



Polemic Thinking Part Two

On development, the place of opening preparation in it, and ways of making chess grow

4. Problems In Contemporary Chess

I believe that almost everyone who loves chess has the feeling that our game does not, unfortunately, occupy the place it deserves in society. And there are important, objective reasons for this, some of which are natural, and some of which can certainly be eliminated.

The most important natural reason lies in the specific nature of chess: it lacks any outward dynamism, you can't eliminate the length of either the individual games or of a tournament in general without wreaking catastrophic qualitative damage (a case where the cure would be worse than the disease), and the limited number of its adherents. Compared with football and other forms of sport, there is no point in watching a game of chess without knowing the rules of play (which are quite complex for an uninitiated bystander) to at least a minimal level that would allow him to understand, if only with a commentator's help, what is going on over the board. Here's why efforts to develop chess among children and introduce chess lessons into the scholastic curriculum deserve our full support: by this very means, we greatly increase the number of adherents to our game.

Of course, the specific nature of chess includes positive aspects as well: its attractive image as practically the sole intellectual form of sport, and its widespread use of computer technology and the Internet, which should serve as a basis for mutually beneficial contacts with the appropriate companies, etc. Unfortunately, profitable opportunities are barely exploited – to a great extent this is the fault of those who govern chess. It's no secret to anyone that in our day, FIDE has become a collection of incompetent bureaucrats, who have lost all connection, either with those who love chess or with the professionals: they work only for their own profit.

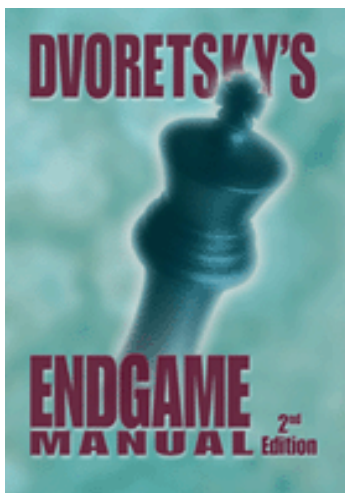
The great number of short draws – an unavoidable attribute of nearly every competition, especially in the late rounds – hurt the popularity of chess. And it's not just the short draws: it looks strange to the fans to see the battle cut short at any point in the game, when the position is still complex and interesting. To resolve this problem, I suggested rescinding the rule allowing players to converse during the game, hence eliminating draws by agreement. I published a lengthy article on this subject in 2003 in the Russian-language magazine *Shakhmatnaya Nedelya*, and on several Internet websites; my suggestion was soon successfully carried out at tournaments in Corsica and Sofia. I think it should be tested more widely, with the aim of eventually introducing corresponding changes in the "Chess Codex."

I could go on for a long time, making a list of the existing problems, but for now I would like to dwell on just one of them: the negative influence of opening theory on contemporary chess.

COLUMNISTS

The Instructor

Mark Dvoretsky



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Let me explain what I mean.

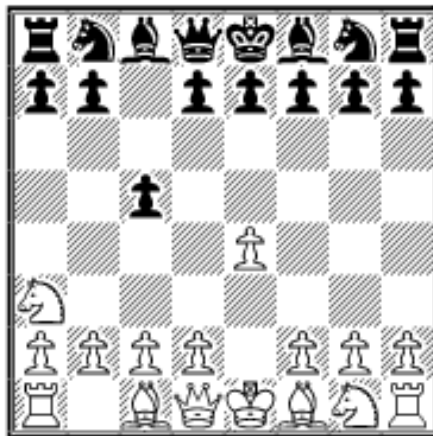
Even before the computer age, many opening variations had been analyzed out to a forced draw, or to positions of little interest, which a competent player should be unable to lose. The introduction of computers has brought about an enormous increase in this kind of “scorched earth.” As a result, many opening duels lead to an immediate shutting-down of play, and quick draws.

And if a player enters a complex opening variation without being sufficiently prepared, then we see the opposite picture: he finds himself outplayed, or at a decisive disadvantage, without having played a single move of his own, but merely a demonstration of his own, or someone else’s, computer analysis.

In both cases, the very concept of the game is destroyed: instead of a tense struggle of intellect over the board, the spectators see merely a comparison of home analyses, of interest only to a narrow circle of chess professionals.

I must make clear at once that the indisputable fact that a considerable percentage of games now have their outcomes determined by home analysis is merely a phenomenon of contemporary tournament practice – it does not, under any circumstances, presage the death of chess ideas under computer pressure. On the contrary: we have not yet discovered many of its secrets; what we do over the board is often, alas, far from perfect.

