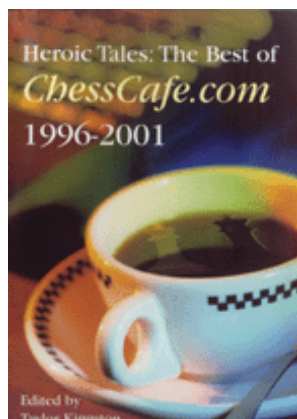




BOOK
REVIEWS



Strategy Light

Steve Higgins

Understanding Chess Strategy, CD-ROM, by IM Alexander Raetsky, 2003 Chess Multimedia, \$26.95.

As promised, Chess Multimedia has produced the second entry in its new series of instructional CD-ROMs, *Understanding Chess Strategy* by Russian International Master Alexander Raetsky. Raetsky had a tough act to follow, since the company's first product last year was a well-done CD-ROM version of the classic 1966 book *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge* by GM Yuri Averbakh.

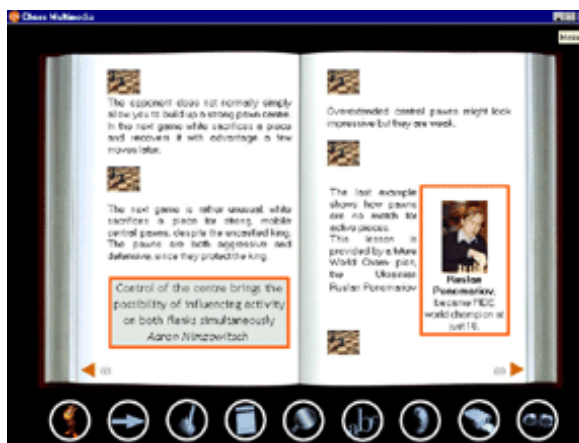


Raetsky's CD-ROM is also a high-quality product, if not as comprehensive as Averbakh's work. Raetsky is the author of *Meeting 1.e4*, a book published by Everyman Chess in 2002, and before that co-authored at least two other chess books, including *Albin's Counter Gambit* in 1998.

Aimed primarily at beginners, *Understanding Chess Strategy* may also prove useful to more experienced players as an easy-to-use brush-up on the fundamentals of strategy. That is, assuming they enjoy studying by computer rather than paper. *Understanding Chess Strategy* is designed the same way the *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge* CD-ROM was laid out: It's an e-book, with the user "turning" pages by clicking on an arrow. A narrator reads the material as the pages are turned, but the user has the option of turning off the disembodied voice. I was grateful for that, because the narrator reads too slowly for my taste.

Several icons are placed below the e-book, including "quit," "print," "help," "glossary," "search," "bookmark" and

“notepad.” The search function is particularly useful, as it allows you to type in a word or words and find the pages that cover that topic. It’s a lot easier than flipping through a book trying to find a dimly remembered topic or position.



The bookmark function adds another level of ease: You can “bookmark” a page by marking it with a searchable word or phrase of your choice. With the notepad function you can type notes concerning the material. Also, a “go to page” icon allows you to jump to any page. And, unlike many computer programs, the “help” function actually is quite helpful.

The heart of the CD-ROM, however, is the chessboard icons embedded in the text. Each chapter includes five to 10 icons, all of which provide examples of the subject matter in that chapter. Clicking on one brings up a position, with a series of moves. The reader can play through the moves, some of which include a brief explanatory text.



As with any computer chess program, there are different move options that bring up branch variations the user can follow. After playing to the end of one variation, the user is returned to the main variation. The advantage over using a

book and a chess set is obvious – you don't have to set up the critical position again and again after chasing down every variation.

Included with the CD-ROM is the Arena freeware chess engine. If you don't understand a move, you can transfer the position to Arena and play it out against the computer. The program will analyze all the variations as you play against it, like Fritz or Crafty.

As in the first entry in the Chess Multimedia series, *Understanding Chess Strategy* aims to explain basic concepts clearly, simply and briefly, and it succeeds. Here, for instance, is part of the short Preface (which is really an Introduction, but not labeled as such):

“Strategy is the most fundamental part of chess. Strategy means systematic action on the basis of an understanding of the game, and the implementation of a plan aimed at weakening and – in the end – destroying the opponent's position. Tactics are single moves within the framework of a strategic plan.”

You can't get much more straightforward than that. The rest of the material is arranged in a manner familiar to any experienced chess player. Here is the Table of Contents (which, strangely, is called an Index in the text. Thankfully such inaccuracies are rare in this series):

- Open files
- Long diagonals
- Weak pawns
- Weak squares
- White or black square weaknesses
- Space
- The bishop pair
- Passed pawns
- Blockade
- Bad piece placement
- Bad coordination
- The centre
- Assessing the position and planning
- The attack
- Defence and counter-attack
- Manoeuvring
- Isolated pawn positions
- Hanging pawns
- Prophylaxis
- Exchanges

- Test

That's a pretty comprehensive list of strategic subjects. Raetsky provides a very brief explanation of each topic, then offers a series of positions that illustrate various aspects of the topic.

