

**The
Modern
Morra Gambit
A Dynamic Weapon
against the Sicilian**

**by
Hannes Langrock**

Foreword by Karsten Müller

Second Edition



2011
Russell Enterprises, Inc.
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The Modern Morra Gambit
A Dynamic Weapon against the Sicilian
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Hannes Langrock

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The Modern Morra Gambit

Foreword

Hannes Langrock has regularly played the Morra Gambit against the Sicilian Defense since 1999; with very good results. We have analyzed many lines together in our training sessions and he has incorporated our findings in his analysis. He has also included many new ideas and analyzed them in depth. I draw your attention especially to 11.d5, instead of the old 11.d4, in the critical ...e7-system (see p.125).

I am convinced that everyone in need of a weapon versus the dreaded Sicilian can consider taking up the Morra Gambit. Those who will obtain particular benefit from this work are:

- 1) Dedicated Morra players that will find plenty of original analysis to refresh their theoretical knowledge and find new inspiration for their own endeavors.
- 2) Young improving players who want to enhance their handling of the initiative and make their play more aggressive and dynamic. I suggest first reading the introduction carefully and playing through the main lines (printed in bold). Then after gaining some experience with the gambit, they should commence digging deeper using Langrock's extensive analysis.
- 3) Players of the 2.c3 Sicilian, who want a second surprise weapon, which is akin to their current repertoire.
- 4) Correspondence gambit players who need fresh ideas and quick access to the latest information.
- 5) And last but not least, Sicilian players in need of a method of meeting the Morra Gambit will find the analysis is very objective, which is not always the case in books on gambits. I guess that this is illustrative of my influence on the author after five years of training together.

In summary, the Morra Gambit is well-suited for players striving for tactical and uncompromising play, as White's better development often leads to a dangerous initiative. Furthermore, traditional Sicilian players may be taken by surprise and removed from their main line repertoire. I do not understand why so few players choose the Morra Gambit and I hope that this book increases its popularity and that you will enjoy it as much as I have.

Grandmaster Dr.Karsten Müller
Hamburg
April 2006

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The Modern Morra Gambit

Signs and Symbols

1-0	White wins
0-1	Black wins
½-½	Draw agreed
+	check
#	mate
!	a strong move
!!	a brilliant or unobvious move
?	a weak move, an error
??	a grave error
!?	a move worth consideration
=	an equal position
≅	White stands slightly better
±	White has a clear advantage
+−	White has a winning position
≅	Black stands slightly better
∓	Black has a clear advantage
−+	Black has a winning position
∞	an unclear position
∞	with compensation
ol	Olympiad
m	match
ch	championship
wch	world championship
corr	correspondence game
[W]	White to move
[B]	Black to move
(D)	see the next diagram

Author's Preface to the Second Edition

Much has happened in the Morra Gambit since 2006, when the first edition of this book was published. Not only have many important games been played, the chess engines have also been revolutionized in these years. The time has passed when it was hard to convince the materialistic engines of the strength of an obviously promising piece sacrifice. Today's leading engines – first of all Rybka – are much more dynamic in their evaluations and of course they calculate much faster than their predecessors.

Every single variation in this book has been checked with modern engines, and the results of that alone would have been worth a second edition! But apart from that, there have been a lot of practical developments – especially in correspondence chess. As a result, many lines had to be reassessed. In general, most developments have been good for White, for example the Chicago Defense is now not far from being refuted. But of course things did also go the other way, so my “old” recommendation against the Classical Main Line didn't pass the test of time and has had to be replaced by a new one.

I was delighted to see how popular the Morra Gambit has become in correspondence chess. There are several strong correspondence players rated over 2400 who play it, and with Japan's Sakae Ohtake, there is also a correspondence grandmaster among them. Therefore, it is no surprise that many of the new main games in this book are correspondence games.

In over-the-board play, the strongest Morra regular is still FIDE Master Mladen Zelic from Croatia, who has been playing nothing but the Morra Gambit against 1...c5 for almost 20 years. Overall he has been doing very well with it, for example, he managed to beat grandmaster Miso Cebalo not once, but twice! In recent years, American grandmaster Aleksandr Lenderman and international master Marc Esserman have achieved excellent results with the Morra Gambit as a second weapon against the Sicilian; I hope that other strong players will follow suit.

