LOOKING

for

TROUBLE

Recognizing and Meeting Threats in Chess

DAN HEISMAN

SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND ENLARGED

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by

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Second Edition

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Dedication

To son Delen:

*Luckily you are rarely Looking for Trouble,
so that made being a parent a lot easier!*

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Acknowledgments

Signs and Symbols

(?)	Inaccurate or not best move
?	Mistake
??	Bad mistake, outright blunder (usually turns a win into draw or loss, or draw into loss)
(!)	Good idea, interesting
!	Good move
!!	Brilliant move, hard-to-find best move
?!	Dubious move, unnecessary complications
!?	Worth a try, creating favorable complications
+−	White is winning
±	White is clearly better
⩲	White has a small edge
=	Equal or drawn
∓	Black has a small edge
	Black is clearly better
−+	Black is winning
(D)	See the next diagram

Introduction

What is a threat?

Threat − a move which, if not stopped by the opponent's reply, can do something harmful to the opponent and/or useful on the next *move.*

So you can *threaten* to win material, checkmate, create a passed pawn, make the opponent's king unsafe, ruin the opponent's pawn structure, etc.

In other words, a *threat* is a move that allows you to do something constructive *next move* if not stopped.

On the other hand, a *tactic* is a <u>forced</u> sequence of moves that win material or deliver checkmate. *Many threats are not tactics because they are easily defended;* the threat to win material or checkmate is not forced. If the threat is unstoppable, of course, it will likely initiate a tactic. As we will discuss below, threats that are defensible may be good moves, but often are not.

For beginning and intermediate players, the study of tactics is paramount. Almost all tactics books provide positions with forced wins and draws, and the reader is shown the moves (examples) and/or asked to find the solution (puzzles).

However, at those levels of play, most games are lost when one player either:

> (1) makes an outright oversight, where *the opponent had no prior threat* but, after the player blunders, the opponent can mate or win material; or

(2) misses a threat made by the opponent's previous move, allowing the opponent to carry out a tactic.

Although studying tactical problems improves your play, you will not receive the full benefits if you only use this ability to spot *offensive* opportunities that arise for yourself on your move. *Winning material and checkmating are great, but preventing those same tactics from happening to you is just as important.* Your chances of avoiding these common mistakes improve if you also consider these "Play and Win" problems from a *defensive* standpoint. You should improve your tactical ability both to spot threats generated by your opponent's previous move and to ensure that your move doesn't create new tactical opportunities for him as well.

Looking for Trouble addresses this underemphasized area of training and study. By providing problems that require you to both identify threats and provide best solutions, this book not only facilitates this additional focus, but it takes it a step further by overtly forcing you to consider prior and upcoming tactics for *both* players before deciding upon your move.

Identifying Threats

A way to determine what constitutes an opponent's threats is to assume you just "pass" – that is, make no move at all (this is called the "null move"). Ask yourself, "Suppose it was my opponent's turn again – what would he

do?" You are most interested in the forcing moves – his checks, captures, and threats *on his next move*. If the moves that this process generates are constructive for him, then those are his threats.

Many inexperienced players fall into the bad habit of asking only, "What does my opponent's last move threaten or do?" instead of the correct "What are <u>all</u> the things my opponent's last move does?" because if you miss one idea, that could be the one that beats you.

Although the strongest threats are tactical in nature – checkmate or winning material – a threat might also be positional in nature: ruining a pawn structure, making a piece bad, controlling a file, weakening a pawn or square, transitioning from the middlegame into a won endgame. A threat may be just to make one player's task easier: simplifying into a more basic endgame, forcing a draw from an inferior position, etc.

Threats and Playing Strength

Most beginners pay disproportionately more attention to their own upcoming threats than to the threats *their opponent generated* last move. Even after considerable experience, most of them disregard possible threats that their opponent can create against them next move. So while inexperienced players often overlook past threats, even once they improve they are likely to allow future threats that cannot be met.

Therefore, the path to becoming a stronger player must include the following: the consideration of any move must not only address the threats presented by the opponent's *previous* move, it also must not allow unstoppable threats to be played *next* move. Experienced players learn to do the former, but only the truly serious players learn to do the latter. From this observation, I developed the following categorization of chess players according to the extent to which they take an opponent's threats into account:

(1) **Beginners** – ignore (or fail to look for) most opponent's threats;

(2) **Intermediate** – meet threats made by the opponent's *previous* move, but may allow unstoppable threats next move (doing this and not #3 I have dubbed "Hope Chess"); and

(3) **Advanced** – do not make a move unless it not only meets threats made by the opponent's previous move, but also (if possible) prepares answers to all of the possible threats that the opponent's next move could generate. This I call "Real Chess."

