

The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

Orders? Inquiries? You can
now call toll-free:

1-866-301-CAFE



Dimensional Analysis

Some time ago I wrote a column entitled *Gambits in Many Dimensions* (see the [ChessCafe Archives](#)) in which I argued that the standard evaluation symbols (+-, +/-, +=, =, =+, -/+, -+) do not capture many of the factors that practical amateur players instinctively want to take into account. This month I begin exploring some of those other dimensions and begin to make a new multi-dimensional classification of openings that may prove enlightening to those who are forever seeking the “One True Opening.”

Let’s begin by agreeing that the Standard Evaluation Symbols (SES) is not wholly useless. It’s important to know, for the sake of objectivity, what strong players and/or strong computer programs think of the position that arises after (putative) “best play” in your openings. If you’re strong enough to form your own independent assessments, you may wish to contest those evaluations – but even then, you will have your own evaluation of the end positions in terms of the SES.

Nevertheless let’s immediately qualify our enthusiasm for the SES. Even titled players occasionally use openings they regard as unsound on the SES. Lest I be accused of blasphemy, let me quote two of them:

“I don’t often play a move I know how to refute. Twice a year maybe, and even then a move which I think my opponent would be able to refute only in correspondence chess.” (Bent Larsen, “A Personal Approach to the Openings,” in Evans, et al., *How to Open a Chess Game* (1974), p. 191)

“At the age of twenty I spent much of the year studying this line, concluding that it is completely useless, and that White is close to winning (if he knows what to do). But then again, how many people would find it worthwhile intensely investigating White’s position? I know one who did, but only after losing too many blitz games against me!” (Jacob Aagaard, *Excelling at Chess* (2001), p. 13)

What I find most interesting about these quotations is that they reveal a special condition under which these players are willing to take a risk.

They believe their opponents will not find their way through the maze of complications over the board. Here is an important clue to our multidimensional analysis. When you select an opening, you are not selecting the position that arises at move 20 after best play by both sides. You are selecting the *whole opening* with all of its traps and twists, its side lines and main lines.

And you are selecting it to play against flesh-and-blood opponents who will very frequently deviate from best play – probably early. Which raises a very important question, supposing they *do* deviate from best play, what will happen then?

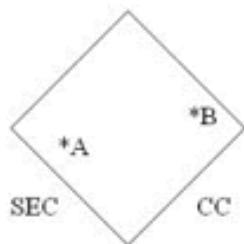
The answer depends on what I will call the “Caltrop Coefficient,” or CC for short. For readers not familiar with military history, I should explain that caltrops are mid-sized pieces of metal shaped rather like gigantic jacks with sharpened points. Canny soldiers camping just on the other side of a river from their enemies would sow the riverbed liberally with caltrops so that an enemy cavalry charge across the river would be demolished as the horses stepped on the caltrops and went down. *Mutatis mutandis*, every wild-eyed gambiteer uses this strategy in chess as well. The more caltrops the better, particularly at blitz or bullet time controls! Let’s agree to say that an opening with a high proportion of moderately well-hidden traps has a high CC.

Of course, if our opponent has studied up on the opening, life will be very hard. This once happened to Larsen in a critical last-round game versus Teschner at the 1957 Zonal:

“It turned out that the Austrian theoretician Haberditz had sent Teschner an article about Aitken’s analysis, one of the last things Haberditz did before he died – well, what can you call such luck in printable English?” (*How to Open a Chess Game*, p. 166)

Larsen drew the game anyway.

We can already begin to see the virtues of a dimensional analysis if we plot a “best play” SES evaluation against CC. Here’s the sort of diagram I have in mind:



For both axes, “up” is the direction of increasing merit. Here the spot marked “A” indicates an opening that is theoretically unimpeachable (about 75% of the way up on the SES – a small but solid += if it’s an opening for White, let’s say) but quite placid, presenting nothing to speak of in the way of caltrops (perhaps 15% on the CC). Perhaps this is where the King’s Indian Attack falls in our

diagram. The spot marked “B”, in contrast, indicates an opening that is theoretically dubious but absolutely loaded with caltrops. This might be where we would find the Fajarowicz variation of the Budapest for Black.

