Evaluating chess information nowadays

Jan Cheung, 2 September 2023

Preface

There is a lot of difference between a chess game nowadays and a chess game in the pre engine area of say, 20 years ago. This article discusses two subjects, information overload and the exchange sacrifice. Some games of the NCC 2022 will be used as examples.

Information Overload

In the past, internet was not wide spread yet and for information about games, players had to rely on magazines as the Chess Informant which was regularly published 3 times a year. A game with a novelty can be kept secret for a long time before it even was published. Nowadays information about games is easily available. With one click on a web site where a tournament is played, you have the games easily within a day.

A huge amount of chess information can be easily found today. Openings can easily be studied by databases as the Chessbase Megabase and the Powerbooks. And we have not said about the availability of free Chess Engines that are available at the internet.

To digest the information in a right way, one must understand one's strengths and weaknesses. Every chess player has an own playing style. Opening variations that are strongly approved by Chess Engines does not suit every player.

Here is a example. The first moves of the main line of the Benko Gambit are as follows.

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6
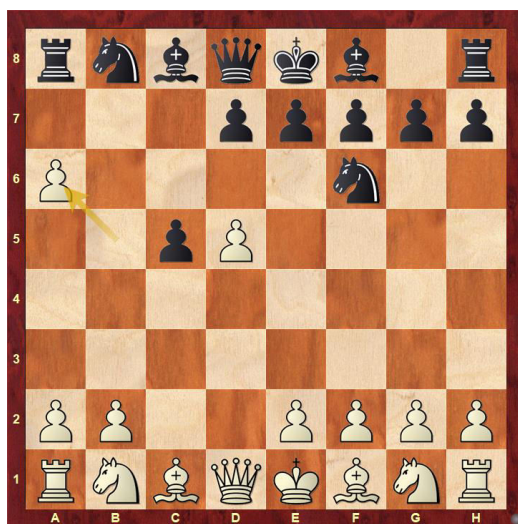
Although Black has long term compensation with high pressure along the open a and b files, and the long diagonal a1-h8 after putting the Black squared bishop at g7, the Engine favors White because he is a pawn up.

 This means that: Black is the attacking player and White has a long task to defend the position, before taking over the attack.

Engines show no emotion. Within seconds, a defending move will be suggested, while a human takes a long time to make a decision, sometimes showing emotion in the form of hesitation which candidate move is the best.

The playing style of White does not suit every player, especially if the player likes to attack. In practice, White spends a lot of time of not falling into a positional disadvantage in the Middle game, while Black has a few standard ways where to put the pieces, for example (Ra8, Rb8, Qa5/a6, Nc7, Nd7) or (Ra6, Qa8, Rb8, e7-e6)

Due to the progress of strength of Chess Engines, this had led to improvements how to defend as White.
The question now, is whether the suggestions of the Engine suits your playing style. Look at the following game played in round 1.

F. Simard – C. Unruh, Tartu 2022
1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 d6 6.Nc3 Bxa6 7.e4 Bxf1 8.Kxf1 g6 9.Nf3 Bg7 10.g3 0-0 11.Kg2 Nbd7 12.a4

Apart from some inaccuracy of Whites 6th move, with **12.a4!** White played a variation, which is nowadays used to defeat the Benko gambit. White had learned that the active move Th1-e1 only loses time, that can better be spend on blocking the Queen side. Whites main plan is to quickly play Qd1-e2 (to prevent c5-c4 followed by Nd7-c5), Nc3-b5 and Ra1-a3, to relieve Blacks pressure along the a and b files. Losing time means that Black has more opportunities to create pressure along the Queen side.

If you unquestioningly follow the most played moves of a position from a database, the risk is that you will mostly play main line variations of an opening, and entering a middle game that does not suit your playing style, entering a situation where you will not feel happy behind the board. With nowadays short time controls compared in the past, you have less opportunity to compensate this by calculation.

So far, both players had blitzed the moves at the board.

12...Qa5 13.Ra3 Rfb8 14.Nd2 Nb6 15.b3?? 0-1

The game only lasted 20 minutes. What happened? Looking at the moves, I have to conclude that White had mixed some defending scenarios. The deep value of the line up where Black had put the pieces at the given moment, was not understand. Ra1-a3 was played with the intention of the blocking move Nc3-b5, but at the wrong moment. First, Qd1-e2, a supporting move for the pawn e4, should be played. Nf3-d2-c4 is a long maneuver to kick back the Black Queen. It takes time to play this. Mostly, the Black Queen will respond to going to the best square a6, challenging to exchange the White Queen. At c4, the knight will be weak if it can be attacked by a rook at b4. Instead spending time to Nf3-d2-c4, White should spend time to put up a barrier at the Queen side with Ra1-a3 and Nc3-b5. With b2-b3, White had the intention to play Nc3-a2 and Bc1-d2-c3 which is only effective if the White queen was at c2. This plan comes from the variation where White puts the light squared bishop at g2, the left rook at b1, then having played b2-b3 and Qd1-c2 and where the e pawn still stands at e2, neutralizing the sequence c5-c4 and Nc5-d3.

