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Less Explored Byways

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Popular Chess Variants, by David B. Pritchard, 2000 Batsford Ltd., Paperback, Figurine Algebraic Notation 143pp., \$19.95

This book is an introductory text for those interested in non-traditional or non-western chess forms. According to *The Encyclopedia of Chess Variants* there exist, besides the standard western chess usually discussed here, at least 1,400 variant forms of the game. These range from traditional Oriental games, such as the Chinese *xiangqui* and the Japanese *shogi* which have millions of players and histories longer than the European form, to very recent experimental forms with only a few followers.

In *Popular Chess Variants*, David B. Pritchard, who also wrote the aforementioned encyclopedia, discusses 20 of the less esoteric, more widely played alternate versions of the Royal Game. Two are the established Oriental forms, xiangqui and shogi, while the other 18 are all variations of standard western chess: Extinction Chess, Racing Kings, Displacement Chess, Randomized Chess, Marseillais Chess, Double-move Chess, Progressive Chess, Kriegspiel, Alice Chess, Triplets, Avalanche Chess, Hostage Chess, Co-ordinate Chess, Knight Relay Chess, Magnetic Chess, Dynamo Chess, and Ultima. Some of these have several slightly different sets of rules, making the total number of distinct games discussed closer to 40 or 50.



Your reviewer will be frank: this is not exactly my cup of tea. Except for the Oriental games, I tend to see such things as gratuitous attempts to fill a pleasant void; the superfluous concoctions of people with too much time on their hands. Standard chess has yet enough mystery and complication to engage my attention indefinitely, and to my traditional mind-set these recent alterations seem like adding fuzz-tone guitar to a Mozart arrangement. However, I am not one to argue with others' tastes or insist they limit themselves, and unlike Capablanca in the 1920s, Pritchard is not proposing that these variants are superior to standard chess or should replace it. Those seeking chessic variety will find this an excellent guide, written in a clear, compact, intelligent style



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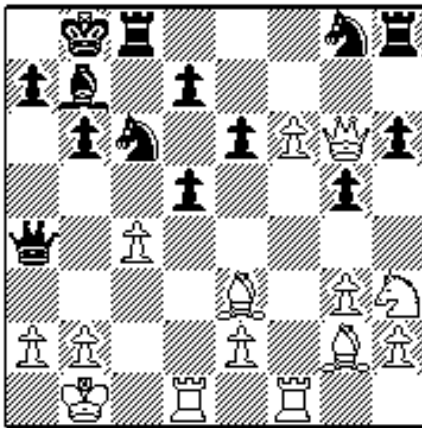
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and presenting ideas ranging from the mildly clever to the ingeniously and weirdly creative. While some of the same ground is covered by several web-sites, notably Hans Bodlaender's www.chessvariants.com, the material there did not seem on the whole to be as detailed, well-written or instructive as Pritchard's.

Pritchard devotes one chapter to each variant, moving from the simpler games to the more complex. He briefly describes each game's origin, if known, then explains its rules, some of its basic principles and unique features, and any especially attractive and/or problematic aspects. He presents a number of sample games, problems, or game fragments. The reader will not learn enough to even begin to master any of the games, but he will see enough to decide if any given variant interests him. At the end of the book Pritchard gives information about sets, software, books, magazines, organizations, web-sites and other means by which interested readers can play, learn more or contact other enthusiasts.

While all these games involve rules mildly to wildly different from standard chess, the 18 western variants are all played with the usual set of thirty-two pieces (or a subset thereof) on the usual 8x8, 64-square board (though sometimes more than one board and/or set is involved). 3- or 4-handed variants (e.g. Bughouse), or games involving circular boards or triangular/pentagonal/hexagonal "squares" and the like are not discussed. Nor are variants involving extra pieces, expanded/contracted boards, or third dimensions (with one possible exception). A full survey of all 20 variants is beyond our scope here, and we lack diagram software to present the Oriental games, but we will discuss a representative sample of the western variants. Be forewarned: even rudimentary comprehension of some of the following situations requires abandonment of normal chessic preconceptions.

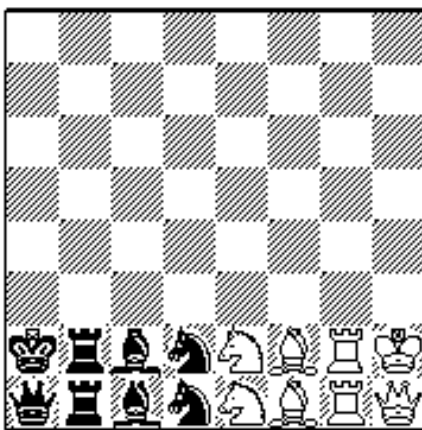
Extinction Chess is probably the simplest variant. All moves are as usual, but each type of piece: king, queen, bishop, knight, rook, and pawn is considered a separate "species." The goal is not checkmate, but rather to cause the extinction of any one of the opponent's species, usually the king, queen, or a minor piece pair; less often the rooks and almost never all eight pawns. A grossly simple example: **1 e4 e5 2 d4 d6? 3 dxe5 dxe5?? 4 Qxd8**, 1-0. White wins by making Black's queen extinct first; the fact that recapture would restore the balance is irrelevant. A more sophisticated combination is this (*See Diagram*):



24 Rxd5!, which makes no sense as a conventional chess move, wins outright. If 24...exd5 25 Bxd5 either the last black bishop or both knights go, or if 24...Nb4 25 Ra5! renders either Q or B extinct. Usually if a bishop or knight is traded off early, it is a good idea *not* to develop the other one, and obviously there

is no endgame in the conventional sense.

