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Dadi Jonsson



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Peshk@: For Training and Improvement

These days it's hard to keep up with everything that is happening at ChessOK in a monthly column. In recent months the focus has mostly been on Rybka Aquarium, but now they have a brand new product, Peshk@, which is to be released soon. It is a welcome addition to their long line of respected training and improvement programs.

Many readers are probably familiar with ChessOK training programs, such as CT-ART, Chess Tactics for Beginners etc. Peshk@ ("peshka" is the Russian word for "pawn") is a completely new product, with a modern user interface and new features.



Peshk@ is the next generation of ChessOK's training programs

In addition to all the changes, the most popular features of CT-ART and other training programs were also added to Peshk@.

Taking Advantage of the Internet

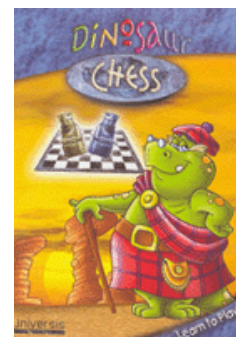
Peshk@ is the first ChessOK training program that takes advantage of the Internet. The basic package will be available both on DVD and as a download. It comes with one training course, but users can browse a list of other available courses from inside the program. The list is automatically updated when new courses are released.

Users will be allowed to try out new courses before they buy them. Since they are presented through Peshk@ there is no need to install a new program. The trial versions will allow you to make a more informed decision about buying or not. If you decide to buy, the purchase only requires a few mouse clicks and you will be able to start using the new course within minutes.

This design allows users to quickly build a library of courses that address those areas that need the most improvement.

There are several interesting ideas in development with regards to new courses for specific rating ranges, etc. As is usual with ChessOK, I'm sure that they will listen closely to their customers when it comes to

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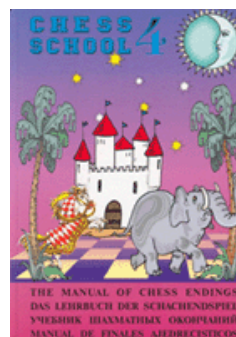
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developing material for Peshk@.

Improvements Based on User Feedback

The improvements in Peshk@ compared to older ChessOK training programs are to a large extent based on feedback from users. Although previous programs have been very successful, users have pointed out several important opportunities for improvement. Many of those have been incorporated into Peshk@. Here are some examples:

1. *Improved user interface.* Peshk@ is based on a modern user interface that is similar to Office 2007, but much simpler. Rybka Aquarium users will also feel right at home with the “ribbon” user interface. Note that you can minimize the ribbon by double-clicking on one of the tabs in order to maximize the working area. This can be helpful for users with low-resolution screens.
2. *Improved piece and board graphic.* Peshk@ comes with a nice selection of boards and piece sets. The pieces are vector based so they look smooth at any size. Board themes and piece sets are interchangeable between Peshk@ and Rybka Aquarium.
3. *Consistency across different training program.* This is solved by Peshk@. Instead of creating a different program for each training course, Peshk@ can handle multiple courses as described below.
4. *Vista UAC compatibility.* Peshk@ is fully compatible with Windows Vista UAC and doesn't need administrative rights to run.
5. *Auto-update and an option to download courses from the Internet.* Both of these features are built into Peshk@. Note that Internet access is only required while you are checking for and downloading new courses. Otherwise everything is done locally; so for training, Peshk@ works in the same way as previous ChessOk training programs.

One Program Many Training Courses

One of the more interesting features of Peshk@ is that it is module based. This means that many different training courses will be available and can be plugged into Peshk@.

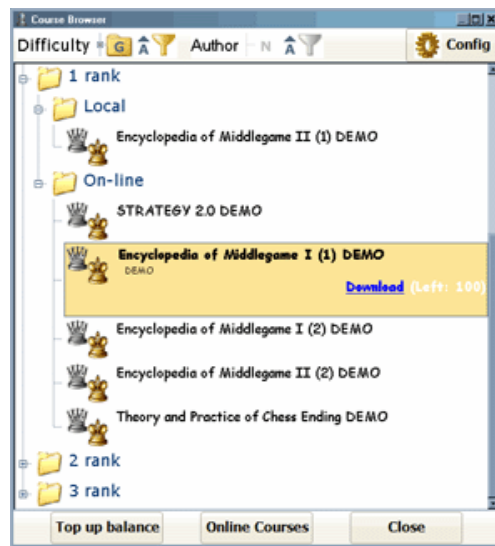
The training courses in previous ChessOK training programs are of very high quality and ChessOK worked closely with several chess schools and experienced trainers to develop the training regimen. Many of the existing courses will also be available for Peshk@.

