



## Quiescence Errors

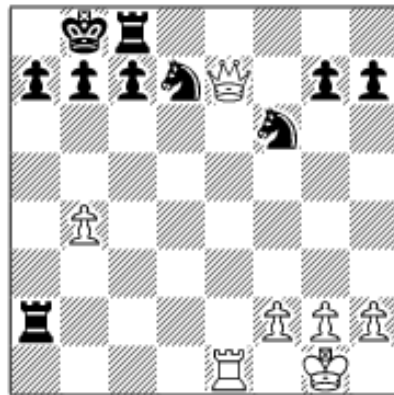
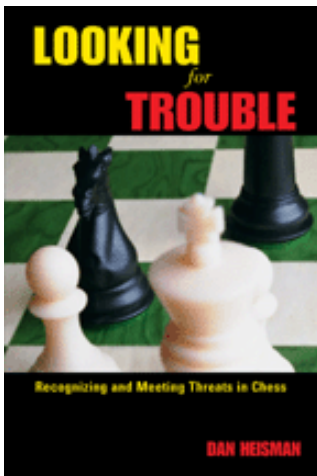
**Quote of the Month:** *Don't stop until you are sure the fire is out!*

I often run across a thought process error that can be minimized just by being more aware of its cause. This common mistake is called a *quiescence* (= *state of quiet*) *error*. Let's start with a simple example:

### COLUMNISTS

## Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



### Black to Play

This position is a simplified version of one where a beginner played **1...Re8??** And he was quite surprised when his opponent replied **2.Qxe8+** Upon the forced **2...Nxe8** naturally came **3.Rxe8#** After the game I asked Black if he had thought that White wouldn't take the rook because it was guarded by the knight, and thus "lose his queen." He said yes, that is exactly what happened. Of course, the position was not

at all "quiet" after 2...Nxe8 – in fact, mate-in-one is about as "loud" as you can get! Therefore, Black should *not* have stopped his analysis after seeing that White was "losing" his queen.

Now you may chuckle and think this kind of thing could never happen to you but, in my experience as an instructor to players of all levels, quiescence errors happen all the time, and not just to beginners.

This mistake is called a "quiescence error" because a player stops analyzing too soon, and evaluates the position before all further meaningful checks, captures, and threats are considered. In other words, he thinks the position is "quiet" – and thus will yield a reliable evaluation – when it is not.

In the above example, the quiescence error was *defensive*: the Black player did not look far enough to see the danger and got checkmated. In such situations a player erroneously comes to the conclusion that his position is fine when, if he had continued to look for further danger (considering forcing moves by his opponent), he would have seen that the line was not acceptable: losing material, getting checkmated, etc.

A quiescence error is *offensive* when a player erroneously stops analyzing prematurely and concludes that he is not doing anything positive (such as winning material or checkmating) when, if he had continued to look further – at forcing lines for himself – he would have seen that the line *was* beneficial. Offensive quiescence errors usually occur after missing a potential sacrifice.

For example, a player might erroneously think, “I can’t take the knight with the rook because I lose the exchange.” Yet, if he had looked a little further, he would have seen that he could have won an additional piece and ended up ahead in material.

Interestingly, *quiescent errors usually occur in positions where many beginners would easily find the tactic if it were in a puzzle*. In other words, if a player came across the identical position in a tactics book with the caption: “White to play and win,” he would immediately play the winning sacrifice. But when faced with this same position over-the-board, they think, “Oh, I can’t take the rook with the queen because the rook is guarded by a pawn, and the queen is worth more than the rook,” stopping their analysis, and overlooking the possibility of winning more material or checkmating in subsequent play.

