Traxler Counter Gambit 4...Bc5?!

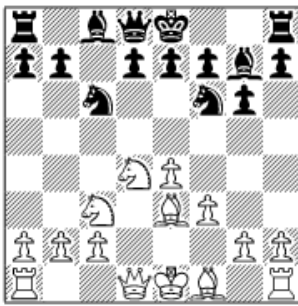
But in the second diagram, a rare Giuoco Piano line, 5.Ng5 is impotent, as Black can just castle, after which capturing twice on f7 is disastrous for White. For more on this erroneous capture, see [A Counting Primer](#).

Set 4: f3 against Dragon Sicilian vs. f3 against Accelerated Dragon Sicilian

Sicilian Dragon: 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 exd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 7.f3



Sicilian Accelerated Dragon: 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 exd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 7.f3?!

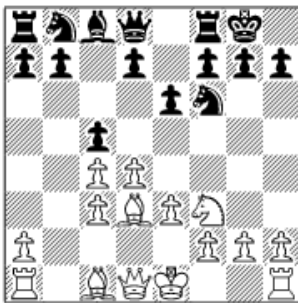


Long the hallmark move of the feared Yugoslav Attack in the Dragon Sicilian, 7.f3 protects the e3-bishop from ...Ng4 attacks, frees up the queen's knight by reinforcing e4, and prepares Qd2, O-O-O, and a general kingside storm.

However, change Black's second move from the Dragon's ...d6 to the Accelerated Dragon's ...Nc6 and the effectiveness of f3 is greatly diminished. The knight on c6 provides an extra attacker on d4, allowing Black to try lines like 7...O-O 8.Bc4 Qb6, when 9.Qd2?, natural in the Dragon, loses a pawn to 9...Nxe4!. Another move for Black is 8...e6. If, after 7...O-O, White instead tries 8.Qd2, then 8...d5, getting the d-pawn to the fifth rank in one move, is a key idea for Black. Finally, without ...d6, ...Ng4 is not yet a threat since the knight would be *en prise* and therefore White can just play 7.Bc4. Therefore, in the Accelerated Dragon, White should either delay f3 or omit it altogether.

Set 5: ...Bxc3 in the Nimzo-Indian and ...Bxc3 in the Ragozin

Nimzo-Indian Defense: 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e3 O-O 5.Nf3 Bxc3 6.bxc3 c5 7.Bd3



Ragozin System: 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 d5 4.Nf3 Bb4 5.e3 O-O 6.Bd3 Bxc3(?) 7.bxc3



In the Hübner line of the Nimzo-Indian, Black plays ...Bxc3 unprovoked and then attacks the weakened doubled c-pawns. But in other circumstances such as in the Ragozin, where the presence of a black pawn on d5 allows the white pawns to be forcibly undoubled, ...Bxc3 usually just cedes White the bishop-pair and an extra pawn in the center. Note that in the Nimzo-Indian, Black usually never plays ...d5; while in the Ragozin, Black played ...d5 before playing ...Bb4, so White never had to worry about a "threat" of ...Bxc3.

Set 6: ...c4 in Colle vs. c5 in Caro-Kann

Colle System: 1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 e6 3.Bd3 Nf6 4.O-O c5 5.c3 Nc6 6.Bd3 c4?



Caro-Kann Defense: 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 Nf6 5.Nc3 e6 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.c5



This comparison is between Black's position in the Colle and White's in the Caro-Kann, when both push the c-pawn into enemy territory. It looks as though Black has made the better c-pawn push in the Colle because he is attacking the bishop. But in fact it is just the opposite! Black is taking the pressure off the center with 6...c4? and White will later have a strong pawn break on e4. Moreover, Black's targets on the queenside, where he has more space, are small and relatively unimportant, while White has a free hand to not only break in the center but attack kingside as well.

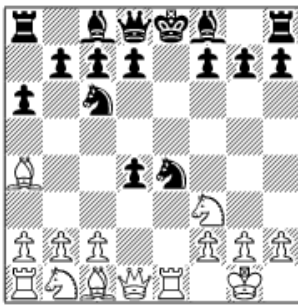
However, in the Caro-Kann White's 7.c5! creates an important queenside pawn majority (three pawns vs. two on the "a" through "c" files), which does not exist for Black in the Colle. For more on the Colle push see [It's Not Really Winning A Tempo!](#)

Set 7: Re1 in Main Line Open Ruy vs. Re1 in Riga Variation

Main Line Open Ruy Lopez: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.O-O Nxe4 6.Re1



Riga Variation Ruy Lopez: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.O-O Nxe4 6.d4 exd4?! 7.Re1