In the Russian Championship Superfinal at the end of 2005, grandmaster Zvjaginsev astounded his opponents, as well as all chess enthusiasts, with a completely new idea as early as the second move of the Sicilian Defense. After **1 e4 c5**, in three games he continued **2 Na3!?**, and scored two points with it.



How do you deal with a knight move to the edge of the board? It’s probably not the strongest move – on the contrary, if a hypothetical top-end computer had evaluated White’s advantage before this move at, let’s say, +0.5, then after it, his advantage would more than likely be reduced, let’s say, to +0.3 (of course, these numbers would be approximate). But then the same assessment would probably prove applicable as well to the case where Black, in response to 1 e4, instead of 1...e5 or 1...c5, chose some other reply, such as 1...d6 or 1...Nf6 – but that doesn’t stop aficionados of the Pirc-Ufimtsev or Alekhine’s Defenses from employing those openings.

What’s important is that Zvjaginsev created a fresh position, in which the players could no longer rely on contemporary opening theory, and had to operate independently, which is never easy.

And if such a thing could happen in the very beginning of a game, then later on the probability of seeing fresh positions must increase considerably. To come up with such positions, we rely on all our experience, and on the strategic and tactical techniques we have learned; however, resolving the position by such means is usually not possible. Some room almost always remains, both for independent creativity, and for mistakes.

Let us return to the situation on the board after Zvjaginsev’s move. The most aggressive

replies are 2...d5 or 2...Nf6. Should Black play one of these moves? 2...Nc6 could be met by 3 Bb5 – what new angle does the knight's position at a3 bring to this position, compared to the usual variations; which side does it favor? Does White plan to continue f2-f4, taking advantage of the fact that his king's knight is not developed yet? It could very well be that he has in mind the King's Indian Reversed setup, with d2-d3, g2-g3, and Bf1-g2, but with the queen's knight unusually placed: what arrangement of forces should be employed against such a plan?

It's interesting that, in commenting on the game Zvjaginsev – Khalifman at the www.e3e5.com website, openings expert GM Sakaev suggested 2...b6 as the best reaction. In the opinion of Zvjaginsev, and also of Motylev, who was preparing for the move 2 Na3 before his own game against Vadim, Sakaev's recommendation is not very good. The question isn't who's right: what's important is that the problem turned out to be quite a complex one, even for leading specialists.

And so, there are creative opportunities, even at the very beginning of the game. But this fact doesn't change the reality that the overwhelming majority of players prefer to follow well-trodden paths. And if they do seek out new ideas and improvements, then it is only at the end of lengthy theoretical variations. The result, as we have already noted, is that for a considerable number of games, the outcome of the battle is predetermined – even before it starts.

We can sense the other side of opening theory's negative influence if we consider what a chessplayer occupies himself with in the time between tournaments. He must spend by far the greater part of his time trying to come to grips with enormous amounts of information. He must examine the opening phase of new games that have been played in those variations that form his repertoire; he must catalogue all the useful games into the systems he is trying to learn. It is useful to examine analyses posted on websites, in magazines and opening books; it is necessary to check the information so acquired on a computer, to expose any weaknesses therein, to examine carefully the complications arising in many sub-variations, to look for new ideas. As the tournament draws nearer – and during the tournament itself – it's important to see what his opponents are playing, to pinpoint weaknesses in their repertoire, and to select the appropriate weapon from his own. Since his opponents will, as a rule, make a practice of varying the openings they use, he will have to prepare himself on several fronts simultaneously, and also to expect surprises. Memorizing this immense load of information is impossible, which means it must be constantly repeated. The fear of forgetting one's analysis during the game chokes many of us (as I know from personal experience). And so, the work goes on, day after day, much of it not even creative, but merely technical. Does that sound like an enjoyable life to you?

Now, let's dream for a bit. Imagine that stone has been lifted from your shoulders, that opening information has all disappeared somewhere, and that the Sisyphean labor described above is no longer necessary.

How much fuller and more interesting the chessplayer's life would be! Professional preparation would take on a completely different aspect. Our colleagues' games would no longer be studied for ways to catch them in the opening, but in order to understand their particular kind of creativity, to choose the most appropriate strategy against them, and at the same time to introduce some newly-discovered playing methods into our own arsenal. There would be time to delve more deeply into our own game, and then to give it a good strengthening, with the aid of some directed training methods, while at the same time devoting more attention to physical and psychological preparation – the result would be an increase in the level of chessplaying in general. The outcome of the struggle would be decided purely over the board, by one's mastery of chess, and not by home computer analyses and one's ability to memorize. The pages of chess books and magazines devoted

to indexes of opening variations would be replaced by pithy analysis of well-played games and fragments, articles on creative problems, and discussions that might involve leading grandmasters, no longer suffering from the time-shortages they have today. They could meet with chess amateurs more often, and share their experience with young players.

