

The Gambit Cartel

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Gambits in Many Dimensions

I have been thinking a lot lately about a deceptively simple question: What makes a gambit playable?

It is easy enough to give an answer that must be, abstractly, approximately correct: a gambit is playable if and only if it enables the gambiteer to win a reasonably high proportion of games, at least partly because of the merits of positions he gets with it out of the opening. But as soon as we start thinking about that answer we realize that it needs to be qualified to be of any practical use. It must enable the gambiteer to win more than his fair share of games *against the people he needs to win against*, the people against whom he scores in the 40-60% range with “ordinary” openings. And how can one tell, in advance, which openings are likely to do that?

Various books offer various schemes of evaluation. Notoriously, MCO, ECO and their various competitors evaluate positions one-dimensionally: +-, +/-, +=, =, =+, -/+, -+. One would think that these evaluations would settle the issue, and they are enormously useful, but they are not the whole of the story and often do more to confuse amateurs – even strong amateurs – than to enlighten them. Part of the trouble is that we need to know *why* an evaluation is put on before we can see what it really means about a position; and though sometimes this is plain enough, at other times the rationale for those GM evaluations is maddeningly opaque.

In the end, from a God’s-eye point of view, any chess position can be evaluated as 1-0, ½-½, or 0-1. So the seven evaluation symbols given above, if they are not just nonsense, must be conveying something more than the bare Objective Truth about the position. But what else is there, and why should it matter?

The truth, I think, is that playability is a multi-dimensional concept. Graham Burgess begins to indicate this in his wonderful little book *101 Chess Opening Surprises*, where he rates each surprise not only for soundness but also for shock value. This is a good start, but there is much more to say.

To illustrate this, I’d like to go back to last year’s analysis of the

Rousseau Gambit and the discussion I had with Dennis Monokroussos regarding its merits.

Here it's true confessions time: I blundered, and I'm still not sure how. Dennis had written some analysis of the 4.d4 lines of the Rousseau (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 f5 4.d4, with the main line continuing 4...fxe4 5.Nxe5 d5 6.Bb5 Qd6) but about the time that someone forwarded it to me my home computer crashed and died. Dennis resent the analysis in December in an email, and somehow I managed to read only the first half of it (dealing with 4.d3) and missed the fact that there was a great deal more beneath it! With apologies to Dennis for having inadvertently ignored his excellent analysis for nearly a year, here are the key lines. Dennis's comments are in italics; my commentary is interspersed.

Tim McGrew has rightly noted that 4.d4 is the biggest test of the Rousseau Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 f5), assessing most lines - correctly - as significantly better for White. His optimistic conclusion is therefore quite startling: 4...fxe4 5.Nxe5 d5 "is, for those with a high coefficient of risk, quite playable and gives White some extraordinary chances to go wrong." The reality of the situation, based almost entirely on McGrew's own analysis, is that if White can avoid Black's recurrent traps based on Qh5+, he is almost guaranteed an advantage by making fairly natural moves.

True or false? Well, that depends on what one means. There is nothing particularly unnatural about the moves Dennis is about to show us, and as you'll see White does indeed seem to be coming out on top there. On the other hand there is nothing unnatural about a lot of other moves White could have made, and some of those paths do not lead to any advantage. How can we resolve the question of whether White has an easy path to an advantage?

I think we need to look at practice. In the ChessBase online database there are nine Rousseau Gambit games that reach the position after 6.Bb5 Qd6. This is a very small sample, much too small to make a statistically significant case for or against the opening, but in it Black scores well, winning five and drawing one while losing three. Eight of these games, moreover, were correspondence games where one might expect the side with a theoretical advantage to make more out of his plusses – and in those eight games Black scores even better since one of his losses in the set of nine was an OTB game.

So it is not enough to make “fairly natural moves”; they need to be the *right* natural moves. This is a point to which I will return later.

Dennis goes on:

Nevertheless, in McGrew's main lines, it's not much of an advantage, so one might think that even if White doesn't really have much to fear, it's not so bad for Black, either. I'd like to suggest that things are worse for the Rousseau gambiteer than Tim's article might suggest.

First: after 4.d4 fxe4 5.Nxe5 d5 6.Bb5 Qd6 7.O-O Bd7 8.Nxd7 Qxd7 9.c4 dxc4 10.d5 O-O-O 11.Nc3 Qf5 McGrew writes that "Black seems to have good counterplay here, with ...a6 coming up and possibilities of a dangerous Knight sacrifice on f3."



One line continues 12.Qa4 Nd4 13.Bc4 Nf3+ when Black has some interesting prospects, but the obvious 13.Qxa7 just wins for White. After 13...Nxb5 14.Nxb5 White will quickly whip up a tremendous attack for a miniscule material investment. One possible line is 14...Qxd5 15.Qa4 Bd6 16.Be3 Qe5 17.f4 exf3 18.Nxd6+ Rxd6 19.Rxf3 b5 20.Qa8+ Kd7 21.Re1 and it's just target practice for

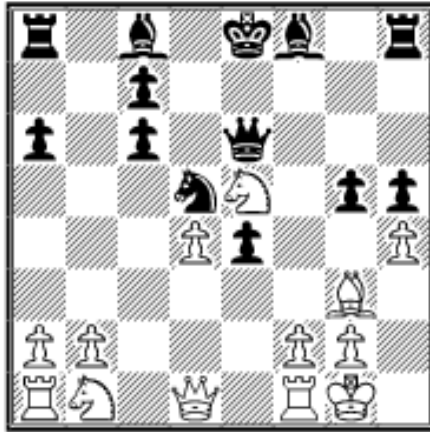
White - computers evaluate White as up a rook here.

