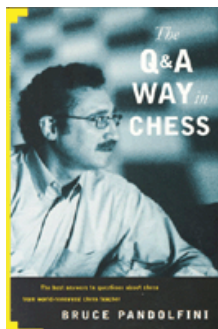




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A
Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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Bored Games

Question I have an interest in old board games. Chess is a board game, though I have heard it described in different ways. It is often compared to checkers. Are they the same types of game? I know they use the same board, but how many different types of games are there? Isn't the Japanese game of Go from the same class of game as chess? Some people say chess is the oldest board game. Is it? How do we know, what if all the information isn't there? There are many things we don't know. What kind of board game is chess? Which types of board games were developed here in America before the Europeans came here? I know these are tough questions, and I do not want to raise questions you might feel are boring, but I thought you might know something about these matters. Finally, which is the oldest board game: chess, checkers, Go, or backgammon? Which one, if I can put it this way, wins? I hope this doesn't game you out too much. Thanks for your column. I've enjoyed many of your past answers. **Ernest Philpott (USA)**

Answer Well, boring or not, I hope you enjoy this one, because I'm starting not to. You're not kidding when you say these are tough questions. I'm surprised you didn't ask me which board game is the best. Who knows what I'd say. It reminds me of something Edward Lasker once joked about: "Go players say Go is a better game, but chess players don't have to believe them." I don't know what I believe, but I'll tell you the little I think I know, responding to your questions as answers occur to me, reading down your paragraph.

When it comes to classifying board games many problems occur. Definers try to establish clear differences, but wind up admitting that certain aspects of the various types overlap. Thus, some games can fall into several categories. Also, since the days when I originally learned what types of games theorists thought there were (we're talking years ago, practically in Precambrian times), many new games have been created that bring into the play of board games modern technology and terminology. These changes have revolutionized the way certain older games are viewed and played. In some cases, they have even altered classifications, but enough of this baloney.

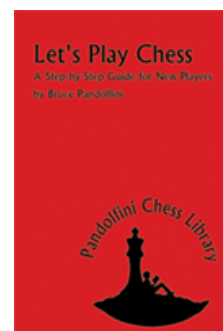
As I remember it, in a private study done by Ogilvy and Mather for Mattel Toys, it was proposed that there were six basic types of board games. (I was a consultant at Mattel for about three years, eons ago, which enabled me to see what they thought was significant; every now and then I still have a good laugh.) The six types of games are (were?) race games, war games, games of position, *Mancala* games, calculation games, and dice games. But O&M was merely drawing from standard analyses by acknowledged experts, such as Willard Fiske, R.C. Bell, and H.J.R. Murray. Indeed, so much new information has been unearthed since the work of Fiske, Bell, Murray, and others, and the world has come to look at ancient games so differently, especially in the light of modern conceptualization, that the issue is complicated. To be sure, we've come a long way since the days of the article appearing on chess in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (published in 1911), a piece that untold chess writers have virtually copied ever since, without giving proper credit.

Originally, a race game, the very oldest known type of board game, is any game where one has to get somewhere on the board before any of the other players. In other instances, a race game may instead necessitate fulfilling some task first. Getting somewhere first, or doing something first, may involve strategy, as in backgammon, but most race games are chiefly motored by the throw of dice (also as in backgammon). Already we have a problem, because there's a separate class of board game called "dice games." How do they differ from race games that use dice? Apparently, a chief difference

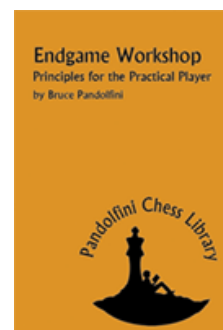
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seems to be that in those games defined as dice games the throw of dice has import beyond the race around the board, or in excess of the tasks to be achieved (if those features are indeed present in a particular dice game). It gets worse.

Chess is a war game, as is checkers. Thus, traditionally, the two games fall into the same class. Most people, when they hear the expression "war game," assume it has something to do with pageantry and/or military-like maneuvers in a field. But this wasn't how the chieftains of definition from the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century saw it. For them, a war game played on a board is any game where one has to capture or "destroy" something in order to win. In chess one has to "capture" the king; in checkers one has to capture opposing checkers. Yet we all know that chess is characterized in different ways, depending on the describer's overview and aims. In many situations it's typified as a game of skill (as opposed to a game of chance). Meanwhile, it's also conveniently classed as a strategy game. You might well ask, what the heck is a strategy game?

To be sure, a strategy game is one that requires the use of strategy, but there's more to it. If we introduce Game Theory into the discussion, other characteristics suddenly come out. Game Theory would depict chess as a finite, two-person, zero sum game, of perfect information, and optimal strategy. The first three parts of the definition are clear. Obviously, the game is played between two people. It's also a game that has to end sometime. It doesn't go on indefinitely or forever. Moreover, its zero sum nature translates into the winner's gain is equal to the loser's loss (one point is contested, and, on a draw, the players split the point).