If you accept these categories, then you can see how vitally important it is to understand how to identify and meet threats!

Meeting Threats

There are three main things one can do about a threat:

(1) Ignore it;
(2) Create a bigger counter-threat (a "counterattack"); or
(3) Stop it.

When would you ignore a threat? Well, suppose you were up a queen and your opponent "threatens" to win a pawn. Instead of making the pawn safe you might continue your development, knowing that your greatly superior forces will win easily. In this situation, saving the pawn is not as important as getting all your pieces into play quickly. A second situation where you can ignore a "threat," as IM Jeremy Silman correctly states, is if it is not a "real" threat at all – your opponent is going to do something to you which is not only not necessarily harmful, but actually may help you! While this book does not *primarily* address such "phantom threats," the idea of ignoring phantom threats is incorporated into several of the problems.

Consider another possibility, where someone is threatening to win your piece by attacking it with something worth less, or attacking it in such a way that the threatened capturing sequence, if not met, would win material. There are five possible ways to meet such a strong tactical threat:

(1) *Capture* the attacking piece;
(2) *Move* the attacked piece to a safe square;
(3) *Defend* the piece to make it safe (not feasible if the attacker is worth less);
(4) *Block* a ranged attack from a bishop, rook, or queen, (interposition); or
(5) *Counterattack* – make your own threat which is at least as strong as your opponent's; this could include pinning the opponent's attacking piece.

There is no generically correct answer – any of these might be forced, or best, depending upon the situation. However, some rough general observations can be made:

(1) On average, the "best" of these is usually to capture the attacking piece (if that can be done without loss of material) or just to move the attacked piece to a safe square.

(2) Guarding a piece is often not as effective, as this both ties down the guarding pieces, which likely have better things to do, and also may allow "removal of the guard" combinations.

(3) Blocking the attack pins the blocker, and thus may lead to further combinational problems. However, early in the game if the attacked piece is the king (check!), blocking may be best if it allows one to castle.

(4) Counterattacking is by far the most complicated and dangerous response to a threat. It can be highly effective and is used quite a bit by strong players. In many situations, a counterattack has the big advantage of not "backing down" and ceding the opponent the initiative.

However, *I recommend that beginners, and anyone who is not highly rated and has a large advantage, should not meet a threat by counterattack*. Inexperienced players who are winning easily should refrain from counterattack because the opponent can often meet their counterattack with a second threat, when both threats cannot be met.
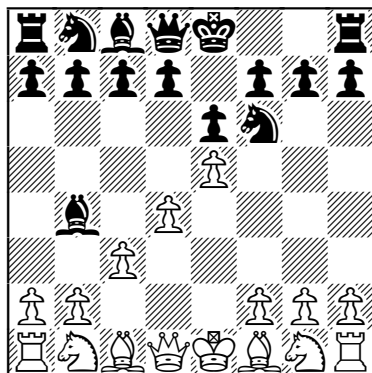
Take the following simple example: **1.e4 e6 2.d4 Nf6 3.e5** (D)
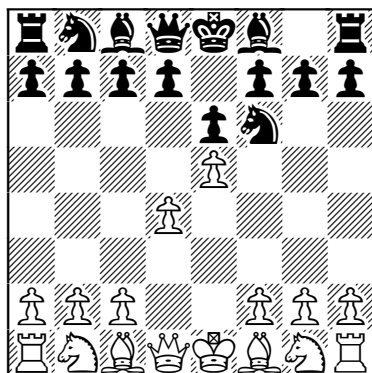
*Black to move after **3.e5***

Instead of simply moving the attacked knight, Black counterattacks with **3...Bb4+?** But then White can play **4.c3**, threatening two pieces, and one has to drop: (D)

*Black to move after **4.c3***

The possibility of additional threats after a counterattack just complicates matters and, when you are winning easily, you are more likely the one to end up being harmed by complications (you have more to lose).

Counterattacks are a legitimate way to meet a threat, and most *zwischenzugs* (in-between moves) fall into this category. Stronger players often use counterattack as a most effective method of meeting threats. However, strong players make fewer tactical misjudgments,

and can afford the extra luxury of this possibility.

