



Slowing Down

Quote of the Month: *I was winning easily until I got sloppy and moved too fast, making a bad mistake that threw the game away in one move.*

This month's column examines why some players consistently play too fast and offers some possible solutions for slowing down. In most cases the motivation for doing so can be found in the answer to the following question: "How many bad moves does it take to lose a chess game?" The answer is one of the few concepts upon which almost all chess players agree: it takes only one move to lose a game!

Therefore, *each move is potentially the losing one, and you have to treat every move as such.* At a minimum, *you should take your time and make sure your intended move cannot be tactically defeated by any check, capture, or threat in reply.* If it can be, then you must discard that as a candidate move and find another. I call using this thought process on every move *Real Chess*. But since it takes a bit of time to complete this analysis on each move, *it is almost impossible to play Real Chess while playing extremely fast.* This topic was also discussed in [Real Chess, Time Management, and Care: Putting it All Together](#).

This thought process is necessary to Real Chess, but simply applying it consistently does *not* make you a good player. Yet if you don't do so, then you can't be a good player! Also, if you constantly make your intended move too quickly, there is a higher risk that the move will be an error. After all, weaker players see *much* less per unit time than stronger players, yet, on the average, play faster – so those weaker players must be arriving at incorrect "conclusions," while thinking just the opposite.

Most players, in situations where they have a choice of moves, usually do not choose the best (or equally best) move.

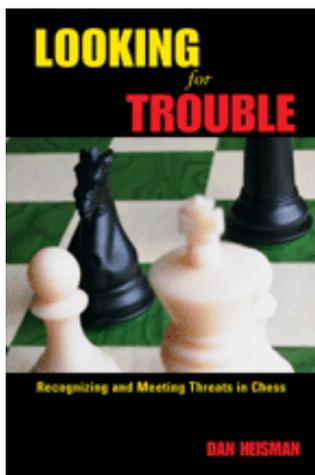
I took an unscientific survey to determine what minimum rating was perceived necessary in order to make the "best" (or equally best) move when some analysis or choice was involved. The results suggested that a rating of at least 2000, or US "expert" level, is needed. However, only 4% of tournament players are experts or above, so *the remaining 96% are not making the best choices!* Therefore, slowing down and taking a nominal amount of time, especially on any move that looks like it could be critical, would result in far fewer "big" errors (for a full discussion on what constitutes "too fast," see [The Two Move Triggers](#)).

Never forget the single most important chess adage: **when you see a good move, look for a better one – you are trying to find the best**

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



move in the given circumstances.

Every chessplayer seems to be aware of this principle, but, strangely, many do not make a serious attempt to apply it consistently! When you have the time and a choice of moves, it is rarely correct to move quickly, because you are possibly making a critical mistake!

If you are just playing for fun and want to see what happens, that is one thing; however, if you want to improve your results and become a better player, the “make a move and see what happens” mindset is never going to work.

Keep in mind that *a move is only as good as your opponent's best reply allows it to be*. So if you make a move without seriously attempting to discover whether your opponent has a critical reply, then you are likely playing too fast and must be willing to accept the consequences. *It is very easy to allow threats that cannot be met*, and allowing such threats is usually disastrous.

If you are the type of player who moves too fast and you wish to remedy this situation, then the following advice may help. For one thing, if you consistently take the time to see what is happening on the board, *you will begin to make better conclusions in a shorter amount of time*. Looking at this from another perspective, *with respect to board vision, practice makes perfect* – or at least slow and steady improvement. If your career includes 1,000+ moves where you (justifiably!) took *at least 10 minutes to complete that move*, you are either a very good player or an overcautious nervous wreck.

Novice Nook has imparted many tips about how to avoid big errors; for example, doing a sanity check or identifying *all* the reasons your opponent made his previous move. Identifying only one reason or one threat will not help much if the move contains several. For instance, if your move forces a certain reply, that does not mean the opponent's forced reply is just responding to your threat, it may also generate threats. Be vigilant and thorough.

An important part of knowing when to play slowly is recognizing critical positions. Critical positions occur quite frequently – sometimes more than half the moves in your game. They can include common tactical decisions, any complex situation, any move that seems to be winning, and important strategic decisions (see [The Most Important Strategic Decisions](#)). *Criticality indicates prudence*. Once criticality is recognized, the capability to consistently play slowly in those situations primarily boils down to willpower. No one else can make you realize the enormity of being careful and not playing too fast, because only *you* can decide not to be hasty, no matter how much you are reminded.