Some remarks about formal changes compared with the first edition: There are now fourteen chapters instead of the eleven that comprised the first edition. In recent years, the Taylor System has become the most popular response to the Morra Gambit in over-the-board-play and thus there is no justification to hide it in a sideline chapter anymore. The Taylor System is discussed in chapter 11. Also, the Tartakower System is certainly popular enough to be treated in a separate chapter, which is now chapter 10. Then, the section about the Morra Declined has been divided in two chapters: Chapter 13 discusses 3...d3 and Chapter 14 deals with 3...e5.

Finally, I would like to thank publisher Hanon Russell for his willingness to bring out a second edition of this book and grandmaster Karsten Müller for his important analytical contributions to the chapters on the Tartakower System and the Taylor System.

Introduction

When I began writing this book, after having played the Morra Gambit for some years, I was of the opinion that I knew “my opening.” It has been my main weapon against the Sicilian Defense and my sympathies are clearly on the white side, but during my detailed study of it, I had to correct many of my assessments concerning the majority of Black’s defensive systems. I attached great importance to remaining appropriately objective, which may sound natural, but remaining objective has been an elusive goal for many authors when writing about gambits.

The theoretical material is divided into fourteen chapters. Chapters 1-12 deal with the Morra Gambit accepted and all begin with the starting position after 1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♘xc3. Chapters 13 and 14 investigate the Morra Gambit Declined, and an Appendix discusses the pros and cons of delaying the pawn sacrifice. Every stem game is introduced by a heading, which should serve to orient the reader while navigating the chapters. In many cases, I have adapted the move order to achieve maximum clarity within each particular system. My criteria for choosing the stem games followed four parameters:

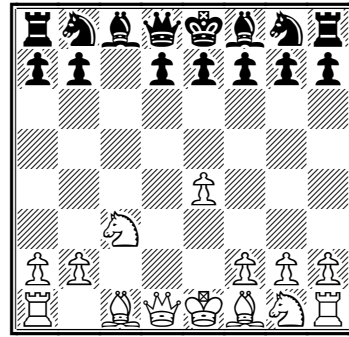
1. Quality (which was the critical move or variation);
2. Quantity (which move or variation was played most often);
3. The strength of the players; and
4. The course of the game (a spectacular attacking game is more instructional than a quick draw)

The Morra Gambit is an exciting opening that is very attractive to the attacking player. Let’s start with a game that illustrates many of its basic elements. A detailed analysis of the variation played in this game can be found in the appropriate theoretical section of the book, and the same holds true for all the games in this introductory chapter.

F. Roselli – N. Tereshchenko

corr 1972

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♘xc3



This is the starting position of the Morra Gambit accepted. What compensation does White have for the pawn? A rule of thumb says that the gain of three tempi justifies a pawn sacrifice in the opening. Obviously this is not the case here, as White is only one developing move ahead. Yet there are other factors that play a meaningful role.

For instance, White has a very free position and he will be able to move all of his pieces to active squares. Furthermore, his strong e-pawn and his control over the d5-square give him superiority in the center. Looking at the position from Black’s side, it quickly becomes clear that it won’t be easy for

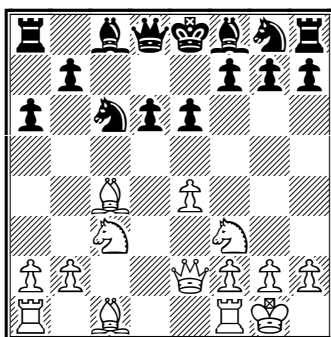
Introduction

him to develop active play. In the Open Sicilian, Black usually plays on the queenside using the semi-open c-file. In the Morra Gambit the c-file is open, which makes it much harder for Black to create counterplay. Of course the open c-file plays an important role, but in most cases it's White who manages to occupy and make use of it.

4...♖c6 5.♗f3 d6 6.♕c4 e6 7.0-0 a6

Black chooses a typical Sicilian setup, while White has moved his pieces to the most natural and active squares. *Fast and natural development is a basic principle of the Morra Gambit, and of gambit openings in general.* White's next move is very important as it introduces the standard Morra setup.

8.♔e2!



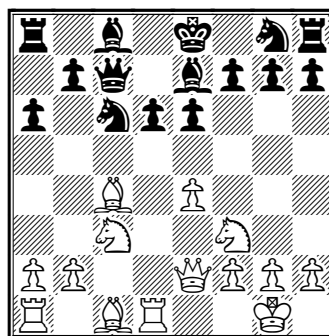
This is a key move. White plans to continue with 9.♗d1 followed by developing his dark-square bishop (mostly to f4, often to g5, but also sometimes to e3). This piece configuration is often effective as it puts pressure on Black's weakest point, the d6-pawn, and brings some tactical motifs into the game. However, as a word of warning: *There are many lines against which the standard*

setup with ♔e2 and ♗d1 is inaccurate or even just plain bad. The most drastic example is the so-called "Siberian Trap," which you will get to know in a later chapter.

