

The Gambit Cartel

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Electronic Alchemy

If you own a computer and some good chess software — and practically everyone reading this column does — then you have all the tools you need to prepare theoretical surprises on your own. Modern day electronic alchemy can produce some pretty potent concoctions, and under the right circumstances you can actually turn lead into gold, reviving a sideline that has little or no current theoretical coverage. Even if you fall short of achieving the full transformation, you may be able to brew a poison that will drive your opponent mad. And if you're intoxicated with your own ideas, the analytical process may provide an antidote.

So step into the laboratory, mind you don't knock over the bubbling acids brewing on the fire, and learn the seven secrets of the mystic art.

Identify a Promising Line

There are several keys to doing this right. First, it is useless to go to work on a position that arises too early in a known opening. If you set Deep Fritz 7 to work on 1.e4 e5 2.f4, the results will be uninspiring at best and amusing at worst. Second, it is important to select a position where there is a fair amount of tactical play. Experienced players can identify these on sight, but one rule of thumb is that if the center pawns are locked or blocked then the position will only be a good one for analysis if one side has already launched an attack on the wing. 1.d4 Nf6 2.e3 d5 3.Bd3 e6 4.f4 c5 5.c3 doesn't count, even though White might later get good attacking chances: the center is not in a sufficient state of tension (a trade on d4 will not, at this stage, give either side any notable tactical chances) and neither side is even close to being mobilized.

On the other hand, you do not want to pick a gambit that cannot be easily forced. The best practical gambits for amateurs to investigate at home are those sprung between moves 2 and 5,

branching directly off of a main theoretical pathway. If you look through the archives of the *Gambit Cartel* you will find that every gambit I have considered in the past year has conformed to this pattern.

Where can you find inspiration? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Play through the games in an old book. This will require you to read English Descriptive notation, but the benefits of being bilingual far outweigh the pain of deciphering “P-QKt4” or “K-Q” (meaning K-Q1). Ellis’s *Chess Sparks* is full of crazy gambits, though it’s hard to find a copy in good condition these days. (I have a musty copy that I store in a ziplock bag.) Freeborough and Ranken’s *Chess Openings* is available used both in hardcover and in a paperback reprint and covers a lot of lines that are today considered offbeat. Tartakower and Du Mont’s classic *500 Master Games of Chess*, still in print from Dover, has interesting gambits sprinkled through the notes.
2. Check out the games of some famous swashbucklers. Collections of games by attacking players of the romantic era (Morphy, Blackburne, Anderssen, Zukertort, Charousek, Mieses, Marshall) are a treasure trove, and many of these collections are available free online. (Note for purists: you get what you pay for. Free online databases contain free online errors; while they are suitable resources in a personal search for gambits, no one should rely on unedited databases for historical research. In fact, I have yet to see a large database, even an edited one, that did not contain numerous errors. Take your favorite book of great chess games and go through *Essentia* or some similar database trying to create a base of those games and you will quickly see what I mean.)
3. Get a fat book on gambit openings and leaf through it. Eric Schiller’s *Gambit Chess Openings* covers a staggering number of gambits, occasionally with some detailed analysis though most of them are just mentioned and (usually) dismissed. The important thing at this stage is to avoid being overawed by the description or the dismissal and just look at the positions. Do they seem promising? Can you express in words what the gambiteer is getting for his pawn or pawns? If you were on the receiving end of the gambit, would you be puzzled for a reply? Is there a simple and obvious way of declining the gambit that leads to a dull position? Depending on your playing level, you may find that an “unsound” opening is

- quite suitable and may provide you with years of pleasure.
4. Check out the footnotes in major reference works. ECO is perhaps the richest source of nuggets. NCO, though a marvelous reference work for strong players, is less useful for our purposes because it concentrates on the main lines to the exclusion of “inferior” sidelines.
 5. Subscribe to, or pick up back issues of, a chess magazine that gives serious attention to unusual openings. For English-speaking readers there is the *Myers Opening Bulletin*, which has come out at irregular intervals over the years but covers quite a lot of interesting territory. It is also a very good idea to look into foreign periodicals. It wouldn't hurt to have access to a set of back issues of *Kaissiber* and *Gambit Revue*. (Recently, after looking at some sample issues of *Kaissiber*, I purchased a complete set of their back issues and subscribed for two years. I recommend it very highly.) Even if you do not read German, the analysis is usually quite understandable; if you do read German, you're in for a treat! *ChessBase Magazine*, which comes out on a CD six times a year, has regular coverage of unusual openings and gambits in special theoretical articles.

