Foreword

by Grandmaster Zong-Yuan Zhao

Initially I was somewhat surprised when I was asked to write a foreword to the book you are now holding in your hands, but this quickly turned into admiration when I realized at how concisely and accurately the author, Per Ostman, has managed to pinpoint many of the important features of good decision-making which is constantly required in practical play.

As the author notes, he was deeply influenced by the classic forefathers in this chess genre, namely *Think like a Grandmaster* and *Play like a Grandmaster* by the eminent Russian grandmaster and teacher Alexander Kotov. However, he believes (and I think very rightly) that the idea of developing an analysis tree is not universally applicable. Indeed, like many others before me, I actually believe that not many grandmasters would think in this "classical manner" described by Kotov. Also, Kotov's books do not really describe how one might attempt to find and compile the list of candidate moves in the first place.

Your Best Move is here to provide both a conceptual and theoretical framework for this candidate move compilation process, complete with well illustrated examples from chess practice. Indeed, as the author points out, the real key is to find "...the move most likely to give you the desired result against a certain opponent in a certain context". Equally importantly, I believe this book has a wide appeal and provides strong examples which are useful for students ranged anywhere from 1400 up to 2000 in Elo rating. In Australia, this means that it would be incredibly useful for most of my students. Furthermore, I believe the scarcity of books in this decision-making genre means that this book will become a classic in its own right, and will hopefully encourage other authors to consider developing this genre further!

Lastly, I think the author does a good job of noting the importance of some basic points about chess (and, in fact, almost all other competitive activities I can think of). This includes the fact that when facing a stronger opponent (especially a titled player), less experienced players often lose hope and forget the basic principle that the game of chess is only decided by the quality of the moves made on the board, and not on reputation. This may seem like an obvious point, but it is one I only fully understood after becoming a grandmaster myself, as I then realized just how fallible grandmasters can be!

For all those players aspiring to improve from club level to 2000 and beyond, you are now holding the right book in your hands!

Zong-Yuan Zhao,

Sydney,

November 2010

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Preface

When we first learn chess, we are primarily concerned with simple traps, tactics and exploiting our opponent's mistakes. Hopefully we also do our best not to make any obvious mistakes ourselves. The move we choose to make is often the very first move that appears in our minds and rarely do we take any time to look for other moves.

As we get stronger, we accumulate more and more experience and knowledge, which ultimately make us subconsciously choose better and better moves. Some players just continue playing like this and sooner or later find themselves stagnating.

It is only natural that some form of conscious selection, some form of process to follow, would help us make more informed and better choices.

Ever since I first got seriously interested in chess and played my first tournaments, I have been keenly interested in how such a process would look, obviously to improve my own results. Surely, many of the world's strongest players must have documented such an approach? I started to look, consuming any information I could get hold of at the time, including all the published books of Alexander Kotov.

I especially remember the two books *Think like a Grandmaster* and *Play like a Grandmaster*, both of which led me to some insights, and still today contain a fair bit of important information. I remember trying to adopt his way of calculating the variation tree and starting to evaluate positions according to the elements described by him.

And I did indeed improve somewhat, but something was not right. I realized that evaluating positions to try to magically find the opponent's weakness and to exploit it by a plan was not enough, and more often than not actually wasted too

much time. I also realized calculating variations is not really possible if you don't have a good way of knowing what moves to look for, which was not described by Kotov.

Nowadays the number of quality chess books is so much greater, and since the best way of structuring the move selection process is still at the core of my chess interest, I think I have consumed most chess books on the subject – those published in a consumable language for me, that is.

Some books, like the classic work *Psychology in Chess* by Nikolai Krogius, studies the psychology of chess, but the actual way of thinking is usually not described.

Other books, like the early *Thought and Choice in Chess* by Adriaan de Groot, Jacob Aagaard's *Inside the Chess Mind*, Amatzia Avni's *The Grandmasters Mind*, and Dan Heisman's *The Improving Chess Thinker*, offer actual studies on how players at different levels think. This is extremely interesting reading and in particular offers insights into what actually separates the strongest players from the rest. Interestingly, it seems that many strong players still calculate almost subconsciously, sometimes actually missing moves that could have been spotted quite easily had they just looked for them.