I should admit at once that there is a hefty dose of subjectivity involved in plotting the position of any opening on either axis. Card-carrying Karpovians might insist that the Fajarowicz be moved all the way to zero on the SES axis, as if it were a forced loss with best play. They might also deprecate the very idea of trying to count caltrops, arguing that a little “brushing up” will send a trappy but unsound opening straight into the dustbin.

For the sake of argument I’ll waive the first point, simply adding that for a player who has a high tolerance for risk it does not constitute a conclusive argument against playing an opening. Still I believe the second claim seriously underestimates the importance of caltrops and the difficulties involved in “brushing up.” For one thing, it is almost impossible to brush up in advance. Suppose we are paired in a tournament and I tell you, or my reputation as a madman tells you, that I intend to play a defense in the vicinity of “B” in our diagram. So what will it be? It’s all very well to make a special study of the Damiano (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6?!) and carry its refutation in your mind from tournament to tournament, hoping someone will play it against you. Yet this will be useless when I whip out a Latvian (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f5!). You may have studied a punishing positional treatment of the Budapest, but where does that leave you if I play the Blumenfeld? Fifteen minutes with your computer may make you invincible on the White side of the Blackburne-Hartlaub Gambit (1.d4 e5 2.dxe5 d6?!), but just when you feel prepared I might play the Felbecker Gambit (1.d4 e5 2.dxe5 Nc6 3.Nf3 Bc5!?) instead. And if, after our game, you swear that you’ll be ready for me the next time ...

Two factors determine whether you should take the CC seriously in selecting your openings. The first is the speed of the game. The faster the time control, the better the chances that an opening high on CC but low on SES will lead to success. Since many of us play thousands of fast games on the internet every year, this factor probably applies to most readers of this column. Second, the level of your opposition is important both as an index of their likely familiarity with your weapon of choice and as a measure of how well they are likely to cope with unforeseen caltrops.

Let me illustrate this with an extreme case of some games with an opening that falls into the extreme “right quadrant” of the diagram – an opening with a high CC but bottoming out on the SES. First, a silly example from one of my one minute games:

EngaBhoy (1851) – McGrew (2054)

Internet Chess Club, Jan 03, 2004

Felbecker Gambit

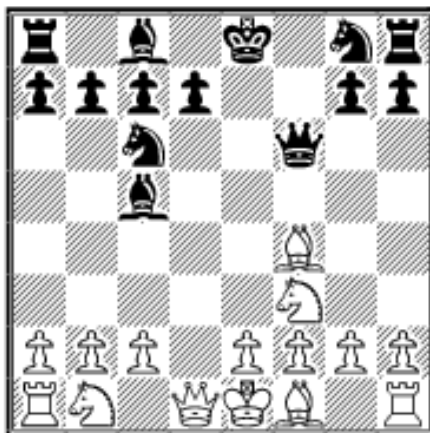
1.d4 e5 2.dxe5 Nc6 3.Nf3 Bc5

No, I would hardly play like this in a serious game! Then again, maybe...

4.Bf4 f6

Played just to induce disorientation, with White's bishop on f4, Black might also try ...Nge7-g6, a sort of deferred Zilbermints Gambit. (What, you never heard of Lev Zilbermints?)

5.exf6 Qxf6!?



More disorientation, by forking f4 and b2, Black gives White something to think about for a few seconds. Probably 6.Qc1 is the best reply, but how about 6.Bxc7 Qxb2 7.Nbd2 instead? Tick, tick, tick...

6.Qd2?? Qxb2!

I did not ask my opponent, but I feel morally certain that at just this point he realized that 7.Qc3 is met by

7...Bb4.

7.e3 Qxa1 White resigns 0–1

I will be the first to agree that this is not great chess – not even good chess. Yet it illustrates what can happen with the right opening at the right time control. White was caught off guard and never had a chance to regain his footing.

Not convinced? Try this one, again from a 1 minute game:

Kharroubi, C - McGrew, T

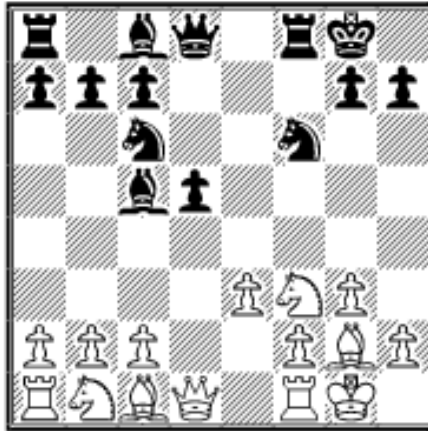
World Chess Network, June 15, 2002

Soller Gambit

1.d4 e5 2.dxe5 Nc6 3.Nf3 f6!?

