



It's Not Really Winning a Tempo!

Quote of the Month: *By my definition, "Hope Chess" is not when you make a threat and you hope your opponent does not see it. Hope Chess is when you make a move without checking the possible consequences, wait to see what your opponent does, and then hope you can meet his threats. Players that practice Hope Chess never get very good because some threats cannot be met.*

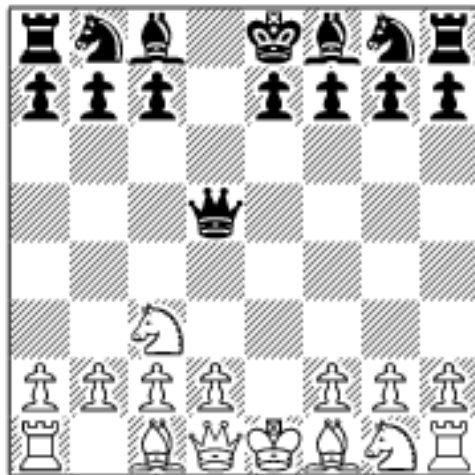
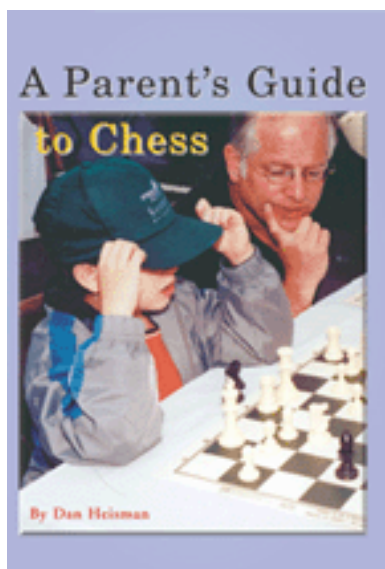
COLUMNISTS

Tempos and Threats

Novice Nook

Why is the sequence **1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3** supposed to be good for White?

Dan Heisman



Because White is supposedly winning a "tempo" – that is, he gains a move because he gets to bring his knight out while Black "wastes time", forced to use his turn to move the queen a second time. But White is not really "winning a tempo" by attacking the queen – that is just what we call the result in this particular case. We can prove by example that this type of attack, in general, does not

always winning a tempo. For this purpose, suppose that Black plays the bad move **3...Qc5** (just to illustrate a point).

"Wow!" thinks White, "If every time I move my knight and attack the queen I win another tempo, then if I won one with **3.Nc3**, then I can win another one the same way with **4.Na4**. I should do this every chance I get..."



See something wrong with this logic? You should. The key is that “winning a tempo” has little to do with attacking a piece with a weaker piece so that the stronger piece has to move (!), although that could indeed be a very good idea.

The correct way to look at it is, “Suppose I make a threat. Now unless that threat is unstoppable or ignorable, I have to assume that my

opponent will meet the threat, so the execution of the threat is not going to happen, and I can pretty much ignore that possibility. Instead, I will suppose that my opponent will meet the threat in the best way he can. As a result the position is altered where I have made the threatening move and he has made his response. Who has gained more from this pair of moves?”

If the answer is you gained more, then your threat is a viable candidate move (but don’t forget, “If you see a good move, look for a better one!”) and you may have indeed “gained a tempo” because you have used your tempo more effectively making the threat than your opponent has meeting it. On the other hand, if your opponent gains more from this same sequence, then making the threat is just a bad idea – it may even “lose a tempo!” With this in mind, let’s re-examine the prior two cases:

1) After 2...Qxd5 3.Nc3 White is moving his knight from a fairly immobile square (b1) to a much more active one (c3). On the other hand, Black has to move his queen from an active (though vulnerable) square d5, to a possibly equally active one. So in this sense White gains by spending his tempo moving his knight, while Black, while possibly not losing anything except the tempo it takes to move his queen, is not gaining anything by moving off the d5 square