Although the game was too short, there is a lot of improvement for White.

Suggestion 1:

If you do not like defending a position, look for other variations. There are a lot of variations in the Benko Gambit that are not favoured by Engines, but are fully playable between 2 humans. The list of side variations from the main line is long, but here are some suggestions.

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.Nf3 leading to the English.
1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.e3 leading to a symmetrical position or a possible Queens Gambit Accepted
1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3. d5 b5 4.Qc2!? / 4.Nf3!? / 4.Nd2!? / 4.a4!? with the intention of quickly creating a pawn centre with e2-e4.
1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.b6 with the intention of preventing an open a line.
1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3. d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.e3 heading to an alternate defending set up at the Queen side, or 5.f3!? with the intention of creating a pawn center while Black spends time to win back the pawn.

Most of these variations suits a player who likes positional play, without having to cope with defending the position.

Suggestion 2:

If you still like to defend Whites position, take your time behind the board to understand the difference between Black move orders. In an average chess game, there are maximum 2 moments where you spend much time to decide where the game will be heading. Consider this one of these moments.

We know that round 1 was played in 30 degrees Celcius (86 F) and with dress code, but just take your time.

After 12...Qa5 the most accurate move is 13.Bd2! with the intent to trap the Black Queen, should it ever go to b4 and b3: 13...Qb4 14.Qe2! with the intent that 14...Qb3 is not possible due to 15.Rhb1 Nb6 16.a5! Nc4 17.Ra4! Nxd2 18.Nxd2 ending Blacks attack. I am sure that the Engine likes Whites position, but for humans in a rapid or blitz game, this is a different case. The path to create an advantage for White is narrow and an engine does not need effort and it shows no emotion to reach that goal. For a human in practice,

White has spend a lot of time of determining the correct series of moves. Look at 13.Bd2. Normally a human first consider to put the queen at c2 before deciding where to put the black squared bishop. In this variation however, Qd1-c2 allows black to play c5-c4 with the intention of Nd7-c5-d3, so the best square for the White queen is e2.
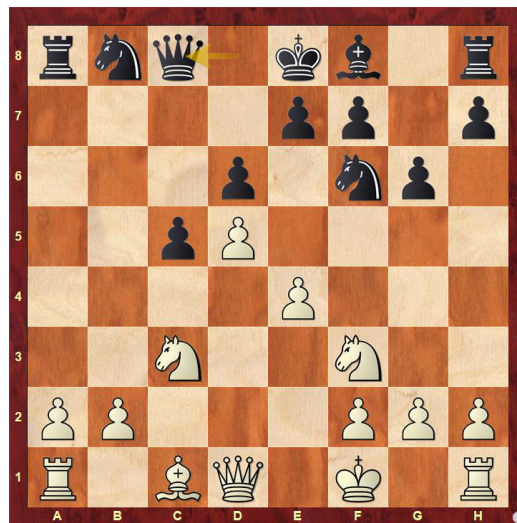
In the tournament, there was another game in which the same variation was played.

Pazeriene – Bohn, Tartu 2022
1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 g6 6.Nc3 Bxa6 7.e4 Bxf1 8.Kxf1 g6 9.Nf3

With the intention of g2-g3 and Kf1-g2. Now comes a surprise.

9...Qc8!?

This move does not prevent g2-g3, but it is uneasy to play this move because of Qc8-h3+, preventing artificial castling. The game continued as follows.

10.h3 Bg7 11.g3 0-0 12.Kg2 Na6 13.Rb1 Nd7 14.a4 Qb7

Black has managed to prevent the setup Ra1-a3 en Nc3-b5 and the position is fully playable.

