

Spotting Critical Moments

Jan Cheung, 27 april 2026

If you scroll through an average list of tournament games, you will notice some patterns. Sometimes one of the players has a good knowledge of the discussed opening. Regularly, one of the players does not know the ins and outs of the discussed opening, but manages to survive this stage. In the ensuing middle game, a couple of moves are played. Then, suddenly the position of one of the players collapses dramatically. Assuming that the player did not play a terrible move, you wonder what was happening at the moment.

In this article, I will try to investigate what was going on during the thinking process, and trying to find strategies to avoid the sudden impact. It is better to lose a game having given any resistance than not at all.

Now and then, I get questions from non chess players about how they imagine chess life. In most conversations, they regard a chess tournament as a holiday. They only look at the end product, moving the pieces, and they regard it as a low intensity activity.

However, regarding a chess tournament as an important examination, gives another insight of the sport. In every chess or not chess related examination, there should be a preparation time. First, you know the date of the examination. You grant yourself a preparation time, by doing some tests, before the examination. In this article I will restrict myself about the time during the examination.

Hopefully you are not getting difficult conversations in the moments before the game, as it will strongly affect your decision making process during the game.

Imagine the following scenario.

You have chosen to start the game open minded, because during the preparation you had examined the strengths and weaknesses of your opponent, but assuming your opponent has also done the homework, you decide to change your preferred opening choices, avoiding the chosen strategy of the opponent.

Sooner or later, a situation occurs where the outcome will be severely affected by the chosen move. In chess terms, this is called a critical position.

Here is an example.



Main line Kings Indian. Position after 6.Bf1-e2.

Black has several ways to attack the centre pawns, e7-e5, c7-c5 or delaying the attack by first developing a piece. The chosen pawn thrust changes the continuation of the game dramatically.

In an average chess game, there will be a couple of these moments. There is not an exact amount of the number of critical moments during the game.

Look at the moments in the game. In a non critical position, you have a plan that can be executed with a couple of moves, where the move order is not important.

Here is an example of a non critical position.



Position after 7.e2-e3.

Blacks plan in this position is to maximize pressure at pawn c4 with Nb8-a5, Bc8-a6 and eventually Qd8-d7-a4, if square a4 is available for the Black Queen .Because the centre is nearly closed, it is not important to calculate the order of moves.

In these stage of the game, you can execute every move relatively fast, based on the fact that this is Blacks only way of play in this position, to get a good result. Of course White has ways to defend this position, but Black should not pay attention about that, as long as there is no direct danger spotted. If you visit a tournament with titled players , you see that they generally do not spend much time in this stage of the game.

It is important to say that not every move in the game is a critical position, because otherwise you will be in time trouble.

Then there comes an important moment where you can choose between many moves, and you can feel that each move directly changes the balance of the game evaluation.

How do you spot such a critical position?

Here are some hints.

- There are a lot of candidate moves to improve the position, or to defend the threats of the enemy.
- All of your pieces are at their best squares. To continue the game, you decide to play a pawn move.
- You can sacrifice material as a beginning stage of an attack.

Depending on the opening, the first critical moment will be early in the game or not.

Take for example, the Pirc Defence with Black. You do not have to know the exact details of this opening, to understand the basic concepts.

In classical chess openings such as the Italian game (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4) or the Queens Gambit Declined (1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Nf6), the opening is defined through the following stages.

1. Put a central pawn at the centre.
2. Develop pieces.
3. Put the king into safety by castling.

The Pirc Defence (1.e4 d6 2.d4 Nf6) belongs to the category modern chess openings, with the following ideas.



Position after 1.e4 d6 2.d4 Nf6.

1. First let the pieces control the centre, by developing the knight to f6 and the bishop at g7
2. Let White build a strong centre, by assuming in the early stage of the game that Whites pieces are not fully supporting that centre.
3. Now it is time to strike the centre, by putting a central pawn at the centre, by giving pressure at pawn d4, with e7-e5. If that is not possible, then by c7-c5. If there is a knight at c6, this strike will be more effective than at d7.
4. If White decides to relieve the pressure with d4-d5, Black has achieved his goal of neutralizing the centre. The centre is closed and play will be moving to the sides of the board.
5. If White decides to keep the pawn at d4, Black can exchange this pawn sooner or later, and Black has made one step of achieving the goal of demolishing Whites centre.

While looking at Blacks complicated way to start the game, you will notice that a critical position will arise in the early stage of the game. It is the moment that Black has to give pressure against the White centre pawns before it is too late. Too late means that the white pieces are fully supporting the centre pawns, leaving Black with a permanent lack of space for the pieces.

What does this mean for the player playing with Black in the Pirc?

This player has to spend much time in the opening. Giving not adequate pressure against Whites centre, results into running trouble quickly.

Here is another example.



Position after 4...g7-g6.

Blacks only way of counter play in this position is playing e7-e6 as soon as the opportunity arises, otherwise Black is doomed to passive waiting.

Here are some exercises. In each position, you have to answer if that is a critical moment or not and you have to give a plan with the next order (2 – 5) of moves that you are going to play. By choosing through the lists of candidate moves, give preference to the move that you always want to play. The solutions will be given later. Good luck!

Position 1



Position after 5.g2-g4. Black to move.

Position 2



Position after 10.a2-a4 Black to move.

Position 3



Position after 7.Nb1-c3. Black to move..

Position 4



Position after 7.Bg5-e3. Black to move.

Positon 5



Position after 7.0-0 Black to move.

Position 6



Position after 7.Nb1-c3. Black to move.

Position 7



Position after 4.Ng1-f3. Black to move.

Position 8



Position after 7.e2-e3. Black to move.