

The Pretty Test

Why is chess unlike other arts?

BY GM ANDY SOLTIS

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HE WORLD'S BEST PLAYER and its best-known amateur both looked at this game and agreed it was pretty. So did

fans. And that points to something unusual about chess:

COLLE SYSTEM (D05)

Edgar Colle
John James O'Hanlon
Nice, 2.21.1930

1. d4 d5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. e3 c5 4. c3 e6 5. Bd3 Bb6 6. Nbd2 Nbd7 7. O-O O-O 8. Re1 Re8 9. e4 dxe4 10. Nxe4 Nxe4 11. Bxe4 cxd4 12. Bxh7+ Kxh7 13. Ng5+ Kg6 14. h4! Rh8



15. Rxe6+!

The world champion, Alexander Alekhine, awarded this game the tournament's "beauty prize" because of variations such as 15. ... fxe6 16. Qd3+, which mates in six moves after 16. ... Kf6 17. Qf3+ or in five after 16. ... Kh6 17. Nxe6+.

More sparkling moves followed: 15. ... Nf6 16. h5+! Kh6 (16. ... Rxh5 17. Qd3+! is a quick mate) 17. Rxd6 Qa5 18. Nxf7+ Kh7 19. Ng5+ Kg6 20. Qb3+, Black resigned.

The amateur was Marcel Duchamp. He was

one of the world's most famous artists but also the world's 129th-ranked chess player, according to retroactive ratings. He finished a creditable ninth in this tournament.

As an artist, Duchamp was controversial. He still is. If you asked 100 art lovers what they think of the work of Duchamp, or any modern artist, you would hear very different opinions — some adoring, others critical.

You might get the same sharp disagreement about the latest movies, music, dance styles — just about anything we could call art. We take it for granted that "there's no accounting for taste."

But chess is different. There is an odd esthetic sense that unites players, regardless of strength. We all recognize chess beauty.

We disagree about *how* beautiful. The move 15. Rxe6+! would not win a beauty contest if another contestant was, say, Frank Marshall's immortal 25. ... Qg3!! (against Stevan Levitsky, Breslau 1912). But it certainly passes the pretty test.

A game is pleasing to our eyes even if we later learn it is dubious to the computer. When Alekhine bestowed the prize on Colle, he overlooked that 12. Bxh7+ was second-best because Black could have defended with 13. ... Kg8! (14. Qh5 Qf6).

No matter. In chess we value flawed elegance over utilitarianism. Consider this candidate for prettiest game of the last year.

ENGLISH OPENING (A15)

GM David Navara
IM Vaclav Finek
Czech Ch, Ostrava, 04.30.2024

1. Nf3 Nf6 2. c4 c6 3. Nc3 d5 4. e3 e6 5. b3 Bd6 6. Bb2 O-O 7. Be2 Nbd7 8. Qc2 Qe7 9. Rg1 e5 10. g4 Nb6 11. g5 Nfd7 12. cxd5 cxd5? 13. Nb5! Re8 14. a4 Nf8 15. a5 Nbd7

16. h4 d4 17. Rc1 Nb8



Those buzz-killing machines want White to grab a pawn with 18. Qe4, responding to 18. ... Nc6 with 19. Nxd6 Qxd6 20. Nxd4.

18. Qxc8!? Rxc8 19. Rxc8

But the engines gradually appreciate White's artistry on a tactical canvas. For example, 19. ... Bb4 can be met by 20. g6! (or the stronger-still 20. Bc4!) 20. ... hxc6 21. Bc4 with the idea of Nf3-g5 and a capture on f7. If 21. ... Qd7 22. Nxe5! Qxc8 23. Nxf7, with at least a draw by perpetual check.

19. ... Qd7? 20. Bc4! g6 21. h5!

Black is lost — if 21. ... Qxc8 22. Nxd6 Qc5 23. Nxe5! Qxd6 24. Nxf7 or 23. ... Qxe5 24. Nxf7 and wins. There was more to come:

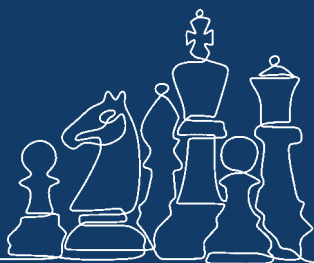
21. ... a6 22. Nxd6 Qxd6 23. hxc6 hxc6 24. Rh1! Qd7 25. Nxe5! Qxc8 26. Nxf7 Qxc4 27. Nh6+ Kh7 28. bxc4 Nc6 29. Nf5+ Kg8 30. Nxd4, Black resigned.

What makes a move or game beautiful? When the chess historian Isaak Linder questioned great players, they gave a gamut of answers.

Sacrifices and surprises, of course, they said. But also "the harmony of the pieces" (cited by Vasily Smyslov), "clarity" (Boris

QUIZ FOR APRIL

► **YEFIM GELLER WON MORE** classical games from world champions than any modern player. He is a candidate for the title of greatest player who never won the world title. This year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Geller's birth, and this month's quiz features some of his shortest victories. Your task in each of the six diagrams is to find the fastest way to win. This will usually mean a forced path to a decisive advantage in material. For solutions, see Page 70.