This observation leads to a kind of “Holy Trinity” for improving basic tactics:

- First, study basic tactic patterns repeatedly until you can recognize the patterns and answers quickly and accurately. I estimate there are at most 2,000 “easy” patterns that occur frequently.
- During play, avoid quiescence errors *and* make use of the [\*Seeds of Tactical Destruction\*](#) so that you can recognize those same patterns when they occur in your games.
- Make use of these patterns (defensively) to consider your opponent’s possible tactics *to prevent them from happening to you* as much as you (offensively) consider tactics to win material or checkmate your opponent.

If you do not excel at tactics, but take the time – both in preparation and during the game – to successfully and consistently implement all three steps, you will almost assured see a marked improvement in your play!

The idea that you can “temporarily” sacrifice material, but immediately win it all back and then some is properly called a pseudo-sacrifice, because you really aren’t taking any risk.

Missing pseudo-sacrifices because of quiescence errors happens quite frequently. In a position very similar to the following, a student could have won material with a petite combination:



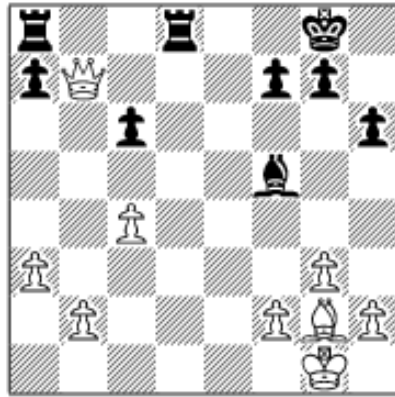
#### Black to Play

Here the proper move is the removal-of-the-guard tactic **1...Rxa4** when, no matter what White plays, White loses at least two pieces for a rook, e.g. **2.bxa4 Rxc3** or **2.Bxb4 Rxb4** or **2.Rec1 Rxc3 3.Rxc3 Rxa2** or even **2.Rec1 Nxa2**.

When I asked Black after the game why he did not play 1...Rxa4, he replied: “I

simply saw the knight was guarded by a pawn and did not consider it.” This is the perfect example of an offensive quiescence error.

Yet, a strong player would never miss this kind of move! Why? Because a strong player is trained to *keep analyzing a position until the potential reward is less than the amount sacrificed*. For example, you would sacrifice anything for a possible checkmate, and you would keep searching if you sacrificed a piece but thought you might trap the queen. Here is an excellent example of how a student made this error when I gave him a problem from Jeff Coakley’s superb *Winning Chess Strategy for Kids*:



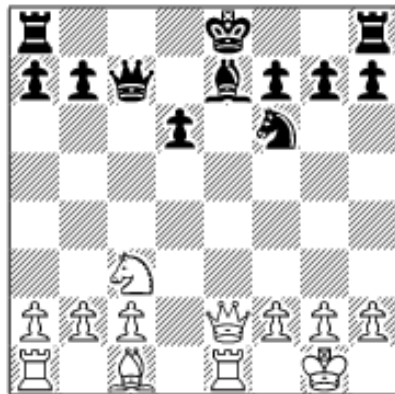
#### Black to play

The student thought aloud: “If I go **1...Rd1+ 2.Bf1 Bh3** then White can play **3.Qxa8+** so that does not work...” He then proceeded to try and find other answers.

But his line does work! Black is threatening mate, and even if White can win the rook on a8, after **3...Kh7** White is *helpless to prevent mate*. A perfect example of the reward (mate) being more

than the sacrifice (a rook). We’ll have more on this important idea later.

Here is a clever example of a common quiescence error, followed by a similar more complicated one!

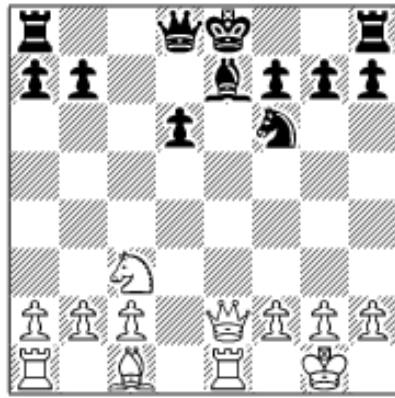


#### Black to play

Now Black thinks he can’t castle because of **1...O-O 2.Qxe7**, but he doesn’t see that castling is indeed possible, as after **1...O-O 2.Qxe7? Rae8** wins the queen for a rook (plus the already sacrificed bishop), since **3.Qxc7?? Rxe1** is mate.

