



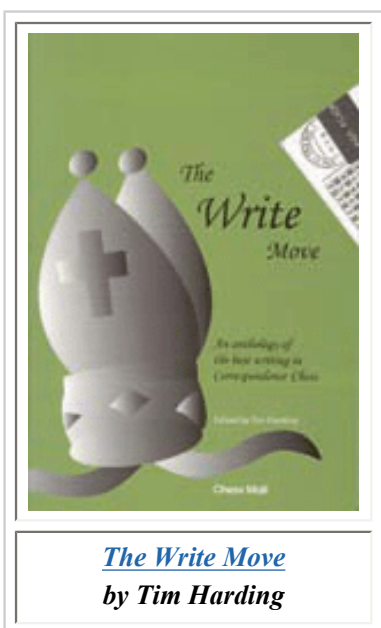
## Has the Morra Gambit been Revived?

Is **1 e4 e5 2 d4 exd4 3 c3** a winning weapon for White? Hannes Langrock thinks so. His book [\*The Modern Morra Gambit: A Dynamic Weapon Against the Sicilian\*](#) (Russell Enterprises, 2006) has created quite a stir in the past year or so. I am not so sure whether it would work in correspondence play, but I am certainly considering giving it a whirl in over-the-board games some time soon. In this review, I will look at some of the lines he considers and add some material not in the book. Thank you to the readers who submitted games for consideration; you will find them mentioned later in the article.

## COLUMNISTS

### *The Kibitzer*

Tim Harding



I believe Langrock has researched all the over-the-board game databases but does he know how Black can defend when he has the leisure to analyse with the board and computer, and access to all the chess literature, as a correspondence player has? (Incidentally, he mentions my *Mega Corr3* database as one of his sources, but that was produced in 2003; he should have got hold of *MegaCorr4*, the 2005 version, and I have issued another one since the book came out, called *UltraCorr*.)

In my private correspondence database, there are now about 820,000 games. Searching for Morra games with some substantial notes, there were 59 annotated White wins, 40 Black wins and 18 draws, making 58.11% score for White if I have done the sums correctly. This is perhaps pretty much the statistic you might get with any respectable opening. White was winning half the annotated games. Of course you can say that annotated games are not a fair sample, but they would tend to be ones by higher-rated players with some intrinsic interest, otherwise they would not have been annotated. I could not search by ratings because in the majority of cases these have not been stored in my database, as correspondence ratings are often misleading.

I then searched for all games, with or without notes, as long as there was a result and the game lasted at least ten moves. (This was to rule out games that had terminated prematurely because of awful blunders or withdrawals.) Of course this meant including some very low quality games. There were 1,795 White wins, 1,565 Black wins and 1,565 draws. It was interesting that the number of Black wins and draws were exactly the same, but that was an anomaly I suppose. Thus out of a total sample of 4,925 games, the percentage of White wins was only just over 27%. White's total score, including the half points from the draws, is just over 52%.

The above statistics change somewhat when limited to 3...dxc3. Here White wins 1,431, Black wins 1,264 and there are 676 draws; i.e., a very high percentage of the draws are in the games where Black does not accept the gambit. White's total score in these games is about 58.33%. The apparently contradictory conclusion from the "damned lies" is that in all games including the weakest players, White definitely scores better when the gambit is accepted. In the higher-level games, it makes little difference; if anything, the stronger players do better when they accept the gambit, because they know how to defend it. If Black plays the sideline 3...d3, White has 45 wins, Black has 29 wins and there were 18 draws; none of these games had significant annotations.

The implication seems to be that stronger players who learn the Morra thoroughly and understand how to play it get reasonably good results, but among weaker players and those who only play the Morra occasionally, it is a disaster for White, who scores far below what he would if he played something safe and boring. It suggests that when the players are relatively weak and neither knows much about the Morra, Black usually muddles through. The dates of the games also suggest a slight trend: half the Black wins were in the years 2000 onwards, when computers provide powerful analytical assistance; White's percentage was a bit higher (but not sensationally so) in the pre-twenty-first century games.

So the statistics suggest that you should not play the Morra unless you do your homework first, and do it more deeply than you might with other openings, but if you do get the hang of it, then it could be a useful weapon, even in correspondence chess. Over-the-board and in Internet blitz, of course, it should be even more effective.

Before we start to look at some variations, I should give one word of warning. Black does not have to take the pawn on c3 at move three. He can defend with 3...Nf6 and aim for positions from the 2 c3 Sicilian. 3...d5 and other moves are also possible. This column will only consider 3...dxc3 and, of course, just a few of the main lines can be considered in an article of this length.

### **The “Scheveningen” Defensive Set-up**

In many games, Black sets up a compact formation with “normal” development, rather like in the classical Scheveningen Sicilian. That is, he plays ...d6 and ...e6, ...Nc6 and ...Nf6, ...Be7, ...a6 and ...Qc7. Then he is ready to castle kingside, if appropriate. All this takes nine or ten moves, but at the end of that stage White had better have some definite pressure or he is just a pawn down for nothing compared with the main line Scheveningen.

*Michael Squires – Manuel Seris-Granier Gonzalez*

ICCF Email Champions League 2002-4

**1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 Nc6 5 Nf3 d6 6 Bc4 e6 7 0-0 Nf6**

Black can also hold back this move and play 7...Be7, which can transpose to the game at move ten, but need not do so. For example, Stephen Whiteman from the USA sent me four games he had played with the Morra. One of his opponents chose 7...Be7 8 Qe2 a6 9 Rd1 Qc7 (Langrock has respect for 9...Bd7!? as in N. Regan – M. Holm, London 1994; see pages 77-9 of the book.) 10 Bfd4 and now instead of 10...Nf6, reaching the diagram below, Black played 10...b5, which seems to be a mixing of systems that does not turn out well.

S. Whiteman – S. Turney, Georgia State Championship 2001, continued (after 10 Bf4 b5) 11 Bb3 Ne5 12 Bxe5 dxe5 13 Rac1 Qb8 14 Nd5?! (Spectacular, but surely not sound?) 14...exd5 15 exd5 Bd6 16 Nxe5 Bxe5? (I don't see how White breaks through against solid defence: 16...Kf8 17 Nc6 Qc7 or 16...Ne7 17 Nc6 Qc7 18 Re1 Kf8 19 Ne5 Qd8 20 Nc6 Qd7.) 17 d6 f6? (Greed is not good here. 17...Kf8 was the last hope.) 18 f4 Qa7+ 19 Kh1 Qd7 20 fxe5 Qg4 21 Rxc8+ 1-0. White's play in this game should probably be replaced by something calmer like 12 Rac1 Qb8 first and then he has various options, retaining the bishop.

