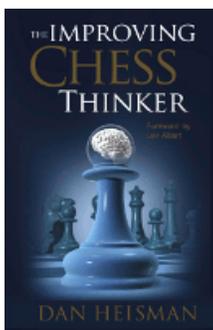




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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Openings vs. Opening Systems

Quote of the Month: *Just play these moves at the start of a game no matter what your opponent plays.*

A few months ago I was reviewing one of my student's games in which he had the black pieces.

1.e4 c5 2..Nc3 a6?!

White to play



Before we discuss my student's interesting move-order, let's tackle a relevant question: what characteristic separates the following two sets of openings?

Set 1: King's Indian, King's Indian Attack, London, Modern Defense, Colle

Set 2: Grünfeld Defense, Sicilian Dragon, Closed Ruy Lopez, Winawer French, Alekhine's Defense

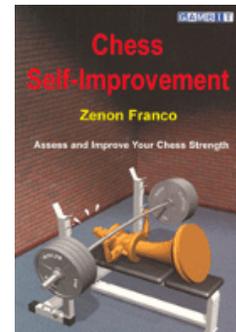
The answer is that the first set of openings can be played as a "system" – that they are not dependent on the opponent's sequence of moves. The second set requires a particular position to be reached for both sides, even if transpositions may allow these positions to occur from other move orders.

Take the King's Indian as an example. There is a difference between a King's Indian Defense (proper) and a King's Indian setup against a variety of openings.

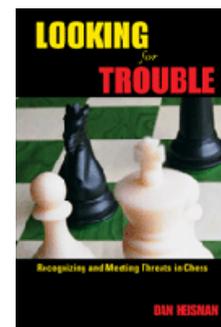
The King's Indian *Defense* requires White to play d4 and c4; i.e., 1.d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 and now, for example, 3.Nc3 Bg7. White does *not* have to play 3.Nc3 – he could play 3.Nf3 or 3.g3 - but Black *has* to play (or transpose into) 3...Bg7 for it to be a King's Indian Defense.

The characteristic moves of the King's Indian Defense (without a specific white third move)

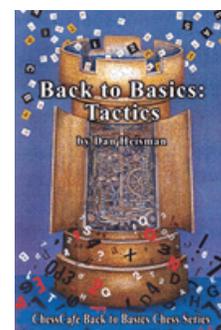
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If instead the opening begins 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 d5 this is not a King's Indian, but rather the position that defines the Grünfeld Defense.

The Grünfeld Defense



These positions could be reached by transposition: 1.c4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nc3 Nf6 is a King's Indian and 1.c4 g6 2.Nc3 d5 3.d4 Nf6 is a Grünfeld.

The chess world doesn't recognize a generalized Grünfeld "setup." For example, if White plays a Polish/Sokolsky with 1.b4 d5 2.b5 Nf6 3.Bb2 g6 it looks like a Grünfeld for Black, but the play is quite different because the pawn at d5 is not interacting the same with White's center, so we don't call this a Grünfeld.

However, the King's Indian can, and is, used as a setup against any variety of move-orders. This is usually called – surprise - the King's Indian setup, and characteristically includes the moves ...Nf6, ...g6, ...Bg7,O-O, ...d6.

The King's Indian Setup



For example, if you buy a book on the English Opening and it covers the moves 1.c4 Nf6 2.Nc3 g6 3.Nf3 Bg7 4.d3 O-O 5.g3 d6 the book may call this chapter "The King's Indian against the English" Or in our Polish/Sokolsky example 1.b4 Nf6 2.Bb2 g6 3.b5 Bg7 4.c4 O-O 5.Nc3 d6 this sequence may be referred to as "The King's Indian against the Polish." Usually authors don't call these variations the King's Indian *Defense*, but just the King's Indian; however, there is no official chess dictionary, so that observation is not hard and fast.

Why is this distinction between openings and systems/setup so important? Because if you are an inexperienced player and you study an opening that requires a specific sequence for *both* players and your opponent does not cooperate (sound familiar?), then you may get confused and think you are playing one opening when in fact your opponent's non-cooperation may invalidate your sequence. This can lead to inaccuracies – and possibly to serious mistakes.

This brings us back to my student's opening. When I asked him why he played 2...a6 against 1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 his response was "Because I am studying and playing the O'Kelly Variation of the Sicilian." There is only one problem with that answer: the O'Kelly Variation begins **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 a6**, not 2.Nc3. Once White plays 2.Nc3, then playing 2...a6 is not the O'Kelly, because the O'Kelly is a specific move-order that requires a white knight on f3, and not a setup that can be played against any white second move. Could his game possibly transpose back into an O'Kelly proper with specific subsequent moves? Yes, but while 2...a6 is considered a sideline variation against 2.Nf3, it makes somewhat less sense against 2.Nc3. Black's main moves against 1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 are 2...Nc6 and 2...e6.