PROBLEM 1

Yefim Geller
Alexey Suetin



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 2

Yefim Geller
Paulos Papapavlou



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 3

Yefim Geller
Stefan Kindermann



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 4

Yefim Geller
Josif Vatnikov



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 5

Yefim Geller
Alexander Kotov



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 6

Lev Psakhis
Yefim Geller



BLACK TO MOVE

Spassky) and "logic" (David Bronstein).

Tigran Petrosian said beauty is different for players of different strengths. For a beginner, a simple knight fork is pretty, he said in Linder's Russian-language book, *Estetika Shakhmat* (Aesthetics of Chess).

Asked which game made a particularly strong esthetic impression on him, Bronstein named one from the 19th-century matches between Louis-Charles LaBourdonnais and Alexander MacDonnell. Mikhail Tal cited another golden oldie: Wilhelm Steinitz – Curt von Bardeleben, Hastings 1895.

Mikhail Botvinnik was an outlier. In keeping with the Marxist mindset, he condemned "art for art's sake." He was critical of "White to mate" problems with pieces on strange squares. Compositions must be realistic, like "Soviet realism" in painting. Any "abstract" art should be avoided. A composer's duty is to teach players how to play better, he said.

When Botvinnik ran a celebrated school for talented youngsters, he was appalled when one of them won a game with an unsound combination, rather than go into an endgame with an extra pawn.

"You broke José Capablanca's commandment," he told the winner, a future grand-

master. "You shouldn't play beautifully if it's possible to play simply."

In answer to Linder's question, Botvinnik said the game that made a great impression on him did not feature a sacrifice:

SELF-TRAPPING

GM Boris Spassky
GM Bobby Fischer
WCh (13), Reykjavik, 08.10-11.1972

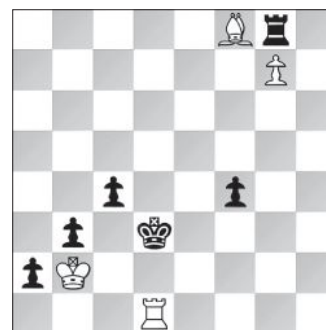


BLACK TO MOVE

Fischer "stalemated his own rook," Botvinnik said, with 59. ... h3! 60. Be7 Rg8 61. Bf8.

Then his five passed pawns won after 61. ... h2 62. Kc2 Kc6 63. Rd1 b3+ 64. Kc3 h1=Q!.

Well, you could call this a queen sacrifice, allowing Black's king to cross the d-file. Nevertheless, Fischer needed the help of a blunder to win: 65. Rxh1 Kd5 66. Kb2 f4 67. Rd1+ Ke4 68. Rc1! Kd3 69. Rd1+??.



White could have drawn with 69. Rc3+! Ke2 70. Rxc4 f3 71. Rc1 and Kb2xb3. The game ended with 69. ... Ke2 70. Rc1 f3! 71. Bc5 Rxc7 72. Rxc4 Rd7 73. Re4+ Kf1 74. Bd4 f2, White resigned.

Bobby didn't play simply in this game, but it was instructive – and, in its own way, beautiful. ♠

Oh-Oh!

How much is castling really worth?

BY GM ANDY SOLTIS

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HERE ARE QUESTIONS THAT serious players rarely ask, even if the answers might improve their play. For example: *How strong is a king?*

This has nothing to do with a king's "relative value." We know the old metric about a pawn being worth one point, a knight worth three points, and so on. That helps us evaluate a position and an exchange of pieces. But a king cannot be exchanged.

The real question to ask is: How powerful is the king in its prime time — the endgame? That's when it wins enemy pawns and promotes its own pawns.

If you frame the question that way, you can appreciate that a king is much stronger than a bishop or knight and is roughly as powerful as a rook. This insight can add rating points to anyone's endgame skill.

There's another rewarding question we never ask: *How valuable is castling?*

Castling is so natural we rarely wonder what chess would be like without it. When versions of Fischer Random and Chess960 began to catch on, players insisted on retaining castling.

HE DID WHAT!?

GM Levon Aronian
GM Leiner Dominguez Perez
Champions 9LX Showdown (3), St.
Louis, 09.14.2022

(see diagram top of next column)

When White castles queenside in these chess variants, the rule is basically the same: His king ends up on c1; the rook that began the game to its left lands on d1.

So **18. 0-0-0!** is legal: The a1-rook can go to d1, even though that square is attacked by Black's queen. This move also attacked the queen and led to a winning endgame



WHITE TO MOVE

after 18. ... Qc5 19. Qxc5.

Of course, the value of any piece or move depends on the position, so the practical question is: Does it pay to take unusual steps to deny your opponent the right to castle?