As would be expected – but is not always the case! – playing many slow *games* helps one learn to play *each move* at a slower pace. You benefit from increased board vision, plus pattern recognition in your long-term memory for future reference. Another reason slow games help you learn to play at a slower pace is simply that those games are usually more meaningful. The pain of throwing away a couple of hours work with one hasty move is so

unpleasant that it is a huge reason to avoid it as much as possible! Once you get into the good habit of making sure each move is not a hastily concocted monstrosity, you should be able to carry this caution into games with faster time controls as well. It is always perplexing to watch someone, who has gobs of time and an interesting decision to make, play their move too quickly – so fast that there is no time to even *begin* to consider how good the move is or how it compares to other candidate moves!

It becomes clear that *in order to reap the benefits of careful play, it is important to use almost all of your time during slow time control games*. It does not make sense to start a game with a slow time control and then play the entire game quickly! This does not help to improve one's game, but maybe it does help them catch that train!

Tip: *The best time to see if you are playing too fast or slow is during your opponent's move!* While your opponent is thinking, check your time management and adjust accordingly.

If I had to make a move hastily in a position where a little thought is required, it would ruin all the fun for me (see [Chess, Learning, and Fun](#)). One of the main reasons that I play chess is that I like trying to find the *best move possible in the time that is available*. If I don't use my time wisely, it's no fun! I might as well flip a coin if I'm just going to make some quick, random move and not "puzzle it out" as best I can. If I played too fast and spoiled the rest of the game, it would greatly diminish my enjoyment.

Realization. Willpower. Habit. Fear. Consistency. Resolve. Patience. Good Time Management. These all enter into the picture. Despite the presence of all these factors, if "thinking" is not fun for you, then no matter how much you try to convince yourself that being careful is good for your chess, in the long run you probably will not consistently take as much time as you should. However, the good news is that just because you can't always concentrate like a grandmaster or have the patience of Job, that does not mean you have to make every move immediately – there is a middle ground.

Suppose that you do make a mistake, get a bad position, and get discouraged. Is that a reason to then move faster than you should? I hope everyone would answer "Of course not!", even if such unfortunate circumstances happen to them regularly, and they wish to stop reacting in such a destructive manner.

Consider two important facts:

- You can't affect the past, and
- Anything that distracts you from finding the best move in the given circumstances is harmful.

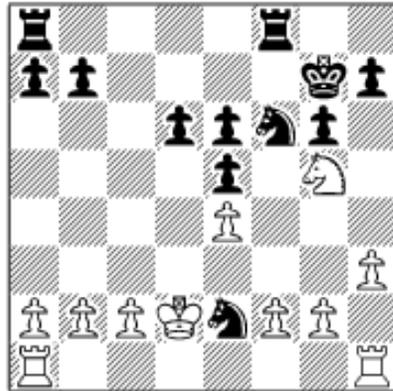
Therefore, there are only two reasonable options:

- *Forget the past and play the best you can, or*
- *Resign*

OK, that may seem harsh. After all, we are all human, and one can't just

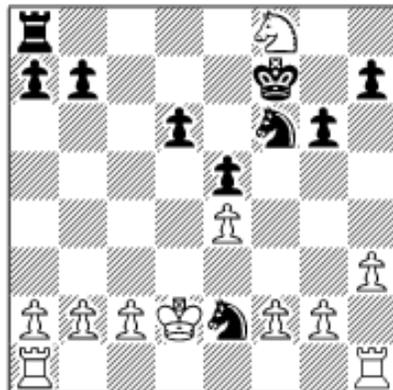
shrug off a bad mistake instantly. So what can you do? First, I would say, take a walk, take a deep breath, or cry silently. Anything. Just get it over with quickly, because the rest of the game lies ahead and you can't dwell on your mistake. Moreover, if you are playing someone close to your strength, he might blunder too! Your chances of a comeback are even better against a much weaker opponent! If you hang tough and take the time to play the best moves, your opponent will be the one who gets discouraged and blunders.

And sometimes you may be discouraged when there is no reason to be!



White to move

In this position, Black has just captured on e2 and expects White to play 1.Kxe2. Instead, White played 1.Nxe6+ Kf7 2.Nxf8. What should Black do?



White to move

Black, discouraged at having his rook captured instead of his knight, quickly and despondently played the “automatic” recapture 2...Rxf8?? and found himself down the exchange and lost after 3.Kxe2 Nxe4. What Black failed to notice was that White's knight is trapped, but that his knight is not! *You should never trade a trapped piece for one that is not.* This is

just common sense, but in the heat of the moment it's easy to panic.

In the above position, the correct idea is to try to save the knight on e2 with 2...Nd4 or 2...Nf4. Since the latter fails to 3.g3? N4h5 (3...Ng2 is trapped) 4.g4 Nf4 5.g5, then 2...Nd4 is correct, e.g. 3.c3 Nc6 Same logic! Not 3...Rxf8?? 4.cxd4. (See the Novice Nook [Examples of Chess Logic.](#)) 4.Nxh7 Nxh7 and Black is only slightly worse with good drawing chances. However, Black was too discouraged to even look for this simple salvation. He resigned himself to his perceived fate and later resigned in the game as well.

