

Willy Hendriks

Move First, Think Later

Sense and Nonsense in Improving Your Chess

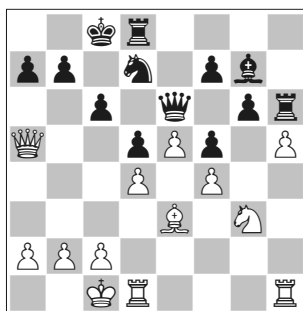
New In Chess 2012

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Preface



Yes, I consider myself to be a rational person.

Yes, I played 20...♖b8 in this position.

No, plenty of time left on the clock.

Spent more than ten minutes on this move.¹

Playing chess can be confronting, and it sure helps if you can look with a smile at your own performances. I have known some players with a longing for perfectionism, who couldn't accept their shortcomings and quit playing.

The term 'confrontation' in a sentence like 'playing chess confronts us with the working of our brain' seems a bit strange. But, although it's our own brain, we don't seem to have great access to it. This well-known fact is a major theme (problem) in the whole history of the philosophical and psychological investigations of our cognitive powers.

In the last decades the cognitive sciences (cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, neurology, neurobiology, philosophy and others) have made considerable progress. From general concepts and theories we are moving towards knowledge on a more empirical and microscopic level, to summarise it briefly and (too) simply.

Some of the old questions and new insights of the cognitive sciences form the source of inspiration for this book. Are they of any use for the player trying to improve his chess? Do they shed new light on our different training methods? Or even suggest new and different forms of training?

If you play chess, try to improve your chess or try to help others to improve their chess, a lot of questions from the cognitive sciences automatically come into mind.

Can we make good evaluations by following some sort of to-do list? Does the recent attention on unconscious decision-making processes have some value for chess thinking? Is significant improvement possible by purely psychological means? Is talent an overrated concept and can we all become grandmasters?²

This book wants to be an inquiry into these and related questions. A lot of theories and books about our thinking and about improving in chess will be reviewed, with the emphasis on their cognitive aspects.

It is not my intention, however, to release a thoroughly scientific work. The way in which playing chess gives us some sort of ‘inside view’ in our mind is one of the fascinating things about our game. Even if the starting point of this fascination is the well-known ‘how on earth could I play this move?’, a question that might turn out to be the ‘ultimate’ one as well. This interest and amazement is what I hope to keep alive in this light-hearted inquiry.

This book is about improving in chess, but apart from being a theoretical discussion it also wants to make a practical contribution towards this goal. Therefore, the majority of the positions that are dealt with will be presented as exercises (puzzles) at the beginning of each chapter.

To anticipate a little: the author is of the opinion that you learn chess only by working with concrete positions. Solving exercises is one way to do this.

One of the main propositions of this book seems to be that the moves written down on our notation forms are sufficient ‘language’ to learn chess, and that no further words are needed. (So why isn’t this book just a collection of puzzles, you may ask – and indeed, that could have been a wonderful outcome, had the author not been so fond of hearing himself talk.)

If you do the exercises, you will learn the most from this book. Some may say: you will learn at least something. There is a fair chance that not everyone will endorse the points of view that are developed in this book – to a considerable extent they conflict with the doctrines of mainstream chess didactics. Although the author isn’t a French philosopher, he does prefer claiming the opposite rather than putting forward some small refinement.

The chess fragments in this book are carefully selected. Since they are not presented as examples of some bigger principle or truth, they should be able to speak for themselves.

No board is needed to play over these fragments. Almost all of them comprise a diagram and just a few moves, so everyone with some skill in visualisation will be able to follow them, lying on a couch or in some other preferred position.

So let’s start our journey into the caverns of our chess-playing mind. I cannot promise the reader that, having reached the end of this book, he will not play moves like 20...♖b8 anymore. But he will certainly have doubts about his rationality!

1. Dam-Hendriks, Dutch Youth Championship 1985 (no, I did not win the championship that year).
2. To avoid false expectations in advance: had my answer to this last question been positive, it would have been on the front cover of this book.

14. Watch out, it's a critical moment

In chess literature, the term 'critical moment' is used in two different ways. In a strong and in a weak sense, you might say.

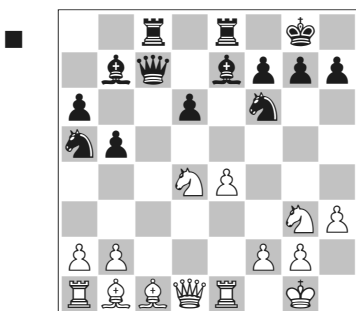
Most often (mainly in game commentaries) this term is used in a rather harmless way to point at the decisive mistake or some other turning point in the game. In retrospect, some move, plan, evaluation, or something psychological is identified as the moment where things went uphill or downhill respectively.

