



How to Play Equal Positions

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How to Play Equal Positions

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Preface

“By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.”

Confucius

This book aims to spare you a part of the bitter experience and teach you the easiest way – by imitating the example of great players. Of course, I will also provide a fair deal of my own reflections.

The first steps in chess are easy. You quickly learn to fight for the centre, to attack and mate the enemy king. Books and trainers teach you a lot of wise things – to develop your pieces quickly, to take open files, to sacrifice for the initiative. You learn basic openings, improve your calculation. All that knowledge brings quick results – most talented could become candidate-masters in two years.

And then you reach a plateau. Whatever you do, you cannot make the next step. You can see already enough tactics, you are able to develop initiative, but you horribly “drift” without clear plan and targets. You simply cannot play “equal” positions.

The purpose of this book is to shed some light on the underlying principles that govern “boring” chess positions, bordering on equality. Such positions have gradually become the main dish of nowadays’ chess menu because people have increased their level, their stamina, their desire to grind down wins out of nothing.

Chess has definitely changed over the past few decades, becoming more and more dense, energy demanding, technical. To win (or survive, if you so prefer) you need a full arsenal of weapons and a well worked out home front. You have to understand, classify, combine, implement a complex set of rules, find exceptions, and even create new rules out of them.

I propose a clear streamlined method of thinking in dry equal positions without long-term plans. It is based mostly on correct evaluation and categorization of the position, and on *move by move* play. We’ll see that some widely accepted slogans as “Attack is the best defense” and Marshall’s famous remark “a bad plan is better than none at all”, are rarely valid.

Foreword

We'll also discuss calculated risk, fear of exchanges and the danger of overpressing.

But most of all we'll discover that dry equal positions could hide a lot of positional subtleties and even top grandmasters fail to cope with them successfully.

The method of playing equal po-

sitions hasn't been covered adequately in chess literature and I would like to thank Semko Semkov for bringing this topic to my attention. It was a pleasure and highly instructive for my chess understanding to analyse the games this book contains. I hope that it will prove so for the readers as well.

Vassilios Kotronias
Athens, 24/11/2020

Chapter 1

Handling equal positions without a clear plan

Rules that govern the play

“If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else.”
Yogi Berra

Defining the terms

We should start by making clear what I mean under the term “equal position”. It is obviously based on evaluation. However, any evaluation is subjective, and depends on the player’s strength. For novices, even pieces could be enough, and for computer engines a lot of crazy positions get “0.00” at a big depth of calculation. So I expect from you fair understanding of chess and a human approach. We are not machines and will never be able to assess the game by “brute force”. A position full of complications and life, with great imbalances, isn’t “an equal position”, even though computers may assess it as “0.00”.

The simplest way to define equality is when neither side has strategic or material advantage **and lacks a clear plan to improve**.

The last point is very important - games when one has typical play, for instance, the possibility to build a minority attack in a Cambridge-Springs pawn structure, are not subject of this book. A well educat-

ed player will seldom “drift” in such situations as he will recall good models to follow.

We are not interested in games with long forced variations either – the player’s task is clear and it is up to his calculation abilities to choose the right continuation.

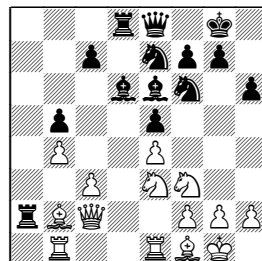
We’ll try to improve our handling of dry positions, where it is difficult to find a target.

Look at the following diagram:

Carlsen – Kramnik

Wijk aan Zee 2019

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6
4.d3 ♙c5 5.c3 d5 6.♘bd2 dxe4
7.dxe4 0-0 8.0-0 ♚e7 9.b4 ♙d6
10.a3 a5 11.♗b1 axb4 12.axb4
♙e6 13.♞e1 ♞fd8 14.♚c2 h6
15.♙f1 ♞a2 16.♙b2 ♚e8 17.♘c4
b5 18.♘e3 ♘e7



Equal positions without a clear plan

An appropriate description for the situation on the board is “equality, without a clear-cut plan for either side to stir up some play”. Let’s see the arguments:

- The pawn structure is symmetrical.
- Both kings are absolutely safe.
- The possibilities of pawn breaks are extremely limited. They are c3-c4 for White and ...c7-c5 for Black, but these advances cannot be carried out without weakening the respective b-pawns for either side.
- The piece mobility is about equal.
- Space is finely shared between the two sides.