**8 Qe2 a6**

If Black is not careful with his early move order and leaves his queen opposed to the white rook open the d-file; for example, by 8...Be7 9 Rd1 Nf6?!, then an uncomfortable early e4-e5 can come into play. After 10 e5 Ne8 11 exd6 Bxd6, White usually plays 12 Ne4 or 12 Nb5 with a good game. Instead, the classical main line 9...e5 is discussed after this game.

**9 Rd1 Qc7 10 Bf4**

Langrock thinks this is more dangerous than 10 Bg5 Be7 11 Rac1 0-0 12 Bb3 (Fischer – Korchnoi,

Buenos Aires 1960), when 12...Qb8 is safest is his opinion.

### 10...Be7



This is all analysed in chapter one in Langrock's book.

### 11 Rac1

White continues his build-up. Now we see a definite difference from the Scheveningen: because the c-pawn has been gambitted, the file is open and White posts his rook opposite the black queen to set up tactical opportunities. In the classical Sicilian, the half-open c-file is Route One for Black to seek counterplay and potentially obtain a favourable endgame. Thus we immediately see one of Black's dilemmas against the Morra: he has a solid-seeming position, but his main idea for positive play is

gone. The corollary is that White need not panic; the main weight of the struggle is to come and Black's play has to be primarily reactive rather than proactive.

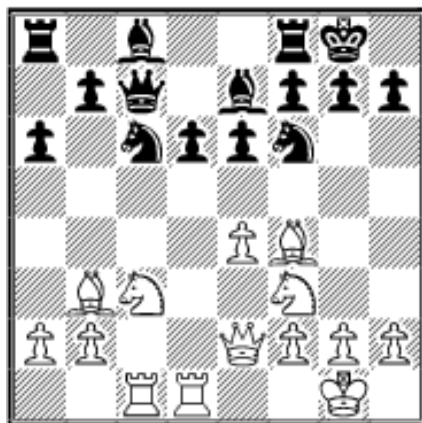
It follows from this that there is no need for 11 e5?!, when Langrock says "White gets compensation but no advantage." In fact, he indicates, White's whole idea may fail after 11...Nh5! (forcing a second pawn sacrifice) 12 Bg5 Bxg5! 13 Nxg5 Nf4 14 Qf3 dxe5! 15 Nce4 (V. P. Belenko – Rivlin, corr 1990) 15...0-0!, because if 16 g3 Nd4! "most likely buries the 11 e5 variation."

### 11...0-0

Black continues to play simple developing moves and await developments.

### 12 Bb3

12 Bd3 is "clumsy and bad" says Langrock, page 60, and he recommends 12...e5! 13 Nd5 Qd8. Instead, a game too recent for inclusion in his book went 12...Qa5 13 e5 dxe5 14 Nxe5 Nxe5 15 Bxe5 Rd8 16 Bxf6 (a new move here) 16...Bxf6 17 b4 Qa3 18 Ne4 Be7 19 Nc5 Rd5 20 h3 g6 21 Rb1 Bxc5 22 bxc5 Qxc5 23 Be4 Rxd1+ 24 Rxd1 Qc7 25 Qf3 e5 26 Bd5 Kg7 27 Qa3 Bf5 28 g4 Bc2 29 Rc1 Qd7 30 Bxf7 Rc8 31 Bb3 Bxb3 32 Rxc8 Qxc8 33 Qxb3 Qc6 34 Qe3 Kf6 35 Qd2 Ke6 36 Qd8 Qd7 37 Qb6+ Ke7 38 Qb4+ Kf7 39 Qc5 Qe6 40 a4 h5 41 g5 e4 42 a5 Qc6 43 Qe5 Kf8 ½–½, Renzo Gutierrez – Daniel Cinca, Chessfriend.com, 2003-4.



This position after 12 Bb3 is a standard position where Black has a choice.

### 12...Qb8!

Usually played here. Langrock says the queen move, removing the opposition between queen and rook, is not necessary, but is the safest move. Alternatives are:

a) 12...Rd8!? 13 Nd5 exd5 14 exd5 Bf8 and 14...Bg4 are both about equal (see Langrock page 55).

b) 12...e5!? is rarely seen; the main line from Langrock is 13 Be3 and he thinks White has some chances for an advantage.

### 13 Na4

13 h3 is often played, but the author thinks it is slow and Black can reply 13...Nd7.

### 13...b5!

Black returns the gambit pawn to achieve equality.

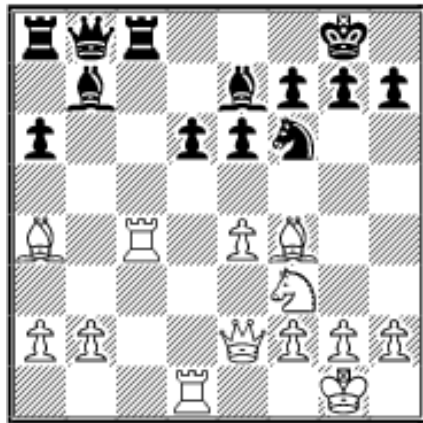
### 14 Rxc6 bxa4 15 Bxa4 Bb7

Black can also play 15...Bd7 16 Rc4 Bb5 17 Bxb5 axb5 18 Rc6 Rxa2 19 Bxd6 Bxd6 20 Rcx6, which is equal as Langrock points out. This actually occurred in a high-level correspondence tournament a few years ago, and the game ended 20...h6 21 R6d2 Qa8 22 e5 Nd5 23 Qxb5 Rb8 24 Qe2 Qb7 25 Rc1 Rxb2 26 Rxb2 Qxb2 27 Rc8+ Kh7 28 Qe4+ g6 29 Rxb8 Qxb8 30 g3 ½–½, V. Grigoryev – B. Zlender, Mikhailov Memorial 2002.

