Making decisions in chess

How could I find the best move in a position? This is a question that every chess player would like to answer. Playing the best move in all positions would make someone invincible. Of course such a thing is impossible and neither a computer will meet the perfection in chess soon. So, is it a loss of time to look for the best move in every position? My answer is firmly NO. Certainly you will not find every time the best move, but looking for the best move involves a peculiar process that will help you to understand better the position. Understanding the peculiarities of the position, you will always play "acceptable" moves even if you will not find the best moves. More frequently you will find the best moves, higher your chess level will be.

This lesson will teach you an original, but effective method to improve your chess thinking. First sight the things could seem complicated, but I promise you that all you need to understand my method is some patience. You must not be a chess expert to understand the following algorithm of making decisions in chess, just let you mind to think logically. Let's start!

1.What's the objective of a chess move?

According to my method every chess move has a quite simple goal. ***By every move we are trying to accumulate a certain advantage or to reduce a certain advantage already accumulated by our opponent.*** Higher the advantage cumulated, better the move.

Anything illogical till now? I don't think so.

But what about so-called "waiting move". My answer is: forget them! You will make no progress by waiting the opponent to mistake. Such a style of play could sometimes help you, but it will negatively affect you in time.

The attitude of a player during a game is an essential thing in chess.
Someone who is always trying to create problems to his opponent can be a successful player even if his chess knowledge is limited. Instead someone who is waiting for the opponent's mistakes and makes "waiting moves" has no chance to substantially improve his chess.

So, keep in your mind: **BY EVERY MOVE YOU MUST LOOK FOR SOMETHING!** and that "something" is normally a certain advantage in your position.

2. Which are the advantages in chess?

OK, we agreed that it is worth trying to reach an advantage by every move, but which are the advantages in chess? First chess player who classified the advantages in chess was Wilhelm Steinitz who claimed there are nine advantages: lead in development, mobility of the pieces, seizure of the center, position of the enemy king, weak squares in the opponent's position, superior pawn formation, pawn majority on the queen-side, open files and the advantage of the two bishops. Nowadays the opinions partly changed and the pawn majority on the queen-side and the two bishops are no more considered as general positional advantages.

The classification of the advantages in chess that I propose to you is somehow different, but I think it fits better with a modern thinking. Look around you and will see the value of any product depends on two things: **quantity and quality**. Why would chess be different?

There are two main categories of advantages in chess: quantitative advantage and qualitative advantage. Consciously or not, we are always looking to reach one of them. All I wait from you is to do it consciously, by thinking logically.

3. The quantitative advantages in chess

The quantitative advantages are **the material advantage** and **the local superiority of the forces**.

The importance of a material advantage is well-known and it's not my intention to tell you what important is a knight or a pawn up.

The superiority of the forces has a huge importance too. A chess game is usually composed by more local battles. It is always convenient to fight in those local battles by having a superiority of the forces in that area. But if you wish to have a local superiority of the forces, you must create it because nobody will do it for you.

Creating a local superiority of the forces is directly correlated with finding the best plan of play. How? Very simple. When you are looking for a plan of play you always ask yourself *"Where would be better to challenge my opponent for a local battle?"* and the logical answer is something like that *"The battle must be on the queen-side (or in the center or on the king-side) because I have (or I can create) there a superiority of the forces"*.
One more sample. Let's imagine that analyzing the position you discovered that opponent's pieces are massed on a side and can hardly be transferred on the opposite side. You immediately start thinking to provoke a battle on the weak side of the opponent. What's the next step in your logical thinking process? Of course you will start thinking how to bring more pieces there in order to create a local superiority of the forces.

So, did you understand now how the quantitative advantage of the superiority of the forces and making the plan of play are directly correlated? I'm convinced of that.

4. The qualitative advantages in chess

For a spectator who doesn't know the rules of chess, any qualitative advantage is imperceptible. A qualitative advantage is a result of the dynamic of the pieces during the chess game. To correctly understand what a qualitative advantage is, you must see the chess pieces as lively beings.

First I will mention the five qualitative advantages and we will deal them with any of them in part.
a. King safety
b. The qualitative value of the pieces

c. The qualitative value of the pawn structure
d. Space advantage
e. Seizure of initiative

4.a. King safety

There is nothing more important in chess than the king's safety. It's enough to forget a moment it and the effect can be lethal.

When you are making the plan of play you must be always careful to have your king well protected and must try to put in danger the position of the opponent king.