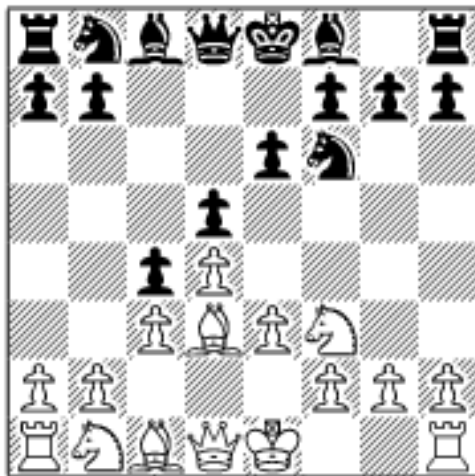
2) On the other hand, after 3...Qc5 4.Na4 Qa5, just the opposite has happened: Black is using the tempo to move from one OK square to another, while White is moving his knight from a good square, c3, to a weaker one, a4 (“knight on the rim, your future is dim/grim”). Therefore, Black is doing more with his tempo and White’s move is bad, even if he is “making the queen move.”

Therefore, the key theme is: *you should not make a threat with the expectation that your opponent might not see it, but rather because you believe it forcibly improves your position.* In other words, there are mainly two situations when you should make a threat: (1) if your threat can't be met - that certainly should improve your position! - or (2) when it can be met, but when that happens you “gain” relatively more from your threatening move than your opponent does meeting the threat.

One of the most difficult transitions from adult “beginner” to intermediate is to understand that *chess is **not** a game where each side makes threats and the one who misses the most or the biggest or the final threat loses.* In order to progress, one has to recognize that even at the intermediate level almost all the basic tactical threats will be recognized and defended (in slow chess!), so the “percentage” of missed threats is not (or should not be!) a consideration in the decision whether to make a threat.

However, in beginner's games, missed threats are so much a consideration that players get used to making simple threats just to see if they will be defended, and this habit is hard to break. That is one reason why players who seek out stronger opponents improve more rapidly: their opponents will almost always defend well against simple threats, teaching you that many threats are counterproductive. On the other hand, a weaker opponent might not see your threat, and that reinforces your psychology that such threats are “good”, and so you likely will keep making them, even if they are not good moves.

The following is another common example of “not winning a tempo”. After **1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.e3 e6 4.Bd3 c5 5. c3** Black decides to “win a tempo” with **5...c4(?)**



The reason 5...c4 does not “win” a tempo is because it takes one tempo for Black to make the move and one tempo for White to respond. So in order to really gain a tempo the pawn on c4 has to either:

- (1) Be going to a square that it is better than on c5, while forcing the bishop in a spot that is no better,
- (2) Be going to a square that is about equal to c5, while forcing the bishop to an inferior square, or
- (3) Trap the bishop.

...in any case, gaining more for Black than for White. But here White responds **6.Bc2** and all Black has done is to take the pressure off of d4 and thus strengthened White’s upcoming “break” move e4 (see last month’s *Novice Nook*). Another argument that 5...c4 is “good” is that it “gains space”, but this is also somewhat nebulous. Which space did it gain? It did not gain the vacated c5 since White’s d-pawn now controls that square. It did not really gain d3 because although White does have to vacate that square, Black has no access to it either. 5...c4 did block White from playing c4, but I would not describe this as gaining space. For a more complete discussion of space as a pseudo-element, see my first book *Elements of Positional Evaluation*.

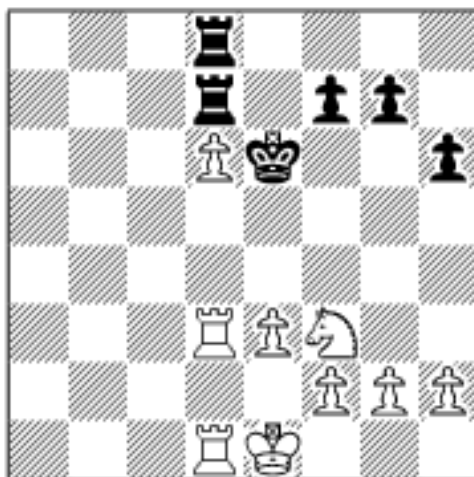
Understanding Threats

Do you know what a “threat” is?

