Making decisions in chess

How can I find the best move in a position? This is a question that every chess player would like to answer to. Playing the best move in all positions would turn someone invincible. Of course such a thing is impossible and not even a computer is going to meet perfection in chess anytime soon. So, is it a waste of time to look for the best move in every position? My answer is firmly NO. Certainly you will not find the best move every time, but looking for the best move involves a peculiar process that will help you better understand the position. Understanding the peculiarities of the position, will always help you play "acceptable" moves even if it won't always be the best moves. The more frequently you will find and use the best moves, the higher your chess level will be.

This lesson will teach you an original, but effective method on how to improve your chess thinking. At first sight things could seem complicated, but I promise that all that you need in order to understand my method is patience. You don't have to be a chess expert to understand the following algorithm of making decisions in chess, just think logically. Let's start!

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

According to our 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.*** The higher the advantage cumulated, the better the move.

Is there anything illogical till now? I don't think so.

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

A player's attitude during the game is essential in chess.
Someone who always tries to create problems to his opponent can be a successful player even if his chess knowledge is limited. Instead, someone who waits for the opponent's mistakes and makes "waiting moves" has no chance to substantially improve his chess skills or game.

So, keep in 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 not considered anymore to be general positional advantages.

The classification of the advantages in chess that I am proposing 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 always try to reach one of them. All we expect from you is to do it consciously and logically.

3. The quantitative advantages in chess

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

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

The superiority of the forces has a huge importance too. A chess game usually consists of 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 look for a plan of play you must always ask yourself *"Where would it be better to challenge my opponent for a local battle?"* 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, while analyzing the position you discovered your opponent's pieces are gathered on a side and can hardly be transferred on the opposite side. You immediately start thinking to challenge your opponent to a battle on his weak side. 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, do you understand how the quantitative advantage of the superiority of the forces and making the plan of play are directly correlated? I'm confident you do.

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 the result of the dynamics of the pieces during the chess game. To correctly understand what qualitative advantage is, you must consider the chess pieces as beings.

First I am going to mention the five qualitative advantages and then, we will deal with each and every of them.
a. King's 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's safety

There is nothing more important in chess than king's safety. A moment is enough to forget about it for the effect to be fatal.

When you decide the plan of play you must always be careful to have your king well protected. Moreover, you 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 has learnt 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 at the diagram no 1.

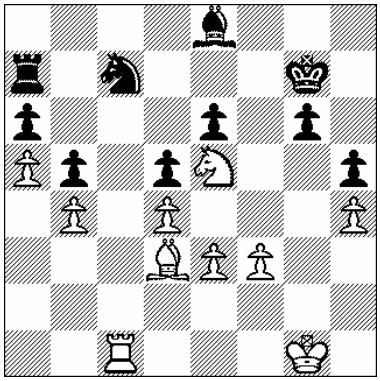

Diagram 1
1.?

You don't have to 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 only one move to a8. Therefore it's clear that we can't even compare the two knights.
The same qualitative difference is visible when we compare the bishops and the rooks. White's bishop and rook has a higher freedom of move than their black opponents. They occupy open line and put pressure over weak points in the opponent's position.

In the position in the diagram no 1 these qualitative advantages can be immediately converted into 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 mentioned above means.

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

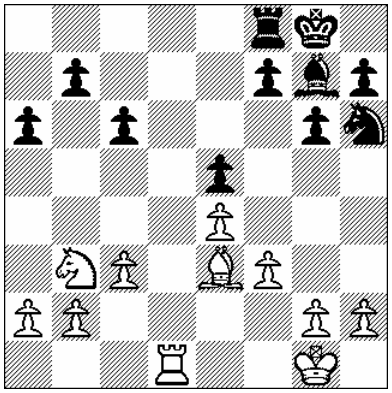

Diagram 2

In the diagram no 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 the white bishop has a superior mobility to his black opponent. The latter has only two possibilities of move and it needs many moves to arrive to the central area of the board.

Also, White's rook 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 placed on the center of the board controls more squares than a knight placed on the edge of the board, while the linear pieces (the queen, the rooks and the bishops) have a better positioning when occupying an open line.

However a linear piece is also very strong in the center, as you can see in the diagram no 3.

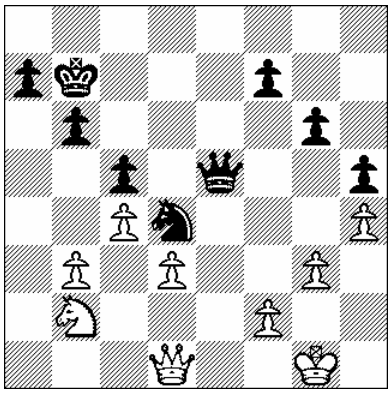

Diagram 3
1...?

A better positioning of a piece increases its qualitative value.

In the diagram no 3 the qualitative advantage is transformed into a quantitative advantage by 1...Qe2. After the exchange of the 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 placed on their lines of action. This could be observed in all the 3 analyzed samples.

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

1. A piece out of play. It is the worst situation and it occurs when a piece is far away from a local battlefield and it 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 one. While defending an objective, a piece can have a supplementary role as it indirectly helps another piece by freeing it from its defensive task.

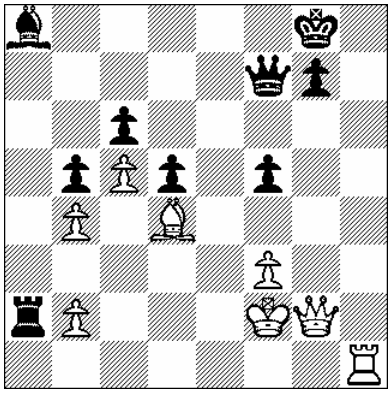

Diagram 4
1.?