However, having seen that pattern, two players were fooled by the following

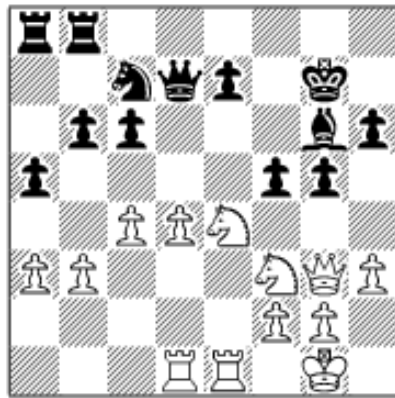
similar position:

**Black to play**

Black thinks he has the same clever trick and plays **1...O-O?** White then refuses to take the bishop, but failing to make this capture is yet *another* quiescent error. White should see that **2.Qxe7** is possible since **2...Re8** does not save the bishop because after **3.Qxd8** it is impossible for Black to capture the rook on e1 since Black's e8 rook is pinned to the king!

White ends up ahead a piece *and* has traded queens as a bonus.

Here is a more advanced version of a quiescence error: Consider the following position, which occurred in an Internet game after Black has played 27...f5:

**White to Play**

**28.N4xg5!**

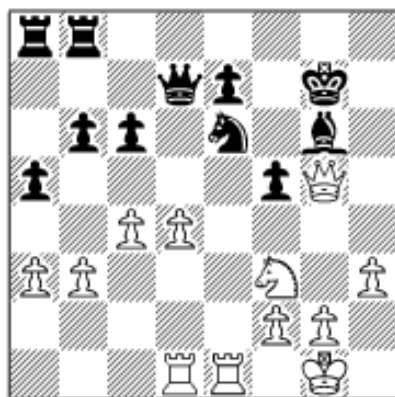
An excellent practical decision! Rather than retreating the attacked knight, White gets two pawns for it and opens up the black king. I gave this position to Fritz and its evaluation was that White is completely winning, whereas after a knight retreat like 28.Nc3? White is only much better, about a two-pawn error!

**28...hxg5 29.Qxg5**

White has many threats, not the least of which is 30.Rxe7+.

**29...Ne6**

At this point White has two equally good wins. Can you find both? I saw the first immediately and the second rather quickly.

**Position A: White to Play**

**Win #1** 30. Qxg6+ Kxg6 31.Ne5+ Kg7 32.Nxd7 winning a piece, or

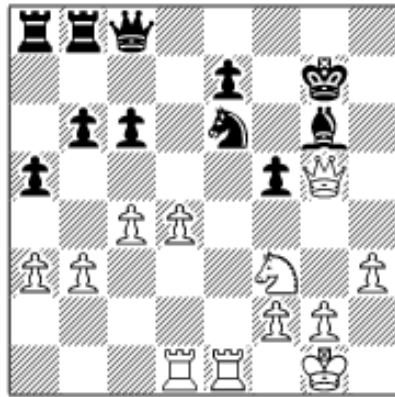
**Win #2** 30. Rxe6 Qxe6 31.Re1 when Black has nothing better than 31...Qxe1+ losing material, e.g. 31...Qd6 32.Rxe7+ Kf8 33.Ne5! and Black's position collapses.

I'll bet that many *Novice Nook* readers

found at least one of these wins! Yet, in a game, that same reader may miss this opportunity, just as White did when he played 30.Qg3? Why can players who are at a particular level see such a combination when it is presented as a puzzle, but not in a game? When you understand why, you will be a better player! There are two related answers:

- When you play a game, no one is holding up a sign saying, “White to play and win,” and thus, even if you use the *Seeds of Tactical Destruction*, you may easily miss a tactic since you are not necessarily looking for one.
- Most interestingly, weaker players are much more likely to miss a sacrifice in a real game, and much more likely to overlook the same sacrifice that they are able to find in a problem. The reason is that they make a quiescence error (more on this below!).