8...♗e7 9.♗d1

Now Black has to deal with a main tactical motif of the Morra Gambit – the e4-e5 break.

9...♔c7



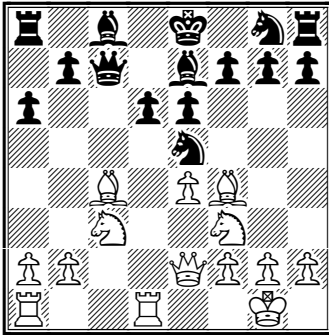
Black moves the queen off of the d-file in order to avoid e4-e5 for the time being. Another point is that on c7 the queen controls the important e5-square. The ...♔c7-system is playable for Black, but he must be extremely careful. This variation contains the three most characteristic tactical motifs of the Morra Gambit: the e4-e5 break, the knight sacrifice on d5, and the piece sacrifice on b5. For this reason, I recommend that the reader begins studying the Morra Gambit with the ...♔c7-system.

10.♗f4!

This is the most dangerous move. White puts pressure on d6 and threatens to open the position with e4-e5.

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10...♗e5?!

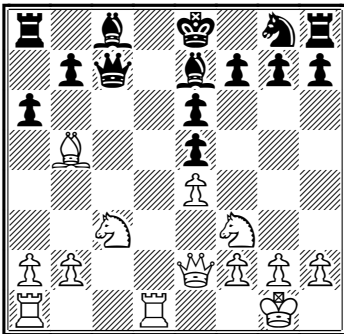


And this is a typical mistake. Black feared the e4-e5 advance, so he decided to close the h2-b8 diagonal. Yet, this move is a loss of time, as Black didn't develop a piece and, secondly, the knight was doing an excellent job on c6. It kept both the c-file and the a4-e8 diagonal closed. 10...♗f6! was called for.

11.♙x♗e5!

Exchanging the strong defensive knight and continuing the attack with tempo. The latter is especially important as *the time factor plays a major role in the Morra Gambit*.

11...♗dxe5 12.♙b5+!?



This is the most aggressive way to initiate an attack on the king. White sacrifices his bishop in order to get at the black king immediately. The piece sacrifice is very promising because of Black's poor state of development, which was a consequence of 10...♗e5?!. The natural 12.♙ac1 is also strong.

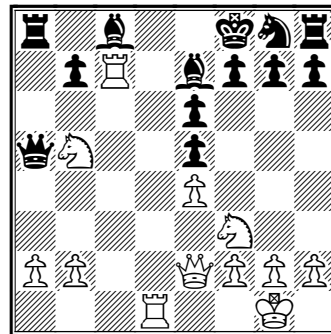
12...♖f8

12...axb5 is analyzed in the theoretical section. White's attack more than compensates for the piece. Here is one illustrative line: 13.♗xb5 ♖a5 14.♙ac1 ♗f6 15.♗c7+ ♖f8 16.♗xa8 ♖xa8 and now White wins by means of a tactical motif that is typical of the ...♖c7-system: 17.♖c4 ♗d7 18.♙xd7!+.

13.♙ac1 axb5

Black finally decides to accept the sacrifice. He has nothing better; for example, 13...♖b8 finds a very strong answer in 14.♗a4! with a winning attack.

14.♗xb5 ♖a5 15.♙c7!



Threatening 16.♖c4 (or 16.♙dc1), winning a piece.

Introduction

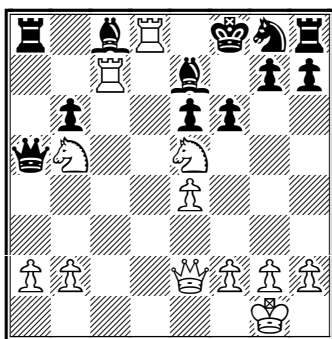
15...b6

Meeting the direct threat and intending 16...♘a6, but after 16.♘×e5 this remains a dream. Now Black collapsed under the pressure and played...

16...f6?

Allowing a nice finish. Still, his position was beyond salvation. For example, the desirable 16...♘a6 fails to 17.♖h5 g6 18.♖×e7! ♘×e7 19.♖h6+ ♔g8 20.♘d7 f6 21.♘×f6+ ♕f7 22.♘h5! and Black resigned in Jansen-Hadley, Email 1998.

17.♖d8+!