It is extremely difficult in such a situation (for either side) to create winning chances or even some shreds of play. The first thing that comes to my mind is to improve the position of our own pieces and to try to exploit the opponent’s movements. What do I mean by that?

There are two kinds of advantages in chess: those of permanent nature and those which are transient or temporary. In both cases the superior side’s method of action is standard: In the first case we devise our short-term or long-term plans according to the source of our advantage. In the second case the secret is alertness: the strong player keeps a hungry eye for any tactical opportunity that might pop up, or

any slight uncoordination in the enemy camp that would allow him to transform his minute advantage into something of a more enduring nature. I would say that the approach employed in the second case should be also the key for those who want to excel in creating a playable balance out of an apparently sterile equality. Since the sterile equalities are often based on symmetry, one important thing is to be alert enough to exploit any given opportunity to break it. Or even lure our opponent (within reasonable boundaries) to do it himself. The present game is an example of this particular theme.

19. ♖a1

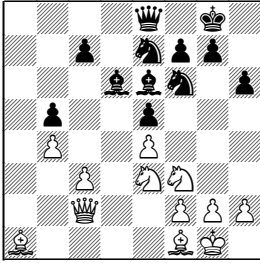
White doesn’t have any illusions about the position. He knows that it is equal and starts with some simple chess, removing the annoying intruder. In doing that, he acknowledges the fact that this may result in an exchange of his central pawn for a wing pawn. However, that would be already some sort of progress from the viewpoint of creating chances, wouldn’t it?!

I would have also considered 19. ♖ed1!? at this point, with the aim of passing the move to Black and keeping more pieces on the board (at least for a while).

Another option is 19. c4 ♗xb4 20. ♖ec1, but it is obvious that 20... bxc4 21. ♗xc4 ♗xc4 22. ♖xc4 ♖g6 23. ♗b3 ♖a4! 24. ♗xa4 ♖xa4 25. ♖xe5 ♖xe5 26. ♗xe5 ♗d6=

leads to a position where neither side can hope for anything more than a draw.

19...♞da8 20.♞xa2 ♞xa2 21.♞a1!
♞xa1 22.♞xa1



22...♞a8!?

Black shows that he is ready to take up the gauntlet. This is a duel between a former and a reigning world champion, so obviously both players are out there to prove something. Considering that Vladimir Kramnik is a man who has the courage to vindicate his convictions, his choice isn't surprising. After all Carlsen isn't the only player in the world capable of profiting from imbalances. On the other hand, Black succumbs to the lure as Carlsen was hoping for, allowing him to create a fight out of nowhere.

23.♞b2 ♞xe4

The question at this point is: How would have Carlsen continued against a more conservative top player who would have been satisfied to keep the symmetry? Or a 2500 player who would be solely

intent on drawing without allowing any imbalances occur? The answer is certainly not easy, but before trying to address it, we first have to take into consideration a couple of things:

A 2500 player would have had a good chance of going wrong at an earlier stage; few chess players in the world can match the level of Kramnik's opening preparation.

Carlsen's reputation as a technician is so powerful that it often works for him. People who have to play him are most often facing this dilemma: Should I allow the position to remain symmetric at the risk of being eventually squeezed, or should I seek counterplay at the earliest opportunity in order to unsettle him? Those two things considered, there is already a good chance that many people would have gone down in flames earlier, or having reached the game position, they would have reacted in Kramnik's manner.

Still, let's suppose that Black chooses a method of play where the symmetry persists. What do we do then? The answer is the most important rule of the book:

We start playing *move by move*.

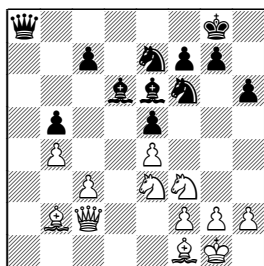
This method should serve us well in such situations and should save us a lot of time on the clock. It would be futile to look for a long-term plan, and even if we came up with one, it would certainly be wrong. A plan makes sense only when we

Equal positions without a clear plan

sense that the first imbalance has occurred, be it an imbalance in space, in the pawn structure, or in the quantity/quality of the pieces. Let me now try to become more specific.