4.b. The qualitative value of the pieces

Since the first steps in chess, every chess player learn that every piece has a "quantitative" value: a knight = a bishop ~3 points, a rook ~ 4 ½ -5 points, a queen ~ 9 points
Let's take a look over diagram 1.

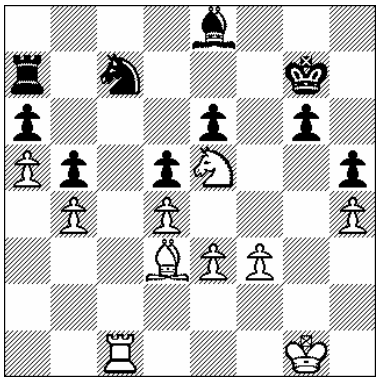

Diagram 1
1.?

You must not be a chess expert to see there is a difference between the pieces of the two sides. For instance look at the two knights. While the white knight has a dominant position in the center, from where it can quickly arrive anywhere on the chessboard, the black knight has a passive position and can make an only move to a8. Therefore it's clear that we can't put the sign equal between the two knights.
The same qualitative difference is visible if we compare the bishops and the rooks. White's bishop and rook has a higher freedom of moving than their black opponents. They occupy open line and put pressure over weak points of the opponent position.

In the position from the diagram 1 these qualitative advantages can be immediately converted in quantitative advantages by playing 1.Kf2 followed by 2.Rg1. A superiority of forces is thus created on the king-side and Black's passive pieces can't intervene in time to defend the g6-pawn.

As a rule, the qualitative value of a piece depends on 4 characteristics:

1. The mobility of the piece
2. The positioning of the piece
3. The role played by the piece
4. The stability of the piece

Let's see what each of the terms above mentioned means.

Mobility of a piece represents its capacity to move on a big number of squares and to move quickly (namely in few moves) anywhere on the chessboard.

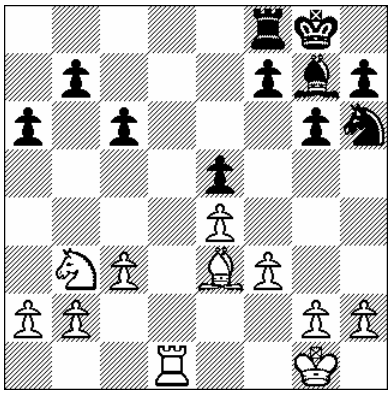

Diagram 2

In diagram 2 we can see how the mobility of a piece can be restrained by both own and opponent pieces. For instance the mobility of Nh6 is restrained by the white pawns which control the square g4 and f5 and the black pieces which occupy the squares f7 and g8.

Comparing the two bishops we observe that white bishop has a superior mobility to his black opponent. The late has only two possibility to move and need many moves to arrive in the central area of the board.

White's rook also has a better mobility than Black's rook

White has more possibilities to transform his huge qualitative advantage into a quantitative advantage, for instance 1.Rd7 Rb8 2.Na5

Positioning of a piece is a very important characteristic too.

Usually a knight emplaced on the center of the board controls more squares than a knight emplaced on the edge of the board, while the linear pieces (the queen, the rooks and the bishops) have a better positioning when occupy an open line.

However a linear piece is also very strong in the center, as you can see in diagram 3.

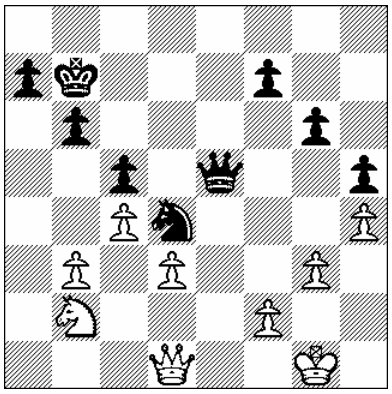

Diagram 3
1...?

A better positioning of a piece increases its qualitative value.

In diagram 3 the qualitative advantage is transformed into a quantitative advantage by 1...Qe2. After the change of queens Black wins by force the pawn b3 due to the awful position of Nb2.

It's important to note that the linear pieces usually have their mobility restrained by the own pawns emplaced on their lines of action. It could be observed in all 3 sample analysed.

The role played by a piece has a great importance. On a scale, there are four main situations sorted from the worst to the best:

1.A piece out of play. It is the worst situation and occurs when a piece is far from a local battlefield and is unable to quickly arrive there.

2.A piece that plays a defensive role, namely a piece whose main task is to protect a certain objective.

3.A piece that plays an offensive role, namely a piece that attacks an objective in the opponent's field.