One author describing his preferred way of reaching a conclusion is Jeremy Silman. His work about imbalances, described in *How to Reassess Your Chess*, is one of the most pedagogical and logical books on the subject of move selection. In it, he also describes several other processes from authors I had not heard of before.

In short, Silman proposes that we should look at the imbalances at hand and then implement plans for strengthening our own imbalances while at the same time weakening our opponent's. I still regard his work as the best when it comes to handling the important area of imbalances.

One area Silman could have described in more depth is the transformation of imbalances into others, and how to identify and handle those critical moments when this is most likely to occur.

Another author, Iossif Dorfman, has tried to describe this in his work *The Critical Moment*. He does so in very few words and is a bit too simplistic for my taste; but his point is very valid and in a way he complements Silman's work, even if their writing and style are miles apart.

Further complementing these two authors, by describing the art of forming and verifying plans out of positional elements, or imbalances, are Robert Bellin and Pietro Ponzetto in their work *Test Your Positional Chess*. Together, these three books are the main source of inspiration for me when it comes to positional play

and how to select moves using strategic reasoning. This is not to say there are not better or better-known books on the subject.

Still, when I look at my own games, I realize that regardless of my increasing playing strength, almost all of them are decided in some way by tactics. Fair to say, many of the tactics would not have come about had the winning player not had the positional advantage, but it is a clear reminder that tactics is king. The same seems to be true for grandmasters and even world champions, who sometimes mysteriously miss even one-movers.

An author completely and utterly convinced about this fact is Michael de la Maza. In his work *Rapid Chess Improvement*, he describes a training program for increasing your tactical ability, as well as a simplified thinking process. In the same spirit, *Forcing Chess Moves* by Charles Hertan preaches the importance of always looking at the most forcing moves. Obviously, tactics has to play a central part in any efficient move selection process.

It would be gravely ignorant of me not to mention Andrew Soltis' work *How to Choose a Chess Move*, which describes so many cues and tips on how to think, that it is almost peculiar that he did not try to bring it all together in a process. I would also like to mention the continuous work of Dan Heisman and Jonathan Rowson.

I truly stand on the shoulders of these and many other authors and trainers when I present to you my findings. From them I have distilled what I believe is an effective and logical way of thinking, and hopefully also added my own logic and ideas.

Eager to share and test my theories and conclusions, I have used them in many different forms in my training of young chess students, and the results have been encouraging indeed.

After years of searching and thinking, I realize my interest in refining my findings is decreasing, which for me indicates I am close to the point where I cannot add much more. It is time for me to share it with the chess community and let the next runner take over the torch.

Per Ostman

Sydney

November 2010

Introduction

There is a simple truth about chess, which forms the foundation of what I will try to achieve in this book. Since each player alternates in making moves, and since you are not allowed to make more than one move each turn, the conclusion we all already know is that you only have to decide on one move at a time.

Of course, to be able to decide on that move, we usually have to look several moves ahead, but some players almost forget the reason they are looking ahead. Pragmatically, you only look ahead in order to decide on which next move is the best one to make.

Many players think they have to find what they would call the "best" move, but the question is: Is there one move that is better than the others in every position?

When thinking about it, you realize that even the concept of "best" is not clear! We can all agree that if there is one and only one move leading to a forced checkmate, it should certainly be considered as "best". But what if two of the moves lead to checkmate? You might argue that the quickest one is the best because if nothing else, it saves you a tiny bit of effort. But if they are both checkmates in the same number of moves, is there still a best one?

The same question, but on a much more profound level, is the question about which first move is the best. Experience suggests it is probably 1 e4 or 1 d4, and we think it should at least be a move controlling the centre.

But chess is a finite discrete mathematical problem and there is a solution. The problem is we don't know what the solution is, and even if we did, there would be no way for us to always choose one of the moves leading to the solution.

The point is, say we knew that by best play White would win. If that was the case, there would most probably be much more than one way to get there, and since

the end result is the same, are all those moves of equal value, or which one should be considered the "best"?

When trying to answer this, we have to remember that chess is a sport, with two humans trying to outsmart each other. What we should strive for is optimizing the probability of winning, which means looking not for the objectively "best" move, but for the move with the highest probability of delivering the desired result.