Why is it a game of perfect information? I have certainly attempted to answer a question like this before. But to reiterate, chess is a game of perfect information because nothing is hidden from either player. So where does the strategy come in? Strategy is something one resorts to when there's uncertainty. There shouldn't be any uncertainty because all the pertinent facts exist right before one, on the chessboard in front of both players. But there's a problem. Although none of the relevant details are concealed (let's leave human subjectivity out of this, though in real life we can't), the degree of complexity can be so great, it might as well be as if there are hidden fine points. Thus, chess players must make decisions with, in essence, imperfect information, and chess itself therefore becomes a strategy game. It's considered a game of optimal strategy, in that, in every set of circumstances, there is likely to be a best course of action, even when a number of strategies are apparently or insignificantly comparable.

Go is a strategy game, too, but it doesn't fit into the war class of the original six types. Rather it's a game of position, where territory is marked off and won. The fact that what's inside the territory can be captured does not make Go more of a war game than a positional one. Then there are *Mancala* games and calculation games. Versions of *Mancala* are played around the world, but especially in Africa, parts of the Middle East, and Asia. I'm not certain, but I don't think that any actual game is called "Mancala." Rather the name signifies the variety of games using a board with holes or pits to place seeds, stones, or beads. In most versions of *Mancala* one wins by capturing these enemy seeds, stones, or beads, but this action in itself does not make *Mancala* a war game, since the main propellant has to do with going around the board and "sowing" or placing the seeds, stones, or beads into the holes.

At risk of adding to the confusion, calculation board games have to do with performing arithmetical operations. One such calculation game, *Rithmomachia*, can be traced to the Byzantine Empire and Medieval times. Supposedly, it was based on the Pythagorean theory of numbers. Players start with pieces of various shape (triangles, squares, pyramids, and so on), and these are worth different points. The object is to capture enemy units by amassing certain totals of value in the form of combined units of attack. Once again, we have a capturing action that fails to be strong enough to be the chief characteristic, and thus *Rithmomachia* is not considered to be a war game either.

To my knowledge, North American Natives did not initially have any board

games whatsoever. All those ideas were brought over from the Old World. What they did specialize in were ball games and games of dexterity, but no board games. Finally, it's hard to say which surviving board game is the oldest. Accounts of some old games take them back so far, but then archaeologists and such find root games that may take possible surviving versions back even further. Unsubstantiated accounts seem to indicate that board games may have been played as far back as eight or nine thousand years ago. *Senat*, an Egyptian race game, was played for sure around 2500 BC, but possibly even a thousand years or so earlier. We really don't know the rules, but with a little imagination, it's not hard to see how it might have evolved into backgammon. So, of the major board games still played (chess, checkers, backgammon, Go), it seems likely that backgammon, to use your language, wins.

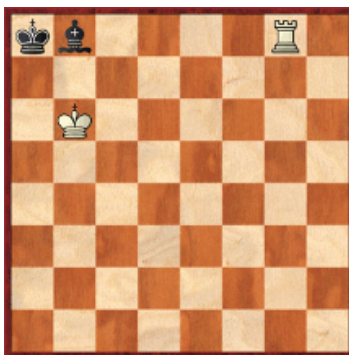
If you want to read more about what we've considered here, I recommend the following titles: *Chess Tales* by Willard Fiske; *The Study of Games* by Avedon and Sutton-Smith; *Games of the North American Indians* by Stewart Culin; *Old Board Games* by R.C. Bell; *Two-Person Game Theory* by Anatol Rapoport; and H. J. R. Murray's two wonderful tomes, *History of Chess* and *History of Board Games other than Chess*. Track down these works and you may not resolve much, but I'm certain you'll find any of the above enjoyable reading.

Question The question I have concerns certain endgames in which there is a bishop. I know that when one side has a rook-pawn, a bishop, and nothing else but his king, and the other side has just a king, the game can be drawn by getting in front of the pawn. In those cases the bishop is called the "wrong bishop." The right bishop is a bishop that can guard the corner, preventing a blockade. Recently, I have encountered the term "wrong bishop" applied to another ending, but I cannot seem to recall which ending in particular. Are there any other endings where a bishop might be called the wrong bishop?