### 16 Rc4

Or 16 Nd4 Ra7 17 e5 Nd5 18 Bg3 dxe5 19 Bxe5 Qa8 20 Rc2 Rc8 21 Nxe6 Rxc2 22 Qg4 g6 23 Bxc2 Bc8 24 Bf5 Nf6 25 Bxf6 Bxf6 26 Qf4 Rd7 27 Rxd7 (27 Bd3!?) 27...Bxd7 28 Be4 Qc8 29 Nc7 Qd8 ½–½, (49) T. Roelofszen – S. Andersson, IECG email 2002 (not in the book).

### 16...Rc8



### 17 Rxc8+

Langrock says White goes astray with this move and that preferable is 17 Rdc1 Rxc4 18 Rxc4 Nh5! 19 Bg5 Bxg5 20 Nxg5 Nf6 21 Bc6 Bxc6 22 Rxc6 with equality. Actually, I do not see much wrong with exchanging rooks.

### 17...Qxc8 18 Rc1 Qd8 19 e5

Langrock doesn't mention this move. He only gives 19 Bc6 Rc8! 20 Bxb7 Rxc1+ 21 Bxc1 Qc7 22 Bxa6 Qxc1+ 23 Ne1 d5 24 exd5 Nxd5. Now it is Black who has sacrificed the pawn for a strong initiative. White indeed

lost eventually in the game Langrock gives, namely W. Erben – D. Migl, Germany 1996.

### 19...dxe5

19...Nd5 20 Bg3 dxe5 only transposes, but 19...Bxf3 20 Qxf3 Nd5 leads to further exchanges after 21 Rd1 dxe5 (21...Nxf4?! 22 Qxf4 forces 22...d5 23 Bc2, with an opposite-colour bishop middlegame where White has the attacking chances. 21...Rc8 and 21...Qc7 are also playable.) 22 Bxe5 Bf6 23 Bxf6 Qxf6 24 Qxf6 Nxf6=.

### 20 Nxe5 Nd5 21 Bg3 Rc8 22 Rd1 Bc5

With a complicated and roughly equal game where the better player should win. As it turned out, this was White.

### 23 a3 Bb6 24 h3 Qe7 25 Qd3 Qg5 26 Qb3 Rc1 27 Rxc1 Qxc1+ 28 Kh2 g6 29 Qf3 f5?

Too ambitious and creating an unjustifiable weakness. Maybe Black already stands worse, but 29... f6 was superior.

**30 Nd3 Qc8 31 Qe2 a5 32 Bb5 Nf6 33 Be5 Nd7 34 Bc3 Be4 35 f3 Bd5 36 Kh1 Bc7 37 Qe3 e5 38 Qa7 Qb8 39 Qxb8+ Nxb8 40 Nxe5 Bb3 41 f4 Kf8 42 g4 Ke7 43 gxf5 gxf5 44 Kg2 Bxe5 45 fxe5 Nd7 46 Kf3 Ke6 47 Bxd7+ Kxd7 48 Bxa5 Ke6 49 Kf4 1–0**

The conclusion seems to be that the classical defensive set-up with ...Qc7 should not offer Black more than a draw, but is very hard to break down. If Black seeks a refutation of the Morra, he must be willing to play less routine moves in the opening.

### Classical Main Line with ...e5

Langrock calls the rather passive option 8...Be7 9 Rd1 e5 the “Classical Main Line.” Here is a recent correspondence game sent in by a reader.

*Joan Canal Oliveras – Jiri Simunek, J*

Czech Republic-Spain corr (7), 2001 [B21]

**1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 Nc6 5 Nf3 d6 6 Bc4 e6 7 0–0 Nf6 8 Qe2 Be7 9 Rd1 e5**



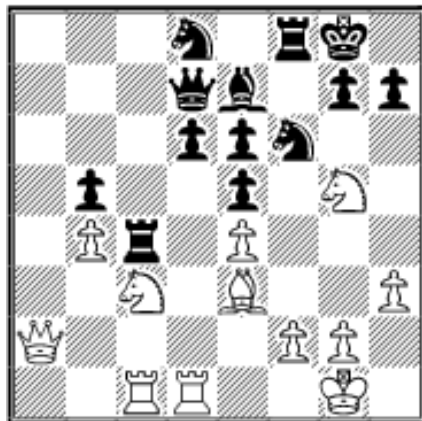
Black rules out e4-e5 and can now develop his queen's bishop, but at the cost of a lost tempo and obvious weaknesses on the d-file.

**10 h3**

Langrock thinks there is no need to waste time with this move, and does not give any examples. He reckons that after 10 Be3 Bg4 11 h3, both 11...Bxf3 and 11...Bh5 are fine for White, so his main line goes 10 Be3 0-0 11 b4 (11 Rac1 is also known.) 11...Nxb4 (or 11...Bg4 12 a3 with a space advantage) 12 Nxe5, and now Langrock recommends 12...Be6!, with chances for both sides. This

does not seem to have been played previously, so you will have to look at this for yourselves.

**10...0–0 11 Be3 Be6 12 Rac1 Rc8 13 Bxe6 fxe6 14 b4 a6 15 a3 b5 16 Qa2 Qd7 17 Ng5 Nd8 18 a4 Rc4 19 axb5 axb5**



White's pressure can only be increased now by a piece sacrifice.

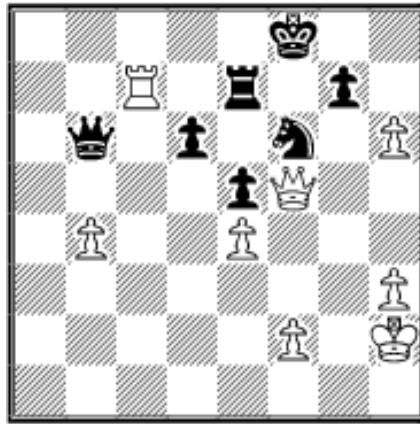
**20 Nxb5! Rxc1 21 Rxc1 Qxb5 22 Nxe6 Nxe6 23 Qxe6+ Rf7 24 Rc7 Kf8 25 Bg5 h5**

White had the very powerful threat of 26 Bxf6 gxf6 27 Rc8+ Kg7 28 Qg4+ Kh6 29 Rg8, so the point of 25...h5 is to remove the check on g4.

