

A new rate of play (with victims)

Jan Cheung, 1 april 2022

It was a big relief for the Belgium organizer that the 31th edition of the NCC could be held in 2021, after the compulsory annulation of 2020. All things in our habits have been changed after the world was faced with an unknown virus in February 2020, including the rate of play of the NATO Chess tournament.

To understand what happened, we have to go back to the 30th NATO Chess Championship of Berlin 2019. The rate of play has been unchanged since the first edition in 1989. It was 40 moves in 2 hours, followed by a second time control of 30 minutes. In the meantime, there is an ongoing evolution in chess clocks and chess engines, effecting the rate of play. In 1998, DGT developed a successful digital clock with an option of incremental time. At around 2000, with the Fritz Chess program, the ELO ratings of Chess engines crossed the 2500 mark. Slowly the chess world changed. Due to the strong chess engines, adjournments did not exist anymore. At the time that every chess club has adequate budget to buy digital clocks, more and more tournaments were played with shorter time controls, with incremental time.

Nowadays, there are regional team competitions with a rate of play with incremental time, without using a second time control...

So the chess world has been changed, ... except for NATO Chess...

As subsequent NATO Chess tournaments got more participants, there arises the problem with the pairing of the afternoon where two rounds are played at one day. There were countless times where the referee had no time to have lunch or that the round could not start at time, because there was always a game that lasted till the last minute.

At one day, to keep the FIDE Elo rating processing of the tournament games, the time control had to be changed.

At the team captains meeting one day before the closing ceremony of the 30th NATO Chess Championship in Berlin, there was a voting to change the time control. The result was the new rate of play of 90 minutes for the whole game, with an increment of 30 seconds for each move. Every participant received the message of the new rate of play from their team captains. By the time COVID turned the world upside down, that message was completely forgotten by many participants...

So at the Sunday before the 1st round of NCC 2021, many people were surprised. I must say, the rate of play is a huge change: Some national team competitions also played with 90 minutes for the whole game, with an increment of 30 seconds for each move, but with the addition of a second time control of 30 minutes after the 40th move. For these players, the new rate of play without a second time control, looks like playing in a rapid tournament.

Looking at my own performance, and at the games played in the NCC 2021, I have collected some facts.

1. The new rate of play could be threatred best as an extended rapid tournament.
2. The participant usually take less risks at the opening and middle game, to have adequate time for the last stages of the game.

This means that players who regularly plays an enterprising style, should consider to change their playing style. Neglecting or forgetting the 2 facts and also not having played chess for 2 years, you will end with the following kind of player, like me:

1. Thinking too much at the wrong moments.
2. Coping with 5 or less minutes at the 30th move, wondering why the opponent has 10 minutes more time."
3. Coping with 1 or less minute at the end game.

The final result was a disaster.

1. Having a 1st round from a winning to a drawing position and then suddenly into a lost game because I forgot that there was no 2nd time control...
2. Structural throwing away points after not applying a good time management.

Gladly there was a solution, but it could only be learned outside the tournament. Here are some guide lines for the new time control.

1. In an average game, for each move you should only take a maximal thinking time of 3 minutes.
2. In an average game, there are 1 or 2 critical moments where you take a maximal thinking time of 15 minutes.

Here is an interesting game in round 1 of the recent NCC, packed in exercises. In the following position, Black has only 3 minutes left of the clock, while White still have 15 minutes more time.

Exercise 1



*Freddy Charles – Jan Cheung, Round 1
Position after 29.Nb3-d2.*

Black to play. White has a threat, Nd2-f3, attacking both pawn g5 and Rh4.

Would you play 29...g4? You have only 3 minutes of time left on the clock.

If you look closely at the position, you see that Black has nearly decisive advantage because only Black is attacking and that one of the plans is to push the g pawn to g3. The other plan is to play Rh3,

with threat f5-f4 opening a diagonal for the White squared bishop. However, Black has to reckon that after a g5-g4, square f4 will be available for a White knight. Following the middle game rules of thumb, Black should not play a pawn move as g5-g4 unless all his pieces are put at the best square. Black could play 29...Rh3, with threat f5-f4, but what after 30.Ng1 Rh5 31.Nf1?



Analysis position after 31.Nd2-f1.

Here, Black can play 31...f4 32.exf4 Bxf4 opening diagonals for the bishops. Note that 32.e4 dxe4 33.Qxd5+ c6 also leads to a good position for Black.

So the answer of the question whether Black should play the pawn move 29...g4 is: "No, he has plenty of time to do that in a later stage of the game, although he has to reckon with the fact that one of the knights are defending pawn h2." And that answer confirms with the thumb rules of the middle game where you should only play a pawn move if all your pieces are put at the best squares.