Threats vs. Good Moves

Earlier we noted that not all threats are tactics, but it is important to add that *not all threats are good moves, nor are all threats necessarily very harmful*.

A trivial example of a threat that is not a good move is **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Qh4??**: (D)
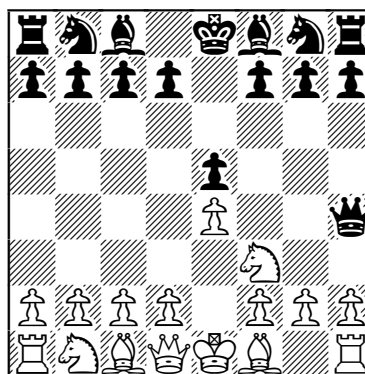
*White to move after **2...Qh4***

Black threatens to capture the e-pawn next move with 3...Qxe4+. However, while this is a "good" *threat* **2...Qh4** is a terrible *move* because the threat can obviously be prevented by **3.Nxh4.**

Attacks are possibilities to capture on the next move. Another important note is that after 2...Qh4, Black is *attacking* the pawns on e4, f2, and h2, but only 3...Qxe4+ is a threat since the other two captures result in a recapture losing the queen. From this example it should be clear that *not all attacks are threats!*

By the same token, *not all threats are attacks*. Here is a simple example: (D)

Problem M107

White to move after **1...Qg4** (****): (D)
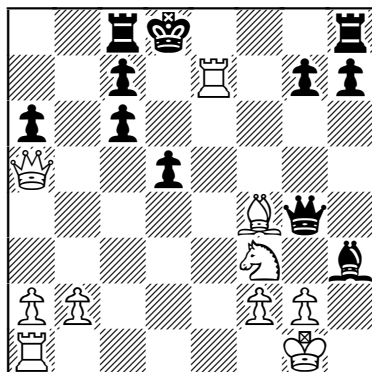
Threat: 2...Qxg2#, but White also has to watch for possibilities of 2...Kxe7 and 2...Qxf4 in many lines.

Prevention: **2.Bxc7+!** In the game I could not resist the cute 2.Rd7+!?!, a move that makes the win a lot harder. My opponent was already in time trouble and replied with the weak 2...Ke8, allowing 3.Qe1+ with a win. But instead, what if he had met 2.Rd7+ with 2...Qxd7! (2...Kxd7? 3.Ne5+ wins the queen)? Starting at the time the game was played, it took many years for computers to get good enough to find a forced win with 3.Re1!. One key line runs 3...Ra8 4.Ne5 Qe6 5.Qc3 c5 6.Qxc5 Kc8 7.Ng6 Qe1+ 8.Kh2 etc. Instead, after **2.Bxc7+**, White wins after **2...Kxe7 3.Qc5+ Kf6 4.Qxc6+ Qe6 5.Qc3+**, e.g., 5...d4 6.Qxd4+ Kg6 7.Re1 Qf6 8.Ne5+ Kh5 9.g4+.

Problem M108

Black to move after **1.Rh7** (****): (D)
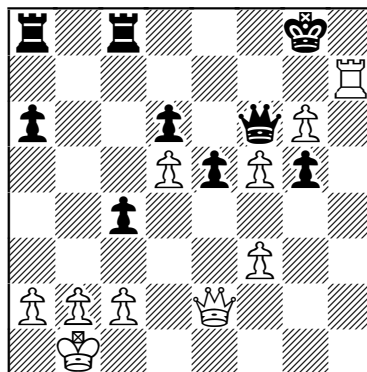
Threat: 2.Rf7 Qh8 3.Rh7, drawing. 2.Qh2 e4 3.Rd7 Qh8 4.Qxh8+! is also a cute draw: 4...Kxh8 5.f6 exf3 6.Rh7+ Kg8 7.Rg7+ Kf8 8.Rf7+ Ke8 9.Re7+ Kf8= (9...Kd8?? 10.g7 will mate!).

Prevention: White found 2.Ne4, which, although not best because of the game continuation (see below), at least gives Black some problems to solve in order to win. *Sometimes the best/only thing you can do when faced with a series of threats (as in this game) is to continue to give your opponent difficult problems to solve.* The computer's top move is **2.Qc1**, which, after **2…Re2**, forces White to give back the piece immediately and still leaves Black a much better position after **3.Nxf3** (best) **3...Qxc1+ 4.Rxc1 Bxf3**. Instead, the game continued 2.Ne4 f5 3.Ng3 f4 4.Ne4 Re6?. Black missed the winning line: 4...Qh3! 5.Qf1 Qh5 6.Qc1 Rf8!−+. The game eventually ended as a well-deserved, hard-fought draw.