17...♙×d8 18.♖f7+ ♕e8 19.♘d6# 1-0

In over-the-board-play, the Morra Gambit is used by FIDE and international masters, but it has not established itself on the grandmaster tournament circuit. I believe that one reason for this is that most grandmasters shy away from taking risks when playing the white side of an opening. The majority of strong players are satisfied to obtain a small but solid edge as White. This aim cannot be achieved with the Morra Gambit,

as Black has many ways to meet it, and most of them are playable from a theoretical point of view. *If Black accepts the gambit, then it leads to sharp positions in which White has an attack, as compensation for the sacrificed pawn, but no forced advantage.*

The following quote from Kalinichenko and Gufeld's *Handbook of Chess Openings* reveals that the Morra Gambit is respected among masters as well:

“What openings should be chosen? Evidently, those which are characterized by the rapid mobilization of forces, when the two armies get into close combat in the early stage of the game ... It would be interesting to test the validity of military laws in such semi-open and double-edged systems as Morra's Gambit ... Morra's Gambit (named after an unknown French chess player who proposed 1.e4 c5 2.d4 cd 3.c3) gives White a chance of aggressive play ... If Black accepts the sacrifice, White concentrates his forces in the center gaining superiority in development...”

The most significant features of the Morra Gambit are the subject of the following pages. To a great extent these features reflect the Morra Gambit accepted and are illustrated by selected miniatures.

The Practical Point of View

The practical aspect of the Morra Gambit plays an important role, as it is a typical over-the-board opening. As the theoretical sections demonstrate, most of Black's defensive systems objectively offer acceptable prospects in a complicated battle. Nevertheless, I can

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promise that *every talented attacking player who studies the Morra Gambit will achieve excellent practical results.* The positions that arise are extremely difficult to play, especially if the defender is not familiar with them. I'm not claiming that the defender fails more often in these positions than the attacker, but one mistake by Black frequently means the end of the game, while White more often gets a second chance.

Perhaps this is why Dorian Rogozenko advised readers in *Anti-Sicilians: A Guide for Black* not to accept the pawn sacrifice:

“3.c3 White offers the Morra Gambit. Black has a choice: either to accept the pawn, giving White the initiative, or to decline it by transposing into a 2.c3 Sicilian. I am convinced that in the 2.c3 Sicilian White has no advantage at all, while the Morra Gambit is less explored at high level and there are several unclear positions in which White enjoys the initiative for the pawn. I have failed to find a very clear way of accepting the pawn sacrifice and then completely neutralizing White's initiative.”

Another practical advantage for the Morra enthusiast is that he's "at home" in his opening, and he will have memorized the main tricks and motifs. Furthermore, it's not so easy to prepare against the Morra Gambit. In databases such as *Mega Database 2010* there are hardly any helpful annotated games to be found, whereas in encyclopedic opening books, the Morra Gambit is usually discussed in an incomplete and super-

ficial way. In order to study this opening properly, you must use specialized literature, but my guess is that less than 5% of Sicilian players possess such literature about the Morra Gambit. The consequence is that the Morra practitioner, who has studied the opening sensibly, will usually know more than his opponents.

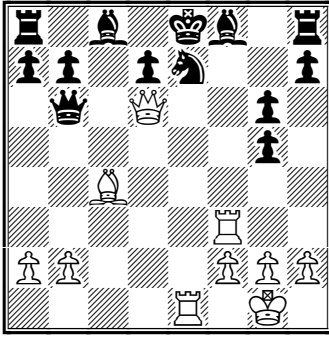
However, your opponent will prepare against the Morra Gambit if he knows that you use it regularly. He will most probably choose a certain defensive system and play nine or ten moves quickly. Yet when his preparation has ended he will find himself in a highly complicated position swarming in tactical motifs. It is at this exact moment that it becomes meaningful that you play the Morra Gambit regularly, and your opponent meets it only once every few years. He is likely to lose control quickly, and after one tactical mistake the game is over. For such reasons, many Morra games resemble a senseless slaughter of innocents rather than a game of chess. Here are a few briefly annotated examples:

Freyre (2225) – Rittiphunyawong (2290)

Thessaloniki ol (Men) 1984

**1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♗xc3
♗c6 5.♗f3 g6 6.♗c4 ♗g7 7.e5!
♞a5? 8.0-0! ♗xe5 9.♗xe5 ♞xe5
10.♞e1 ♞a5 11.♗d5 → ♞f8
12.♗d2 ♞d8 13.♗xe7! ♗xe7
14.♗g5 f6 15.♞d6! f×g5 16.♞e3
♞e8 17.♞ae1 ♗f8 18.♞f3 ♞b6 (D)
19.♞×f8+! 1-0**