(Incidentally, while I'm on this topic: I'm trying to get my hands on a complete set of back issues of *Blackmar-Diemer Gambit World*, to which I contributed in the late 1990s. If anyone has copies through issue 70 or so in good condition that they'd be willing to part with in exchange for some of my secret analysis files, please email me at info@chesscafe.com. I'd also like to know whether the *Myers Opening Bulletin* is still going.)

Here are some suggestions for those who just can't get past stage one.

For White:

Sicilian Defense, Wing Gambit (1.e4 c5 2.b4 cxb4 3.d4 d5 4.exd5 Qxd5 5.c4)

Sicilian Defense, Smith-Morra with f4 (1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 Nc6 5.f4)

Sicilian Defense, Alapin with 4.f4 (1.e4 c5 2.c3 Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.f4)

Caro-Kann, Goldman Variation (1.e4 c6 2.Nc3 d5)

3.Qf3)

Caro-Kann, Two Knights with d4 (1.e4 c6 2.Nc3 d5 3.Nf3 Bg4 4.d4 dxe4 5.Nxe4 Bxf3 6.Qxf3)

Caro-Kann, Hillbilly Attack (1.e4 c6 2.Bc4 d5 3.Bb3 dxe4 4.Qh5 g6 5.Qh4)

French Defense, Rasa-Studier Gambit (1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Be3)

For Black:

Scandinavian Defense, Kiel Variation (1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Nf6 3.d4 Nxd5 4.c4 Nb4!?)

Modern Defense with ...d5 (1.e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nc3 d5)

Komfortable Defense (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d5 3.exd5 Qxd5 4.Nc3 Qe6)

Danish Gambit Declined, Tarrasch Variation (1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.c3 Qe7!? 4.cxd4 Qxe4+ 5.Be3)

King's Gambit, Bryan Counter-Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Bc4 Qh4+ 4.Kf1 b5)

Spanish, Konikowski Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Bc5 4.c3 d5)

Spanish, Cordel Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Bc5 4.c3 f5)

Hyper-Benoni (1.d4 c5 2.dxc5 e5 3.Nf3 Bxc5 4.Nxe5 Qa5+ intending 5...Bxf2+ and 6...Qxe5)

Slav Defense with ...e5 (1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 dxc4 5.a4 e5!? 6.Nxe5 Bb4 or 6...Be6)

Some of these can be refined into playable weapons while others will remain lumps of wretched lead no matter how much analysis is lavished upon them. I've mixed the good and the bad here deliberately. Remember, these are just things to *explore*: at this stage we are in no position to endorse or discard a sharp idea

since the analysis phase is yet to come.

Do a preliminary examination

This is a time-saving step, because many irregular gambits are on the scrap heap of theory for a good reason. There is no sense doing research to prepare a line for tournament use if you can tell in five minutes that it is worthless.

My favorite way to examine a possible gambit line is to fire up Fritz and run through the main line, spending 5 or 10 seconds on each move. If Fritz finds a major hole in the variation (e.g., the evaluation drops to -1.88), I will leave it to look at the position for a few minutes to make sure it's hopeless. If there's no rescuing that line, I back out one move and see whether the gambiteer has any preferable alternatives.