In defense of this particular student, his problem is not that uncommon; as an instructor I have run across this type of confusion more than I anticipated. For example, a student studies 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 to play the Dragon variation of the Sicilian. But instead if White plays a move other than 2.Nf3, this move sequence for Black might be played with results varying from somewhat normal to quite dangerous. The unaware Black player just feels he is playing a Sicilian Dragon, period! For instance, after **1.e4 c5 2.c3**, then Black's main continuations are 2...Nf6, 2...d5, 2...e6, and lately 2...g6 (with a later ...d5). But to just blithely play **2...d6** allows White to avoid all problems with **3.d4** and while **3...cxd4 4.cxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Nf3 Bg7** is not terrible for Black, White does have a better center than in the Dragon. I see this line fairly frequently in amateur play!

This is not a Sicilian Dragon



We could provide many examples where playing "normal" moves against one move-order is disastrous against a different or even similar move-order. In the case of my student's O'Kelly variation or here with the Dragon, it is only a minor blip, but things can be much worse:

Suppose you play the French Defense and against the Advance Variation you correctly play **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5**, but instead your opponent plays the Classical **3.Nc3**. Then **3...c5** is not nearly as good: **4.exd5 exd5 5.dxc5 d4** else the d-pawn is lost. Now Rybka suggests **6.Qe2+** is even better than the book **6.Bb5+**. In any case, White has quite a nice advantage.

If you like 2...Nc6 in the Open Sicilian, you can't play it against the Morra Gambit: **1.e4 c5 2.d4 Nc6? 3.d5** and White has a much bigger than normal advantage; e.g., **3...Ne5 4.f4 Ng6** (4...e6?! 5.fxex5 Qh4+ 6.Ke2 Qxe4+ 7.Kf2 may be fun for Black, but it's not very good) **5.Nf3** with a great game.

In the King's Indian it is well known that ...e5 does not have to be guarded a second time in the Main Line: **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.Be2 O-O 6.Nf3 e5**

White to play (Main Line King's Indian Defense)



...because **7.dxe5 dxe5 8.Qxd8 Rxd8 9.Nxe5(?)** can be met by **9...Nxe4** with approximate equality; e.g., **10.Nxf7??** attempting to win a pawn with his desperado knight, but **10...Bxc3+ 11.bxc3 Kxf7** wins. A student, who often plays the King's Indian setup, perhaps had this trick for Black in mind when he recently blundered a pawn against a London (another setup!) with **1.Nf3 Nf6 2.d4 g6 3.h3 Bg7 4.Bf4 O-O 5.e3 d6 6.Nbd2 Nc6 7.c3**

Black to play



He "thematically" continued **7...e5?**, but this is just a simple Counting error that loses a pawn to **8.dxe5 dxe5 9.Nxe5** because there is no good discovery with the knight on f6.

Similarly, suppose White studies how to defeat the Damiano Defense with **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6(?) 3.Nxe5 fxe5? 4.Qh5+ Ke7 5.Qxe5+ Kf7 6.Bc4+ d5 7.Bxd5 + Kg6 8.h4 h5 9.Bxb7!** with a big attack, but instead Black reasonably plays ...f6 in the Exchange Ruy Lopez: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Bxc6 dxc6 5.O-O f6**. White is mistaken if he feels he can play similarly with **6.Nxe5? fxe5 7.Qh5+** when **7...Kd7 8.Qxe5 Qf6** is good for Black. More opening mistakes of this type can be found in [Similar Positions, Different Evaluations](#)

Suppose you like the Budapest **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e5**. Playing **2...e5** would not make much sense if White plays **1.d4 Nf6 2.Nf3**. **2...e5** would not make the opening a Budapest; it is just a bad move. At that point something more normal like **2...g6**, **2...e6**, or **2...d5** would be more logical.

The Nimzo-Indian is **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4**. Some **1.d4** defenses are also good against the English, but not this one. If White plays the English without **Nc3**, the same Black sequence **1.c4 Nf6 2.g3 e6 3.Bg2 Bb4?** bites on air and White can just start chasing the bishop with **4.a3**.