**26 Kh2**

White continues to play for a win based on the daring idea of a kingside pawn breakthrough. Instead, 26 Bxf6 gxf6 27 Rc8+ Kg7 28 Rc7 Kf8 would be a draw.

**26...Qa4 27 g4 Qa6 28 gxh5 Qb6 29 Qc8+ Ne8 30 Bxe7+ Rxe7 31 Qf5+ Nf6 32 h6**



**32...Qxc7!**

Black sees a clever drawing manoeuvre. Instead, 32... Rxc7 33 h7 Rc2 34 h8Q+ gives White winning chances as both queens will get back into play.

**33 h7 Rf7 34 h8Q+ Ng8 35 Qfh7 Rxf2+ 36 Kg3 Qc3+!! 37 Kxf2 ½-½**

Perpetual check!

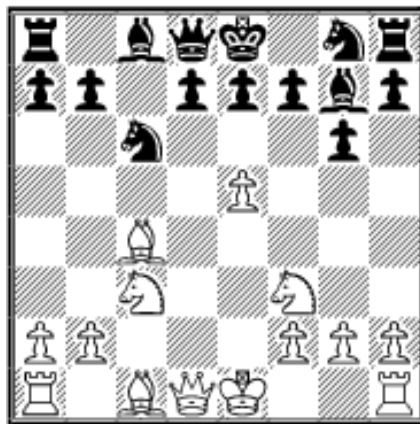
### **Kingside Fianchetto Variation**

There is one line quite different in character from all the others, where Black develops his king's bishop at g7. A reader sent in this important game.

*Steve Whiteman – W. Schaetzle*

US Open, 1996

**1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 Nc6 5 Nf3 g6 6 Bc4 Bg7 7 e5!**



The standard Morra set-ups with Qe2 are no good here. White must act quickly with an early e4-e5 to prevent Black achieving his desired Dragon formation.

**7...Nxe5**

There are two other critical lines:

a) 7...Qa5!? 8 0-0! Nxe5 9 Nxe5 Bxe5 (9...Qxe5 10 Re1) 10 Re1 “looks even stronger” says Langrock. (10 Nd5 e6!) 10...d6. Langrock claims that this critical move has never been played, but I did find one example in my correspondence database: 11 Nd5? e6 F. Alozy – J.

Treiber, France corr. 1998. Instead, White can try 11 Bd2, which brings the game into unknown territory, analysed by Langrock on page 191.

b) 7...Nh6 is a relatively untried playable alternative, also discussed by Langrock. Then 8 Bf4 0-0 9 0-0 d6! (Other moves are bad, he says.) 10 exd6 exd6=, when Langrock does not agree with Palkövi's assessment of an initiative for White.

**8 Nxe5 Bxe5 9 Bxf7+ Kxf7 10 Qd5+**



**10...e6?**

Condemned by Langrock. He gives 10...Kg7! 11 Qxe5+ Nf6 12 0-0 d6 13 Qe3 h6 14 Re1 e5 15 h3 (Walter – Kruse, corr 1986) 15...Qb6! (Returns the pawn to obtain a drawish endgame) 16 Qxb6 axb6 17 Be3 Be6 18 Bxb6 Rbc8 19 f4 Nd7 20 Be3 = (Langrock). The opposite-coloured bishops mean that playing for a win for either side could be difficult.

**11 Qxe5 Qf6 12 Qc7 Ne7**



Alternatives are discussed on page 193 of the book.

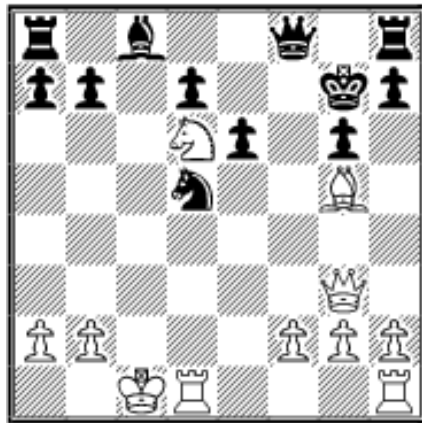
### 13 Ne4

13 0–0 is the main move in the book.

### 13...Nd5 14 Qg3 Qe7

Black seems to be in difficulty whatever he does here. Schaetzle varies from N. Nasikan – P. Lebed, Ukraine 2004, which Langrock did not examine very critically. It went 14...Qd4 15 Ng5+ (Maybe not best) 15...Kg7 16 0–0 h6 17 Nf3 (Probably Be3 is better here or next move) 17...Qf6 18 b3?! Rf8? (Of course not 18...Qxa1? 19 Bxh6+ Rxh6 20 Rxa1, but 18...Nc3 and 18...b6 both look playable.) 19 Ba3 Rf7 20 Bd6, “with initiative” says Langrock, but White could have won immediately by 20 Ne5!.

### 15 Nd6+ Kg7 16 Bg5 Qf8 17 0–0-0!+–



Queenside castling is a great rarity in the Morra, so it is worth a diagram!

### 17...h6 18 Rxd5 exd5

Or 18...hxg5 19 Rxd5 Rh6 20 h4, followed by h4-h5.

### 19 Be7 Qg8 20 Re1 g5 21 Bf6+ Kxf6 22 Qe5+ Kg6 23 Qf5+ Kh5 24 Re3 Qf8 25 Rh3# 1-0

### Early Queenside Expansion by ...b5

One way in which Black can expand on the queenside is to forgo standard developing moves and try to harass

White’s king’s bishop by a rapid ...a6 and ...b5, but maybe this is too risk? Let’s see a recent example that is not in Langrock’s book.

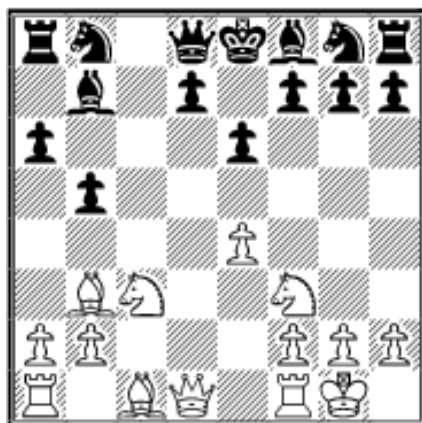
### Marco Jenull – Kiyotaka Sakai

Chessfriend.com rapid game, 2003

### 1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 a6 5 Nf3 e6 6 Bc4 b5

This variation is considered in the “Sidelines” chapter near the back of the book.