This is an important point, because two moves that can both be considered "best" might not have the same probability of success, mainly because we are humans, with all sorts of subjective attributes. We possess different knowledge in different aspects of the game, we thrive in different kinds of positions and we have different amounts of visualization power and intuition.

This means that in the same position, an attacking player's "best" move can easily be different from the positional player's. Sometimes there is only one objectively "best" move and sometimes there are more, but even the objectively "best" move can be a worse choice than another move because of the nature of the human mind.

There are plenty of examples where grandmasters choose an easily calculated good move instead of a possibly best move leading to extremely complicated positions, simply because they cannot see all the variations to their end, implying a bigger risk.

As a result, in this text, the "best" move means *the move most likely to give you the desired result against a certain opponent in a certain context*.

This book is about finding that "best" move.

To find your best move, you need a structured way to filter the possible moves and to logically and efficiently select one of them as being the best. You need a step-by-step process by which to think.

For such a structured thinking **process** to work well, you need **skills** for executing the different steps, and you obviously need the **knowledge** to build upon. These three building blocks form the basis of what you need to master to be able to find your best move, and together they form the content of this book.

In formal situations, I have called the thinking process *The Oakhill Thinking Steps*, since it took its final form in Oakhill outside of Sydney in Australia. But for simplicity, I have started to refer to it as just *Yobemo* when talking to my students, obviously using the first two letters in each word of "Your Best Move".

The content is intentionally mainly textual, with diagrams and variations present only to demonstrate the concepts in the text. This by no way diminishes the value of heavy analysis and lengthy variations in chess, but I think it would serve little purpose in our context.

For the same reason, while nearly all of the examples are taken from real games, often involving my students, you will only find the most famous examples attributed with player names.

To be honest, most books on the subject of chess rely heavily on elaborate examples and analysis, and the reader no doubt will select one of these books to train and develop analytical skills.

A note on move numbering in the examples: for very well-known opening positions, early in the game, I've used the actual move numbers; in all other cases I've started at "move 1" rather than using the game's actual move number.

Contents

Part One
Process

Finding the elusive "best" move during normal play means you have to find the best move from maybe 40 possible candidate moves, and you only have a few minutes to do so.

It stands to reason that this task either calls for great intuitive ability to quickly and subconsciously choose a move, or demands a disciplined and efficient process, or most probably both.

I will propose to you a way of thinking – a thinking process which will guide you in your search for the best move, taking into account all important parts of pragmatic chess. In its simplest and shortest form, it works like this:

If we start at the moment your opponent makes his move, the most natural thing to do is to **update** your understanding of the position.

When you have done this, you start looking for the move you want to make. Calculating and evaluating several candidate moves, you **select** one move as your main candidate. The selected move then has to be scrutinized, so you **verify** that your opponent does not have any replies which would make your choice inferior to other moves. If you find such a reply, you select a new main candidate.

Before you actually make your move, it is good practice to stop for a second to **check** that you are not making any obvious mistakes and to look at how, on a basic level, the move will change the position. Only then are you ready to **execute** the move on the board and start your opponent's clock.

During your opponent's time, you seize the opportunity to **prepare** for your next move by looking at aspects not concerning an immediate move. You ask yourself what your opponent would like to do and how you could stop his intentions, and you look for objectives around which you can form a plan for the coming moves. If you feel the need, you continue this preparation into your own time.

Then it is time to again update the position according to the move your opponent has executed.

You continue this way, move after move, never deviating from the process. Only the details within each step and the relative importance of the steps change.

If you can find the discipline to do this, I will guarantee you will be astonished by how much you will find during your search. But be prepared – it might sometimes feel like a mundane task. Chess is not for lazy people, nor for the players thinking the game will play itself.

You are as strong as the moves you make. Not stronger, not weaker. If you play grandmaster moves, you are as strong as a grandmaster; and if you play rookie moves, you are as weak as a rookie. Your rating is only measuring how strong you were in the past. Never forget it.

Update

The first step in the process is Update, with the following sub-steps:
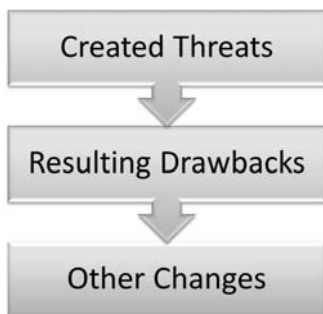
When your opponent has made a move, the position has changed. This means it's time to update your understanding of the position. In doing so, you will get cues about potential candidate moves.