Most of my students, when asked this question, are a loss for a reasonable definition. A “*threat*” is a move which, if not stopped by the opponent’s reply (or, similarly, ignoring any possible reply), can do something harmful to the opponent and/or useful for you next move: create a passed pawn, make the opponent’s king unsafe, win material, mate, ruin the opponent’s pawn structure, etc. It is important to note that *not all threats are good moves nor are all threats necessarily very harmful*.

A trivial example of a threat that is not a very good move is **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Qh4??**. Black threatens the e-pawn, but while this is a “good” threat it is not a good move because the threat can obviously be prevented from being executed by **3.Nxh4**.

Threats that are not harmful are also common. Suppose you are “up” a queen and your opponent makes a move to “threaten” to win a pawn, it may be correct to ignore the threat and continue to develop your pieces, or just let him take the pawn if in doing so he has to trade off a few pieces. In the latter case the move might not really be considered a threat at all because although he wins material, the net result (trading off pieces when down a queen) is not good for him. Similarly, consider the following after **1...Ke6**:



Black “threatens” to win the d-pawn, but actually it is not much of a threat since White would be very happy if he ignores the threat, say with **2.Ke2**, and allows **2...Rxd6 3.Rxd6+ Rxd6 4.Rxd6+ Kxd6** trading off all the rooks and leaving White with an easy win. Playing **2.Nh4** to “stop” the threat and get a knight fork on f5 afterward the trades on d6 is not only not very effective (**2...g6**), but

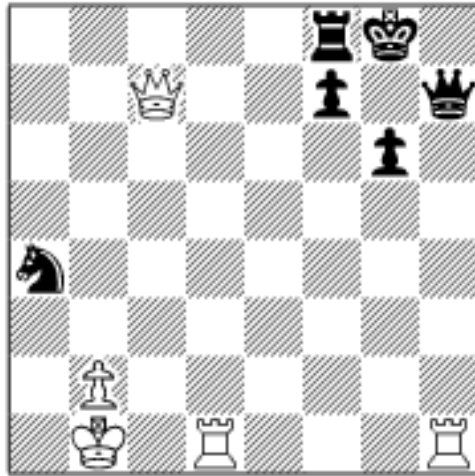
also silly, since why would White want to stop this “threat”?

Don’t Miss Threats that Also Have Other Functions

In *Everyone’s 2nd Chess Book* I include a chapter “Just Because It Is Forced.” There I examine the common problem where a player makes a forcing threat and the opponent replies as expected. The first player then thinks to himself, “Every time my opponent moves, I need to make sure I understand why he made that move and what it does (and does not do). Therefore, I deduce that he made that move because it is the only move that meets my threat. OK. Now what can I do next?” Do you see the possible error in this logic?

The problem is that a forced move may still contain threats. So while it is true that the opponent made that move because it is forced, that does not mean it cannot contain new threats that are “incidental” to meeting your threat. If you don’t search for those new threats, you may be in

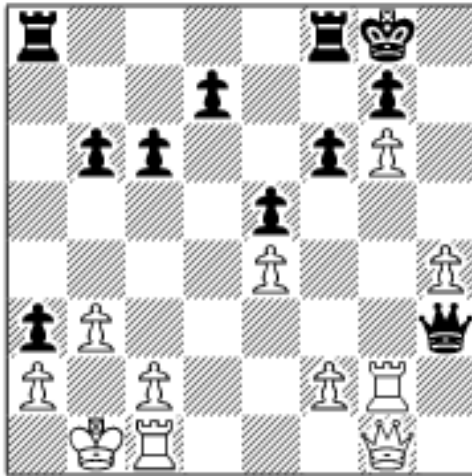
for some nasty surprises. Suppose White has just played **1.Rh1** threatening the Black Queen:



Black replies **1...Qg7**. White may reason that this was the only way to save the queen and forget to look that Black is now threatening **2...Qxb2#!** So he may play another “threatening” move like 2.Qc4 and lose instantly. This type of error is more common than you might suppose.