Clearly it would come in very handy if those moments of more than average importance could be identified with foresight as well. In some chess manuals, the 'critical moment' is presented as a constructive concept in this sense. In every game, a few critical moments are supposed to occur, the moments at which the course of the struggle gets determined and the decisive choices are made. In between these moments there are a series of moves of lesser importance and lesser difficulty.

So the player is advised to develop some sensibility for when such a critical moment has arrived and then spend some extra time to steer the game in the right direction.

The danger of this concept is clear as well: it gives the player an excuse for thinking too long: 'This is a critical moment, now I have to play a really good move', the player thinks. Later it turns out he has been spending half an hour on three moves that give $-0,05$, $+0,10$ and $+0,15$ as a (computer) evaluation. At the end of the game, new critical moments occur, but this time the different evaluations are $+0,45$, $0,00$ and $-2,75$ and there is only one minute left on the clock.

In *Excelling at Chess Calculation*, Jacob Aagaard gives some nice examples of himself spending a lot of time in difficult ('critical') positions, leading to great success.



Jacob Aagaard
Kezli Ong
Sweden 2003

17...d5

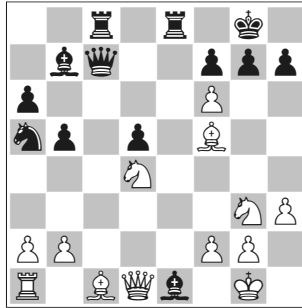
14. Watch out, it's a critical moment

Here Aagaard realised that after the planned move 18.e5, Black can play 18...♙b4, attacking both the rook and the e5-pawn. So he sank into deep thought. After thinking for almost 50 minutes, he found a saving possibility.

18.e5 ♘b4 19.♙f5!

This is it. It was known to theory, by the way, but Aagaard had to find it himself, since he was already on his own for some moves.

19...♙xe1? 20.exf6!



And White had excellent play; trying to hold on to the exchange with 20...♖cd8 (*Exercise no 71*) loses directly to 21.♙xh7+! ♜xh7 22.♚h5+ ♜g8 23.♚g5 (21.♚h5 h6 22.♙xh6 also wins).

In Aagaard's book, the critical moments are of a tactical nature. Other authors present the moments when a plan has to be developed as such special moments, when extra time has to be invested.

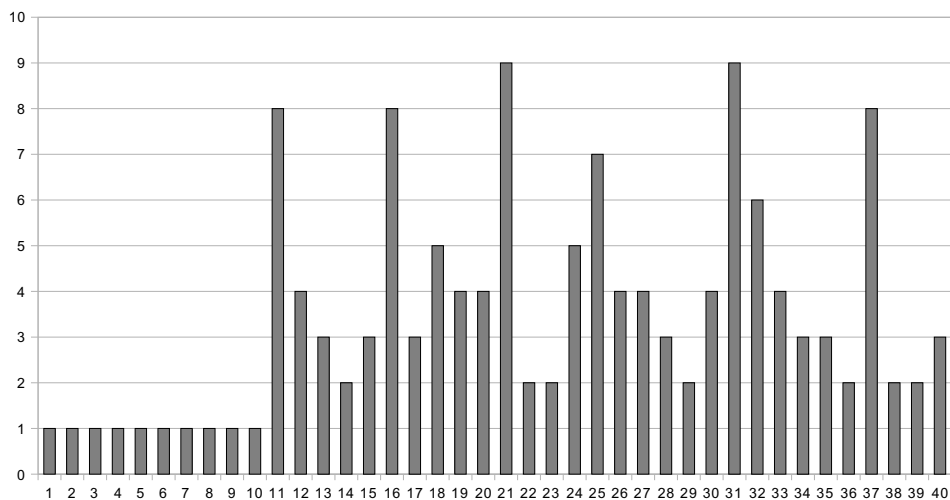
To my mind, the issue of the critical moment is an ideal opportunity to mess up what is clear with hindsight, with the (im-)possibility of what can be seen with foresight, when you are actually playing a game. You might have the feeling that the position is very difficult, and that a mistake will have grave consequences, but this doesn't mean that there won't follow many more of these moments. Nor is there a guarantee that the moves between which you are tossing up do make a big difference. Will investing a lot of time bring you a move like Aagaard's 19.♙f5? Maybe it just isn't there.

With hindsight it's easy to say: 'There I went wrong, that was the critical moment, why didn't I use some more time there?'