Introduction

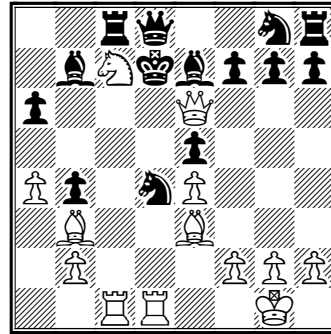


Fuchs – Merkel

corr 1964

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♟xc3
 ♞c6 5.♞f3 d6 6.♝c4 e6 7.0-0 ♞f6
 8.♞e2 a6 9.♞d1 ♞c7 10.♝f4 e5?!
 11.♞d5! ♞xd5?! (♠ 11...♞d8)
 12.exd5 → ♞e7 13.♞xe5! f6 14.♞f3
 b5 15.♝b3 ♞f7 16.♞ac1 ♞d8
 17.♝xd6! ♞xd6 18.♞c6 ♞d8
 19.d6+ ♞e8 20.dxe7 ♞xe7 21.♞c7!

♞d8 14.♝e3 ♞c8 15.a4! b4 16.♞c4
 ♞d4 17.♞c7+ ♞d7 18.♞xe5+ Now
 white mates by force. The finish given
 in *corr 2011* is definitely faulty, but a
 possible mating finish is: 18...dxe5
 19.♞e6+!

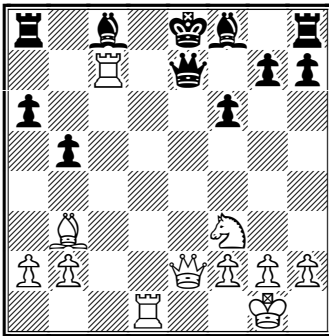


19...fxe6 20.♝xe6+ ♞d6 21.♞xd4+!
 exd4 22.♝f4# 1-0

Klewin – Lau

Hamburg 2002

1.e4 c5 2.♞f3 ♞c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.c3
 dxc3 5.♞xc3 e6 6.♝c4 ♞c7 7.♞e2
 a6 8.0-0 b5?! In combination with ...♞c7
 this often proves too risky. 9.♝b3 ♝b7
 10.♞d1 d6 11.♝f4 ♞e5?! 12.♞ac1 →
 ♝c6? (12...♞xf3+ 13.♞xf3 →) 13.♞d4
 ♞e7 14.♝xe5 dxe5 15.♞db5! axb5
 16.♞xb5+- ♝xb5 17.♞xb5+ ♞c6
 18.♞xc6 ♞b8!?

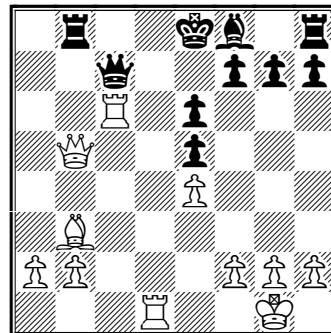


and 1-0 because of 21...♞xe2 22..♝f7 #

Oliver – Bennett

corr 1984

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♟xc3
 ♞c6 5.♞f3 e6 6.♝c4 d6 7.0-0 ♝e7
 8.♞e2 a6 9.♞d1 b5 10.♝b3 ♝b7
 11.♝f4 ♞c7 12.♞ac1 → e5 13.♞d5

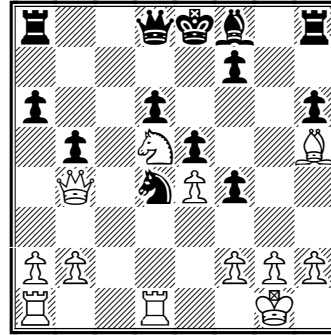


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19. ♖×e6# 1-0

Imai – Stanulis
Detroit 1992

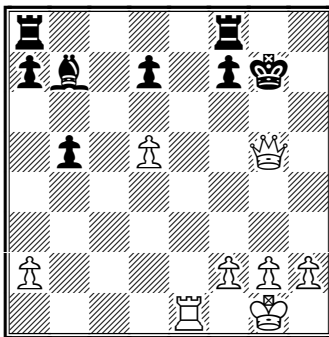
1.e4 c5 2.d4 c×d4 3.c3 d×c3 4.♟×c3
e6 5.♟f3 ♟b4?! 6.♟c4?! (6.♞d4!)
6...♟×c3+ 7.b×c3 ♟c6
8.0-0 ♟ge7 9.♟a3 (9.♞e2)
9...♞a5?! (♟9...d5) 10.♟d6 ♞×c3
11.♞c1↑ ♟a5 12.♟d4 ♟×d4
13.♞×d4 ♞b6 14.♟c5 ♞c6
15.♟×e7 ♞×e7 16.♞×g7 ♞f8
17.♞×h7 b5 18.♟d5!+- ♞×c1
19.♞×c1 e×d5 20.e×d5 ♟b7
21.♞h4+ ♞d6 22.♞b4+ ♞e5
23.♞e1+ ♞f6 24.♞f4+ ♞g7
25.♞g5+ 1-0