It is important to guide this stage of the analysis by hand rather than letting the computer generate all of the lines for you. One of the things you want to check out is what happens if your opponent makes "plausible" moves. Your computer may see that these are inferior and ignore them: it's up to you to enter them by hand and make the computer show the refutation. For example, suppose that you are analyzing the crazy Anti-Sicilian line 1.e4 c5 2.c3 Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.f4!!?? Powering up your computer, you run through the pretty natural looking moves 4...Nxf4 5.d4 Ng6 6.Nf3 cxd4 7.cxd4 Nc6 8.Nc3, but now Deep Fritz 7 likes 8...e6. That's a fine move, but wouldn't a human be likely to play 8...d6 instead to undermine those central pawns? [see diagram]

Surprisingly, 9.e6!! is a shot. Obviously 9...Bxe6 meets 10.d5 forking two minor pieces, but the real idea behind the move is 9...fxe6 10.Bd3! and Black's Knight on g6 is embarrassed. Even Fritz thinks White has full compensation for the two sacrificed pawns here. That doesn't mean that 4.f4 is actually a good move; there's still 8...e6 to investigate as well as other, earlier deviations. But it is worth knowing because 8...d6 is a very natural move likely to be seen over the board.

Amass and Organize Raw Game Scores

In an age of databases, this is not hard. If your line is any good it has almost certainly been tried before. Don't simply obtain the games: sort them using an opening key (ChessBase) or a tree (Chess Assistant, BookUp). Opening keys are easy to view at a glance; trees are more useful when transpositions abound.

When you have sorted the games, you will usually find that there

are several main lines that appear frequently. Make a note of these: they will figure in the analytical step. Pay particular attention to lines where your idea scores poorly. In the Konikowski Gambit, for example, make a special note of 5.Nxe5 Qg5 6.0-0 Qxe5 7.d4, where White scores heavily (80%).

Sometimes a single game can give you pause. If you're excited about Black's chances in the Bryan Counter-Gambit, it might be because you saw Morphy himself going down in flames:

Morphy,P - Maurian,S

Springhill, 1855

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Bc4 Qh4+ 4.Kf1 b5 5.Bd5 Nc6 6.Nf3 Qh5 7.d4 Nf6 8.Bb3 Ba6 9.Qe2 Nxd4 10.Nxd4 b4 11.Qxa6 Qd1+ 12.Kf2 Ng4# 0-1

But if that was the source of your idea, then you might want to check out the "Immortal Game," where the Bryan doesn't fare so well:

Anderssen,A - Kieseritzky,L [C33]

Match, 1851

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Bc4 Qh4+ 4.Kf1 b5 5.Bxb5 Nf6 6.Nf3 Qh6 7.d3 Nh5 8.Nh4 Qg5 9.Nf5 c6 10.g4 Nf6 11.Rg1 cxb5 12.h4 Qg6 13.h5 Qg5 14.Qf3 Ng8 15.Bxf4 Qf6 16.Nc3 Bc5 17.Nd5 Qxb2 18.Bd6 Bxg1 19.e5 Qxa1+ 20.Ke2 Na6 21.Nxg7+ Kd8 22.Qf6+ Nxf6 23.Be7# 1-0

The following more recent game might also cool your ardor a bit:

Short,N - Kasparov,G

Exhibition Game (thematic), 1993

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Bc4 Qh4+ 4.Kf1 b5 5.Bxb5 Nf6 6.Nf3 Qh5 7.Nc3 g5 8.d4 Bb7 9.h4 Rg8 10.Kg1 gxh4 11.Rxh4 Qg6 12.Qe2 Nxe4 13.Rxf4 f5 14.Nh4 Qg3 15.Nxe4 1-0

Don't be deceived: Kasparov did not play this line voluntarily. It was chosen at random for him in a special "thematic" exhibition where the players could not select their own openings. (Kasparov, as John Emms notes in *Play the Open Games as Black*, was not a happy man.) A little more investigation will reveal that Morphy himself gave up on this idea after an embarrassing loss to Stanley, who chose 5.Bb3.

A handful of games is not sufficient for a final decision, of

course. But if you want to resurrect this gambit, you will definitely have to analyze 5.Bxb5 and 5.Bb3 as well as 5.Bd5.