One of the advantages of the ChessOK training courses is that they squeeze as much value as possible out of each exercise. As an example, the user must find all important moves in a combination, not just the first one. Sometimes he may even be required to find the correct continuation against different defending moves. If he is in trouble, Peshk@ will help put him on the right track using different methods without actually revealing the correct moves.



The “Courses” button displays the available training courses

The “Courses” button in the ribbon at the top of the application window presents a list of available courses in the “Course Browser,” which is shown in the image below.

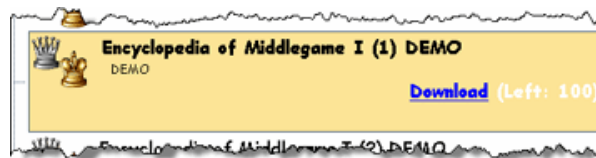


The "Course Browser" shows local and Online courses

You can use the buttons at the top of the window to filter the list, so you only see the courses that you are interested in.

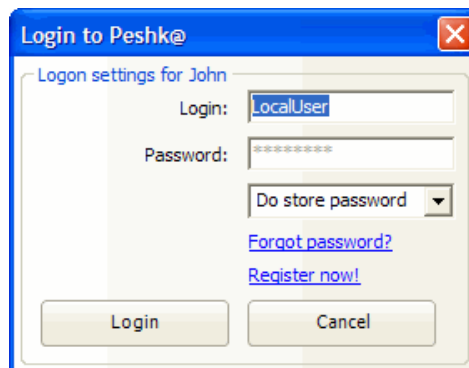
The courses are displayed in a configurable multi-level list. In the example above I have placed rank or difficulty at the top of the hierarchy. The next level shows two categories: "Local" and "Online." The local courses are already available on your computer. They were either part of the Peshk@ package or you may have downloaded them separately.

The Online list shows additional courses that are available for download. If you click one of the items in the Online list, you are presented with a purchase link or a download link if it's a demo.



Additional courses and demos can be downloaded

Before you can start using the Online resources you must register. Click the "Go online" button at the bottom of the course browser window.



If you are already registered at the Chess Resource Server (e.g., through the ChessOK Downloader) you can enter your login and password here. Otherwise click the "Register now!" link to register. After you log in the "Top up balance" button replaces the "Go online" button at the bottom of the course browser window.



In case you are planning to buy a new course, click this button to add the required amount to your account. After that you can purchase the course in Peshk@ and it will be automatically downloaded and installed.

Starting Peshk@ for the first time

The first time you start Peshk@ you are asked to create a profile with your name and estimated Elo rating.

In this example, I'll register a new user by the name of John with an estimated rating of 800.

The reason why you must create a profile is that Peshk@ can keep track of several user profiles. Each user's performance is recorded and the statistics are available for viewing. This makes the program ideal for use by trainers, schools, and chess clubs.

It's important that you enter a realistic rating, as it is updated after each exercise to reflect your progress. If you are unsure about your rating, it's better to start too low than too high. Your rating will increase to the appropriate level once you have solved a sufficient number of exercises. After that the rating changes will tell you how fast you are improving.

Some of the training courses are designed specifically for lower rated players. If you enter a rating that is too high, you may be surprised if it doesn't increase when you solve the exercises intended for much lower rated players. The reason is the same as when one player beats a much lower rated player in a tournament. He doesn't gain any rating points. But in case he loses, his rating decreases.

Finally, don't expect the rating level to be directly comparable to other rating systems; of course you can compare your rating to others who are also using Peshk@.

Different Approaches to Training

Peshk@ uses the same basic approach as most ChessOK tutorial programs. It offers four different methods to teach and reinforce the material:

- *Learn (theory)*: In this mode a new topic is introduced via a narrative and examples that the user can play through on the screen. When available, this should be your starting point for each new topic.
- *Learn (practice)*: When you select this mode you are given exercises to solve from the selected topic. The program keeps track of your practice results.

- *Play*: In this mode you can play against the built-in chess engine, starting from any position on the board.
- *Test*: Here you can select various test parameters. The program keeps track of your test performance.