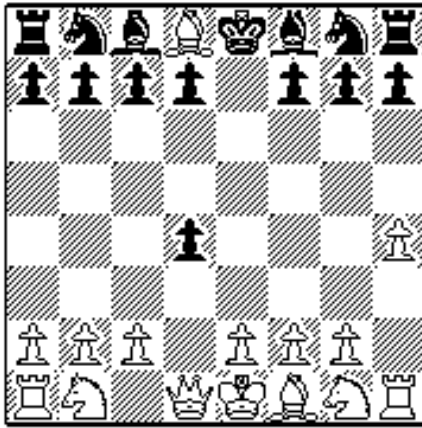
Racing Kings is the only variant with a significantly different opening array (*See Diagram*).



The goal is to get one's king to the 8th rank first. Both giving check and moving one's king into check is prohibited. This game seems either the least explored or least popular of the book's twenty, with only two pages devoted to it. Likewise little space is devoted to "displacement" and

"randomized" chess forms, such as Fischerandom, in which the starting back rank piece array is changed. Once popular but now in decline, says Pritchard, is Kriegspiel, a sort of Blind Man's Bluff in which the two opponents sit at separate boards and do not see each other's moves but must try to guess or deduce them while a referee keeps track of the full position.

Most popular according to Pritchard is Progressive Chess, a form of madness in which White starts by making one move, then Black makes two, White three, Black four, and so on. Checkmate is the goal, but giving check at any point ends one's turn regardless of the number of moves remaining. Knowledge of openings is essential, and a substantial body of theory has evolved, with 1 e4, d4 and Nh3 considered the best first move possibilities. As might be expected, endgames are rare, miniatures common, e.g. **1 e4; 2 Nc6, Nf6??; 3 Bc4, Qh5, Qxf7 mate**. A more sophisticated, aesthetically pleasing example: **1 d4; 2 e5, exd4; 3 h4, Bg5, Bxd8** (*See Diagram*):



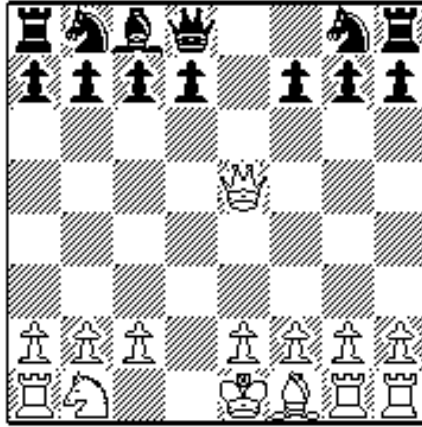
Black has lost his queen and developed only one pawn, but still has a forced mate: **4 d3, dxc2, cxb1(R), Bb4 mate.** Those who find Progressive Chess intimidating may wish to start with Double-Move Chess or Marseillais Chess, variants in which each side makes two moves at a time.

Those who habitually leave pieces *en prise* may wish to try Losing Chess, also known in America as Giveaway Chess and in France as "Qui perd gagne." Captures are compulsory and the goal is to force the opponent to take all one's men. Oddly, the two most common standard chess openings, 1 e4 and 1 d4, both lose by force in this variant.

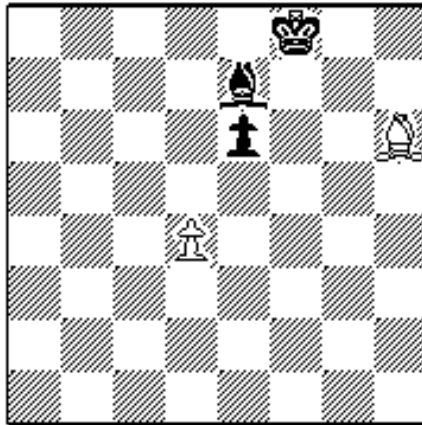
Pritchard waxes rhapsodic over Alice Chess, a "wonderful game, appropriately named after Lewis Carroll's eponymous heroine ... If you pass over every other game in this book don't miss this one." It requires two boards, one (board A) with the normal array, the other (board B) empty to start with, making it the book's one game with a dimension beyond the normal two. A piece moved on A transfers at the end of its move "through the looking glass" to the corresponding square on B, and vice versa. However, the move must be legal on the board from which it starts, e.g. a king on A cannot move into check on A, even if after translating to B it is not in check. Nor could one open, say, 1 Qd4 or 1 Bb2, because a piece starting on A cannot leap (except of course for knights) over a pawn, or move to a square occupied on A even though it ends its move on B. Also corresponding squares cannot be occupied at the same time, e.g. if there is a white pawn on A's e4, neither player can move anything from A to e4 on B.

