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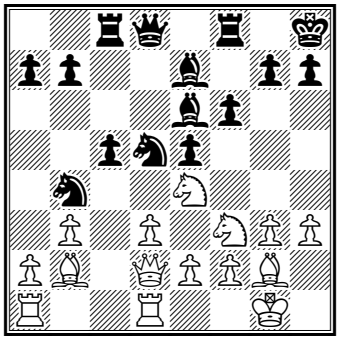
1: It's Your Move

Making a decision is one of life's basic skills. Good decisions bring us almost everything we hold valuable. Bad decisions cost us friendships, time, money and mental ease.

Schools don't teach us how to make good decisions. But chess can. Some of the first difficult choices we make in life are at a chessboard.

Years later we forget how bewildering choosing a move can be. Here's a position that masters would call "quiet."

Firouzja – Mamedyarov
Norway (blitz) 2023



White to play

Quiet perhaps. Yet White must choose from among 42 (!) different moves.

Of course, only a computer considers all 42. Humans quickly learn how to whittle the number down. Even players who have just learned how the pieces move can grasp how truly awful **1 ♕xb4??** is.

As a player improves, he or she learns shortcuts to trim the list further. A "post-beginner" eventually discovers how to rule out pointless retreats, such as **1 ♗h1.**

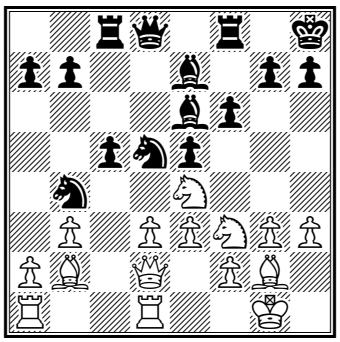
Gradually, that player goes beyond rejecting bad moves, pointless moves, innocuous moves and such to spotting moves that may be good. These are moves that might improve winning chances in some way. For example, **1 ♖dc1** looks forward to a time when the c5-pawn can be safely captured (e.g. 1…♘c6? 2 ♘xc5!).

Masters have a name for moves that survive the trim-down cut. They are "candidate" moves. In a position like this, only a handful of the 42 legal moves could properly

be called candidates. That should tell you how hard it is to find a good move.

In this game, White chose **1 e3**. It was a good choice because White may want to gain space and expand the power of his queen and d1-rook with d3-d4.

Now let's switch seats and think about how Black should reply.



Black to play

It is purely a coincidence that Black has nearly as many legal moves to choose from. Once again we can identify blunders. Nine of Black's 41 moves lose enough material to cost Black the game. For instance, **1…♗xh3??** allows 2 ♗xh3.

Another half dozen or so are pointless, such as **1…♖a8**. They could turn Black's slightly favorable position into an equal or inferior one. So would any of several weakening moves such as **1…h5**.

But there are alternatives that improve Black's chances in various ways. For example, **1…♕d7** develops the queen while making a threat (…♗xh3). Also, **1…b6** protects a potentially vulnerable pawn. A master might consider them and two or three other moves before choosing one to play.

But chess teachers rarely explain how to make that choice. Instead, they provide an avalanche of advice – about pawn structure, material values, and so on. Then they tell students to sort it all out.

"It's easy," they say. "Just pick the right move."

TWO TYPES

It is not easy. But we can make it easier, starting with this:

There are two basic types of candidates. The first are those that improve your position according to "general principles." Those are the guidelines that all beginners are taught.

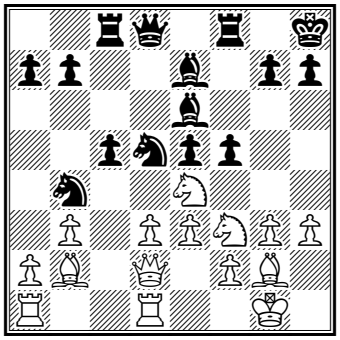
Some are very broad: Develop your pieces and improve their range. Protect them and your pawns. Try to control the center squares. Defend pieces and pawns under attack.

Other general principles are more specific. "Improve the range of your pieces" can mean "Put rooks on open files" and "Don't move knights to the edge of the board."

The second basic kind of candidate is tactical. Moves that give check or make a capture are tactical. So are moves that threaten to make a damaging check or capture.

Most of the moves you make in a typical game are either "principled" or tactical. If you want to make a move but can't describe it in one of those two ways, you should take more time to consider it.

Some positions are so tactical, that principled moves take a back seat until the tactics are over. After 1 e3 in the last diagram Black passed up various principled moves and chose the tactical **1…f5**.