Consult Theoretical Sources

This includes not only opening books that are devoted to your line but also the major encyclopedic references (ECO, MCO, BCO, NCO), specialized books on gambits and/or offbeat openings such as Schiller's *Gambit Chess Openings*, Benjamin and Schiller's *Unorthodox Openings*, Keene's *Complete Book of Gambits*, Watson and Schiller's *Big Book of Busts*, and a host of smaller works that might contain something on your line such as Andrew Martin's *Secret Weapons* or Graham Burgess's *101 Chess Opening Surprises*. Don't forget to look at repertoire books. Chris Baker's *A Startling Chess Opening Repertoire*, for example, covers several gambit suggestions for White, and Schiller has two *Gambit Opening Repertoire* books, one for White and one for Black with uneven coverage of various lines.

At this point you are not merely looking for inspiration: you are trying to find concrete lines that you must evaluate if you hope to make this a viable tournament weapon.

Make an Analysis Tree

Before the computer takes over, you need to outline the variations you want it to consider. These should involve all of the main lines discovered when you organized the raw game scores, any key lines identified in your preliminary analysis, and any known theoretical variations discovered in your study of the literature.

By far the best way to handle this stage is to enter the lines into your favorite software program. Create a single game with the lines branching off of it. To save time, you may want to omit, temporarily, the real boners you unearthed when going over the line by hand: at the next stage, the computer will treat these with deadly seriousness and if it's doing a serious analysis it may take hours walking down a line of analysis after your opponent's position has long since gone belly up.

Run a Thorough and Reasonably Deep Computer Analysis

At this stage, I routinely use the Deep Position Analysis (DPA) function available in the recent versions of Fritz. Briefly, Fritz looks (say) 10 half-moves ahead (10 ply, as the cognoscenti like to say) and then plays the move considered best at that depth. Then Fritz starts all over again, looking 10 ply ahead from this new starting point — and therefore looking, down at the end, one

ply deeper. It makes the best move for the other player and starts the same process again. By tweaking the "length of variations" parameter in Fritz you can set it to take any number of steps forward like this you like; by adjusting the "depth" parameter you can specify how deeply Fritz is required to look into each position before settling on the best move and ratcheting forward a notch.

An analytical depth of at least 10 ply is desirable, and if I'm really serious about a variation I will generate a 10 or 12 ply depth analysis and follow this up by running, from the same starting point, a 14 ply analysis (usually overnight on a 2 gig processor) to see what else turns up. For a typical position, something like 20 ply is generally enough in "length of variations" to give a decent picture of what is likely to happen; with shorter length, you may end up stopping at just the point where things are getting interesting.

You can also set the computer to generate lines for "alternates" — the 2nd and 3rd choice moves, for example. It will then go back and examine those alternates, generating a line of analysis from each of them as a starting point. Best of all, it organizes the lines at the end so that the main variation (in bold on Fritz) is the one the computer considers as best play for each side.

Prune, Extend, and Annotate

The raw material from a DPA can be intimidating, particularly if there are many branches. Cut this down to size. Lines for "your" side that emerged as clearly inferior can be pruned out, leaving only the best reply or perhaps the computer's main line plus an interesting alternative. You must also go back and add in the poor defenses that you omitted for the purposes of a DPA. Have an engine running in the background for this to remind you of the refutation; it would be embarrassing to go through all of that work and then transpose two key moves and end up with very misleading analysis.

Check the terminal evaluations to see whether they make sense. If the position is still complex, you may want to extend the analysis from that point — either by hand or by another DPA, which can be embedded in the original one. (Just choose the new starting point and the length of variations you want to pursue from there.)

Undigested analysis will do you no good; unless you have the chessic equivalent of a photographic memory, you will lose your

way over the board almost as readily as your opponents do. Your job, having reached this point, is to put into words the plans evolved in the various lines of analysis. Unfortunately, no software can do this for you. But if you have done your job well up to this point and used your software intelligently, you will probably find that the explanations are not too difficult to give.