Psychological Aspects

In the Morra Gambit accepted, lines of attack are cleared from the very beginning; White has sacrificed a pawn for an attack and the initiative, while Black has to defend. This situation can be viewed in different ways. A staunch defender would likely say: “I’m a pawn up; you have to show that you have compensation for it. The burden of proof lies with you!” The opposite argument goes: “I have the initiative and I set the threats. If you only make one single mistake, you will lose!”

Both arguments have merit. However, playing Black against the Morra Gambit can be very unpleasant, especially for a higher rated opponent. He may be favored in this David-versus-Goliath conflict, yet it soon becomes clear that just one mistake may decide the game. Even a 300-point rating difference can have the defender wishing he had chosen a quieter opening. The rating favorite often cannot withstand the pressure; and so, in practice, a surprisingly high number of upsets occur with this system. I am sure upsets occur more frequently than with other openings; I offer three examples:



Tarasov – Shestakov
corr 1970

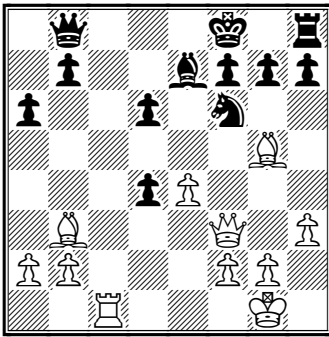
1.e4 c5 2.d4 c×d4 3.c3 d×c3 4.♟×c3
♟c6 5.♟f3 d6 6.♟c4 e6 7.0-0
♟ge7 8.♟g5 a6 9.♞d2 (♟9.♞e2)
9...h6 10.♟f4 g5 11.♟g3 ♟g6
12.♞fd1 e5 13.♟d5 ♟g4 14.♟e2
♟×f3?! (14...♟g7) 15.♟×f3↑ ♟d4
16.♟h5 ♟f4? 17.♟×f4 g×f4 18.♞b4
(18.♞c3!) 18...b5? (D)
19.♞×d4! e×d4 20.♞×d4 1-0

Introduction

E. Cunha – C. Martinez (2370)

Rio de Janeiro 1991

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♟xc3
 ♞c6 5.♞c4 e6 6.♞f3 d6 7.0-0 ♞f6
 8.♞e2 ♞e7 9.♞d1 ♞c7 10.♞f4 e5?!
 (△ 10...a6) 11.♞g5 a6 12.♞ac1↑
 ♞g4 13.h3 ♞d4? 14.♞xd4! ♞xf3
 15.♞xf3 exd4 16.♞b5 ♞d8
 17.♞c7+ ♞f8 (17...♞xc7 18.♞xf7+
 ♞d8 19.♞xc7 ♞xc7 20.♞d3+-)
 18.♞xa8 ♞xa8 19.♞b3 ♞b8

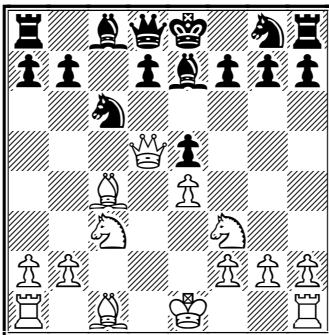


20.♞xf6! ♞xf6 21.♞h5 g6
 22.♞d5+- ♞e8 23.♞c8 1-0

Murta – Camara (2330)

BRA-ch Goiania 1982

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.♞f3 e5 4.c3
 dxc3 5.♞xc3 ♞c6 6.♞c4 ♞e7?
 (6...d6) 7.♞d5+-

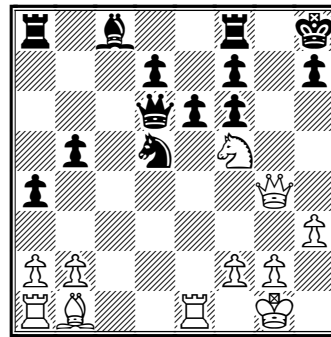


Oops! 7...♞a5 8.♞xf7+ ♞d8
 9.♞xg7 ♞f6 10.♞g5 1-0

Milman (2356) – Ehlvest (2587)