I remain convinced that chess in its present form is moving gradually towards a dead end, and must inescapably lose its current stature in the life of society. The first sign to appear – indeed, it's already appearing, in part – will be the straitened financial circumstances of masters and grandmasters; after them will come the trainers, the authors of books and articles – almost every inhabitant of the chess world, in fact, except for the bureaucrats, who always seem able to take care of themselves.

For chess to make progress requires changes; and one of the most important changes must be the realization of that fantasy which I have just described.

But how do we turn it into reality? One possible way already exists, and has been tested in several tournaments. I'm talking about Chess-960, or Fischer-random.

5. Chess-960

The rules offered by Robert Fischer for this form of chess are the same (except for the changes required in castling), but the initial setup of the pieces changes. The pieces are set up behind the pawns on the first rank at random – that is, by lot, with the black pieces arranged the same as White's. There are some restrictions: the bishops must still start on different colors, and the rooks must be on opposite sides of the king. There are 960 possible variations of the opening position.

Clearly, opening preparation would be senseless in Fischer-random, since it's impossible to know which position you'd have to play; still less would you be able to know how your opponent would play it. Creating and memorizing an entire system of opening variations for each of the 960 possible setups would be unrealistic. You have to create, starting with move one.

I've never played this game myself, but many of my friends and students have taken part in the traditional Fischer-random tournaments in Mainz. Most of them liked the new game. They were very happy not to have to waste time preparing for the game, and it was interesting to test themselves and compete with their opponents in solving original tasks. That being the case, one can only welcome the continued hosting of such events, and hope there will eventually be more of them.

But this can hardly mean that chess-960 should be promoted as the designated successor to everyday chess. Most of us love playing blitz, but nobody (well, except for GM Tkachiev – I just remembered him) is suggesting we should replace serious chess with blitz. The problems involved with such an enormous change in the rules should be examined from all sides and tested, with all aspects considered in order to find out whether there are drawbacks that might prove dangerous to the future of chess.

The first things that springs to mind is the original shape that play takes from the very first moves, and the almost complete lack of any connection with the usual strategic schemes. Some will be scared off by the unusual nature of the resulting positions; others will like it – but one could hardly give a definite answer as to whether this is a bad or a good thing. It's a question of one's own system of likes and dislikes, and everybody's different.

Let's approach the problem from a different angle. The basis of our attraction to chess comes from sporting as well as esthetic elements. The former involves, for players, the

battle for victory; for the spectators, it's the intrigue of a tournament, "rooting" for one player or the other, determining a champion. Obviously, changing over to chess-960 would cost us nothing from the sporting standpoint – on the contrary, the battle would probably grow even fiercer.

The esthetic element, for the player, is expressed through his joy in finding and successfully executing over the board beautiful and hard-to-find ideas. The spectators (and most of us find ourselves on both sides: sometimes we play, sometimes we watch) gain enjoyment from the players' discoveries, usually after the fact when they play over already-played games. Then they can enjoy not only the moves actually played, but also the sharp ideas that remained behind the scenes, yet were noted in commentaries. The best examples of chess creativity are retained for many years, examined repeatedly in the pages of magazines and books, giving joy to new chess enthusiasts, increasing their love for our game, and their respect for its leading specialists, capable of creating such beauty over the board. Here, I see a most important distinguishing feature of chess, separating it from any other form of sport in which the most interesting part of the game is over when the tournament concludes. This is one of our trump cards, and we must not, under any circumstances, devalue the creative element of the game of chess.

One of the main criteria of beauty (along with subtlety and originality) is the soundness, the correctness of the moves, of the individual ideas, or of entire games. And here is where I have some doubts about the future of chess-960.

Recall our examination of Zvjaginsev's novelty. Into the standard Sicilian position one fresh element is introduced, and immediately we have problems not easily solved over the board. But there, we could at least give a qualified assessment of the plusses and minuses of this or that way of continuing the game, since we could refer to a known setup of the remaining pieces, and tested plans of action in similar situations.

But in Fischer chess, where the majority of the pieces – if not all of them – are standing in unusual positions, we must deal with many new and unknown elements. As a result, a chessplayer has almost nothing to refer to in looking for a move; he's playing "without line or compass."