Varying from the 3...Bc5 of the previous game, this is neither better nor worse than anything else in this (by the SES, worthless) gambit.

4.exf6 Nxf6 5.g3 Bc5 6.Bg2 0-0 7.0-0 d5 8.e3?!



White wants to blunt the diagonal leading to f2, but this creates a set of light-square weaknesses that Black immediately plays to exploit.

8...Bg4 9.c3 Ne4

Here the immediate 9...Ne5! is even stronger and wins back the gambit pawn immediately.

10.Nbd2??

This natural attempt to reinforce f3 is a fatal mistake. 10.h3 was imperative, though White can no longer lay claim to any advantage.

10...Nxd2 11.Bxd2 Ne5!

White is losing his shirt on f3 and only played on seven more moves out of inertia before resigning.

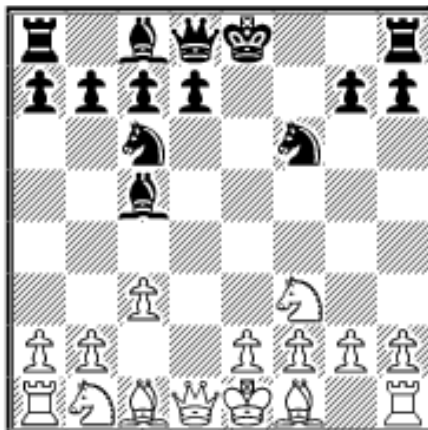
One more to illustrate our theme:

Raza,D - McGrew,T

World Chess Network, April 05, 2003

Soller Gambit

1.d4 e5 2.dxe5 Nc6 3.Nf3 f6 4.exf6 Nxf6 5.c3 Bc5



Here White has a fine game after a sensible move like 6.e3 or 6.Bf4, but he steps on a caltrop and goes down with a bang:

6.Bg5? Bxf2+! 7.Kxf2 Ne4+ 8.Kg1 Nxf5

On the SES White is somewhat worse here but not yet lost, but having stumbled on one caltrop White was off balance and hit

another almost immediately.

9.Nxg5 Qxg5 10.Nd2?? Qe3# 0-1

Lest the skeptical among my readers think that I am bluffing, I'll make a confession – I've played these nutty Englund Gambit lines over 250 times in one minute games against opposition with an average rating over 2000. My winning percentage is a hefty 57% – with *black*. And in 25 of those games White got mated in 25 moves or less. It's not just that I out-rated my opponents, either; my score against comparable opposition at fast time controls with more conventional defenses, defenses that I have no doubt are objectively sounder (it wouldn't take much, would it?), is actually *worse*. This is typical of openings that fall into the right quadrant of the diagram; at fast time controls and/or against the right opponent, they score almost obscenely well despite their deservedly poor reputations.

Did I set out with the intention to play something trappy but unsound? Not really, though I'm not above it in principle. Initially, I got into the Englund Gambit by accident because I was pre-moving under the assumption that my opponent's first move would be 1.e4. At first I tried the lines beginning 1.d4 e5 2.dxe5 Nc6 3.Nf3 Qe7?, but a little bruising experience convinced me that this has almost zero caltrop potential for Black; all he gets against marginally accurate play is an unpleasant position where he is behind in development and his queen is badly misplaced. In the terms of our diagram, these "straight" Englund Gambit lines with 3...Qe7 are down at the bottom of the diamond – low on both the SES and the CC axis.

I can't recommend 1.d4 e5 as a serious tournament weapon for players rated over 1800. Below that, as you please – but don't blame the results on me! As a blitz weapon, however, it has its points, and it would be unfair of me to keep all of the fun to myself. If you want to try it out, see if you can get a copy of Stefan Bücker's book *Englund-Gambit*. Focus on the Felbecker and Soller lines in the illustrative games above. You'll lose some embarrassing games, no doubt. I certainly have, but if you select your opponents well and play at a fast time control, odds are you'll notch up more wins than you have any right to expect.

Happy hunting!



[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2004 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe®**" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.