### 7 Bb3 Bb7 8 0–0



### 8...b4?!

This seems to be too risky. Black can play instead 8...d6!, for which see the next game.

### 9 Nd5!? exd5 10 exd5 Bd6 11 Re1+

Compare Langrock’s page 286; he doesn’t consider Black’s next move, but White’s attack is probably too dangerous for Black to answer, whatever he does.



11...Kf8

11...Ne7 12 Ng5 0-0 13 Qh5 h6 14 Ne4 Qc7 (14...Nc8 15 Bxh6!) 15 Bxh6! is discussed in Langrock's book. White obtained a big advantage in M. Zelic – D. Sermek, Makarska 19895, but managed to lose in the end.

## 12 Qd4 a5

Argentinian correspondence grandmaster Roberto Alvarez says that: "Maybe 12...Qf6 is worth a try, although it doesn't promise more than a draw: 13 Qe4 Qe7 (13...g6? 14 Bg5) 14 Qd3 Qf6 (14...Qd8 15 Bg5) 15 Qe4=."

## 13 Bg5 f6

Or 13...Nf6 14 Re2 (Roberto Alvarez suggests 14 Nd2! h6 15 Bh4 Ra6 16 Nc4, with the initiative, or 15...g5 16 Ne4 Ra6 17 Bc4, with advantage.) 14...Na6 15 Rae1 Bc5 16 Bxf6 Qxf6 17 Ne5 Qf5 18 Qd2 g5 19 d6 Nb8 20 Nxd7+ Nxd7 21 Re7 Bc6 22 Rxf7+ Qxf7 23 Bxf7 Kxf7 24 Re7+ Kf6 25 h4 h6 26 Qe2 Bd5 27 Rxd7 Rac8 28 Qe7+ Kf5 29 Rc7 Rxc7 30 Qxc7 Bd4 31 g4+ Kxg4 32 d7 Kf3 33 Qd6 1-0, M. Jenull – R. R. Baumann, Chessfriend.com 2003.

## 14 Bf4 Ra6

"Exchanging pieces does not seem to solve Black problems, since his rook at h8 is unable to join the game," says Alvarez. 14...Bxf4!? 15 Qxf4 Qb6 16 Rac1 a4 17 Bxa4 Ne7 18 Bb3 is one possible continuation.

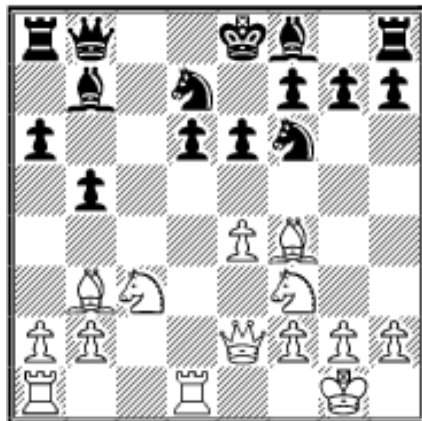
**15 Re2 Ne7 16 Rae1 Nc8 17 Bh6! gxf6 18 Re8+ Qxe8 19 Qxf6+ Qf7 20 Qxh8+ Qg8** and now White picks up the queen by **21 Re8+! Kxe8 22 Qxg8+** and White eventually won. Black has a nominal material equivalent, but his forces are impossible to organise effectively. His kingside pawns all fall, his king is exposed and the d5-pawn cripples his queenside development.

Instead, Black can play more sanely at move eight, as in the next game.

**Robin Smith – Gary Good**

13<sup>th</sup> US Corr. Ch. Final 1999

**1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 a6 5 Nf3 e6 6 Bc4 b5 7 Bb3 Bb7 8 0-0 d6! 9 Qe2 Nd7 10 Rd1 Ngf6 11 Bf4 Qb8**



White seems to have some problems in this line.

## 12 Rac1

Instead:

a) Langrock recommends 12 Nd5, saying that after 12...exd5 13 exd5+ Be7 14 Re1 (14 Nd4 Ne5 15 Nf5 Bf8 and 16...g6 he says.) 14...Ng8 15 Rac1 "it will be difficult for Black to free himself."

I believe the standard reply to such claims applies here:

"Tell that to the Marines!" After 15...Kf8, Black is a

whole piece ahead and I do not see what White has for it. Maybe this knight sacrifice will work in Internet blitz, but not in a real game.



b) Maybe Zelic's 12 Rd2 is the only playable move for White, needing more analysis. Langrock suggests 12...Nc5 for Black.

**12...Be7 13 Nd6 exd5**

Black found in Graham Burgess' book on the Morra that White had played the knight offer in the game Lendwai – Costa, which went 13...Nxd5 and ended in a draw. He figured he could do better.

**14 exd5 Kf8!**

Langrock cites this game with no further continuation. He prefers to analyse 14...Nf8, which was played in a different correspondence game between two unknowns, but perhaps it is a stronger move. I leave that to readers to decide if it's relevant to their repertoires.

**15 Nh4 Ne8!**

Robin Smith explains that "all four squares the e8-N now guards are weaknesses in Black's position. The knight will remain on this square for another fifteen moves, and White will have a terrible time trying to break through." He adds 15...Ne5 should also be OK for Black.

**16 Nf5 Bf6 17 Re1 Ne5 18 Bd2?!**

Smith thought this was slow. "Black is happy to give back a pawn to relieve some pressure. After 18 Nxd6? Qxd6 19 Bxe5 Bxe5 20 Qxe5 Qxe5 21 Rxe5, White has a pawn back for the piece, but the ending is just lost."

**18...Qd8 19 a4 g6 20 Ne3 Kg7 21 axb5 axb5 22 Kh1 Qb6 23 f4 Nd7 24 Ng4!**

White finds an aggressive try, but Black proves his position is sound.

**24...Bxb2 25 Be3 Bd4 26 Bxd4+ Qxd4 27 Qe7 Nc5 28 Rcd1 Qc3 29 f5 Nf6 30 fxg6 hxg6 31 Rf1 Nce4 32 Rf3 Rae8 0–1**

So now at last we have found a candidate line where Black may try to play for a win. Of course, he can only do so if he is willing to take risks. This line may be more suitable for Black given the long analysis time and computer assistance available in correspondence play than in the hurly-burly of a tournament game over the board.