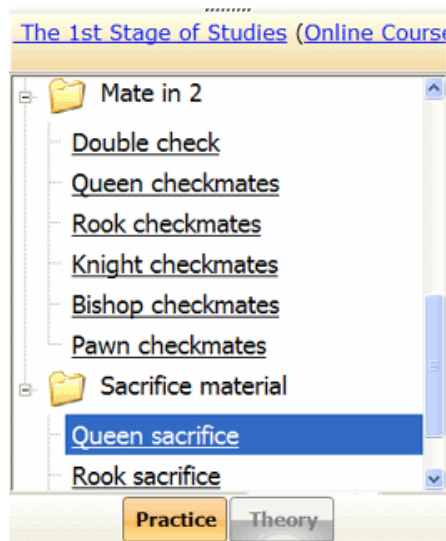
These methods correspond to the first three buttons in the Home tab as shown in the image below.



Additionally, you can switch between theory and practice in learn mode using the course navigator.

The Course Navigator

The course navigator serves as an outline for the training regimen by breaking it down into manageable sections and providing a framework for studying. It is displayed in the working area, but you can switch it on and off with the click of a button. The navigator allows the user to select a lesson for study or practice.

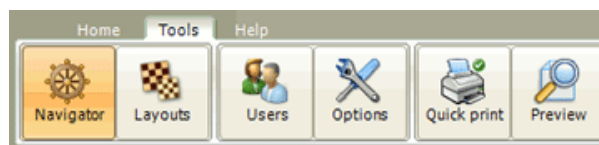


The course navigator

The text at the top of the pane shows that “The 1st Stage of Studies” is the currently selected course. Below that, the table of contents for this course is displayed. It is divided into sections, two of which are currently visible, “Mate in 2” and “Sacrifice material.” Each section is further broken down into several subsections or lessons. The user has selected the “Queen sacrifice” lesson in the “Sacrifice material” section.

The “Practice” button at the bottom of the image is highlighted by default. If the course contains theoretical sections, the “Theory” button is also enabled, allowing you to study the theoretical part of the course.

As mentioned above you can switch the course navigator on and off as you like. Just click the “Navigator” button in the “Tools” tab to toggle the display of the navigator pane.



Here the “Navigator” button is highlighted, which means that the course navigator pane is displayed. Click the button to switch it off.

By default, the course navigator is displayed when learning mode is active, but not in play or test modes.

Learn Mode

Learn mode lets you study the topics of the course both through theory and practice. The theoretical lessons use specific examples, graphic illustrations and verbal explanations. Several positions, often from real games, are used to show how the theoretical material works in practice.

When in learn mode you can switch to practice mode by clicking the “Practice” button in the course navigator pane. You are then immediately presented with the first exercise as shown in the next screenshot.



At the top of the image there is a slider with one notch for each exercise. It moves automatically as you go through the exercises. You can also drag the slider left or right with the mouse.

Peshk@ uses the slider to let you keep track of the exercises you have completed. The following screenshot shows what the slider might look like after you have completed some of the exercises.



The leftmost exercise was solved successfully so it is shown in olive color. If you failed to solve an exercise, it is shown in orange color. The light-gray color shows exercises that you have not yet tried to solve.

Learn mode allows you skip an exercise and then come back to it later using the slider. Few users will be able to solve all the exercises at first, so don't hesitate to skip exercises and solve them later.

The chessboard is below the slider. The small white square in the lower left corner of the board shows that it is White's move. The buttons below the board are disabled until you have finished the exercise. Then you can use the buttons to play through the moves.

You should keep an eye on the status bar at the bottom of the window, because it shows several fields with useful information. Going from left to right:

- *Learn mode*. This field displays the current mode.
- *Task 1 of 11*. The first number “1” shows that you are currently working on task number 1 and “11” tells us the total number of

tasks or exercises.

- *Score 0 of 30.* The first number keeps track of the score for the current task. The second number shows the maximum number of points for the task (30 in this case).
- *Attempts 0.* This field keeps count of how many attempts you have made to find the correct move in the current position. The penalty increases every time you make a wrong move.
- *Time spent 00:00:19.* Here you can see how much time you have spent on the current task; 19 seconds in this example.
- *Task Elo: 1500.* Each exercise has an Elo rating attached to it based on its difficulty. This field is not visible in the image above.

Finally there is a task status field (not shown) that displays the status of the current task, such as whose move it is and if the task is completed.