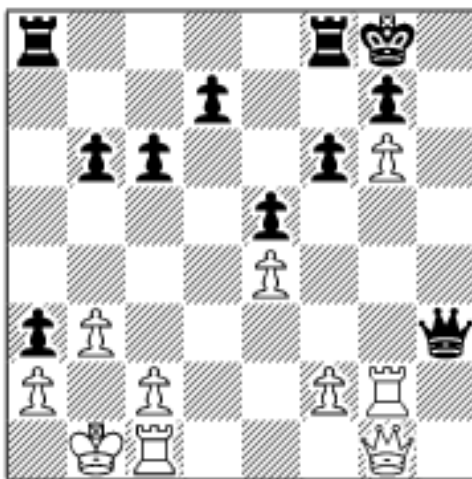
As stated in earlier *Novice Nooks*, it is a good idea to always consider all of your, and your opponent’s, checks, captures, and threats. The reason I list them in that order is because you want to examine the most forcing sequences first because you and your opponent will have little recourse in trying to meet them. For example, if you are in check, then the rules of chess require you to get out of check, so your options are limited and the potential danger could be great (In *Elements of Positional Evaluation* I call this “lack of flexibility”).

Some threats can be even more forcing than a capture or even a check. For example, any time your opponent has a possible reply to your candidate move that threatens a forced mate (say mate in one), this sequence must be examined with high priority, because the forcing nature of the threat makes it extremely likely that the sequence may be critical. Any candidate move of yours that allows an *unstoppable* mate-in-one threat reply must be discarded unless that candidate move also contains a threat to mate first which is not simultaneously stoppable by the opponent’s mate-in-one threat reply (got that?). The following two examples are easy to understand:



In this position 1.Rh2 is not a good candidate move since Black can play 1...Qc3 threatening an unstoppable mate on b2 next move.

But remove the pawn on White pawn on h4 and it is a completely different story:



Now **1.Rh2 Qc3** is met by the common motif: **2.Rh8+** (clearance for the queen) **Kxh8** **3.Qh1+** (or **3.Qh2+**) **Qh3** (just delaying the inevitable) **4.Qxh3+ Kg8** **5.Qh7#**. So 1.Rh2 is winning, as the Rh8+ threat cannot be met and Black must give up his queen. Coincidentally, these two positions are also good examples of why, when castling

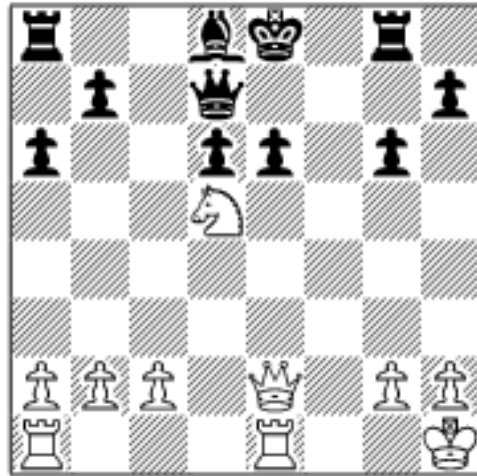
on opposite sides with queens on the board, it is often not a bad idea to sacrifice pawns in front of your opponent's king to open files for your rooks and queen!

Exceptions

There are exceptions to the guideline of "Don't make threats that don't improve your position" – aren't there always? For example, if you are losing badly anyway, you might make a difficult-to-see threat that, if your opponent does counter correctly, may "weaken" your position (from dead lost to dead-dead lost!) but, if he misplays, lets you back into the game. In this case you have a lot to gain and very little to lose, so the risk is worth it.