4.A piece that simultaneously plays an offensive role and one or more defensive roles. It is the best case, better than the 3rd case. The fact a piece has a suplementary defensive role, defending an objective, indirectly help another piece by freeing it from a defensive task.

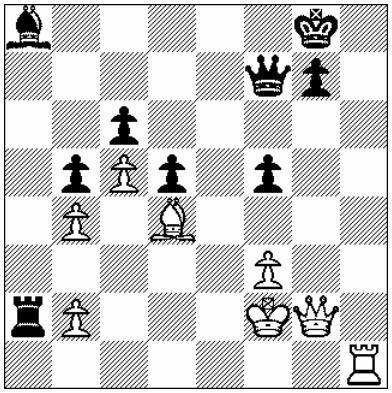

Diagram 4
1.?

In diagram 4 we can observe a clear difference in White's favor from the perspective of the role played by the pieces. The battlefield is on the king-side and thus Ra2 and mainly Ba8 are out of play. Instead White's pieces play offensive roles and the menaces created by them immediately decide after 1.Qh2.
We must observe the double role played by Bd4 which aids the attack on the king-side and simultaneously protects the pawn b2, such preventing a black counter-attack on the queen-side.

Stability of a piece becomes an important feature when that piece occupies an important square. If the piece has not stability on the square where it is emplaced, the opponent can easily remove it from there and thus its qualitative value decreases. Contrary, when a piece is well emplaced and has stability (namely the opponent can't remove it from there in good conditions), its qualitative value increases.

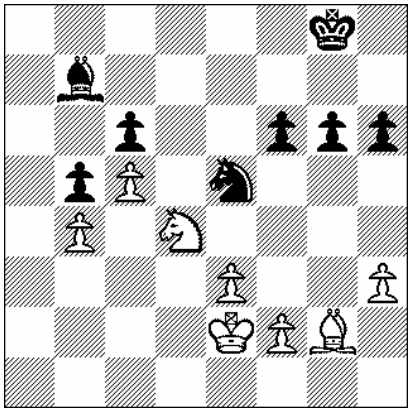

Diagram 5
1.?

In diagram 5 the two knights have an equal positioning on the center of the board. Though, White's knight has a superior qualitative value because its stability is better, while Black's knight can be removed from its central position by 1.f4.

I hope you understood how important the qualitative value of the pieces is. Therefore, during a chess game, we must consequently try two things:
1.Improving the qualitative value of our pieces (by increasing their mobility and emplacing them on good square where they are stabile and play offensive roles)
2.Reducing the qualitative value of the opponent pieces (by restaining their mobility, don't allowing them to occupy strong and stabile positions and forcing them to play defensive roles or, if possible, putting them out of play)

4.c. The qualitative value of the pawn structure

Alike the other pieces, the pawns have their qualitative value too. You must not treat the pawn as an individual entity, the pawns act together like a unit. When you talk about the qualitative value of the pawns, we talk about the qualitative value of the pawn structure. Indeed, the qualitative value of the pawn structure is influenced by the presence of the doubled pawns or isolated pawns or more isles of pawns, but your goal is to have a strong pawn formation and not strong individual pawns.

Likely there are dozens of books that treat this subject of the qualitative value of the pawns either analyzing general aspects or focusing on particular pawn structure. Of course we can't solve such a subject in two phrases. All I expect from you after this lesson is that you regard the pawns as they are, namely a unit.

If you will regard the pawn structure like a unit, you will see that its qualitative value is influenced by the same four characteristics above mentioned: **mobility, positioning, role played and stability**. In this case by a good positioning we understand both a healthy pawn structure and a pawn structure that ensures a good control of the center.

4.d. Space advantage

By space advantage we understand that one of the two players better controls a certain area of the chessboard. Normally the space advantage is earned by advancing the pawns on that area. Why is the space advantage important? Simply because the space advantage indirectly acts over the qualitative value of the pieces.

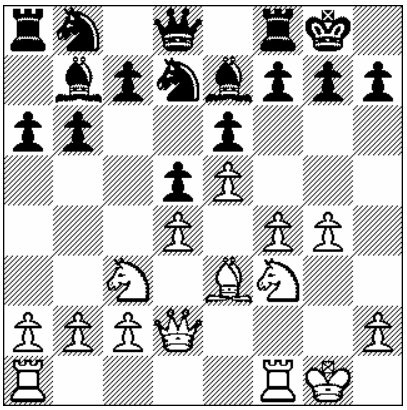

Diagram 6
1.?