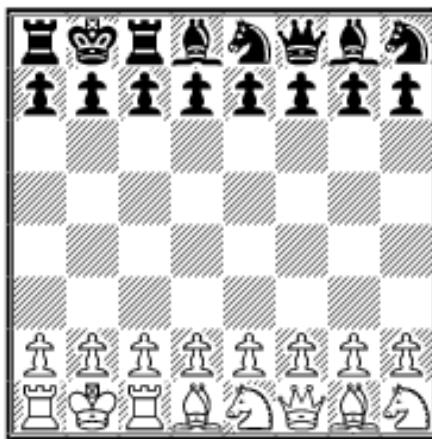
I can assure you that even leading grandmasters play a weak game of chess-960, full of both strategic and tactical errors. Some of these blunders are immediately evident; others are not easily uncovered, even during analysis, in view of the absence of reliable and proven positional benchmarks. Fine, deeply considered decisions, close to the level of the best achievements of traditional chess, become practically impossible. True, somewhere in the midst of the middlegame, the position usually begins to look something like "normal" – that is, familiar to us. But by that time, the players already have no thinking time left, because they had to use it all resolving the hugely complex problems of planned development from the very first moves. So these games almost never show us any aesthetic value.

If we remember how hard it can be to discover the secrets of a position even in traditional chess, where we can refer to many generations' worth of experience, what I'm saying becomes logically obvious. Nonetheless, I shall illustrate my idea with a concrete example.

Grandmaster Yusupov showed me the opening of two games from the Mainz tournament of 2005, both played in the same round. On that day, the game began with the following position:



Aronian – Bacrot

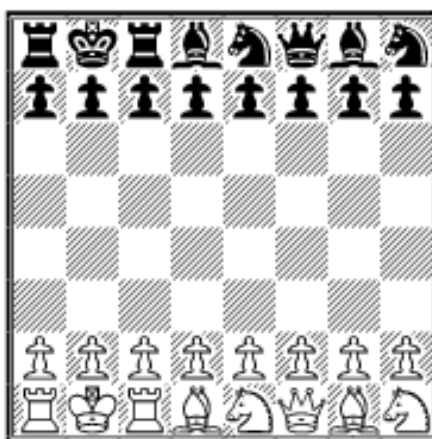


1 e4 e5 2 Nd3 Ng6?! 3 f4! Bf6? (3...Nf6) 4 Nc5 Rd8 5 Qb5 Nd6 6 Nxd7+ Rxd7 7 Qxd7, and White parlayed his exchange plus into a win.

What's to be said about this? Levon Aronian spotted one of the tactical peculiarities of this starting position: the weakness at d7. He chose a developmental scheme, allowing him to mount a quick attack on this weakness in his opponent's camp (while simultaneously attacking another one at b7). His opponent, meanwhile, brought out his

pieces with no suspicion of the danger threatening him.

The same motifs appeared in the following game, where it was Black who exploited the weakness at d2.



Hertneck – Morozevich

1 d4 This move looks weaker than 1 e4, since it doesn't open any lines for White's pieces. Evidently, Hertneck intended to develop the knight at d3, but did not wish to place it in front of the pawn. This is a positional consideration taken from classical chess, laid down as a rule back in the 18th century, as far back as Philidor. But is it correct to follow it in this situation? Nobody knows.

1...f5 2 Nd3 Nf6 3 f3 g5 Strange. Instead of developing his pieces and fighting for the center, Alexander Morozevich advances a wing pawn – apparently for the same reason that I used to explain Gerald Hertneck's opening move: he wanted to develop the knight on g6.

4 e4 fe 5 fe? Nxe4! The queen is untouchable, because of the mate on d2.

Clearly the German GM overlooked an elementary tactical shot, although after **6 Qe1**, he definitely had compensation for the pawn in the form of Black's lagging development (Morozevich went on to win the game).

White should have played 5 Nc5, with threats of 6 Qb5, 6 Nxb7 and 6 fe. Black would probably have had to protect his queenside with the "non-standard" 6...c6 7 fe Rc7 (without fear of 8 e5? Ne4!), but the position looks better for White. On the other hand, I wouldn't stake my life on any of my evaluations so far.

This is all very curious and funny – but that's all. The level of play demonstrated here by grandmasters isn't much different from (to take an example from traditional chess) the efforts, successful or unsuccessful, to exploit the weakness at f7 from the starting position, and deliver the "scholars mate." Of course we need to take into account the fact that in Mainz, the games were played in rapid chess; however, I suspect that, even under a classical time-control, the quality of play would not have risen very much.