Another well-known and common example is Black playing against the Two Knight's variation of the Caro-Kann as if it were the Classical Variation **1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Bf5 5.Ng3 Bg6 6.h4 h6**. However, suppose White omits **2.d4** and plays instead **1.e4 c6 2.Nc3 d5 3.Nf3**. Then **3...dxe4** is different than the main "book" **3...Bg4**, and Black continuing "normally" as if it were a Classical is terrible: **3...dxe4 4.Nxe4 Bf5(?) 4...Nf6** is playable. **5.Ng3 Bg6 6.h4!** with good play:

Black to play



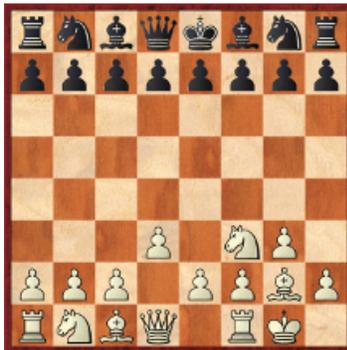
If Black keeps playing as in the Classical with **6...h6(?)**, then **7.Ne5! Bh7?**
 Bad, but already Black is in big trouble. **8.Qh5!** forces **8...g6** and Rybka
 thinks White is just about winning already with **9.Qf3 f6 10.Bc4! e6 11.Qg4!**.

Some players play the King's Indian setup against any irregular opening, but
 Trompowsky players are often happy to have the white side of **1.d4 Nf6 2.**
Bg5 g6 3.Bxf6 exf6. Black is not doing that badly, but this continuation is not
 popular for Black at the grandmaster level.

As shown in earlier *Novice Nooks*, if White likes the Ng5 line in the Classical
 Two Knights Defense: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5, he can't try to
 force it in a Giuoco Piano: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.O-O 4.Ng5??**
Qxg5 4...Nf6 5.Ng5? O-O and the white knight on g5 just looks silly, while 6.
 Nxf7? would just compound the error (see [A Counting Primer](#)).

Some instructors have all their beginning students play the same system
 against everything, just to make the opening phase more "routine" and thus
 less prone to disaster. For example, they may suggest that the student start all
 games with the King's Indian Attack playing **1.Nf3, 2.g3, 3.Bg2, 4.O-O, and 5.**
d3 against "everything," hopefully being careful to explain that if Black
 successfully gets in ...e5, then d3 need to be played in response right away.

The King's Indian Attack



There are pros and cons to this systematic approach of playing the opening.
 The pros include the above issues, as well as ease of learning the opening, and
 the confidence the student may build that the first few moves are "in the
 book" and "in the bank." However, some of those pros are also cons, as these
 students do not learn as quickly to think independently, and thus when things
 go wrong – as they inevitably sometimes do – the student is not as resilient
 under pressure because they are more dependent on rote ideas. Another con
 with using this opening is that it goes against the generally correct traditional
 advice that beginners should start by playing open, tactical games with
 sequences such as 1.e4 e5, because these are the backbone of learning safety
 issues. Playing a more sophisticated closed opening not only requires a more
 experienced hand, but also delays the inevitable need to learn to survive
 tactical fights as soon as possible. Delaying this need may result in fewer ten
 moves disasters, but does not necessarily make for a better learning curve.

On the other hand, playing systematic openings often requires less study.
 Someone who likes the Modern sequence 1...g6 and 2...Bg7 can play it

against almost any opening, except something similar to 1.b3 g6 2.Bb2 Bg7?? 3.Bxg7. This reminds me of the old correspondence player who liked to follow this Modern sequence and, after his opponent played **1.d4** he responded with a postcard stating "**1...g6** and If 2.any, then 2...Bg7". Correspondence "If any" rules required Black to respond 2...Bg7 after any White second move.

White to play



Black was obviously expecting a normal move like 2.e4 or 2.Nc3 or 2.Nf3. But White sent back "2.Bh6 Bg7 3.Bxg7 and If 3...any 4.Bxh8. – your move."

Opening setups can be very handy, but you have to be careful with those "If any" moves!

Time Management Tip

Consider your chess game like an essay test. The teacher (or TD) gives you a specific amount of time for the test (game). To hand in your paper (make all your moves) in much less time than the given time or to write almost nothing until just before the end makes little sense. What grade would you get in a ninety minute essay if you handed in your paper in seven minutes? Even a great seven minute paper is not up to the standard of a great ninety minute paper, so your grade would not be very good. On the other hand, you would not write just a little, saving all your work for the final few minutes, either. Similarly, in chess, playing too fast or too slow is not nearly optimum. I am amazed at how many students, who would not dream of skimping on time in an essay test, play much too fast or too slow when playing chess.