Created Threats

First you look at the moved piece. What does the piece threaten and where can it move to next? You also have to look for other threats created from other pieces. Ask yourself if the threat has to be met or if you have an equal or stronger threat, making this unnecessary.
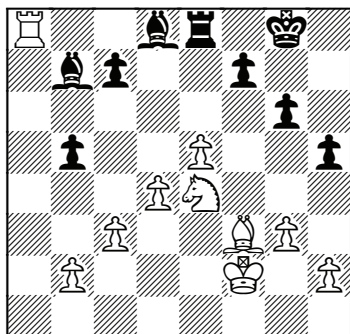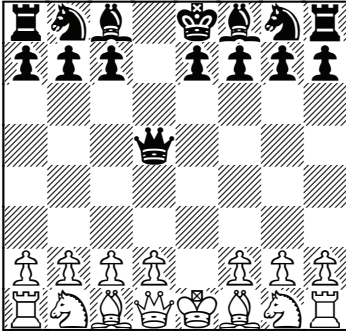

Example 1 (W)

Black's last move was 1...Bc8-b7. The moved bishop is now threatening the white rook.

White can meet this threat by moving the rook. But the threat doesn't need to be met, since White has the stronger threat 2 Nf6+, which wins a piece after 2...Kf8 3 Bxb7 Bxf6 4 Rxe8+ Kxe8 5 exf6.

Resulting Drawbacks

After you have looked at the threats, it is time to look at the resulting drawbacks. You establish if the new position of the moved piece can be exploited; for example, if the piece can be attacked.

Example 2 (W)

In this classic opening position, Black has just played 2...Qd8xd5. White can exploit the queen's position and develop a piece by 3 Nc3.

Because every move creates weaknesses, you should then look at what the piece previously protected. It might not have protected another piece, but at least one square has one less defender. Establish if the created weakness is important and if it can be exploited.
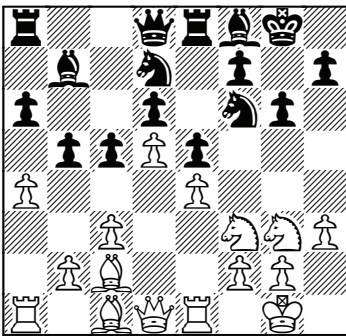
Example 3 (B)

White has just played 1 d4-d5 and no longer attacks the c5-square. Black can now follow up with 1...c4 and 2...Nc5.

You should also look for drawbacks for other pieces, like those which are now blocked by the moved piece.
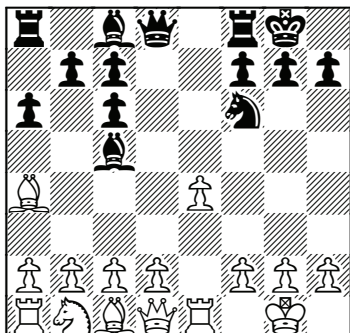
Example 4 (B)

White has just played 1 Rf1-e1?, but this removes one of the squares the queen could move to. After 1...Bg4 White is forced to put his rook into the firing line by 2 Re2, allowing Black to win material.

A special way of dealing with threats is to look at what drawbacks the execution of a threat would create. This is a very effective way of meeting a threat, because the opponent is likely to execute the threat if you let him. If you have seen deeper into the position and actually realize how to exploit the resulting position, you are one move ahead of your opponent.
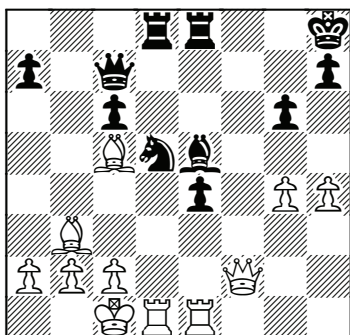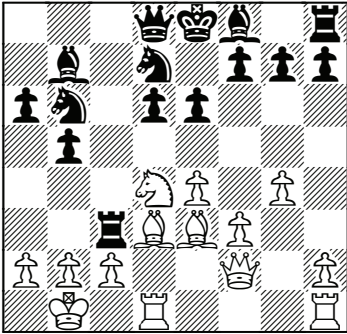

Example 5 (W)

Black has just played 1...Bg7-e5, to be able to continue with 2...e3 3 Bxe3 Nxe3 4 Rxd8 Rxd8 5 Rxe3 Bf4, pinning the rook (6 Kb1 allows 6...Rd1 mate). If White can find a move refuting Black's plan without preventing it, chances are Black will fall on his own sword.