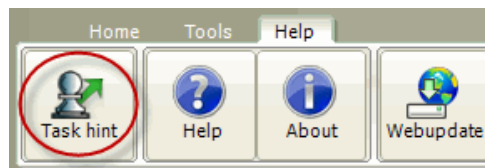
When you find the correct move, the program responds and then asks you for your next move. Sometimes there is more than one good move in a position and you will be asked to consider other moves besides the one you chose.

If you don't play the correct move, the program will guide you by highlighting the most important pieces and using arrows to draw attention to key aspects of the position, as shown in the diagram below:



If you still don't find the correct move, the piece that you are supposed to move will blink. If you can't find the correct move after that, the program will make one or more moves for both sides and resume the exercise from there.

It's also possible to ask Peshk@ to give you a hint by clicking the "Task Hint" button in the "Help" tab.



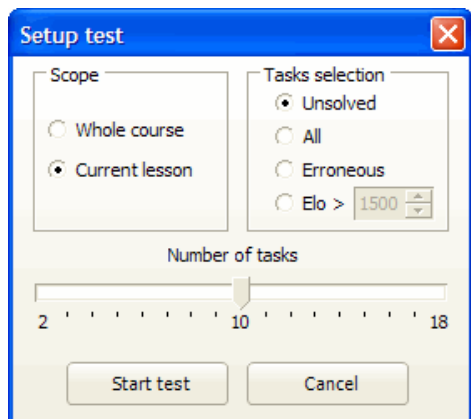
After solving an exercise you can play through the variations on the board. This is recommended, because there are sometimes additional variations given that were not played, plus it helps to review the solution.

Test Mode

The main difference between learn mode and test mode is that the exercises are randomly selected and presented in varying order. You also

have greater control over which exercises are included in the test. You can even set up a test that covers exercises from the whole course instead of a single lesson.

Test mode is started by clicking the “Test” button on the “Home” tab. There are several parameters that the user can set before a test begins, as shown in this screenshot.

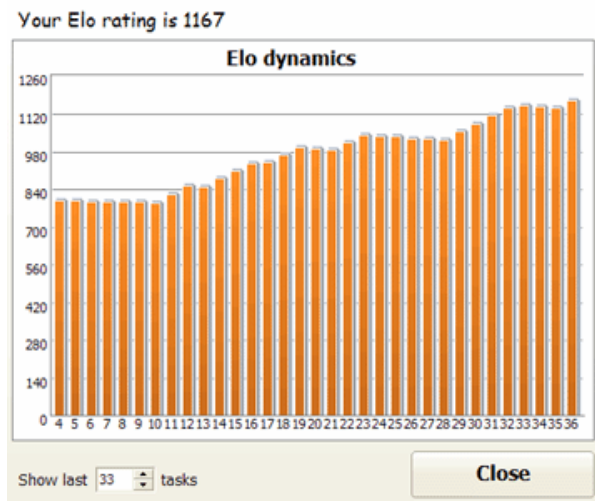


In the “Scope” pane you can either limit the test to the current lesson, as I have done here, or the whole course. The “Task selection” pane defines which tasks from the selected scope are included in the test. “Unsolved” limits the test to tasks that you haven’t solved. If you don’t want to exclude any tasks from the scope, select “All.” By selecting “Erroneous,” you can create a test consisting of tasks that you failed to solve. You can also limit the test to tasks that are above a certain Elo rating. This option can be helpful if the simplest exercises are too easy for you.

Finally you can decide the number of tasks in the test by using the “Number of tasks” slider. I have selected ten tasks. When you are ready, just press the “Start test” button.

Statistics

As you progress with Peshk@ and complete more tests, the program evaluates your rating changes based on your performance. You must realize that it is the rating changes that matter most, but not the actual rating level. This feature is helpful to trainers, who can use it to compare the performance of their students. Each column on the bar graph below corresponds to one exercise. Basically, if you correctly solve an exercise, without any clues from the program, then your rating will increase. If you fail to solve it, your rating will decrease. If you need help from the program to solve an exercise, you will receive penalty points. In this case your rating change depends on the number of penalty points.



In this column I have given a quick overview of Peshk@. Users of current ChessOK training programs were given some insight into the differences between Peshk@ and previous training programs and new users got a taste of what it is like to work with Peshk@.

Since I'm working with a beta version, readers must keep in mind that some of the screenshots and descriptions I have given above may change before the final release.

Many of the Chess Assistant programs described by Dadi in this column are available in the [ChessCafe.com Online Catalog](#).

Do you have a question about a Chess Assistant product? Send it along and perhaps it will be answered in an upcoming column. Please include your name and country of residence.

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