Here, for example, is the DPA output for Deep Fritz 7 on the f4 pawn sac in the Alapin Sicilian, slightly organized for readability in this format:

1.e4 c5 2.c3 Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.f4 Nxf4 5.d4 Nd5

[5...Ne6 6.Nf3 (6.dxc5 Qc7 7.Nf3 d6 8.cxd6 exd6 9.exd6 Bxd6 10.Na3 Bc5 11.b4 Be7 12.Bc4 a5 13.Qb3 axb4 14.cxb4 Nc6 15.Nc2 0-0 16.0-0 =+ -0.53/10) 6...d6 7.Bb5+ Nd7 8.0-0 Qb6 9.Bxd7+ Bxd7 10.d5 Nc7 11.c4 h6 12.exd6 exd6 13.Qe2+ Kd8 14.a4 Kc8 15.a5 Qa6 16.b4 += 0.34/10 ;

5...Ng6 6.h4 (6.Qa4 Nc6 7.Nf3 e6 8.Bg5 Qc7 9.Na3 cxd4 10.cxd4 d6 11.Nb5 Qb8 12.exd6 Bxd6 13.Bd3 Nf4 14.Be4 Bd7 15.0-0 Ne2+ 16.Kh1=+ -0.37/10) 6...cxd4 7.cxd4 e6 8.h5 Ne7 9.Nc3 d6 10.Nb5 dxe5 11.dxe5 Nd5 12.h6 Nc6 13.Nf3 g6 14.Bc4 Qb6 15.Qe2 a6 16.Nc3=+ -0.37/10]

6.Bc4 [6.Nf3 cxd4 7.Qxd4 e6 8.Nbd2 Nc6 9.Qf2 d6 10.exd6 Qxd6 11.Bc4 Qc5 12.Nd4 Nf6 13.Nxc6 Qxf2+ 14.Kxf2 bxc6 15.Ke2 Bd6 16.Bd3-/+ -0.78/10] **6...e6 7.Nf3 Qb6 8.0-0 Nc6 9.Ng5 cxd4 10.cxd4 f6 11.Bxd5 Qxd4+ 12.Qxd4 Nxd4 13.Be4 fxe5 14.Nc3 d5 15.exd6 Bxd6 16.Be3 -/+ -0.75/10**

This is not very promising (you didn't expect me to give you a first-rate idea without *any* work on your part, did you?!). But the least we can do is to prune out 5...Ne6 6.dxc5?!, which just weakens White's pawns. If White has any compensation here that big center is it. Maybe we need an additional DPA on 6.d5!? in that position instead: 6...Nc7 7.Nf3 looks worth exploring for White. More to the point, in the main line with 5...Nd5, it looks like 6.Nf3 cxd4 has been unjustly demoted because Fritz (for reasons known only in the depths of its silicon heart) chose 7.Qxd4?! instead of the apparently more robust 7.cxd4. Running a second DPA at 10 ply starting at just that move, adjusting line depth to match the rest of the analysis, yields a more promising line:

7.cxd4 Nc6 8.Bd3 d6 9.0-0 Bg4 10.h3 Bh5 11.Qb3!?

(punctuation human) Ndb4 12.Bb5 a6 13.Bxc6 Nxc6 14.e6!?
fxe6 15.Be3 Qd7 16.Nbd2 = -0.25/10

That may not be enough to turn the gambit into gold, but if this were the worst that happened to me on my first outing with the gambit I would not be too displeased. After all, White is two pawns down: for Fritz to think that White is nearly equal, there must be some compensation in the position. White has threats of Nc4 (aiming for b6) and Ng5 (aiming at e6). No doubt Black has better defensive resources as well; there's still the entire 5...Ng6 line to examine.

It's not a transmutation of lead into gold, but it might be just potent enough to give some of my opponents lead poisoning. Ahh well, enough for one day. Tomorrow, perhaps, we'll find the philosophers' stone...



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