In the early days of chess, many such naïve games were played. As experience grew, so did the understanding of the principles of opening play; new schemes of battle appeared and

were worked upon, and those that didn't work out were tossed aside. For example, it became clear that certain gambits were not too promising; others, by contrast (like the Queen's Gambit), were positionally well-founded. Some excessively categorical statements (such as Tarrasch's thesis that it's wrong to accept the Queen's Gambit, because the white bishop can then get to c4 in one move, without loss of tempo) appeared, and then lost their power. The conception that one need not occupy the center with pawns, but could attack it with pieces instead, proved viable. And it was this kind of idea-filled development of views on the opening that undoubtedly aided the progress of chess – it was a positive thing, until the time came when the process had grown into an enormous mass of purely concrete information, needing daily absorption by generations of modern chess players.

But in chess-960, there will be practically no accumulation of experience: there are too many opening positions, and too many differences between them. And thus, the concept of the opening phase will find itself frozen, for a long time, at a childhood level.

Let me summarize, briefly: Playing Fischer-random is undoubtedly interesting (and probably even useful: overcoming routine, and developing an unfettered approach to the position). But studying played games is of no interest, because it's almost impossible for anything creatively important to come from them (when measured against the level that both amateurs and experts in classical chess have grown accustomed to). So switching to this new game involves a serious risk that we may lose the aesthetic element of chess – and consequently, a great number of its adherents.

6. An Alternative Suggestion

It's not an easy thing, psychologically, to abandon centuries of tradition. But if it has to be done, then let us try to reach the goal we have set (in this case, getting rid of opening theory) by the most economic means, with the smallest possible changes. In this regard, I suggest a different path, one less radical than Fischer chess.

Let's take the usual opening position. Make one move each of a black and white pawn, chosen at random, one square forward (and the moves don't have to mirror each other); then begin play. This gives us only 64 variants of the starting position, some of which will slightly decrease the advantage of the first move, while others will increase it slightly – but this is not so terrible. Most likely, some combinations of these first moves will give too much of an advantage to one side (such as 1 d3 f6, leaving Black with great difficulties in developing his king's knight) – so we will exclude them. That leaves roughly fifty variants. This number could also be increased, if we add the opening knight moves (though not all of them: after 1 Nf3 Nf6, for example, we reach a position that has already occurred numerous times in practice, which is not what we want). If it should ever prove necessary sharply to increase the number of opening positions, then we could specify that each side gets two opening moves, instead of one. This would add a few hundred more variants unknown to contemporary theory, which at the same time would still be practically balanced.

On the other hand, just one pair of opening moves would be sufficient to take today's theory off the table. And the new theory, which would inevitably appear, would no longer consist of piles of just-played games and computer work-throughs (not knowing what position would be played, or how my opponent would play it, there would be no point in stuffing my head with endless analyses). What will be studied will be the basic strategic motifs behind various opening setups (for example, if the move f2-f3 is played, then it would be a good idea to develop the knight via h3 to f2), as well as the possibility of adapting various plans that were worked out for traditional chess into the new circumstances. For the positions that will be reached will be very similar to those we are familiar with, so the principles of opening strategy will hardly change, and the experience of all those centuries of dealing with the opening will remain at chess players' disposal.

We can see that this suggested form of chess achieves the same goal as chess-960: it frees chess players from all that grinding home preparation, and forces them to think for themselves from the very first moves. But the changes will be less radical (a normal position will arise, but one containing just one or two new elements), chess players will find it easier to get used to, and there will be no significant loss in the quality of play. Everything that's important in our accumulated heritage will be retained, including the best examples of how to solve the problems of the opening (since the tasks to be solved will be very similar). And the technical aspect (that is, recording of games, and using computer programs) of moving to this kind of variant will be much simpler than Fischer-random, since the usual starting position is used as our basis.

We should give the American grandmaster his due; he did not simply come up with the idea of scattering the pieces at will across the back rank (as had already been suggested before), but worked out precise rules for this new game. I have merely described a scheme that will require considerable working out – although I don't think it would be too complex.

It would be good if my suggestion attracted enough interest to be tested in practice. A few tournaments played under these rules (just like the ones played under Fischer rules) would help give a better understanding of the new playing variants, and demonstrate their strong and weak points. If this or some other new form of chess achieved popularity, it would inevitably acquire official status, at which point it would become possible for the majority of fans and professionals alike to move to a kind of chess where opponents would test each other's mastery, and not the results of their computers' homework and their own memorizing skills. The future will show if such projects will remain in Utopia, or turn into reality.



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