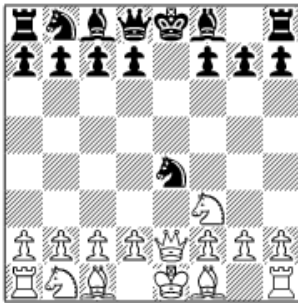


In the main line of the Open Ruy Lopez, the common beginner move 6. Re1 is considered quite innocuous, as after 6...Nc5 7.Nxe5 Nxe5 8.Rxe5+ Be7, Black wins the bishop-pair and has no problem at least equalizing. For this reason, almost all grandmaster games continue 6.d4 instead of 6. Re1.

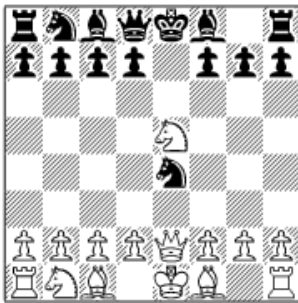
However, a move later in the sharp Riga Variation, once Black has captured and opened the e-file with 6...exd4?! (instead of the normal 6... b5), then 6.Re1 is *de rigueur*, and a big fight is in hand, especially if White does not know the long and forcing main line that gives him a slight endgame edge.

Set 8: Qe2 Main Line Petroff vs. Qe2 Petroff Trap

Main Line Petroff Defense: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5. Qe2



Petroff Defense Trap: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 Nxe4? 4.Qe2



In the main line of the Petroff, 5.Qe2 is considered innocuous, as the forced 5...Qe7 saves the knight and usually leads to a quick queen trade that results in a rather drawish, symmetric position. Therefore, unless White just needs a draw, almost all grandmasters forego 5.Qe2 and play the classical 5.d4 or the recently “hot” 5.Nc3.

However, if Black forgets to insert 3...d6 and instead immediately plays 3...Nxe4?, then he has fallen into a famous trap, where 4.Qe2 is correct and Black has to play carefully to minimize the damage. For example, 4... Qe7 5.Qxe4 d6 will probably only lose a pawn, but Black can do much worse, as 4...d5 5.d3 f6? 6.Nf3 wins a piece, and the most well-known line 4...Nf6?? loses the queen to the discovered attack 5.Nc6+.

Set 9: 5...0-0 6.Bg5 Four Knights vs. 5...d6 6.Bg5 Four Knights

Four Knights: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bc4 Bc5 5.d3 O-O 6.Bg5

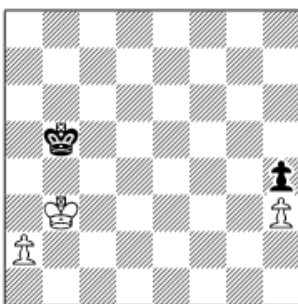


Four Knights: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bc4 Bc5 5.d3 d6 6.Bg5

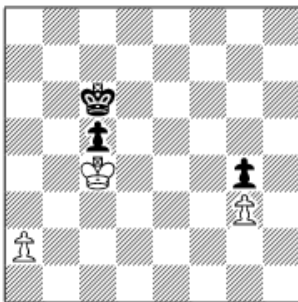


The first line, where White plays Bg5 after Black prematurely castles, creates a strong pin and threatens an eventual Nd5 opening up Black's king. Black is not in danger, but he does have to be very careful, e.g. 6...d6(?) 7.Nd5 is tricky to defend. This is one of the lines where castling too quickly is incorrect; ironically, it is also a line that is played mostly by beginners who don't know not to castle! The second line is the "normal" Canal Variation. Since Black has not castled, then in accordance with one of Lasker's Rules, the pin is not nearly as strong. Black has a couple of satisfactory defenses at his disposal; the strongest is considered to be 6...Na5 going immediately after the bishop-pair. This is one of the reasons grandmasters don't play this line for White.

The idea that players can mix up similar positions is not limited to the opening.



In the first position (above), White has the only pawn on one side of the board, and in this position the only way White can win is with 1.Kc3!, but not push the a-pawn. In the second position (below), both sides have passed pawns and White is winning because of the outside passed a-pawn, as well as the fact that the pawn's are no longer on the h-file.



Unlike the first position, White's proper play is to push the a-pawn, using it as a decoy. Mixing up these two types of positions is a common but sometimes fatal mistake. For another example of a disastrous mix-up in the endgame, refer to the final two positions in [*Trading When Ahead and Behind*](#).

Hopefully, the next time you are in one of the above situations, you will recognize it and play the "good" lines instead of the "bad" ones.

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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