In diagram 6 White has a space advantage on the king-side and can still increase it by f4-f5. The qualitative value of White's pieces is better because they have a great mobility on the king-side, while Black's pieces were forced to occupy passive position due to the lack of space. White can create a superiority of forces on the king-side (i.e. the local area where he has a space advantage) by Nc3-e2-g3-h5 (or Nc3-e2-f4 after f4-f5 is played), Rf1-f2, Ra1-f1.
So, **the main trait of the space advantage is its influence over the qualitative value of the pieces**.

When the two armies have reduced forces, the space advantage loses its importance because its main trait (the influence over the qualitative value of the pieces) can be used.

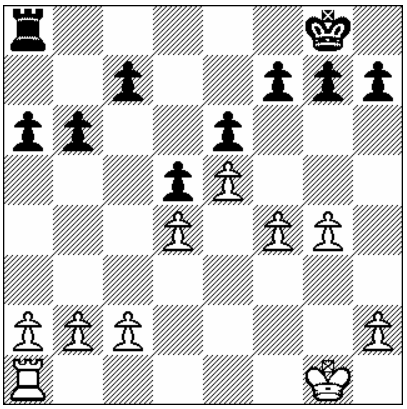

Diagram 7
1.?

Compare diagram 7 with diagram 6. White has the same space advantage on the king-side, but it is useless now. Without pieces, there is no benefic influence of the space advantage over the qualitative value of the pieces.

We will study more deeply this special advantage in a special chapter.

4.e. Seizure of initiative

The seizure of initiative, namely the possibility to create immediate threats, is very important too. Being the opponent under the pressure, he must first parry the threats and only then deal with improving his position, therefore its alternatives get reduced.

The importance of the seizure of the initiative is illustrated in the following sample.

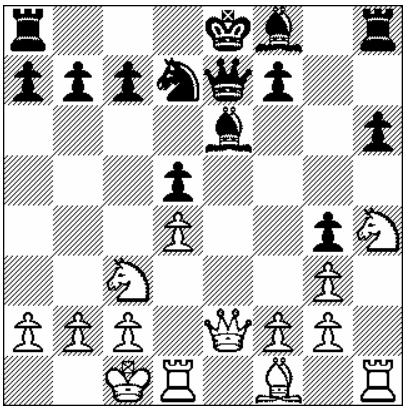

Diagram 8
1.? Em.Lasker-Marshall, St.Petersburg 1914

In diagram 8 Black need only a tempo to solve the opening problems by castling queen-side. But it is White to move and the former world champion immediately sizes the initiative by playing **1.Qb5!**
The pawns b7 and d5 are simultaneously attacked, therefore Marshall set a cunning trap **1...0-0-0**
We must note that 1…Qb4 loses in view of 2.Nxd5!

2.Qa5! Of course not 2.Nxd5?? Bxd5 3.Qxd5 Qg5! 4.Qxg5 hxg5 and Black wins. Now the new threat Qxa7 forces Blacks to weaken its position because after 2…Kb8 3.Nb5 would be decisive. **2…a6 3.Bxa6! bxa6 4.Qxa6+ Kb8 5.Rd3** with a decisive attack and an eventual win for White.

You could see how Black's alternatives were limited because White move by move created new strong threats and obliged Black to parry them.

5. Making the plan of play & choosing the best move

If you understood the subjects shown above, making a correct plan of play and choosing the best move in a position will get easier. All you need is to put order in your thinking.

Looking for the best plan of play means looking for the best way to improve your position. It involves looking for the possibilities to achieve one of the advantages above mentioned or trying to nullify one of the advantages above mentioned which the opponent has.

Here are some questions you must answer in order to find potential best plans and moves.

Is my king safely? How could I enforce its defense?
Is the king of my opponent safely? How could I benefit from its weakened position?

Is my opponent threatening to achieve a material advantage?
Can I achieve a material advantage by force?

Where could I create a superiority of forces in order to challenge a local battle? But my opponent?

How could I increase the qualitative value of my pieces and pawn structure?
How could I reduce the qualitative value of the opponent pieces and pawn structure?

Where could I achieve/increase a space advantage? But my opponent?
How could I use the space advantage I have in order to increase the qualitative value of my pieces and create a local superiority of forces?
How pieces must I change in order to reduce the importance of the space advantage my opponent has?

Could I create immediate threats or size a long-term initiative? But my opponent?

By answering such questions you will be able to find the most interesting ideas (the plans of play) that could improve your position and few candidate moves in the spirit of the ideas (the plans of play) you found. All you need then is to compare the candidate moves by calculating concrete lines and assessing the resulting positions. Evrika, the best move is found!