We can get one answer from a variation of the Grünfeld Defense (**1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 d5**). It runs **4. Nf3 Bg7 5. Bg5 Ne4!** and then **6. cxd5! Nxc5 7. Nxc5 e6!**.

White's knight is attacked. A main line used to go **8. Qd2 exd5** and then **9. Qe3+ Kf8**.



POSITION AFTER 9. ... Kf8

Black can no longer castle and will almost certainly spend tempi to complete his kingside development. But White gave him the bishop pair. Is it worth it?

This position was once thought to be a

major challenge to the Grünfeld. But more recent experience found fairly equal chances, after **10. Qf4 Bf6 11. h4 h6**, for instance.

OK, but what if there are no compensating factors for the loss of castling? That can come about this way: **1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. g3 c5 4. d5 exd5 5. cxd5 d6 6. a4 g6** and now **7. Ra3!?** **Bg7 8. Re3+ Kf8**.

This occurred in an obscure Russian game between Pavel Ponkratov and Viacheslav Zakhartsov from Izhevsk in 2014. White's only concession is temporarily misplacing his rook and losing pawn control of the b4-square.



POSITION AFTER 8. ... Kf8

Black stood well after **9. Ra3 Na6 10. Nc3 Nb4 11. Bg2 b6 12. Nh3 Ng4 13. O-O**.



Instead of **13. ... h6** and an eventual ... Kf8-g8-h7, he tried **13. ... h5?** and lost a spirited

QUIZ FOR OCTOBER

“IF I LOST 25 POUNDS I could beat anyone in the world,” a master named Abe Turner told the talk-show host Johnny Carson. Long before speed chess was considered respectable, the chubby Turner was one of its superstar hustlers. At classical time controls his victims included Bobby Fischer, in the tournament in which Bobby won the “Game of the Century.” This month’s quiz remembers Turner, who was born 100 years ago. In each of the six diagrams you are asked to find the fastest winning line of play. This will usually mean the forced win of a decisive amount of material. But watch out for forced checkmates. Solutions on Page 63.

PROBLEM 1

Abe Turner
Bobby Fischer



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 2

Abe Turner
Larry Remlinger



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 3

Abe Turner
Hugh Myers



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 4

Eliot Hearst
Abe Turner



BLACK TO MOVE

PROBLEM 5

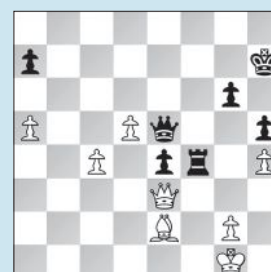
Gerald Schain
Abe Turner



BLACK TO MOVE

PROBLEM 6

Herbert Seidman
Abe Turner



BLACK TO MOVE

game after 14. Ng5 Ne5 15. Nce4 Bf5 16. f4 Nc4 17. Rc3!.

You can get your own answer to “How valuable is castling?” by asking your computer. Choose a popular opening position, such as 1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. d3 Nf6 5. c3 d6.

This position is among the most common ways that elite GMs begin a game these days. White often castles here and Black often castles in reply. Then White rates a tiny plus.



POSITION AFTER 5. ... d6

But let’s take away White’s right to castle. How? By plugging in moves such as 6. Rg1

Nb8 7. Rh1 Nc6. The only change is White can no longer castle. Your computer may tell you Black now has a small advantage, around -0.20.

If you take away the castling right from both players — by inserting the moves 6. Rg1 Rg8 7. Rh1 Rh8 — White enjoys the same tiny plus as he did after 5. ... d6.

You can try this with other typical opening positions. It may seem counter-intuitive, but the loss of castling appears to count more in closed-center openings, such as after 1. c4 c5 2. Nc3 Nc6 3. g3 g6 4. Bg2 Bg7 5. Nf3 Nf6. If we take away White’s right (6. Rg1 Nc6 7. Rh1 Nb8) his chances seem to decline more than in the Giuoco Piano position.

What if we take away the castling right from both players at move one? Former world champion Vladimir Kramnik has championed this kind of no-castling chess. He said AlphaZero determined that White’s winning percentage was the same as in normal chess.

In fact, computers (and computer programmers) have tried for many years to quantify the value of castling. GM Larry Kaufman told me that in general the loss of the right to castle is somewhere between

one and two tempi in value. “So typically somewhat more than half a pawn, maybe about 0.6 pawn on average,” he said.

Kaufman, an authority on chess computers, said this makes the loss of castling a way to improve an Armageddon game. Under normal Armageddon rules, Black wins if the game is drawn. Experience indicates this is a significant advantage, even if White starts the game with extra time.

But if Black cannot castle, that edge is sharply reduced. “As far as I can tell with engines this is as close to balanced as we can ask for,” Kaufman added. “Then there is no need for time odds or bidding, and it works well even for classical time limits.”

He added, “Entire tournaments could be run with these rules if we want drawless chess!”

Did you know that Andy Soltis has a new book out? *Deadline Grandmaster: A Chess Memoir* is one autobiography you won’t want to miss. Find it at your favorite bookseller!