Another exception occurs when, even if your opponent correctly reacts to your threat (which was not your best move), your position does not degrade from won to drawn or drawn to lost. For example, a subtle threat that, if parried, takes you from the better side of the draw to

dead even or to the worse side, might be tolerable if you need to win and can likely draw anyway if your opponent finds the best reply. An example from one of my games:



As a young expert, I had White, was paired down against a younger “A” player, and had possessed the initiative the entire game. At this point the natural culmination of my play would be 21.Qxe6+ with a microscopic endgame advantage. The problem is that in this line my opponent has a fairly easy defense and I would have almost no chance of winning. I thought for over half an hour, quite a rarity for me.

Finally I decided to play the speculative **21.Qc4?!** Today, 30+ years later, even at 14 ply, Fritz does not rate 21.Qc4 as good as 21.Qxe6+.

But 21.Qc4 does have subtle threats that set some problems for my opponent. For example, as a good player he would soon find that the “obvious” 21...Rc8? (“winning a tempo”!) loses instantly to 22.Rxe6+! Then 22...Qxe6 loses the queen to the double check 23.Nc7+! when all king moves can be met by a capture on e6 with check. But not capturing the rook is no good either: After 22...Kf8 simply 23.Rf1+ wins, while after 22...Kf7 23. Rf1+ wins easily, as 23...Kxe6 24.Qe4 is mate.

Would you miss this and play 21...Rc8? Seeing this is not really very difficult since the lines are forced and not too long, and I did not expect my talented young opponent to fall for this trap. But it would get him thinking that this line is one reason why I took so much time for my move and, once he found it, he may relax and not realize that the hard part is still to come.

Sure enough, he saw the trap and figured out that he had to move his king to stop the threat of 22.Rxe6+. But what he did not correctly calculate was that one king move leads toward equality and the other one loses instantly! So I was gambling my tiny endgame advantage (not enough to win, for sure) for a chance to win. However, since the downside was a draw anyway, although my move was not “best” I was not really risking anything.

The game continued **21...Kf8?** (the saving move was 21...Kf7, when 22.Nf4 leads to a fairly even game – likely a very small Black advantage – with White activity offsetting Black’s extra pawn. Black can continue 22...Re8 23. Qb3 Qb5 or possibly 22...d5), but after the incorrect king move I had **22.Nf4** and my threats are unstoppable. The game concluded **22...Kg7 23.Nxe6+ Kh6 24.Re3** (“rook lift”) **g5 25.Rh3+** and Black resigned as White has a forced mate. This game can be found in my second book, *The Improving Annotator*, which consists of an introduction on annotating games and example games showing how I carefully annotated my own play to aid improvement.

In conclusion, next time you consider making a threat, make sure that if your opponent meets it correctly that your move does more than any other move you had anyway. If it doesn’t, then learn to play the better, “non-threatening” move and watch your results steadily improve.

Reader Question *What is strategy and what is tactics?*

Answer Not everyone defines all chess terms the same; moreover, some writers are a little loose with their usage, sometimes causing confusion among the ranks...

One way to answer your question is to first define *statics* and *dynamics*. Statics are concepts *not* involving moving the pieces, like pawn structure. An isolated pawn is an example of a static feature.

Dynamics involve piece movement. For example, tactics are *dynamic, forced sequences that, if successful, usually gain material or result in checkmate*. A positional goal, like ruining a castled king’s pawn structure, is also possible. (Note: in increasing order of complexity, tactical ideas include en prise, counting, single motifs, and combinations).

Evaluation occurs by considering a position (either statically upon the current position, or dynamically after analyzing a candidate move sequence to quiescence) to determine who is better, by how much, and why.

With these definitions we now have enough basis to present a solid answer the first part of your question:

One definition of strategy is *the process which considers all the*

statics, taking into account all candidate move evaluations, and using this information to formulate possible plans (longer range goals and possibilities for achieving them). One then needs to use tactics to determine if those plans are feasible, achievable, and/or effective.

Questions from readers are welcome. Dan teaches on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.

Order Dan's new book *A Parent's Guide to Chess*



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