



SKITTLES ROOM

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Developing Beginner's Board Vision

by Dan Heisman

The following **Skittles Room** article is based upon Dan Heisman's recently released book *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book* (2000 Thinkers Press)...

Does this sound familiar? You finished showing someone how the pieces move and explained their approximate values. You then thought, "What do I teach them next?" The next step you might have chosen was to show the student some elementary tactics, like pins, forks, and double attacks.

But what happened when you tried to show your eager new student how to use a Rook to pin an opposing Queen to its King? You probably heard...

"Which one is the Queen again? Is that the one with the cross or the crown?"
"And that Rook, does it move diagonally or up and across?"

You quickly realized that the concept of a pin wasn't as easy as you thought.

The reason your student had trouble grasping the concept of a pin is based upon what some psychologists call "chunking." Chunking involves breaking down problems into components that you can process at your level of understanding.

In this sense, learning how to play chess is very similar to learning how to read. When you first learn to read, you first recognize ("chunk") the letters, next how they sound, followed by how to put them together into words, and then what the words mean (in a native language you already know what the words mean; in a foreign language probably not). At first you can only chunk a letter at a time, but much later, at least in your native language, you can "chunk" entire sentences.

Chess is no different. First you learn the names of the pieces followed by how they move. But at first that is all that you can chunk. An absolute pin involves the names, movements, and interactions of several pieces, including the difficult concept of an illegal move – the Queen is not allowed to move because it would leave the King in check, and Kings cannot be captured! That is why the beginner cannot handle the problem as yet. I call the chess-specific pattern recognition

necessary to understand such ideas "Board Vision".

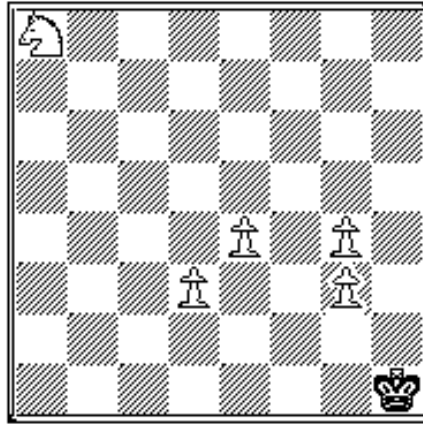
Board vision is like any other pattern recognition. Take a non-baseball fan to a baseball game and it will seem incomprehensible to him. What looks like the simplest play to you will take some explaining to your friend. So it is in chess as well.

But if you cannot immediately teach him tactics, what can you do? Must players learn to handle bigger chess chunks just by just playing a bunch of games against experienced players, asking questions as they play:

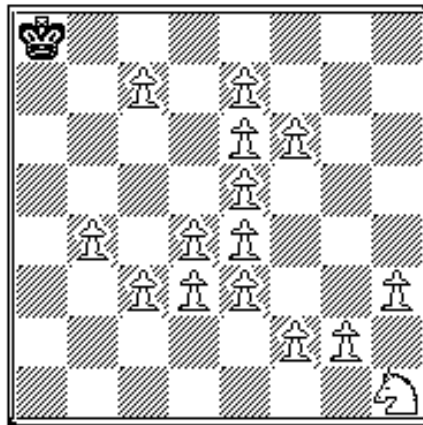
- "Is this the Rook?"
- "How does this piece move again?"
- "How else can I get out of check?"
- "When can I castle?"
- "How did you see so quickly that my Queen could be captured?"
- "Why is this a draw?"

Eventually they begin to realize the most basic tactical concept of "Piece Safety": When is a piece safe from loss of material through a sequence of captures and re-captures? I call this tactic "counting." There are not too many good books on counting, although some beginner texts do begin their tactics section by showing students how to count.