Matthew Cassoni (USA)

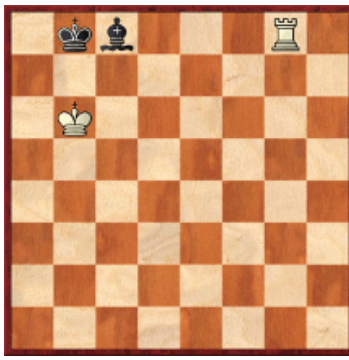
Answer In any endgame where you have one bishop, when it would be significantly preferable to have a bishop of the other color, it could be said generally that you have the wrong bishop. But perhaps you're thinking of the endgame rook vs. bishop, when your king is forced to retreat to a corner. If you have a bishop traveling on squares of the same color as the corner square, you have the wrong bishop and can get mated, since the rook could temporize on the back rank without giving stalemate. The right bishop, in those instances, is one different in color from the corner. This way it could occupy a protected square next to its king, and if the rook tries to temporize on the back rank, then it's stalemate. Perhaps this is the other type of wrong bishop situation you've encountered.

Black has the "right bishop"



[FEN "kb4R1/8/1K6/8/8/8/8"]

Black has the "wrong bishop"



[FEN "1kb3R1/8/1K6/8/8/8/8/8"]

Question I have heard it said that the younger you learn to play chess the stronger player you can become. I am about an average player though I didn't learn to play until I was eight-years old and not seriously until I was ten. It would be great, like many of today's youths, if I could have learned earlier at five or six. Obviously, you got to be a fairly strong player. When did you first learn how to play and then start playing seriously? I appreciate your well written and often humorous column. **Billy Westfield (USA)**

Answer I first learned how to play at age nine, but it wasn't until I was thirteen and discovered chess books in the public library that I started getting more "serious" about chess. Although I learned to read chess books, a lot of people would say that I've never learned to play chess seriously. The fact is, I'm not sure that learning at such a late age was the main reason I failed to get to be a strong player. Of course, the two of us might mean different things by the term "strong player," but thanks for the compliment. These days I can use all the nice words I can get.

Question When I was younger I was always taught that a bishop and knight are worth three points each. So I don't understand why after **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.d3 Nf6 5.Ng5 O-O 6.Nxf7 Rxf7 7.Bxf7+ Kxf7** Black isn't in trouble.



[FEN "r1bq4/pppp1kpp/2n2n2/2b1p3/4P3/3P4/PPP2PPP/RNBQK2R w KQ - 0 8"]

Doesn't White have equal value and isn't the black king in trouble? But people tell me that a bishop and knight are worth seven points, not six, like a rook and pawn. Could you please explain? Could you discuss some of the reasoning behind this assessment? They never give me a satisfactory answer. Do you think I'm right to continue giving up the bishop and knight for a rook and pawn for this kind of attack? **Sam Wykowski (USA)**

Answer This question can be answered in different ways, and I know I already have a number of times before. Whatever I've said before, however the question is approached now, it's important to realize we're not talking about absolute values. The values of the pieces are relative, subject to consideration in context. So, regardless how much we approximate a knight is worth, it should be understood that its value is subject to change, whether the variation is slight and virtually irrelevant or, as in catastrophic circumstances, great and significant.

Yes, knights and bishops are generally worth about three pawns each, but not precisely. We also know that in a majority of cases - not all the time, but

much of the time - bishops tend to get the upper hand over knights. If we really had to think in terms of actual numbers, not knowing exactly what those numbers should be, it's safe to say that bishops are worth a fraction of a pawn more than three pawns (or points, if you will) and the same can be said for knights, with bishops commanding the higher fraction. Thus, together, it's not unreasonable to contend that a bishop-and-knight team is worth more than six pawns or points, if you include their two unspecified fractional values.

There's another consideration to factor as well. When you add the values of these two team members together, there's a synergistic effect, such that, to some extent, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Thus the team gains in value even further. To be sure, it's not hard to imagine the team-effect in play. A knight, for instance, could capture an enemy pawn, possibly on either side of the board, while being protected from faraway by a bishop (or defended indirectly by subsequent skewers, pins, and other methods). A bishop, too, might be supportable by a knight, either close up or with follow-up checks and tactics.) Meanwhile, a rook-and-pawn team, though worth roughly the same value as the two minor pieces on rounded-off paper, doesn't have that kind of flexibility. The pawn can help out the rook primarily (though not exclusively) in the vicinity of the main action. But a distant pawn, say one on the b-file, couldn't exert direct support for a rook on the f-file, as a minor piece could.

Naturally, one should also take into account the phase of the game. As one enters the endgame the value of a pawn, with its ability to promote (or merely threaten promotion), can gain over its earlier value in the opening and middlegame. But there's even still another way to look at this, and it's not based on precise values at all. It has to do with experience. As one acquires more and more actual playing and thinking time over the board, one comes to realize that the totality of cases weigh in favor of the knight and bishop gaining the edge over the rook and pawn. Moreover, in the instance you've referred to in particular, where the king has been dislocated to f7 from g8, the level of exposure and danger may not be as great as you tend to conclude.