For instance, here is the introduction to Chapter 4, Weak squares:

“A weak square is one the enemy side can occupy with a piece, and the piece cannot be chased off by a pawn. Sometimes the piece can be dislodged by lengthy manoeuvring, which nonetheless weakens the position. This is a relatively weak square.

“A weak square for you is a strong square for your opponent. A strong square close to your king is generally a serious headache. Often strong and weak squares go in pairs; think of d5 and e5 for example (or, from the other side, d4 and e4). Many openings aim to install a knight on one of these key central squares, as the first game shows.”

The reader then clicks on the chessboard icon and plays through the moves of a game illustrating that idea, usually starting and ending with a middlegame position. Chapter 4 includes another nine illustrative examples, each with a line or two explaining the point to be illustrated. The positions are not overly complex, and include few annotations. There is just enough information to get the point across.

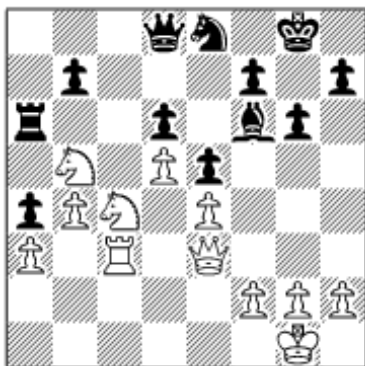
Each chapter is introduced by a quotation from a famous chess figure, everyone from Max Euwe to Eugene Znovsko-Borovsky. Black-and-white photos of well-known players are also sprinkled throughout the text, from Aaron Nimzowitsch and J.R. Capablanca to Ruslan Ponomariov and Xie Jun.



At the end of the CD-ROM the author includes an interactive test section with 90 middlegame positions, all testing the reader's understanding of various strategic ideas. I found the tests to be quite challenging.

Each test offers a maximum number of points, and the user may print out a graph of his results and obtain a rating based on his or her performance. If you're stumped you may ask for a "veiled hint," an "explicit hint," a "key move," a "key square," a look at the final position and, in the most extreme case, the correct move! Asking for help lowers your score.

Here is Test 17:



"White to move: a4, b7 and d6 are Black's weak spots, but the a4 pawn isn't attackable, d6 is defended and to attack b7 by Na5 would bring nothing due to ...Qd7. A more elegant manoeuvre is needed!"

Stumped? If you would like a hint, read on. Otherwise, keep trying and don't look ahead. Pressing the 'veiled hint' icon brings up "Put the d7 and c8 squares under control."

The answer to Test 17 is 1 Qh3!, making the Na5 threat count. The continuation is 1...Ra8 2 Na5 Rb8 (if 2...Qb6 then 3 Qd7) 3 Qe3! Ra8 (if 3...Qd7 then 4 Qa7) 4 Nxb7 Qd7 5 Qb6 Qg4 (if 5...Rb8 then 6 Nb5xd6) 6 f3 Qf4 7 Qe3.

Unfortunately, *Understanding Chess Strategy* includes a feature that was also on the Averbakh CD-ROM – a strange

little mascot that pops up during the tests for a few seconds off and on as the test clock runs. It's a bug-eyed, pot-bellied, red-and-yellow human-like thing with rubbery skin wearing a paper-thin gold crown on its head, with C/M emblazoned on its chest, Superman-style. It winks at you, and it's cute enough when the CD-ROM first opens up and when it waves goodbye when you hit the "quit" button. But during the tests the weird creature is extremely distracting, because it abruptly appears to the right of the chessboard and breathes in and out in very dramatic fashion. As I said in the Averbakh review, it looks like it's having a severe asthma attack! Then it disappears for a minute, only to pop up again and again while you are trying to think, breathing in and out.

Presumably the point is to remind the user that the clock is running, but that is unnecessary. Anyway, this time around I finally caught on to the fact that you can make the creature disappear by clicking on it. However, it just reappears a few seconds later, and you have to keep clicking it off! The producers of this series need to eliminate the strange creature entirely, or at least allow the user to exterminate it for the duration of a test.

Outside of the bizarre mascot, *Understanding Chess Strategy* is well edited and on point. The chapters do not include a lot of examples, and the examples are not deeply annotated, but that is part of the aim, to keep it simple. The tests, on the other hand, are quite challenging.

Some people may prefer books, of course – that's simply a matter of personal taste. But if you enjoy studying chess via the digital world of bits and bytes, this CD-ROM offers a well-produced and easy-to-use overview of the basics of chess strategy.

[Order](#) *Understanding Chess Strategy*
by IM Alexander Raetsky



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