## Problem M109

White to move after **1...Rxe8** (****): (D)
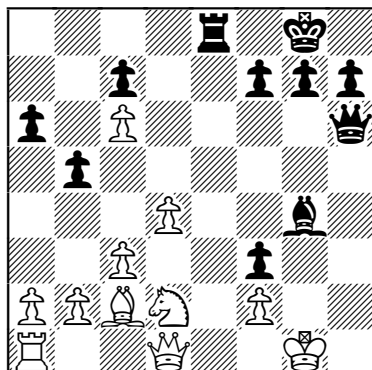
Threat: In this complex position, Black has a tremendous attack for his piece. He has many threats, but the biggest two by far are 2...Bf5!, clearing the g-file for a queen check, and 2...Re2, tying up the second rank. Both would win if White were to pass or play an innocuous move like 2.a3. If you said 2...Re6, to get the rook into action along the sixth rank, you get partial credit.

Prevention: White found **2.Ne4**, which at least gives Black the most problems to solve in order to win. *Sometimes the best/only thing you can do when faced with a series of threats (as in this game) is to continue to give your opponent difficult problems to solve.* All other moves leave Black with an immediate large advantage or more. The only reasonable alternative is **2.Qc1**, which, after 2...Re2, forces White to give back the piece immediately and still leaves him with a difficult game after 3.Nxf3 (best). The game continued **2.Ne4 f5 3.Ng3 f4 4.Ne4 Re6** Instead 4...Qh3! wins e.g., 5.Qf1 Qh5 6.Qc1 Rf8!. The game eventually ended a well-deserved, hard fought draw.

## Problem M110

Black to move after **1.Qc4** (****): (D)
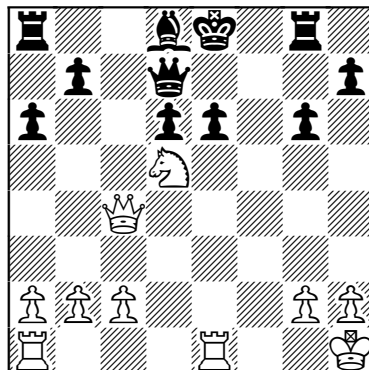
Threat: White threatens 2.Rxe6+ Qxe6 3.Nc7+ Bxc7 4.Qxe6+, winning material. Note that moving the king on move 3 does not help Black, since White's queen *and* the knight both attack the queen!

Prevention: There are three plausible moves, but only one works. First, 1...Rc8? fails to 2.Rxe6+ since the rook on c8 never gets a chance to attack the king, e.g., 2...Kf7 3.Rf1+ Kg7 4.Qd4+ is a rout. Therefore Black must move his king. But the hasty 1...Kf8?, as played in the game, allows 2.Nf4, when neither 2...e5 3.Ne6+ Ke7 4.Nc5 Qe8 5.Rf1! nor 2...Kg7 works: 3.Nxe6+ Kh6 4.Re3 g5 5.Rh3+ mates as in the game. So the only defense is **1...Kf7!** When White has many moves that continue to give him more than enough compensation for the pawn: 2.Re3, 2.Rf1+, 2.Nf4, and 2.Qg4, but none seems to promise anything more than some pressure.

Problem M111

White to move after **1...Rxg6** (****): (D)
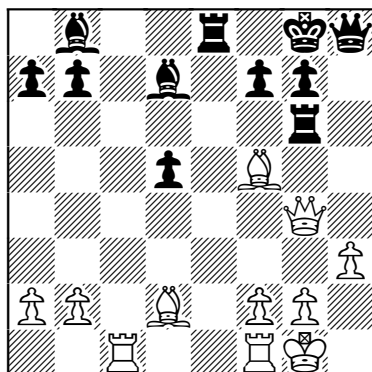
Threat: 2...Rxg4, winning the queen for a rook.

Prevention: **2.Qxg6!** is the only move that retains a nice advantage (2.Bxd7 is a poor second). This was from a game I played and, after my opponent played **2...fxg6**, then **3.Bxd7** was awkward for Black, since his rook needs to guard e6 and the back rank. My opponent chose to give up the exchange right away with 3...Kh7, but I won rather easily after 4.Bxe8. Instead, he could have tried 3...Rd8 4.Be6+ Kh7 5.Bg5, but I would have a clear advantage.