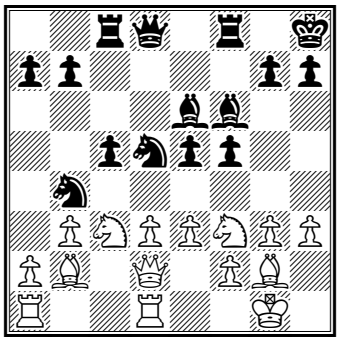
White to play

White's reply **2 ♘c3** could also be called tactical. By responding to Black's threat of …fxe4, it frees him to threaten 3 ♘xe5. Black met the threat with **2…♗f6.**

Masters would say the position has become "sharper." This just means there are more tactical candidates than before. They tend to crowd out the principled candidates and get more of our attention than, say, **3 ♖ac1**.

After Black plays 2…♗f6, the tactical candidates begin with a capture, **3 ♘xd5**. Masters say such a move is "forcing." Black would be forced to recapture or accept the loss of a knight.

White has other forcing moves, including **3 e4** and **3 a3**, which threaten Black knights, and **3 ♘e2** and **3 ♘a4**, which open the way for 4 ♗xe5 or 4 ♘xe5.



3 ♘xd5!

In sharp positions it pays to think of tactics first, general principles second. Now **3…♘xd5** would cost Black the e5-pawn. So would **3…♕xd5** because 4 ♘xe5! discovers a ♗xd5 attack on the queen.

The position has become very sharp. It should be no surprise that more forcing captures and threats followed:

But ♕xh7 would be safe if White played **21 h3** first. However, Kasparov's intuition called for something more lively than pushing a pawn one square.

He looked at the forcing **21 f4**. That would commit him to the sharp consequences of 21…♗xb2. After he found problems for White in that, he rejected 21 f4.

He turned to another promising tactical idea, **21 ♖ac1**. It prepares a sacrifice on c6, e.g. 22 ♖xc6 ♔xc6?? 23 ♖c1+ and wins, or 22…bxc6 23 ♕xe7+.

But after further examination of the sharp candidates, he returned to:

21 h3!

There was no convenient way for Black to stop ♕xh7 followed by ♕xg6. Kasparov changed his previous view of 21 h3 because he now appreciated how it gave him another way to win. He wouldn't have to mate Black, just promote his h-pawn.

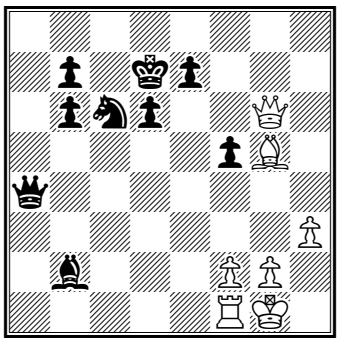
He pursued that plan as the game continued:

21 … ♖xa4!

22 ♖xa4 ♕xa4

23 ♕xh7 ♗xb2

24 ♕xg6



It was becoming clearer that White has the upper hand. He has good chances of promoting his h-pawn. In addition, Black's king is much more vulnerable than his. The game was later decided by a Black blunder.

But what is important to us is how White got to the favorable 24 ♕xg6 position:

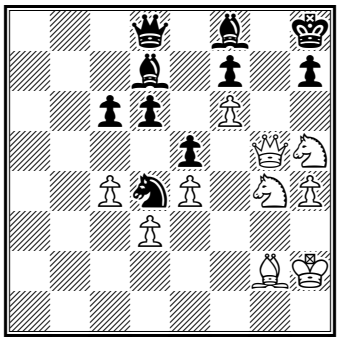
He relied on instincts and analysis that at times seemed confused and random. He changed his mind about the nature of the position and the quality of moves. Yet he made better decisions than Black. This book is about how this is done.

2: Look Smart

The process of choosing a move begins with a quick look at the board. But it is a special kind of looking. It takes weeks, if not months, for a newcomer to chess to learn how to look properly.

This is a knack called quick sight. It consists of spotting the most powerful potential moves. Typically, they are checks, captures and threats.

Dubov – Piorun
Moscow 2019



White to play

You will find quiz positions like this on web sites. Even some elite grandmasters try to solve a few fresh diagrams each day to keep their quick sight quick.

Here you might begin by noticing **1 ♘h6.** That threatens to mate in two ways, 2 ♕g8 and 2 ♘xf7.