Question I love your column even though at FIDE 2009 a lot of it is "beneath" me. (I hope that doesn't sound arrogant). Tal, as you probably know, said he used to watch beginners' chess shows on Russian TV to refresh the basics, and I can say I genuinely receive insights as well as refreshment from reading your stuff.

However, I was rather perturbed by this section in [The Three Show Stoppers](#): "**1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nc6**(?) A common beginner's inaccuracy."

The move 2...Nc6 has been played by some strong players; e.g., Tony Miles, and is written of approvingly by Morozevich/Barsky in their Chigorin book. It's also part of my repertoire! I know the general principle of not blocking your c-pawn in closed openings is useful for beginners, but as with most such "rules" there are exceptions (although I'm sure you already know this).

Answer This question comes up quite frequently for those who instruct players of all levels. How do you help weaker players who play sophisticated moves that break simplistic principles? It is somewhat like telling a third grader that 2 does not divide into 3, when his fifth grade brother tells him it is $1\frac{1}{2}$.

For example, if a beginner moves a knight five times and gets massacred, you tell him to "Move every piece once before you move every piece twice, unless there is a tactic." If Alekhine does similar maneuvers, then he knows what he is doing and you say "Great idea, Alexander!"

So of course you are correct that 2...Nc6 is playable. The problem is that when it is played by weak players who block their break move, they usually can't get all their pieces out. So in that sense it is a common beginner's inaccuracy. You can say the same for many beginner "inaccuracies" – if handled perfectly, then the problems are mitigated. That's why many playable computer moves look strange – they break general principles. As Kasparov implied in [My Great Predecessors, Part I](#) (paraphrasing pp.150 and 153): These principles are necessary for learning but not necessarily held at the highest levels of play. You have got to learn how to walk before you learn how to run.

Still, in their search to generate winning chances, many strong players play openings that are not quite "correct." Yet these players don't risk much – it takes a much bigger error to lose a chance game. We all know that Tony Miles once played 1...a6 against Karpov and won, but that doesn't mean that we can't label 1...a6 an inaccuracy, especially when played by a weaker player.

I can't really question 2...Nc6 as played by strong players; it received the dubious mark in parentheses. Hopefully sophisticated readers like yourself know what I am trying to say. And also hopefully you know that I know too!

By the way, the two most advanced Novice Nooks - I learned something in order to write them - should not be beneath you. They are [The Two Move Triggers](#) and [The Principle of Symmetry](#) – I use these frequently when teaching or reviewing games.

Question I've been following *Novice Nook* for quite some time and have a question concerning the maxim "Can I meet each of my opponent's forcing moves (checks, captures, and threats)? To not do so for each candidate is Hope Chess." How can I practically do that? Do I need to look at all possible candidate moves for my opponent or is there a faster process for this? Sometimes in the heat of battle, I find it very difficult to understand or assess why a particular move was made by the opponent let alone what moves he can make after I move.

Answer In slow games, identifying all checks and captures as a reply to your candidate is clearly defined and, with practice, should be easy to do; the threats part is often trickier. One shortcut is performing this search before you identify any candidates; instead assume a "null move" for yourself to identify his previous moves' threats (which involves your opponent's checks and captures on the next move, which is what you are looking for). Once you do that, you have a mental list of "checks, captures, and threats for the opponent's next move" as a base. Then for each candidate, you just have to see how it affects that list: meets the threats, allows new checks and captures next move, etc. You don't need to generate an entire list for each candidate.

Black to play



For example, here Black should see that 2.Qh6 is a threat, when Black would

have to sacrifice his queen with 2...Qxf6 just to delay mate one move (3.Nxf6 + and 4.Qxh7#). Therefore, any candidate move that allows this sequence must be rejected. This leaves possibilities like 1...Nd7 to answer 2.Qh6 with Nxf6, or 1...Kh8 so that 2.Qh6 can be met with 2...Rg8, etc. To not consider this threat at all, wait until 2.Qh6, and think "This threatens 3.Qg7#; how do I stop this?" is Hope Chess.

Finding all threats at all levels may be impossible, but making sure you can meet all *immediate* threats is necessary. Of course, if you are playing G/30 or faster and your tactical vision is limited (basic tactics books needed), then you may find the time is insufficient. Really good players rated 2000+ can do this for most moves even at G/30, unless the game is really complicated.

As in all similar endeavors, practice may not make perfect, but it does make you better. Good players have played thousands of games at G/30 or slower, which is much more than most hobby players.

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

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

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