Let me point out that, when your opponent castles kingside, and you've given up the king-knight and king-bishop for the castled rook and f-pawn, with the idea of drawing the enemy king to f7 (or comparably to f2 for the white king), you've lost two of your best pieces to harass that "exposed" king. In the variation you've shown, the white king-knight can't check at e5 or g5 because it doesn't exist anymore. Nor can the light-square bishop check along the a2-g8 diagonal. It doesn't exist either. In the diagrammed position, Black has the only developed pieces, and his king is ready to step back to g8, if it's deemed desirable or safer. What's my advice? Don't do this kind of exchange so much anymore.

Question In *The Royal Game* Stefan Zweig uses Alekhine as a main character. I am an amateur collector of material on Alekhine. In particular, I am looking for references to him, not in chess books, but in literature and other kinds of non-chess writing. You occasionally deal with questions like this and I was wondering if you have come across any Alekhine references of this kind. Can you think of any? **Joseph Carter (USA)**

Answer No, no. To my knowledge, Alekhine is not directly referred to in *The Royal Game*. The main character's name is Dr. B, I believe, and he plays against an Alekhine-like antagonist named Mirko Czentovic. In the story, Czentovic is the world chess champion. But I know I've seen a number of references to Alekhine in literature, I just can't recall specifics. Some may have been penned by writers living in Paris when Alekhine was there. I don't recollect for sure, though I suspect there's a chance you might be rewarded by wading through the *oeuvre* of either Nabokov or Sartre. Regrettably, I have been able to find only two mentions from other writers.

The first comes from G.H. Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*. "This view was endorsed by Dr Johnson when I told him that I had been to see [his namesake] Johnson ride upon three horses, he said 'Such a man, sir, should be encouraged, for his performances show the extent of the human powers ...' - and similarly he would have applauded mountain climbers, channel swimmers, and blindfold chess-players. For my own part, I am entirely in

sympathy with all such attempts at remarkable achievement. I feel some sympathy even with conjurors and ventriloquists and when Alekhine and Bradman set out to beat records, I am quite bitterly disappointed if they fail." The other is from Henry Miller's *Under the Roofs of Paris*: "You tell her that you have a friend who wants to show her Paris, the Paris of Villon, of Manet, of Guy de Maupassant . . . Tell her the Regecem where Napoleon played chess . . . and Alekhine too, the champion . . . does she like chess?" Perhaps readers may know of other, non-chess works mentioning Alekhine. Any similar references will be included in the section on reader's responses as they come in.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published below.

Is there a better board game than chess?

Readers' Responses from Last Month

We received many responses to the [April](#) question of the month:

What is your favorite chess maxim?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Terry M. Dutton (UK) - "What is your favorite chess maxim?" Maxim Dlugy.

Gil Wolff (Israel) - "Develop knights before bishops," because it is probably the least followed maxim of them all.

Iain Reeve (United Kingdom) - As usual I have a selection to offer for my favourite chess maxim:

- Most useful: "DAUT - Don't Analyse Unnecessary Tactics" (John Nunn)
- Most Machievallian: "Place the board so the sun is in the opponent's eyes" (Ruy Lopez)
- Most evocative: "Pry open the KR file, sac, sac....mate!" (Bobby Fischer)
- Most heartfelt: "Why must I lose to this idiot?" (Aron Nimzowitch)
- Most painful: "Bishops move backwards" (Me - usually just after a blunder)
- The first that most of us learn: "White to the right".
- The one I really wish was a maxim: "Win or lose, shake hands, smile and say 'well played' - and try to look as if you mean it" (Me again).

R. Surf (Switzerland) - My favourite maxim would be Tartakower's, "One's Adversary has a Right to Exist." If I could remember, and apply this in every game I played, then I would be writing this column instead of responding to it. If the readers think that only a second rate Master of the twentieth century thought this was important, then I quote from Tal's book, [Tal-Botvinnik 1960](#), p. 34. In the note to White's thirtieth move, Tal writes "First it seemed to me that White had a perpetual check, but then I found a strong move for Black in 32...Rh7!" Tal was Tal because he always looked for his Adversary/Opponent's *best* and Strongest move. As someone better than me once said Chess is *not* solitary.

Redmar Damsma (Netherlands) - My favourite maxim has to be one of Nimzowitsch's hilarious comments in his book [My System](#): "A passed pawn is a criminal who should be kept under lock and key. Mild measures, such as police surveillance, are not sufficient."

(BP - These were great. A few of them still have me giggling.)

The Q & A Way is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a question about preparation, strategy or tactics? Submit your questions (with you full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next **ChessCafe.com** column...

[Yes, I have a question for Bruce!](#)

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