**The Crucial Line with ...Nge7**

**1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 Nc6 5 Bc4 e6 6 Nf3 a6 7 0–0 Nge7**



This is another crucial line, which some people believe to be a refutation of the Morra. For example, Roberto Alvarez wrote in a recent *ChessBase Magazine* annotation: "This setup is considered the best antidote against the Morra Gambit: Black keeps the extra pawn, with good prospects, though White has some compensation." Langrock, on the other hand, says that this is because of an incorrect interpretation of how White should handle the line. I have to agree with him. Recent correspondence games in the line show White scoring almost 100%.



**1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 Nc6 5 Bc4 e6 6 Nf3 a6 7 0–0 Nge7 8 Bg5 f6 9 Be3 b5**

9...Ng6 10 Bb3 b5 transposes, although Black has tried other tenth moves to avoid Zaharov's unclear idea in the next note.

**10 Bb3 Ng6 11 Nd4**

The mad-looking 11 Nd5!? (V. Zakharov – A. Gusev, Tula 2001) is analysed by Langrock. I have no new examples here.

**11...Bb7**

a) The main alternative is 11...Nxd4, when White has often gone wrong by recapturing with the bishop, then one good reply seems to be 12...Bd6. Instead, Langrock gives 12 Qxd4! Bb7 13 f4! Rc8 14 Qa7 Qc7 15 Rac1 Bc5 16 Nxb5 Bxa7 17 Nxc7+ Rxc7 18 Bxa7 Rxc1 19 Rxc1 Bxe4 20 Rc7 0–0 and now the correct move is 21 Bc5! as in M. Zelic – Bertok, Croatia 2003 (annotated in the book).

b) 11...Na5 12 f4 Bc5 (Fritz prefers 12...Nxb3 13 Nxb3 Bb7 14 f5 Ne5 15 Qh5+ Nf7 16 Rad1 Qc7 17 Qh3 exf5, with only a minimal advantage to White.) 13 f5 Nxb3 14 axb3 exf5 15 exf5 Ne5 16 Qh5+ Nf7 17 Qf3 Rb8 18 Nc6 Qb6 19 Qe4+ Ne5 20 Nxe5 Bxe3+ 21 Kh1 Bb7 22 Nc6+ 1–0, J. Jenal – K.Krantz, corr 1986.

c) 11...Rb8 also comes into consideration.

**12 Nxc6**

12 Qh5 is inferior says Langrock, though it has often been played; e.g., M. Zelic – M. Cebalo, Pula 2000.

**12...Bxc6 13 f4**



**13...Bb4**

13...b4 seems to have lost in several games. White has a dangerous attack after 14 Nd5.

a) 14...Qa5 15 Rc1 (15 Re1 Bc5 16 f5!? Fritz8) 15...exd5 16 exd5 Bb7 17 d6 1–0, F. Fritsche – M. Dorer, DESC email 2003.

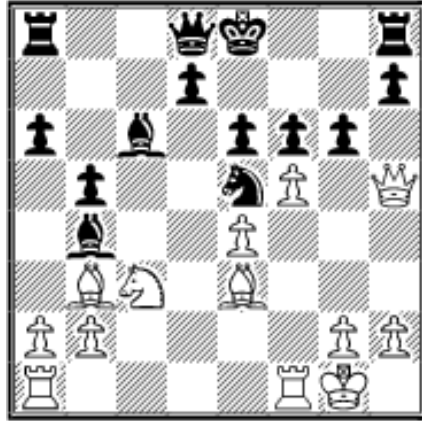
b) 14...Rb8 15 Rc1 (Instead, Langrock has a game on page 146 with 15 Re1.) 15...Rb5 16 f5 Bxd5 17 exd5 exf5 18 d6 f4 19 Bxf4 Qb6+ 20 Kh1 Kd8 21 Ba4 Nxf4 22 Bxb5 Qxd6 23 Qg4 h5 24 Qf5 g6 25 Qe4 axb5 26 Rcd1 Qe5 27

Qa8+ Ke7 28 Rfe1 Nd3 29 Rxe5+ Nxe5 30 Qd5 h4 31 Qxb5 Kf7 32 a4 bxa3 33 bxa3 h3 34 a4 hxg2+ 35 Kxg2 Rh4 36 a5 Rb4 37 Qd5+ Kg7 38 Ra1 Rc4 39 a6 1–0, Jaumandreu Llopis,A – Ottenweller, W/IECG 2004, UltraCorr (39);

Another defence that has failed is 13...Qe7 14 Re1 (14 Rc1!?) 14...Qd6 15 Qh5 0–0–0 16 g3 Qb4 17 Rac1 Kb8 18 Red1 Rc8 19 Rd4 Qe7 20 Qe2 Bb7 21 Rcd1 Rc7 22 R4d2 Bc8 23 a3 Qe8 24 Qf2

h5 25 Bb6 Rb7 26 a4 b4 27 Ne2 h4 28 Rc1 hxg3 29 Nxg3 Ka8 30 a5 Rh4 31 Bxe6 Rxf4 32 Qe3 dxe6 33 Rd8 Qxd8 34 Bxd8 1–0, F. Nepustil – F. Balabaev, Chessfriend.com 2005.

**14 f5 Ne5 15 Qh5+ g6**



A sharp position. White has tried two moves here.

**16 Qh4**

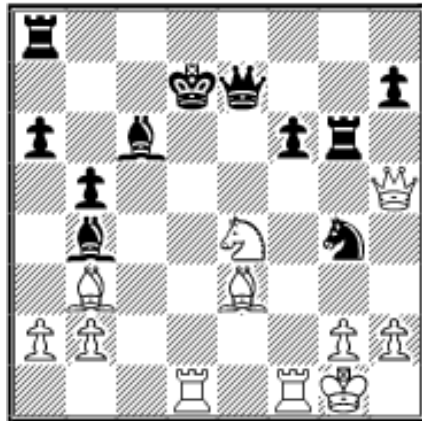
Langrock only mentions 16 fxg6!? Nxg6, when:

a) 17 Rad1 Qe7 18 Bd4 0–0 19 Nd5! Bxd5 20 exd5 Kh8 M. Zelic – C. Horvath, Pula 2002, and now Langrock gives 21 Bc2!? “with dangerous compensation for the pawn.”

b) 17 Nd5!? exd5 18 exd5 Bb7 19 Bc2 was unclear, but White eventually won in P. Schoupal – M. Quizielvu,

Chessfriend.com 2004.