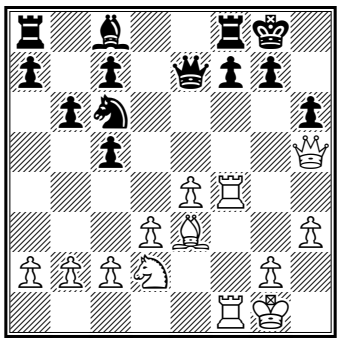
Does it win by force? No, 1…♗xh6 defends.

The little secret of many quiz positions is that they turn out to be easy if you look for a check. In this case, just look for one check after another.

1	**♕g7+!**	**♗xg7**
2	**fxg7+**	**♔g8**
3	**♘h6 mate**	

But bear in mind: A quiz position comes with an unnatural hint. It tells you there is a single winning solution to find. In the vast majority of positions you face over the board, there will be no hint – and no such solution.

Nevertheless, the time-tested recommendation is: Begin each search for the best move by spotting



He can look for a way to use his knight on the kingside or to make ♖f3-g3 and ♗xh6 succeed. For example, **19 ♖4f3** ♗e6? hands White a choice of winning with 20 ♖g3 or the immediate 20 ♗xh6! (20…gxh6 21 ♕xh6 and ♖g3+).

19 ♘f3 ♗e6

Now **20 ♘h4** ♕g5 21 ♕f3 followed by ♘f5 would have been excellent for White.

Instead, he tried to force matters, with **20 ♖h4? f6 21 ♕g6 ♕f7?** (21…♗f7!) and won after **22 ♕g3!** with the idea of ♗xh6.

For example, 22…♔h7 23 ♘g5+!. Or 22…h5 23 ♗h6 and ♖xh5!.

What happened to Black? His minor-piece moves certainly looked reasonable. But White did a much better job of setting up shop (14 ♘d2 and 15 f4) for the middlegame.

LATE OPENING CHOICES

You can't predict, before a game begins, when the most important decisions will be made. But if you are not following book moves, the major choices begin when you complete your piece development.

Often, a decision about what to do with your second rook, second bishop and second knight has longer-lasting effects than middlegame moves.

Carlsen – Duda
Meltwater 2021

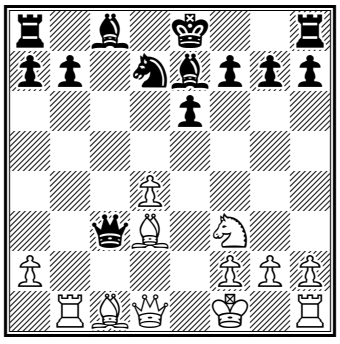
1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 ♘f3 c5 6 e3 cxd4 7 exd4 ♘xc3 8 bxc3 ♕c7 9 ♖b1

This was a rare gambit at the time. White bets a pawn on his rapid development after **9…♕xc3+** 10 ♗d2 ♕c7 11 ♗d3.

9 … ♘d7

10 ♗d3!? ♕xc3+

11 ♔f1 ♗e7



White to play

Soon, if not next move, Black will decide what to do with his c8-bishop. That will probably mean picking either …b6/…♗b7 or …♘b6/…♗d7. Once he makes that choice he can decide where his rooks belong, most likely on c8 and d8.

There is greater pressure on White to make the best move because he is a pawn down. Principled candidates such ♗f4 and ♕e2 look good but don't tell us how to get compensation in the middlegame. Getting White's h1-rook to the half-open e-file with g2-g3, ♔g2 and ♖e1 is slow.

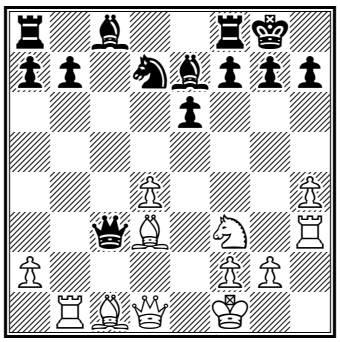
12 h4!

The rook is going to h3 and then to g3, where it will threaten ♖xg7. There may also be tactics in which a third-rank rook will threaten Black's queen.

For instance, **12…b6** 13 ♖h3 ♗b7 14 ♖g3 g6? and now 15 ♘e5! ♘xe5? 16 ♗b5+ and ♖xc3.

12 … 0-0

13 ♖h3



An indication that White is ready for the middlegame is how **13…b6** or **13…♘b6** would be met by 14 ♗xh7+! (14…♔xh7? 15 ♘g5+).

13 … ♘f6?

This seems to add protection to the kingside and also rules out ♗e4 in case of …b6.