In the diagram no 4 we can notice a clear difference in White's favor from the role of the pieces perspective. The battlefield is on the king-side and thus Ra2 and mainly Ba8 are out of play. White's pieces play offensive roles and 1.Qh2 immediately decides the game.
We must remark the double role played by Bd4 which helps the attack on the king-side and simultaneously protects the pawn b2, therefore 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 no stability on the square where it is positioned, the opponent can easily remove it, thus decreasing its qualitative value. On the contrary, when a piece is well placed and has stability (that is, when the opponent can't remove it from there in good conditions), its qualitative value increases.

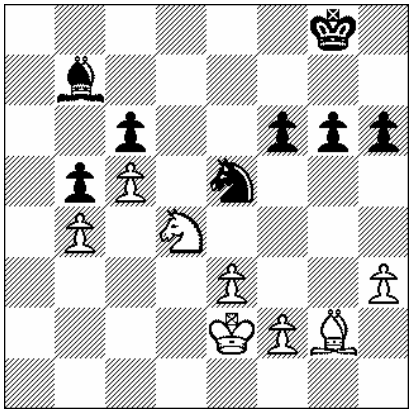

Diagram 5
1.?

In the diagram no 5 the two knights have an equal positioning on the center of the board. Still, White's knight has a superior qualitative value because it has a better stability, while Black's knight can be removed from its central position by 1.f4.

I hope you understand 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 placing them on good squares where they are stable and play offensive roles)
2. Reducing the qualitative value of the opponent pieces (by restraining their mobility, not allowing them to occupy strong and stable positions and forcing them to play defensive roles or, if possible, getting them out of play)

4.c. The qualitative value of the pawn structure

Like 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 referring to 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.

There are dozens of books on the market that treat the qualitative value of the pawns, either analyzing general aspects or focusing on particular pawn structure. It's certain we can't deal with such a large subject in two phrases. All I expect from you after this lesson is that you consider the pawns what they are, namely a unit.

If you see the pawn structure like a unit, you will notice that its qualitative value is influenced by the same four characteristics mentioned above: **mobility, positioning, role and stability**. In this case by a good positioning we understand both a healthy pawn structure as well as 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 obtained by advancing the pawns on that area. Why is the space advantage important? Simply because the space advantage indirectly influences the qualitative value of the pieces.

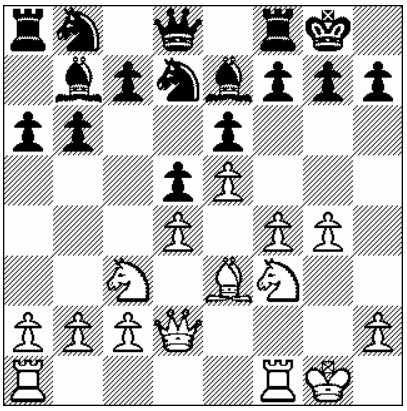

Diagram 6
1.?

In the diagram no 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**.

The space has a small influence over the qualitative value of the pieces when the material on the board is reduced (after more exchanges of pieces).

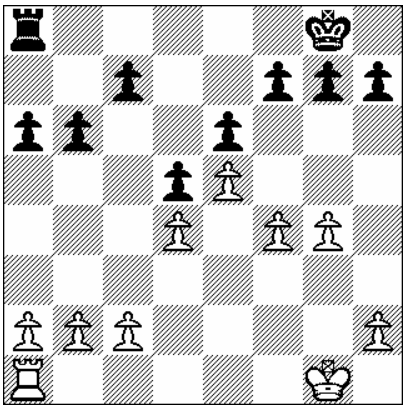

Diagram 7
1.?

Compare the diagram no 7 with the diagram no 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, that is the possibility to create immediate threats, is very important too. The opponent being under pressure, he must first parry the threats and only after deal with improving his position. Therefore his alternatives are reduced.

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

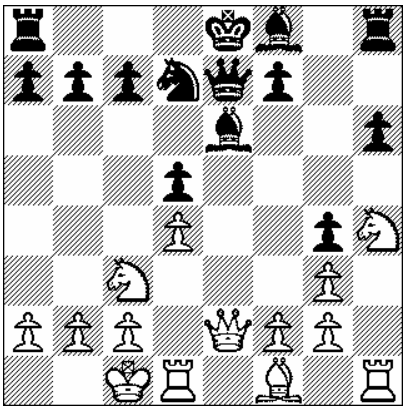

Diagram 8
1.? Em.Lasker-Marshall, St.Petersburg 1914

In the diagram no 8 Black needs only a tempo to solve the opening problems by castling queen-side. But it is White's turn to move and the former world champion immediately seizes 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 understand the subjects analyzed above, making a correct plan of play and choosing the best move in a position will be easier. All you need is to order in your way of thinking.

Looking for the best plan of play means searching for the best way to improve your position. It involves looking for the possibilities to achieve one of the advantages mentioned above or trying to annihilate these advantages if they belong to the opponent.
Here are some questions you must answer to in order to find potential best plans and moves.

Is my king safe? How could I enforce its defense?
Is my opponent's king safe? 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? How about 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? How about 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?
What pieces must I exchange in order to reduce the importance of the space advantage my opponent has?

Could I create immediate threats or seize a long-term initiative? How about my opponent?

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