**16...gxf5 17 exf5 Rg8 18 Ne4 Qe7 19 fxe6 Ng4 20 Qh5+ Rg6 21 exd7+ Kxd7 22 Rad1+**



If 22 Qf5+ Kc7, Black may survive.

**22...Kc7?**

White’s advantage is less pronounced after 22...Kc8 or 22...Ke8.

**23 Bf4+ Kb6 24 Bd5 Rc8 25 a4 bxa4 26 Kh1 f5 27 Bxc6 Rxc6 28 Nc3 Bxc3 29 bxc3 Rc5 30 h3 Nf6 31 Qh4 Nd5 32 Qxe7 Nxe7 33 Be3 Re6 34 Bxc5+ Kxc5 35 Rd4 Re4 36 g4 Rxd4 37 cxd4+ Kxd4 38 Rf4+ Kc5 39 gxf5 Nxf5 40 Rxa4 Kb5 41 Rf4 Nd6 42 Rd4 Kc5 43 Rh4 a5 44 Kg1 Nc4 45 Kf1 1–0**

It seems that the ...Nge7 defence cannot be recommended unless major improvements can be found for Black.

### Lines without an Early ...e6

In most defences to the Morra Accepted, Black plays an early ...e6, trying to blunt the pressure from the white king’s bishop against f7. (In Langrock’s book, the main exception is chapter seven, where he considers the early fianchetto of Black’s king’s bishop). In practically every other variation, Black plays ...e7-e6 by move six at latest, but in recent years some players have been asking why.

The disadvantage for Black in playing ...e6 is, of course, that the c8-bishop is hemmed in, and so we often see that Black quite soon plays ...e6-e5, partly with the idea of liberating that bishop. So why not get it into play first, before ...e6. It turns out, however, that this is not easy to do without falling into a tactical trap.

**1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 Nc6 5 Nf3 d6 6 Bc4 a6**

In Langrock’s book, this move is discussed on pages 278-284, as part of a chapter containing

miscellaneous sidelines. In view of the introduction above, you may be wondering what is wrong with the immediate development of the bishop, 6...Bg4. Actually, on page 19 in his introduction, Langrock gives this as an exercise for readers. Black played that move in a 1999 Finnish game I. Kaarne – E. Nakkila, and he asks “What is the best way for White to meet this variation?”

I expect you saw in a flash that this fails to the standard tactic 7 Bxf7+ Kxf7 8 Ng5+ and 9 Qxg4, when White regains the gambit pawn and smashes Black’s king position into the bargain. The corollary to this is that Black cannot play ...Bg4 until the knight has been developed at f6, in order to defend the bishop.

So then perhaps you will ask, what is wrong with 6...Nf6 at once? How does playing 6...a6 help to develop the queen’s bishop? Surprisingly perhaps, Langrock does not ask or answer this question in the book. This position, arising after the fairly commonplace-looking sequence of moves 4...Nc6 5 Nf3 d6 6 Bc4 Nf6 is not given in the index to variations at the back of the book. I think that this oversight can be explained by the fact that the variation we are going to consider next had not arisen as a problem when he was writing, and so he did not consider it.



After 6...Nf6 (which has occurred in nearly 250 games in my databases), White’s usual and correct continuation seems to be the aggressive 7 e5!. Then if 7...Nxe5?? 8 Nxe5 dxe5 9 Bxf7+ Kxf7 10 Qxd8, while if 7...dxe5 8 Qxd8+ Nxd8 9 Nb5 is awkward, White gaining at least some advantage after 9...Rb8 10 Nxe5 (Kristiansson – Roberts, Harrachow 1967, for example). If Black takes with the king, 8...Kxd8, White could play 9 Bxf7, but 9 Ng5! looks stronger and has been played several times; e. g., 9 Ng5 Na5 10 Bxf7 h6 11 Ne6+ Bxe6 12 Bxe6 Nc6 13 Be3 Nd4 14 0–0–0 Ke8 15 Bxd4 exd4 16 Nb5 1–0, Whiteman – S. Peschke, Peach State Championship, 1988. Somewhat better than 7...dxe5 are 7...d5 8 Bb5 or finally 7...Ng4 (or 7...Nd7) 8 e6, but in each case White obtains

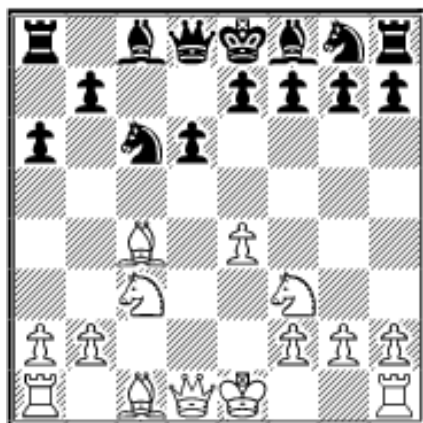
the initiative in a complicated game.

So not only must ...Bg4 be prepared by ...Nf6, but ...Nf6 itself must be prepared by a waiting move that rules out one of the tactical disadvantages of 6...Nf6. So we arrive at 6...a6!?, which is a move that eliminates White’s Nb5 and Bb5 options, as well as offering options like ...b7-b5 in some circumstances. Langrock doesn’t really explain this clearly; he just has an enigmatic headline “the notorious 6...a6!?” That is the final variation that I am going to look at.

### Morra under Attack: a Remedy from a Grandmaster

Grandmaster Karsten Müller sent me some interesting analysis on the variation just mentioned. What follows in this section is almost entirely his work, unless otherwise indicated by the initials TH.

1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 Nxc3 Nc6 5 Nf3 d6 6 Bc4 a6!?



TH: After this move, the lines with e4-e5 lead to nothing clear for White, because Black can take with the pawn and after the queen exchange, White does not have the move Nb5 threatening a fork at c7. So there are two main possibilities. The one that Langrock recommends in the book has run into some trouble. The one the author condemns is the one that Müller recommends.