This is an excellent piece of analysis and from the point of view of objective soundness it puts the Rousseau back in the shop for some serious repair work. One try is 9...0-0-0 instead of 9...dxc4, and as an experiment I ran it through Shredder with Deep Position Analysis set at 12 ply, checking out 10.Nc3, 10.Be3, and 10.cxd5. The last of these comes out best, but Shredder gives White only a moderate edge (+.60, which lies in its += range) after 10...Qxc5 11.Nc3 Qxd4 12.Qg4+ Qd7 13.Qxe4 Nf6 14.Qa4 Bc5 15.Bf4 Rhe8 16.Rac1 Kb8 17.Bxc6 Qxc6 18.Qxc6 bxc6 19.h3 Kb7. But I certainly don't want this position for Black in a serious game, and I suspect that with deeper analysis White's advantage can be increased in this line.

But isn't it curious that Shredder can't prove more at that depth? My opponents, on average, play far worse than Shredder running at about a minute per move. In one of the original columns where I first addressed some of Dennis's worries (about 4.d3) I wrote that I am not averse to playing a move that I know can be refuted, even playing it repeatedly, if I think my opponent would only be likely to find the refutation with some help from Pocket Fritz. Carrying on that line of thought, I note that Dennis – a strong master with plenty of time on his hands to analyze something as fringy as the Rousseau – has had recourse to computer assistance to come up with his line? If the moves are so natural, why use a computer at all? If they aren't, then what does that say about one's practical chances with the Rousseau at levels far below the 2400 plane on which Dennis plays?

Dennis also tackles an earlier deviation for Black, striving hard to drive a stake into the heart of the Rousseau:

An important alternative for Black is 7...Nf6 (instead of 7...Bd7 as in the previous paragraph) 8.Bf4 Qe6 9.c4 a6 10.cxd5 Nxd5 11.Bxc6+ bxc6 12.Bg3 h5 13.h4 g5



the next few moves.

and now McGrew continues with 14.hxg5 h4 15.Bh2 h3 with Black having some chances to mess around with White's king. But why in the world play 14.hxg5? Instead 14.Qc2 (why not develop instead of looking ways to open lines for Black to the White king?), when 14...gxh4 15.Bxh4 e3 16.Nc3 gives White a decisive advantage. Black's king is a sitting duck, soon to be executed as White opens the central files over

Again, I think this puts another line of the Rousseau into the shop for repairs. Curious, I put 7...Nf6 into Shredder and let it generate a line at 12 ply. What cropped up doesn't look anything like Dennis's (and for that matter, my) analysis: 8.c4 a6 9.cxd5 bxa5 10.dxc6 bxc6 11.Bf4 Qe6 12.Qc2 Bb7 13.f3 Bd6 14.fxe4 0-0 15.Nc3 b4 16.Na4 Nxe4 17.Rae1 c5 and Shredder actually evaluates the position as slightly better for Black! Once again, I don't actually believe that this analysis gives us the truth in this line (what about 9.Bxc6+ or 9.Qa4, for example?), but I'm surprised that the many time World Microcomputer Champion doesn't find something more punishing and I wonder whether the local A players would find what Shredder didn't.

Dennis goes on to consider 9...Bd6 and actually agrees with me (shocking!) that this should lose for Black. And yet this line, with 9...Bd6, came up in two postal games between Borrmann and Mueller in 1979 and 1982, both of which Black won after White failed to find the refutation of Black's play. Yet again we see a pattern: the right moves are natural enough when seen in hindsight, but nowhere near all of the natural moves are right. We need a dimension of evaluation to reflect the fact that in some gambit lines the proper response is not marked out with bright orange analytical flags leading one's opponent through the wilderness of plausible options, and perhaps we need yet another to indicate what proportion of the plausible paths in that wilderness lead him into the bog.

Plausibility is a matter of strength, of course. In private correspondence

Dennis has indicated that he objects to my “advertising” of the Rousseau as an opening that is playable for those with a “high coefficient of risk.” Let me take the opportunity to say that, having seen some of the junk that Dennis plays, I unreservedly withdraw my earlier suggestion that my coefficient of risk is higher than his. (There is a funny story here, but I’ll save that for another time.)

I have no doubt that if one’s opponents take the trouble to prepare seriously for any of the gambits covered here they will fare well in the opening over the board. But this is missing the point. The path to the lines Dennis likes is strewn with caltrops. I’ve had fifty-five outings with the Rousseau against players whose online ICC 1-min ratings average about 1930 and in which my own 1-min rating averaged about 50 points higher. (For comparison, Mark Hebden’s 1-min rating dips below 2000 from time to time and so do those of several other IMs and GMs. This is ridiculous; the ICC needs to renorm this rating, as I’ve suggested several times. But who listens to me?) In those games I’ve faced the plausible but nearly fatal 4.exf5? *twenty-four times* but 4.d4 only fourteen times and reached 6.Bb5 Qd6 only nine times. My overall Rousseau success percentage with the Rousseau is about 65%, which is more than acceptable for a crazy, probably unsound, gambit for Black.

This is the critical point to hammer home: whatever its objective merits, and I grant freely that Dennis’s excellent analysis has cast doubt on those, White’s early deviations from the straight and narrow are sufficiently plausible that at amateur levels Black’s risk of running into a bust or a near bust in a main line against an unprepared opponent (rather than a master who has probed this particular off-the-wall gambit with his computer running at gigahertz levels) is fairly low. If you’re unfortunate enough to run into someone who has done that with your pet line, life is very hard. So far, for me, no one has.

And in the end, that is what makes the Rousseau playable – for me, in fast games where I want to employ it, at the level at which I play. It adds, you might say, a whole new dimension to my chess.



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