Problem M112

White to move after **1...c7-c5** (****): (D)
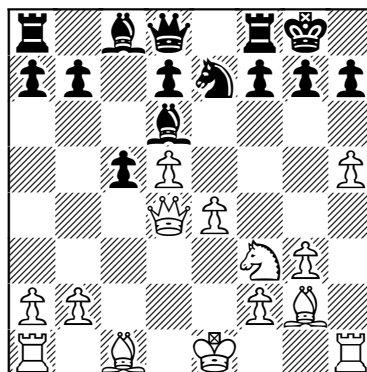
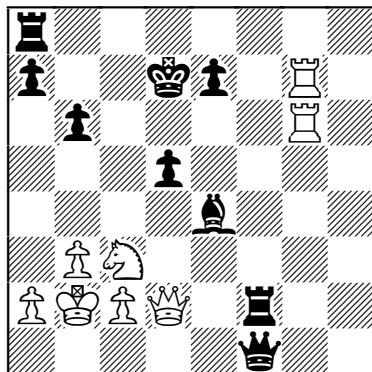**Threat**: 1...cxd4, winning the queen.

Prevention: This problem is tricky – I was White and never seriously considered the best move because it did not look strategically correct – "anti-positional" as some would call it. However, that best move permits White to play a strong tactic, once again proving that tactics, at least in the short run, are more important than strategy. This was a fun game and White had been prematurely attacking on the kingside. After 1...c5, I was following the dictum *a flank attack is more justified when the center is closed or fixed*. I certainly did not want to help Black coordinate his awkward bishop on d6, so I immediately rejected **2.dxc6!**, which opens the center and solves most of Black's development problems. Instead I played 2.Qc3. But **2.dxc6!** gives me an important tempo, as after **2...dxc6**, guarding the bishop, I have **3.h6!**, threatening mate on g7, which is awkward to meet. 3...gxh6? 4.Bxh6, attacking the rook and continuing to threaten mate, is hopeless for Black, so he must allow **3...f6 4.hxg7 Rf7** (4...Kxg7? 5.Bh6+ +−) **5.Bh6**, and White has not only won a pawn, but

Black's kingside is starting to look like spaghetti. Strangely, some beginners would play **2.dxc6!** not because of any tactical or positional reason, but just because they play *en passant* every chance they can, just to show everyone how much they know! Yet others to whom I have shown this problem never consider **2.dxc6!** because they forget about *en passant*! So this seems to be a problem in which mostly very strong or very weak players are likely to play the right move, but only the strong players will do so for the right reason...

Problem M113

White to move after **1...Rf2** (*****): (D)

Threat: 2...Rxd2, winning the queen and, if the queen moves to prevent this, 2...Rxc2+.

Prevention: **2.Nxd5!!** – counter-attack! Now the queen is taboo, as 2...Rxd2? 3.Rxe7+ Kd8 4.Rg8+, and mate is a pretty way for the game to finish. Black's only move is 2...Bxg6, when White is better after 3.Nxb6+ Kc6 4.Rxg6+ Rf6 5.Rg5!. Instead Black took almost all his time – about 40 minutes – and was mated after 2...R8f8 3.Rxe7+ Kd8 4.Rd6+ Kc8 5.Qc3+, Heisman-Edmondson, US Amateur 1968.

Problem M114

Black to move after **1.Qb4** (*****): (D)
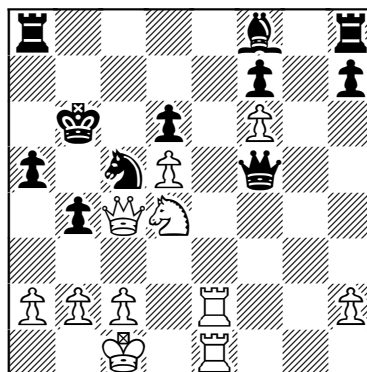
Threat: 2.Qb5+ mates, e.g., 2...Kc7 3.Qc6+ Kb8 4.Re8+

Prevention: 1...Qd7! 2.Re7 Bxe7 3.Rxe7 Qa4 4.b3, trying for removal of the guard. It looks strong, but **4...Nxb3+!**. I saw this before I played 1...Qd7!. Black survives, e.g., 5.Nxb3 Rhc8, and although the position is about equal, Black had the psychological advantage of surviving and later I won. 5.axb3 Rhc8 is better for Black, and 5.cxb3 is a slight improvement over the game, but after 5...Rac8, Black is also about equal.