Now in the main line 7 Bg5!? Nf6 8 Bxf6 gxf6 9 0–0 e6 10 Nd4, John Donaldson’s idea 10...Be7, to follow up with ...0–0, has cast doubt on White’s concept. So I



searched for other ideas against Black's dangerous plan to include ...Bg4, before playing ...e6. What follows is of course no exhaustive analysis, just a few ideas on

relatively unexplored ground.

TH: Instead of 10...Be7, my database has 10...Bd7! 11 Kh1 Qb6 12 Nb3 h5 13 f4 Be7 and White's compensation was negligible in J. A. Tait – P. Szekely, Cleveland Open, England 1991.

### 7 0–0 Nf6 8 Bf4!?

It may seem premature to develop the bishop to f4 so early, but, as Black's kingside development is quite slow, it can easily help open the position by e4-e5 or pressuring d6. 8 Bg5 is also known.

### 8...Bg4!?

This is the critical test and the point of Black's development scheme. 8...e5?! 9 Ng5 gives White a very dangerous attack and 8...e6 9 Qe2 is followed by Rfd1, and play may soon transpose to well-known main lines, if Black does not find a way to exploit the early Bf4.

TH: In H. Mujica – P. Medina, IECG 2002, Black played 8...b5?!, which was met by 9 Bxf7+?! Kxf7 10 e5, but now Black might have returned the piece with 10...d5 11 exf6 gxf6, so probably White should have just played 9 Bd5. And Tartakower – Prins, Southsea 1950, saw the line 8...e6 9 Qe2 Qc7 10 Rac1 Be7, but now instead of the flamboyant, and surely unsound, 11 Nd5?! exd5 12 exd5 Na7 (although White eventually won), 11 Bb3 0-0 12 Rfd1 gives chances for both sides.

### 9 h3

TH: The game L. T. Ellis – G. A. Williams, BCCA Thematic Final corr., 1999, went

9 Qb3!? e6 10 Be2!? (Instead of 10 Qxb7, which White has usually played here.) 10...b5 11 Rfd1 Be7 12 Nxb5! e5 13 Bxe5 Nxe5 14 Nxe5 Be6 15 Bc4 axb5 16 Bxe6 fxe6 17 Qxe6 Rf8 18 Rac1 Qb8 19 Nc6 Qc7 20 e5 dxe5 21 Nxe5 Qb7 22 Rc3 Nh5 23 g3 Rf6 24 Qg8+ 1–0.

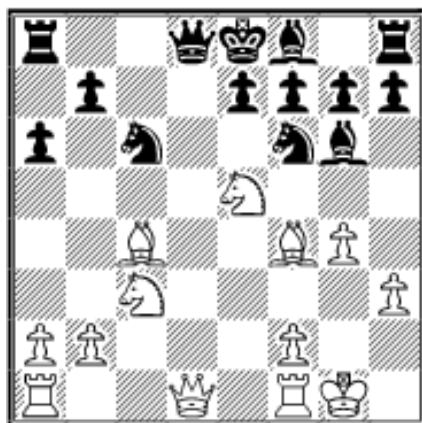
### 9...Bh5

Or 9...Bxf3 10 Qxf3 e6 (not 10...g6? 11 Rfd1 Qb6 12 Bxd6, with clear advantage to White) 11 Rfd1 Qa5!? 12 Be2 Ne5 13 Qg3 Be7 14 Bd2 and White has compensation in typical Morra fashion.

### 10 g4 Bg6

White now can open the position directly because of his early Bf4.

### 11 e5 dxe5 12 Nxe5



Black is at the crossroads in this critical position.

### 12...e6

a) 12...Qxd1 13 Raxd1 Nxe5 14 Bxe5 Rc8 (or 14...e6 15 Nb5 Rd8 16 Nc7+ Ke7 17 Rfe1 Rxd1 18 Rxd1 Ne8 19 Na8) 15 Bb3 Nd7 16 Bd4 e5 17 Rfe1 f6 18 f4 with good compensation in both cases.

b) 12...Nxe5 13 Bxe5 Nd7 14 Bg3 e6 and now even 15



Bd5 seems to be worth investigating.

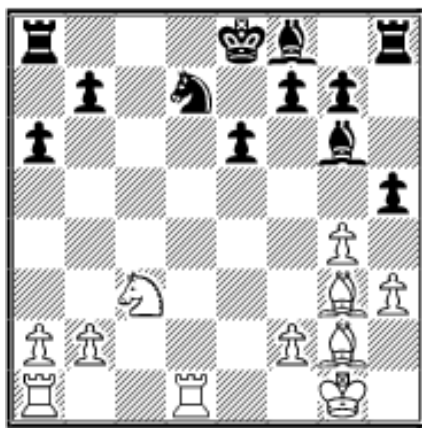
### 13 Qb3

13 Qa4 is another option; e.g., 13...Qa5 (or 13...Qc8 14 Nxc6 bxc6 15 Rad1 Be7 16 Bd6 Bxd6 17 Rxd6 0-0 18 Qxc6 with some advantage to White) 14 Nxc6 Qxa4 15 Nxa4 bxc6 16 Nb6 Ra7 17 Be3 and White is not worse because of his activity.

### 13...Nxe5

If 13...Qc8 14 Rac1 Bc5 15 Na4 Bd4 16 Nb6 Bxb6 17 Qxb6 and White's pressure and bishop-pair give him enough compensation for the pawn.

### 14 Bxe5 Nd7 15 Rfd1 Qb6 16 Qxb6 Nxb6 17 Bf1 Nd7 18 Bg3 h5 19 Bg2



This is the end of GM Müller's variation. His assessment is: "with strong pressure against Black's queenside. Now the absence of the c8-bishop is felt."

### Postscript to Last Month's Column

John Beasley wrote to remind me of a book which, as it happens, I must have failed to receive for review over ten years ago. I said there had not been a major work on endgame studies since the 1970s, but it seems I did not know about the 1996 book *Endgame Magic* by Timothy Whitworth and Beasley, which sold over four thousand copies before Batsford went bankrupt. He thinks it is still in print, but as yet I have not had time to look for it in a library.

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