An odd and at first very confusing consequence of these rules is that pieces starting on A can only capture those on B, and vice versa. If a check is to be answered by interposition, the interposing piece must also start on the opposite board from its king. This is the basis for the Alice version of fool's mate: **1 e4B ("B" indicating the board to which the moving piece transfers) d5B 2 Be2B dxe4A?? 3Bb5A mate.** Any man moving to interpose (3...c6, Bd7, Nc6 or Qd7) is whisked away to board B, and the king cannot play 3...Kd7B because he is still in check on d7A. Since in this example all the pieces finish on board A, it is not that good an illustration of

Alice Chess. A more sophisticated brevity is **1 d4B e6B 2 Qd6B** (the d-pawn having transferred to B does not impede the queen moving from A) **2...Be7B 3 Qe5A+** (Remember, the e6 pawn and the Be7 are on board B and thus do not block this check from A, nor can any piece on A interpose.) **3...Kf8B 4 Bh6B mate**. The final position(s), first board A (*See Diagram*);

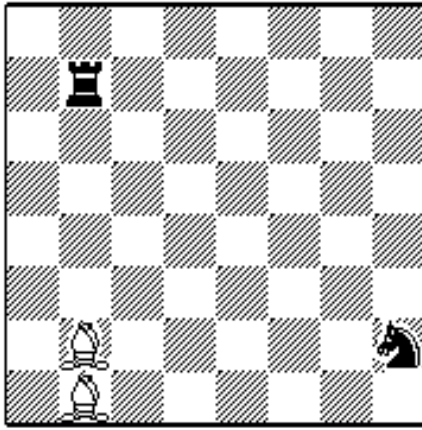


and board B (*See Diagram*).



Though on B Black's king seems to have three squares open, on A they are all either occupied or in check, thus it is mate. One wonders if there has been any attempt at playing Alice Chess *sans voir*; the challenge of remembering what pieces are on which board would seem enough to confound a Koltanowski.

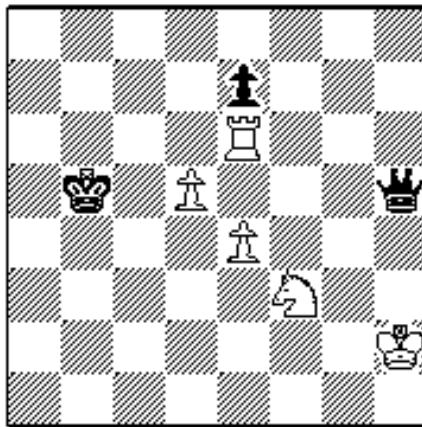
Another challenge to one's powers of visualization is Coordinate Chess. Here like pieces (e.g., both rooks or both knights) of one color form "coordinate pairs." For coordinate purposes the king and queen are sometimes considered a pair. Pawns do not form pairs. When one of a coordinate pair moves to a square not on the same rank or file as its counterpart, they can be seen as standing at the corners of a rectangle. The opposite two corners then become their "coordinate squares" for that move only. Any pieces that happen to stand on those coordinate squares become subject to special rules, which differ according to the particular sub-variant involved. A simplified explanatory example: suppose here (*See Diagram*)



White were to play 1 Bh7. The two white bishops then form a rectangle with coordinate squares at b7 and h2. The rook and knight at those squares then become subject to the special rules. If the sub-variant being played were, say, Transportation Chess, White could transport both the R and N to any

unoccupied squares. In Conversion Chess, they would become white pieces, or in Zombie Chess they would lose all power to capture or give check.

Even stranger is Magnetic Chess, based on the principle that like magnetic poles repel, while unlike poles attract. Any move of any piece immediately "magnetizes" the nearest pieces on the same rank and/or file as the moved piece, "repelling" those of the same color and "attracting" those of the opposite color. Pritchard gives an excellent illustrative example. Here (*See Diagram*)



the black queen attacks the white king. White responds with 1 Ne5, resulting in a wholesale rearrangement of the position (*See Diagram*).

normal kings, but pawns move like rooks and all other pieces move like queens. However, they do not capture as they move, but in various complex ways that require about three pages of explanation. Pritchard himself admits that "The game suffers from a lack of clarity that makes forward planning difficult, at least at first."

Fortunately that is not true of the book. As noted, Pritchard writes in a clear, to-the-point style that makes it easy to grasp the basics of even the more exotic games. And the reader should not assume from the brief examples given here that these games produce only miniatures; many lead to longer games of considerable complexity and subtlety, of which Pritchard gives many examples. On the question of whether playing variants affects one's normal chess strength, Pritchard claims that it "can enhance your perception, particularly in tactical situations." He offers no evidence, but for what it's worth I do recall a *Chess Life* article several years ago, in which the author claimed that his chess rating rose about 200 points after extensive study and play of shogi.

However, the main point of this book is not to improve one's standard chess, but to enable one to enjoy variants for their own sake. For this purpose, it is a very competent work. If, for whatever reason, you wish to go beyond the well-trod paths of standard chess, *Popular Chess Variants* will serve well as an introduction and guide to some less explored byways.

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