Indeed, if White plays 2 c3, then 2...e3 3 Bxe3 Nxe3 4 Rxd8 Rxd8 5 Rxe3 Bf4 no longer works, because of 6 Kb1 Bxe3 7 Qf6+ Qg7 8 Qxd8+ Qg8 9 Qxg8 mate.

Other Changes

You should also note other changes resulting from the move, like how it affects imbalances. Have new imbalances been created? Have the values of existing imbalances changed?

Example 6 (W)

Black has just played 1...Rc8xc3, capturing a knight to create several imbalances. The two obvious imbalances are material (Black will have a knight against White's rook) and a destroyed white pawn chain in front of the exposed white king.

Select

The step following Update in the process is Select, with the following sub-steps:
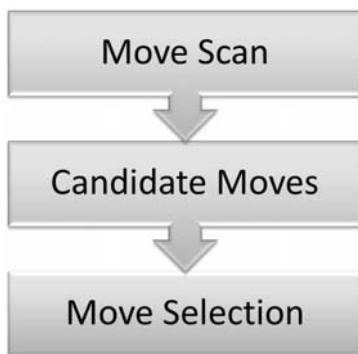
Now that you have updated your understanding of the position, it's time to select the "best" move. Even in the rare cases where you don't have a clue of what move you want to make, the process is simply to pinpoint the move you think is your "best" move, given the available options.

The purpose of the Select step is to extract a move as the one you think is the "best" for you. Verifying its value is the purpose of the next step, Verify.

Move Scan

Very few, if any, players look at all possible moves, but a full move scan can be done in a matter of seconds, taking into account scans from the previous move selections and the understanding created when updating the position.

If you have a good understanding of what a candidate looks like, and immediately recognize the different candidate types, the move scan is much faster than looking for the candidate moves type by type (candidate types are described later).

During the scan, most moves are immediately dismissed, either because they are obviously bad or because they are quiet and don't seem to add any value. Be wary of the premature dismissal of combinational moves, which will only show their true value several moves ahead.
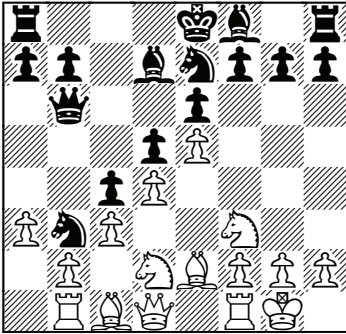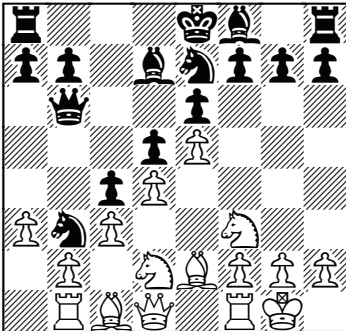
Example 7 (W)

Moves like Qxb3, Ra1, Nxc4, Ne4, Bd3 and Bxc4 look easy to dismiss as candidates because of material loss. Other moves like a4, g4, h3, Qe1, Re1 and Kh1 look either less good or plain pointless.

But wait – let's not dismiss 1 Bxc4 just yet. After 1...dxc4 2 Nxc4 the black queen is threatened, as is Nd6+.

Candidate Moves

After completing the scan, a few moves are left. In some positions there could be as many as 6-10 moves left. All these are potential candidates, but you will most probably not have to look at them all. Just see them as a shortlist from which you will select the candidate moves to evaluate, one at a time.

Example 8 (W)

Bxc4, Nxb3, Qc2, g3, h4, Ng5, Nh4 and Ne1 looks like a shortlist of possible candidates.