You can try to make a graph that expresses the difficulty of the process of deciding on a move during a game.

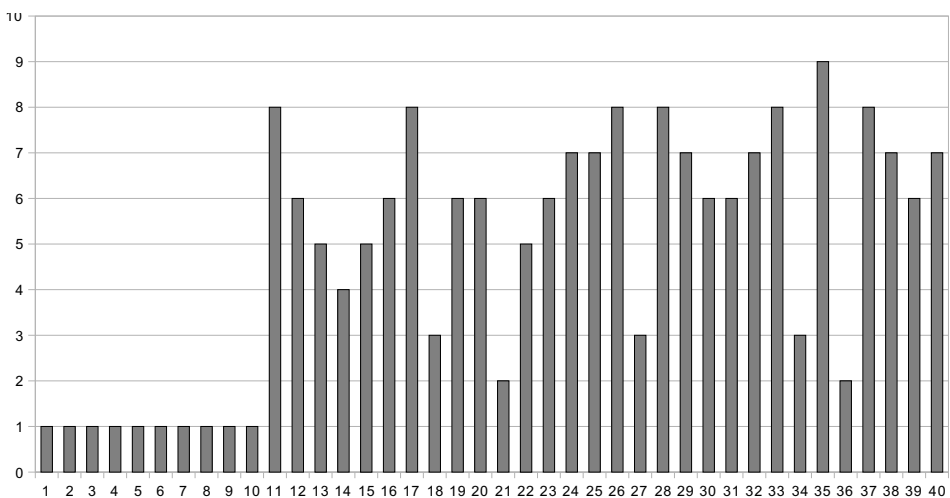
The assumption that important tactical or strategic decisions are followed by a series of moves of lesser importance and lesser difficulty, might give a graph like figure 1 on the next page (with the move numbers horizontally and the 'difficulty', on a scale from 0 to 10, vertically):

Move First, Think Later



I don't think this type of graph adequately reflects the experience of most players. Maybe the very best recognize a pattern like this, but for the great majority almost every move will offer quite serious problems.

Closer to most players' reality comes a picture with more gradual differences (figure 2). Occasionally there is a move that can be decided upon quite easily, but most choices pose a lot of problems.

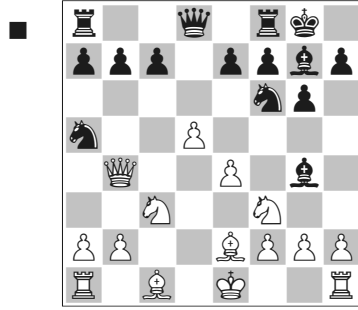


On closer inspection, the second graph looks a bit like a mirrored version of the first one. Here, easy decisions are rare. Almost all moves offer the opportunity to make big, maybe decisive mistakes.

So critical moments do exist. One follows the other!

Let's have a look at some positions and enjoy the ability of other players to go wrong in 'non-critical' positions.

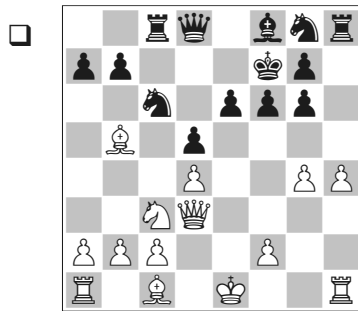
In both graphs, the first ten moves are rated 1 on the scale of difficulty. In these examples the player is supposed to follow theory for the first ten moves. But even at this stage there is room for mistakes. How many games start off badly, or are even lost before they have properly started, because of wrongly remembered theory?



Tomi Nybäck
Tapani Sammalvuo
 Finland 2009

Theory advises to play 10...♙xf3 11.♙xf3 and only then 11...c6. But IM Sammalvuo played the direct **10...c6?** (*Exercise no 72*) and after **11.e5!** promptly resigned. He was not the first player to make this mistake, at least five players before him went astray in this way.

In the next position we are also not yet outside theory, but the double mistake was not a result of bad memory.



Jelmer Jens
Michael Berg
 Solingen 2005

My teammate's last move was **12.♖d3**, whereupon Black defended his g-pawn with **12...♙f7**.

This also unpinned the knight on c6; the importance of this detail passed unnoticed by both players. We are still in theoretical territory, but Jens had to find his own way, which he did with the novelty **13.♙d2?** (*Exercise no 73*).

Now Black could win directly with 13...♘b4!, but he simply continued developing with **13...♙d6?** and after **14.0-0-0** the chance was gone. White later won this game. A rare case of a double blunder for such strong players.