There are some improvements for Whites play. White has ended up in an unknown position after 9...Qc8. This move is not much played because the Black queen has many candidate fields a5, b6, c7, c8, a8 and usually the first moves are played from pieces where you know where they should be going. From c8, the Black Queen can go to the ideal square a6. The variation with 12.a4 in the last game is a evolution of Whites game play in the past. First, White tried with h2-h3 and Kf1-g1-h2 and Rh1-e1. It was too slow to test Black. Then White tried with g2-g3 and Kf1-g2 and Rh1-e1, making artificial castling 1 move quicker. Then it was found that Rh1-e1 was not neccessary and it was replaced with a2-a4. If we compare these set ups at the game, after 10.h3, 11.g3 and 12.Kg2 White has lost 1 move compared with the a2-a4 variation. With this story in mind, we have found a solution for White after 9...Qc8. It is a move that sooner or later should be played:

10.a4!

Black can delay the development of Nb8. At the moment, it is difficult to say whether it should be go to a6 or d7. After the move

10...Bg7

White can respond to another move that sooner or later should be played:

11.Qe2!

After

11...0-0

Analysis board

Black has got the extra option of opening the position with e7-e6, instead of heading all heavy pieces to the Queen side. White should pay careful attention to the next move. Reckoning with e7-e6, it should be a directed to the centre. 12.Ra3 is not directed to the centre,

12.Nd2!

Analysis board

meets these conditions. The knight is heading to the ideal square c4. White has solved a lot of the development problems and Black can head to a different middle game after 12...e6.

I am leaving the game here and I will discuss the next subject of the article, the exchange sacrifice.

Exchange Sacrifice

If you have practiced a lot with Engines, you have noticed that an Engine likes to restrict the enemy, sometimes with the costs of sacrificing material! Notice the following game, also played in the first round.

Van den Heuvel (1799) – Mouroutis (2133)

Position after 13...Bf5-h3. White to move.

Despite a rating difference of more than 300 ELO points, White evaluated the position corrrectly and played **14.Nxe4!** After **14...Bxf1** White is an exchange down, but:

- All the light pieces are at their best squares, while Black just had exchanged its only active piece.
- White has an impressive pawn center, restricting Blacks pieces.

We leave this position, because Black later won the game after White overlooked a tactical trap, giving Black the opportunity to activate the pieces. After the text move **14...Bxf1** the best continuation should be **15.Bxf1**! (instead of the text move 15.Nxd6+) not exchanging the White Knight. White needs this knight to restrict Blacks pieces. Exchanging this knight at d6 does not fit the plan because at d6, the black bishop is not an active piece.

In round 7, there was the following game.
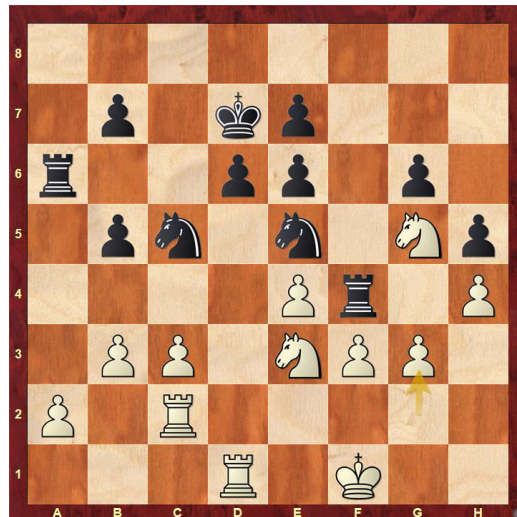
Position after 28.g3. Black to move.

In the game Sycz – Duren, Blacks pieces are more active than Whites counterpart. The double pawns at the b at the e file helps black to control important squares. They cannot be attacked. Blacks pieces are at their best squares. To make progress, Black responded with

28...Rxf3+!

After

29.Nxf3 Nxf3 30.Ke2 Ne5

Black has 1 pawn for the exchange, but the Black knights are more active than all of Whites pieces. The game ended in a draw, although.

In round 1, there was another game in which Black was at a cross road.

Position after 16.b2-b3.
Black to move.

If you look at the position, you notice that Black has too many pieces at the board and waiting will not help Black. The only way to create counter play is to play e7-e5 and hoping at the right moment, or winning pawn d5 and hoping to rely on the power of the centre pawns. The game Valeinis – Rosseel continued with 16...e5 and after 17.dxe6 ep fxe6 18.Nb5 the Black centre pawns becomes weak and White got the upper hand and winning the game later. What will happen after the other candidate move 16...Rxc3!? After 16...Rxc3 17.Bxc3 Nbxd5 18.Bb2 (18.Bd4 e5) Ne4 19.Qxd5 Bc6

Analysis board

White can only keep the advantage with 20.Qxc6! Bxc6 21.Bxg7 Kxg7 22.Rxe4

The conclusion is that 16...Rxc3 is better than 16...e5.