Here is the (trick) question that is the key to the second reason. Let’s take the previous diagram and move the black queen to c8:



#### Position B: White to Play

Suppose it is White’s move and he is contemplating 30.Qxg6+?. Now there is nothing else to win after taking the bishop. *In considering the line beginning with 30.Qxg6+?, would White be losing his queen for a bishop?*

You might think the answer is “Yes,” but in fact the answer is “No!” The reason is that in the above paragraph White did not

play 30.Qxg6, he is just *contemplating* playing 30.Qxg6! I told you it was a trick question.

**But it is not *really* a trick question – in fact, it is one of the most important differences that you can realize!** A strong player *would* consider a move like Qxg6+ whether it is good or bad – he would not care if it is a sacrifice because he is risking very little – he is not losing his queen; *the only thing he is losing if it doesn’t work is a little time on his clock*. But the rewards if Qxg6+ works, as in Position A, are enormous, so the risk-reward ratio makes considering the queen sacrifice worth his time.

However, when I ask weaker players why they did not seriously *consider* moves like Qxg6+ in their games – even when it works – **they state they are losing their queen for a bishop! But that is silly – they are not losing anything except some time on their clock by *thinking about it***. They are afraid to risk losing their queen even though it is not really happening – it is all in their head! If the analysis shows that Qxg6+ is bad, as it is in Position B, then they don’t have to play it!

So this gets back to the idea of what causes this error: the weak player sees that a bishop is worth less than a queen and stops there. He thinks, “I can’t take the bishop since I lose a queen for a bishop.” Period. But that is bad

analysis. You should never stop your analysis until the rewards are less than the possible risk. And the possibility of greater rewards is often there if the attacker has additional checks, captures, and threats. In Position A, White has 31.Ne5+ winning back the queen, but he won't see it if he stops after 30...Kxg6.

In general you *should* stop your analysis if:

- The sacrifice isn't calculable and your judgment says the sacrifice is worth it (or not),
- The reward becomes less than the risk, or
- There are no more checks, captures, and threats and you end up behind in material.

The final case is the most common. When there are no checks, captures, or threats then the position is called "quiet;" in other words, the analysis has reached "quiescence." To end your analysis, as if the position is quiet, when it clearly is not is, as you now know, a quiescence error.

In puzzles you rarely make quiescence errors because you know there is a solution and many problems involve a sacrifice, so you're willing to try them. Moreover, in a game your clock is running, so even slow careful players learn to cut off their analysis of silly sacrifices or else they will use up all their time needlessly. In a problem the clock is rarely running, so you are never "wasting your time" considering a sacrifice.

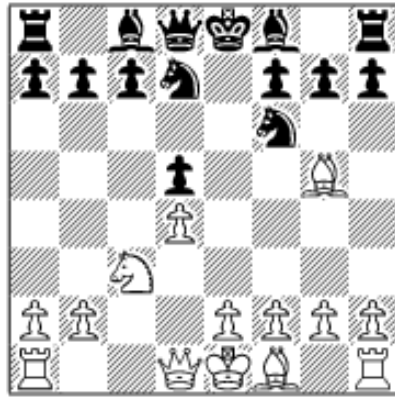
Let's present some practical examples of quiescence errors in the opening. In a position similar to the following I once saw a strong tactical player make a quiescence error:



**Nf6 4.Bg5 Nbd7 5.cxd5 exd5**

Here White missed the clever **1.Bb5!** This pin is easy to miss if you have never seen this pattern. The quiescence error is that White cannot safely make this move because it puts the bishop *en prise*. But if you look a little further you find **1...Qxb5 2.Nxc7+** wins the queen.