A better try is **13…♕a5** and then 14 ♕e2 b6. This looks unplayable because of 15 ♕e4, threatening ♕xh7 mate and ♕xa8. But Black has his own tactical tricks, 15… ♘f6 16 ♕xa8? ♗a6!, when he holds the upper hand.

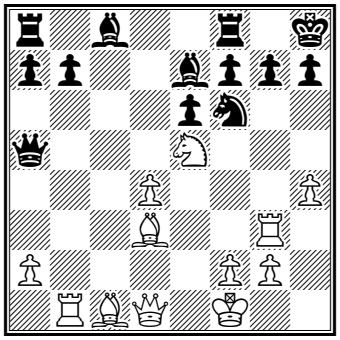
14 ♘e5!

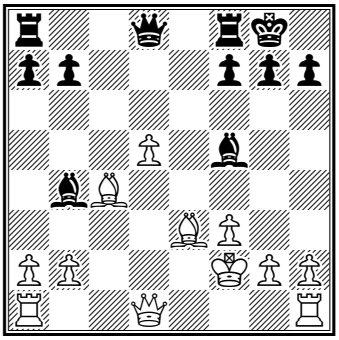
Black needed his knight on d7, at least temporarily, so he could capture a White knight on e5. He is entering serious trouble now.

14 … ♕a5

The queen had to move but **14…♕c7** served better (15 ♖g3 ♘e8).

15 ♖g3 ♔h8





Black to play

He wanted to prove that Black had enough compensation for his sacrifice. He didn't expect more than that. He gave:

15 … ♖e8

And wrote: "With good play for a pawn." The rook threatens, for instance, 16…♖xe3 17 ♔xe3 ♕b6+ or …♕e7+ with a strong attack.

Years after Fischer's book appeared, it was noticed that there was something much simpler – **15…♕h4+!** and …♕xc4 wins a bishop. Fischer clearly did not consider the queen check.

But what also eluded attention is the move Fischer did look at. Black has a lot more than a pawn's worth after 15…♖e8. He would be winning easily.

For example, 16 ♕b3 ♖xe3! and now 17 ♕xe3 ♕h4+ or 17 ♔xe3 ♕e7+ 18 ♔f2 ♗c5+ and mates. Or 16 ♗d4 ♕h4+ 17 g3 ♗e1+!. Fischer stopped his analysis of 15…♖e8 because he didn't suspect it was worth looking for more than "good play."

Takeaways: Evaluation completes calculation. It can also spare you from unnecessary calculation. But there are some positions that defy calculation. Also, your expectations may cause you to over-value or under-value moves – or simply ignore critical tree branches. Often the easiest candidate to calculate – the one leading to a short tree branch of forcing moves – turns out to be the candidate resulting in the hardest future position to evaluate. But the good news is: Once you've accurately evaluated your candidates you've taken the largest of the final steps to finding the best move.

11: Tree Tweaking

Suppose you spot a candidate move with a promising tactical or strategic idea. But when you calculate and evaluate the candidate, it does not deliver its promise.

The problem may not be the idea, the calculation or the evaluation. It could be the order of moves you looked at.

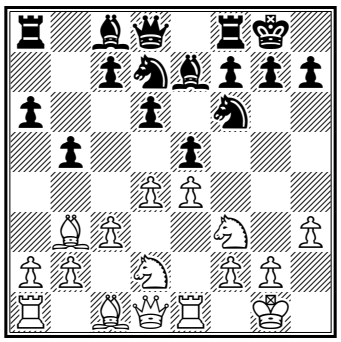
Sequence matters. Good moves can turn out to be dumb mistakes if they are played in the wrong order.

J. Polgar – Spassky
Match 1993

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗b5 a6 4 ♗a4 ♘f6 5 0-0 ♗e7 6 ♖e1 b5 7 ♗b3 d6 8 c3 0-0 9 h3 ♘b8 10 d4 ♘bd7 11 ♘bd2

This is a standard opening position, reached innumerable times by amateurs and masters.

If White has not protected the e-pawn when Black carries out his plan, he will lose it after …♗b7 …♖e8, …♗f8, …exd4 and …♘xe4.



Black to play

11	**…**	**♖e8**
12	**♘f1**	**♗b7**
13	**♗c2**	**♗f8**
14	**♘g3**	

White has protected his e4-pawn with three pieces (♗c2, ♘g3 and ♖e1). A balanced middlegame lies ahead. But after the game the players realized they had both blundered already.

Black had wrongly transposed the routine moves …♗b7 and …♖e8. He should have played **11…♗b7** and then 12 ♗c2 ♖e8.