Note that it is not uncommon for a candidate to rise to the top of the list in the middle of your evaluation of another candidate. It might even be a candidate you have already dismissed. The reason a candidate may rise like this is because you suddenly realize it makes something else possible, something you discover during the analysis.
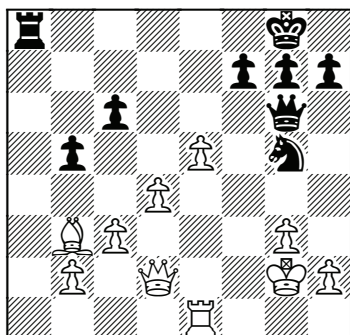
Example 9 (W)

White has identified f7 as a weakness, so candidates might be Rf1, Qf2 and h4.

A quick look at Rf1 shows that the black knight and queen are still very potent. After 1 Rf1 there's the devastating 1...Qe4+ 2 Kf2 Nh3 mate.

1 h4 immediately gets rid of this possible threat and should rise to the top of the candidate list.

Move Selection

Move Selection is all about selecting the move with the highest value. The moves should be looked at in the order of decreasing potential. *Since the potential value of a forcing move is very high, any forcing moves in the short list should be looked at first.*

I will use the term "potential value" to denote the value you think a move might have, before you have analysed it in any depth. "Maximum" and "minimum" values instead form the range of uncertainty you are left with after analysis.

So first you pick the move with the highest potential value and try to look at it deeply enough to get a sense of its value, or rather the maximum and minimum values you think it has.

To get a good sense of the value, sometimes you have to look several moves ahead and take several opponent replies into account. However, sometimes the position and the move are quiet, and the evaluation rather depends on weighing the positional pros and cons against each other.

When you have a sense of the value of the first candidate move, ask yourself if there is another candidate that could possibly have a higher value than the minimum value of the move you have just considered. Now it becomes evident why you should look at the potentially most valuable move first, because it might be very easy to dismiss most if not all of the remaining candidates! If you don't think there is a potentially more valuable candidate, the selection process is finished; otherwise, you evaluate the next move with the highest potential value.
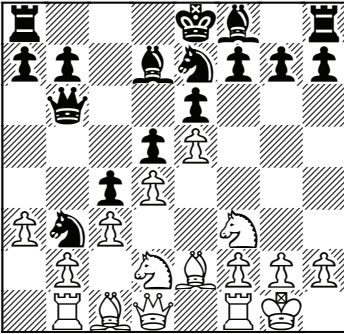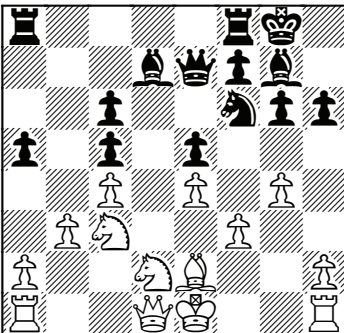
Example 10 (W)

Forcing moves almost always have the highest potential values, so Bxc4 and Nxb3 should be looked at first. Since Bxc4 seems to have more potential than just an exchange of pieces, it is a natural first candidate.

After 1 Bxc4 Nxd2 2 Nxd2 dxc4 3 Nxc4 Qc6 4 Nd6+ Kd8 5 Nxf7+ Kc7 6 Nxh8, White has a rook and three pawns for a bishop, and a stranded knight on h8. Even if eventually the knight could be captured, the minimum value for this variation is a material win of one pawn.

No other candidates have a potential value greater than one pawn, so no more candidates need to be evaluated.

You continue in this way until there are no candidates left with a potential value of at least the minimum value of the "best" move you have considered so far. If two moves look about equal, you either look a bit closer at them to be able to establish which one is better, or if you think looking deeper wouldn't help, or if you are short of time, you could select either of them. The reason being that if they have about the same value, it might not even matter which one you choose!

Example 11 (B)

...Nxg4 and ...Ne8 are the two main candidates, one having to be calculated and the other positional. No other moves have the same potential.

1...Nxg4 2 fxg4 Qh4+ 3 Kf1 Qh3+ 4 Kf2 Qxc3 wins at least a pawn.

1...Ne8 followed by ...Nc7, ...Ne6 and ...Nd4 places a giant knight in the centre and could very well be worth almost as much.