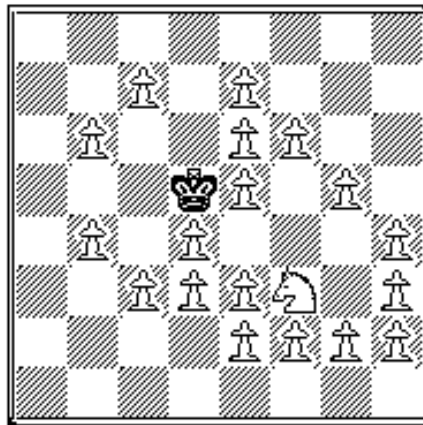
Having also experienced the above chunking problem in my beginning students, I realized that there was a gap in chess literature – something was needed to cover this time period starting after a beginner learns the moves up until he is able to learn basic tactics. At first I thought a good name for such a book would be "You Can't Play What You Don't See" – which is what I tell my students when they cannot find all their checks, captures, or threats in a position. However, it turned out that there are many other subjects that are not in beginner texts, but need to be covered once you finish your first chess book, such as commonly misunderstood rules, chess etiquette, and misconceptions about the world of chess. Therefore my publisher suggested I come up with a more encompassing name and it became *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book*. Here is an excerpt from my section on counting (*See Diagram* – there is no King):



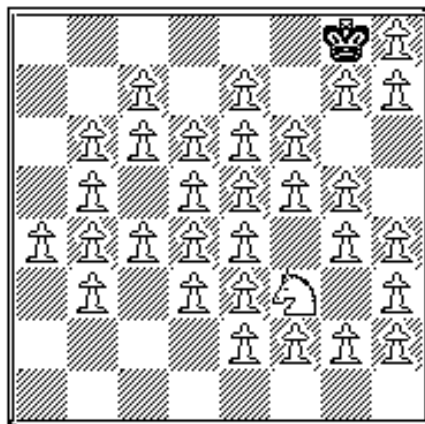
A. This maze for beginners requires care to get to f2 such as: **Nb6-c4-b2-d1-f2-xh1**



B. This easy maze has many solutions such as **Ng3-f5-d6-c8-b6-xa8**

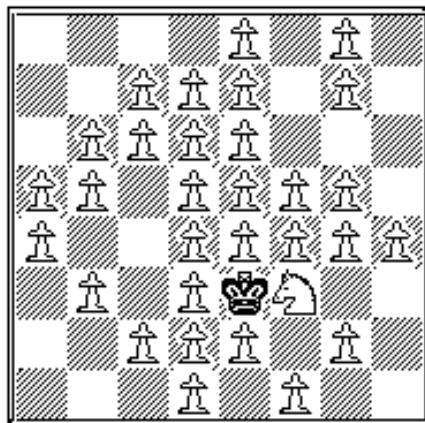


C. This slightly harder maze has also many solutions such as **Nd2-e4-g3-h5-f4-xd5**



D. White must go something like

Nd2-f1-g3-h5-f4-g6-f8-d7-b8-a6-c5-b7-d8-f7-h6-xg8! (To make this easier, remove the pawn on b4 or the one at h8!)



E. Here try

Ng1-h3-f2-h1-g3-h5-f6-h7-f8-g6-h8-f7-e8-b7-c5-a6-b4-a2-c3-b1-a3-c4-xe3!

The above exercises can be done with other pieces, such as Rooks and Bishops, although the Knight is the most "fun." *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book* also addresses common beginner mistakes. For example, "Don't Believe Him" is about how beginners often make terrible blunders because they think their opponent must know something, so instead of figuring it out for themselves they just believe their opponent's move. For example, often beginners will offer a trade of Queens when it is advantageous for their opponent. The opponent, also a beginner, figures "If my opponent wants to trade Queens, it cannot be good for me", so he avoids the trade, thus also losing a tempo. Even intermediate players make this mistake.

Another chapter is called "Don't Make Lemonade When You Should be Making Ice Tea." There are many guidelines in chess, but most of them change priority drastically when one player is ahead or behind a piece or more. Yet beginner's

often follow these guidelines as if they have absolute value. This causes major misjudgments, like a player avoiding a Queen trade when ahead a Rook because it would double his pawns. This chapter gives such examples and tries to educate the reader about how the priority of these guidelines change drastically depending upon the position.

The book should be a big help filling the chess learning gap. The book is targeted at beginners ages 12 and above, chess instructors, and parents.

[Order](#) *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book* by Dan Heisman



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