One final comment: it can be done! A few years ago I was watching a student play in a slow tournament (40 moves in two hours), and his mother, a professional psychologist, was standing next to me, when she said: “You don't know what a miracle this is – he has ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder] and has never been able to stand still for anything. Yet he wants to win so badly that he has been sitting there at the table, move after move, and taking his time because he knows that if he moves quickly he won't be a good player.” Could there be a better role model for those who think they cannot

play slowly? Slowing down may not be easy, but it is not impossible and it is almost always beneficial.

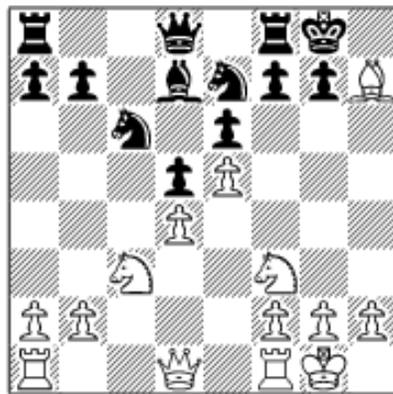
Note 1: Accepting or Declining Sacrifices

There are two types of sacrifices:

- Those where the player sacrificing does *not* capture material – when the opponent can capture the sacrificed piece or not, depending upon which move yields the better position.
- Those in which the player sacrificing captures material – **when the opponent must usually accept the sacrifice or be behind in material and still suffer an attack.**

Of course, if accepting a sacrifice leads to mate in three and declining it only loses a pawn, then clearly you should choose the latter. However, in most instances, if the player sacrificing captures material, you should “hold your nose” and capture the sacrificed piece.

For example, Black should almost always accept the classic bishop sacrifice after White plays Bxh7+:



Black to move after 1.Bxh7+

Take the sacrifice with 1...Kxh7 2.Ng5+ Kg6, and see if you can weather the storm! If you play 1...Kh8?, then you are just down a pawn with an exposed king!

Note 2: Graphic Depiction of Initial and Final Candidates

A picture is worth a thousand words – The “move narrowing” aspect of the thought process:

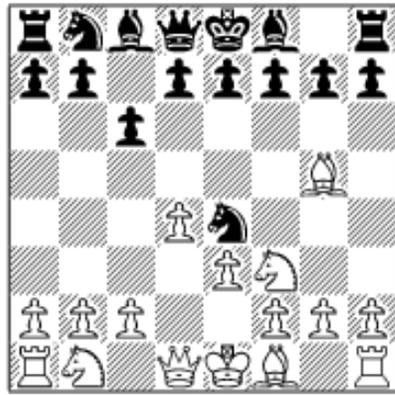
- Opponent’s move – Is it safe? What are all the things it does?
- ↓
- What am I trying to do?
- ↓
- What moves accomplish my objectives? (This list should include all checks, captures, and threats) = *Initial Candidates*
- ↓
- Which of the Initial Candidates are safe? (i.e., cannot be defeated by a check, capture, or threat in reply) = *Final Candidates*
- ↓
- Which of these moves can I find in the given amount of time?
Determining what is a reasonable amount of time and what is the best move is the really hard part!

For additional information, see [Making Chess Simple](#).

Note 3: Defining “only just adequately guarded”

A piece is *only just adequately guarded* if it is attacked as many times as it is

guarded. The important point is that such a piece is nearly *en prise*! This is especially true if all the pieces involved are of the same value. As an example, look at the final problem from [A Tactics Quiz](#).



Black to Play

Here the bishop on g5 is inadequately guarded, so 1...Nxb5! 2.Nxb5 Qa5+ wins a piece, but not 1...Qa5+ 2.b4!, which only loses a pawn.

Readers Questions

How many annotated master games should I review before I see noticeable improvement?

Answer Two thousand seems like a good number. At about sixty games per book, that would be almost thirty books. A mixture of anthologies and personal game collections seems best (see [The Four Homeworks](#)). Also, don't take too much time per game or you will be pretty old by the time you finish!

I played three "friendly" games against a 1650 USCF rated player. They were G/15 + 5 second delay. I ended up losing each game because of some tactic and I realized afterward that if I was far less interested in planning and more interested in safety, the games would've been more even. Of course, I also spent too much time in the opening and on non-critical moves. So it seems that if safety was my first concern (especially in a 15 minute game), I would've played better.

Answer Yes, the shorter the game (and 15/5 is pretty short) the more the critical/safety moves need attention, and the more likely the game will be decided on tactics. But if you learned something from it, then you are a better player for it!

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

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