Many famous opening traps work only if your opponent makes a quiescence error. For example after **1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3**



Black is now happy if White makes the quiescence error of only seeing that the knight on f6 is pinned to the queen and thus 6.Nxd5?? is possible. But, if one looks further, it turns out that identifying the relative pin on the knight is not sufficient:

**6.Nxd5?? Nxd5! 7.Bxd8 Bb4+ 8.Qd2 Kxd8** and, when the smoke clears, Black will be ahead a piece.

A less experienced player might not even play 6.Nxd5 because “the d-pawn is guarded by the knight on f6,” not even identifying the pin. Not seeing that the pin makes 6.Nxd5 worth consideration might also be categorized as a quiescence error but, in this case, the error would unintentionally turn out to be beneficial!

The reason so many opening traps depend on quiescence errors is that *in order to be a trap, the “bad” move has to be reasonable-looking*. Many moves look reasonable until you see more deeply, and thus many opening traps involve quiescence errors. Here is another example:

After **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Bxc6 dxc6 5.Nxe5(?) Qe7(?) 5...Qd4** is better **6.d4 f6** It looks as though the typical pattern with 7.Qh5+ may work, but...



**7.Qh5+? g6 8.Nxg6** and now not the hasty **8...hxg6? 9.Qxh8** but simply **8...Qxe4+ 9.Be3 Qxg6** and Black wins a piece. For White not to see this when playing 7.Qh5+ is a type of quiescence error because he believes he has the typical “Qh5+ g6 Nxg6” pattern and does not look further to see that the fatal difference is the possibility of ...Qxe4+.

Therefore, when playing slow games, take your time and consider any check, capture,

or threat that may be reasonable, even if the initial move loses material. Only if the resulting position contains no further possibilities to recoup your losses (no *Seeds of Tactical Destruction* of which you can take advantage) should you then reject the move. Otherwise, continue to search and see if you can regain all your investment and more. Positions where you temporarily sacrifice material and then regain it don’t just occur in problems – but if you consistently make quiescent errors you won’t see them in real play. This extra effort, along with the “Real Chess” thought process described below, should help slow down anyone who thinks they play too fast and don’t know what to think about. Happy hunting!

### When to do the “Real Chess” Analysis

As a result of a faulty thought process, one of my students in a recent game allowed his opponent to make an unstoppable threat. I call this type of insufficient thought process “Hope Chess.” I have also dubbed the thought process of consistently identifying and preventing such damaging moves “Real Chess.” My student then explained that he should have done a “sanity check” to make sure that the opponent’s threat did not exist. But that is not the purpose of a sanity check at all – a sanity check is just a brief high-level check to make sure your move is not insane. Interestingly and importantly, *the time to do the “Real Chess” analysis – to see if a move can be defeated by an opponent’s reply of an unanswerable check, capture, or threat (the three types of forcing moves) is fairly **early** in the thought process.*

Suppose your opponent has moved. Then one of the first things you do is to figure out what his move does: how it affects the position, what can he do now that he could not do before, etc. Then you need to figure out what you are trying to do (make a plan based on his threats, imbalances, etc.) and identify which moves might accomplish your objective. These are your initial candidate moves. *But before you do any serious analysis on any candidate move you must **first** ask yourself, “No matter what this move does, if I do it, does my opponent have in reply any checks, captures, or threats which I cannot meet or ignore?” If the answer is yes, then that candidate move must almost always be dismissed.* More importantly, any analysis you do of that candidate move, before such a “Real Chess” filter, is usually a complete waste of time if the move can be rejected! Even among “Real Chess” aspirants, this kind of error is very common. Of course, if you don’t do the Real Chess analysis at all and make the move anyway, then you are playing Hope Chess and it will catch up to you sooner or later – probably sooner!

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Dan welcomes readers’ questions; he is a full-time instructor on the ICC as Phillytutor.

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