What do I mean with this **move by move** motto? I'll be discussing this term many times during the book. Let's start here with a short explanation. Playing *move by move* means that we do not build complex long-term plans or calculate long variations. Instead we make a list of candidate-moves and try to build a variation tree with short, but dense branches.

To give you an idea of what I mean, we should go one move back, to the position after 23.♙b2. If Black chooses to keep the symmetry, he would have to defend his b-pawn with his queen, pawn or bishop.



In the given situation Black would most probably put his queen to b7 or the bishop to d7.

After 23...♙b7 White has two moves that adhere to our motto:

24.♙d3! is the best one. White hits the b5 pawn, again challenging Black to break the symmetry,

or become slightly more passive by retreating his bishop to d7!

The other move would most certainly be 24.♙d2, but it leads to the exchange of too much wood after 24...c5! 25.♙d3 ♙d7, making the draw trivial. So I am sure Carlsen would have avoided it.

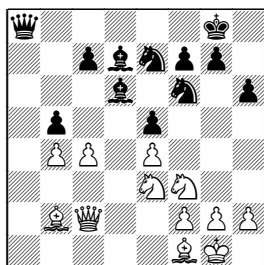
Therefore, 24.♙d3!? ♙d7!?. I am not examining the captures on e4 because we assumed that Black insists on the symmetry. Now e4 is hanging, so White has to make a decision:

It seems that White would finally have to do something, like 25.c4. But I am not sure Magnus would have played it, especially if facing a significantly lower rated player than him. Here we have basically one of the cases where we should pick a move depending on the strength of our opponent, his time management, tournament situation, etc. However, the basic thing is to play a move which **doesn't weaken strategically** our position.

25.♙d2 isn't liked by the engines as it removes the pressure from the e5-pawn. Still, it doesn't disrupt the equilibrium, and keeps the game going. Well, if only for a couple of moves: 25...♙g6! 26.g3 ♙f8!. This is the recommendation of the machine, but also my own logical thought. Now Black is ready for ...c7-c5. In such a situation, when the opponent has found all the best moves, it is logical to call it a day.

Returning to 25.c4, play will most likely proceed 25...bxc4 26.♖xc4 ♜xe4 27.♝xe4 ♘xe4 28.♗fxe5 ♙xe5 29.♗xe5 ♙e6=. White has gotten the bishop pair, but it is insignificant as the queenside pawns are bound to disappear.

23...♙d7 is the other logical continuation for Black. Here again both 24.c4 and 24.♗d2 are possible, with similar ideas and evaluations. However, on this occasion 24.c4 requires an accurate reply from Black:



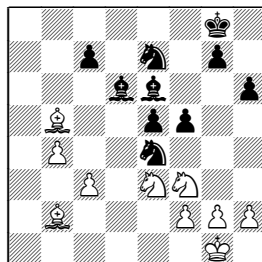
24...♗c6!. Definitely not a piece of cake to find.

Most likely many people would choose the simplistic 24...bxc4?! 25.♗xe5 ♙xe5 26.♙xe5 ♜xe4 27.♝xe4 ♘xe4 28.♙xc7 when suddenly White comes out on top.

25.♝c1!?. Planning either c4xb5 or c4-c5 and the game is going on. An important point is that when playing 24...♗c6! Black would have to evaluate that 25.c5 ♗xb4 26.♝c3 ♗a2! is at least okay for him. Usually seeing such small tactical ideas (or overlooking them) can change the course of the game, so paying

attention to small 2-3 move deep skirmishes is absolutely essential in our effort to create something in apparently barren situations.

24.♝xe4 ♗xe4 25.♙xb5 f5



Carlsen's "luring strategy" has succeeded. While theoretically the game remains equal, it isn't sterile anymore. Both sides have a plan now. White's one is the easier to carry out in practice as he has the prospect of an outside passed pawn on the queenside. I am almost certain that Magnus would score at least 75-80% against 2500+ opposition if he is offered the chance to play this position several times. In the present game, the legendary Volodya manages to keep the balance in style.

26.♙d3 ♗f6 27.♙f1 g5