In the game, Black still played 29...g4 because he wanted to prevent a possible Nd2-f3-e5 and he also thought that g4-g3 could not be stopped. It is not a bad move, but it adds some complexity in the game, while he has nearly no time left on the clock. Back to the game.

After 29...g4 (difficult move, losing time) the game continued with 30.Nf1 (an easy move, winning time) 30...Rh3 31.Nf4 (an easy move, winning time) 31...Bxf4 32.Rxf4 the critical position arises, where Black has calculated since 29...g4.



Position after 32.Rxf4.

Exercise 2

Choose between 32...g3 or play an other move. You have only 1 minute left on the clock.

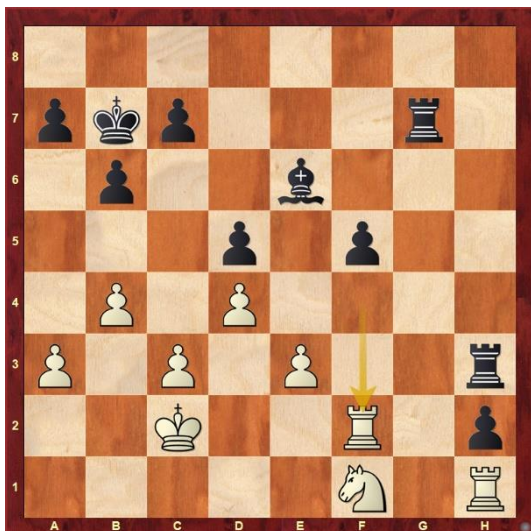
Solution

You will ask yourself: I do not like to play a pawn move again, because not all my pieces are at the best squares. Look at the bishop e6 and the queen at d7. There should be better squares for these pieces? In the game, Black had considered to play 32...Qa4, with threat Bd7-b5. But what about 33.Qc2?



Analysis Position after 33.Qd3-c2.

Black had calculated 33...Qxc2+ 34.Kxc2 g3 35.Rg1 gxh2 36.Rh1 Rg7 37.Rf2 leading to the following analysis position.



Analysis Position after 37.Rf4-f2.

Exercise 3

Will black lose the pawn at h2? You have only 30 seconds left on the clock.

Solution

Of course Black had considered 37...Rg1 and now 38.Rfxh2 Rxh1! winning decisive material. But what about 38.Rhxh2? There was no time to see that Black would also win with 38...Rxf1!

Back to the game. It was the fact that Black decided not to play 32...Qa4 because he has not seen 38.Rhxh2 Rxf1. The game continued with After 32...g3 33.Qe2 (again an easy move, winning more time) Black now thought to play the decisive move 33...Qg7.



Position after 33...Qd7-g7.

Directly after playing this move, Black realizes that the queen is vulnerable at this square. White directly answers with an easy move **34.Rg1!**

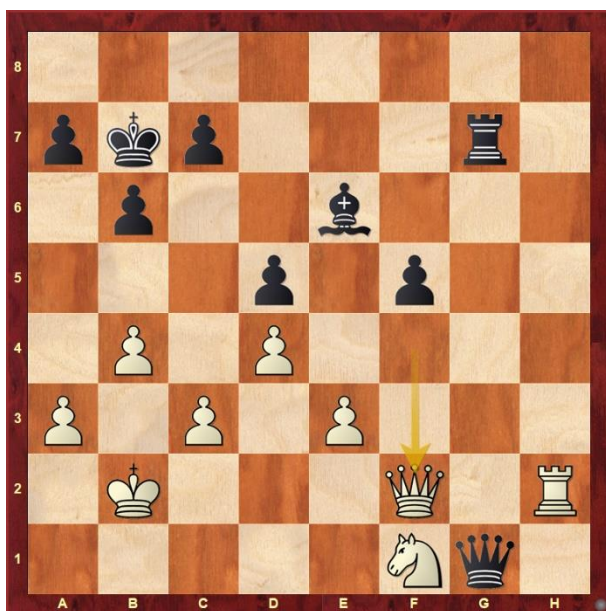


Position after 34.Rh1-g1!

Here Black realizes that he cannot win material and 32...g3 was not the right move. The game continued with **34...gxh2 35.Rxg7 h1Q 36.Rxh7 Rxh7**



The position is completely equal. The game continued with **37.Rf2 Rg7 38.Rh2 Qg1 39.Qf2 Qg5 40.Qf4 Qg1 41.Qf2**



Now a strange situation arises. There is nearly 3 times the same position and Black thought that there was a second time control and he had plenty of time to accept the three folded position... The flag fell, and the result was **1-0**... My tournament ambitions were destroyed after this game and the whole internet thought that the score board was wrong...

What can we say about this game? Due to bad time management, Black lost the game. There were too many critical moments. There are pawn moves made at the moments where there was no time to have a deep analysis. A solution is to look at the earlier stages of the game, where time can be saved for the decisive stages of the game.