New York Masters 2003

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♞xc3
 ♞c6 5.♞f3 e6 6.♞c4 ♞c7 7.0-0
 ♞f6 8.♞b5 ♞b8 9.e5! ♞g4
 10.♞d6+?! (△ 10...♞f4) 10...♞xd6
 11.exd6 b5 12.♞b3 0-0 13.h3 ♞f6
 14.♞e1 a5 15.♞g5 a4 16.♞xf6 gxf6
 17.♞c2 ♞b4 18.♞b1 ♞d5 19.♞h4
 ♞xd6 20.♞g4+ ♞h8 21.♞f5! 1-0



Strategies

Since White is a pawn down he should play aggressive chess. Slow and over-cautious play usually gives Black the opportunity to gradually consolidate his material advantage, so moves like a2-a3 and h2-h3 are inappropriate in most cases. Of course, there are exceptions; one is the partially fixed pawn structure of the Classical Main Line, when White's compensation is of a more positional nature.

Theoretical knowledge plays a very important role; knowing the proper methods of meeting the different Black defensive systems is much more impor-

The Modern Morra Gambit

tant in the Morra Gambit than in other Anti-Sicilians, such as the c3-Sicilian or the ♘b5-lines. In many cases, there's only one promising concept against each particular Black defense. If the Morra player is aware of the correct counter-plans, then positive practical results are as good as guaranteed. Unfortunately, many Morra practitioners play the opening mechanically, and don't know anything beyond the standard setup. It is such laziness that leads to the unsatisfactory score of the Morra Gambit. For instance, in *Mega Database 2010* after 3.c3 dxc3 4.♗xc3, White only scores 49%. While in correspondence games, where industriousness is an important issue, White scores over 51% of the points, and I'm convinced that White can do even better.

As with most other gambits, the Morra Gambit is characterized by very concrete play. The ability to calculate variations deeply and accurately is of paramount importance compared to other openings. I am often completely exhausted after many of my Morra games, which is quite natural after "training" in tactics for three or four hours non-stop!

The Target Group

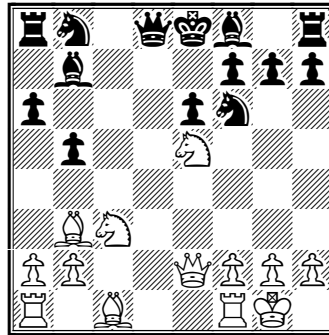
Naturally, this sharp and aggressive opening is made for uncompromising attacking players, although even cautious players, who fear and avoid tactics, can profit from it by perfecting their attacking skills. After only ten Morra Games the exposure to the newly learned tactical motifs will allow one to enter into complications with greater self-confidence and a much higher chance of success. Young talented players should also learn the Morra Gambit.

At this stage of development, it is much wiser to teach a pupil the Morra Gambit than all the theory of the Open Sicilian. The Morra Gambit is easy to explain and rapidly absorbed by young players. Moreover, it's fun to play, which is significant in retaining a young and talented players interest.

In this context I would like to relate my own experience connected with the Morra Gambit, which was a decisive turning point in my chess life. In 1998, I was 15-years old, and I was participating in a German Youth Team championship as a member of the Hamburg team. In those days I was justly known as an overcautious draw maker. We finished the tournament in third place, which was a very good result, and at the presentation ceremony every member of the best three teams received a book prize. Destiny placed Jozsef Palkövi's *Morra Gambit* into my hands and, at first, I didn't care much about the book. Yet, about a month later I began to leaf through it, and, page by page, Morra's magic began to enchant me. Six months later I dared to try the Morra Gambit in a tournament game, and I won. My results were excellent from the beginning, and I played many games before I finally lost one. I had fun playing chess again and I completely changed my style. I only wanted to attack my opponents; to attack and checkmate them. While today I have a more universal style, my intensive Morra years 1999-2001 were the most important for my chess development and I doubt that I would have become an international master without them. So, if you are an attacking player, or if you want to become one, the solution is the same: *play the Morra Gambit!*

Typical Tactical Motifs

When White offers the c-pawn with 3.c3, Black has no weaknesses at all. It is only during the further course of the game that White can jeopardize Black's defenses through tactical means, mostly sacrifices. While the Morra Gambit just swarms with tactical motifs, from the double-bishop sacrifice to the smothered mate, there are three main motifs that occur most regularly and are therefore characteristic of the opening:



11... Qe7?? 12. Qxf7! Qxf7
 13. Qxe6+ Qe8 14. Qf7+ Qd7
 15. Bd1+- Qc8 16. Bxd8+ Qxd8
 17. Qd5 Bc8 18. Qf4 Qxd5 19. Qxd5
 Bc7 20. Qxb8 1-0

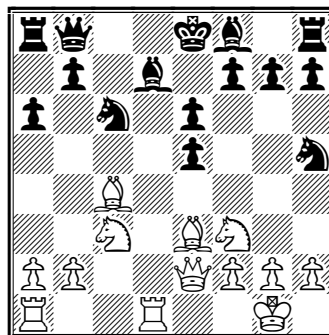
(1) The Pawn Advance e4-e5

This motif can be found in many lines of the Morra Gambit. With a black pawn on d6, this break gives Black the choice between closing the position (d6-d5), opening the position (dxe5) or allowing White to do so (exd6). The first is generally the most desirable, but often black jumps out of the frying pan and into the fire, as a sacrifice on d5 can follow (Qxd5, Qxd5 or even Bxd5), which definitely opens the position. If the black d-pawn is placed on d7, White sometimes plays e4-e5 in order to restrict the opponent, followed by an attack that is based on a space advantage. Such an adaptation of the e4-e5 advance can be seen in the Siberian Variation and in the ...Qc5-system.

Rosing – Schonherr
 corr 1987

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Qxc3
 Qc6 5.Qf3 d6 6.Qc4 e6 7.0-0 Qf6
 8.Qe2 Qd7 9.Bd1 a6 10.Qf4 Qb8?!
 11.e5! Qh5 (11...dxe5 12.Qxe5 Qxe5
 13..Qxe5↑) 12.Qe3± dxe5?!

Here are two straightforward examples of an effective e4-e5 break:



13. Bxd7! Qxd7 14. Qg5 Qf6
 15. Qxf7 Bg8 16. Bd1+ Qe7 17. Qg5
 Qd8 18. Qb6+- 1-0

Rambelosen – Le Meur
 Paris 2002

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Qxc3
 a6 5.Qc4 e6 6.Qf3 b5 7.Qb3 Qb7
 8.Qe2 (8.0-0) 8...d6 9.0-0 Qf6?!
 10.e5! dxe5 11.Qxe5

(2) The Knight Sacrifice on d5

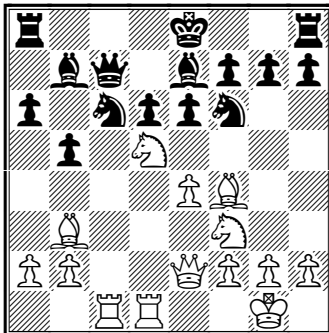
The Modern Morra Gambit

This motif also occurs in many variations of the Morra Gambit, often it's the only way to keep the initiative and continue the attack. Usually the move $\text{d}3\text{-d}5$ is connected with a direct threat, giving Black no choice, but to accept the sacrifice. The open e-file (after $\dots\text{e}\times\text{d}5$, $\text{e}\times\text{d}5$) can then give White's attack decisive power; furthermore, the white d-pawn can play a dominating role and condemn Black to complete passivity. Frequently, the second white knight causes a great deal of trouble at c6 or f5 via d4.

A typical defense for Black is to return the extra piece immediately in order to castle and equalize. In the Morra Gambit declined ($3\dots\text{d}3$), the knight sacrifice on d5 frequently occurs as a temporary sacrifice with the aim of achieving a positional advantage. Again, I give two examples. The first is rather easy, as White wins back the piece immediately; the second is slightly more complicated:

Ruchicchio (2188) – Damia (1888)
ITA 2002

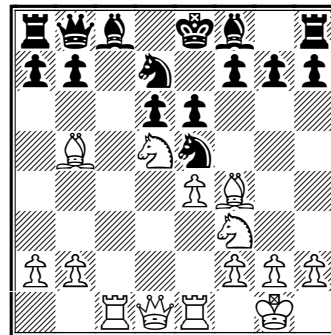
1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 d6 3.d4 c×d4 4.c3?! d×c3?! (4...♟f6!) 5.♟×c3 ♟c6 6.♟c4 e6 7.0-0 ♟e7 8.♟e2 a6 9.♟d1 ♟c7 10.♟f4 b5?! 11.♟b3 ♟b7 12.♟ac1 ♟f6 13.♟d5!



13...e×d5 14.e×d5 0-0 15.d×c6± ♟c8 (15...♟×c6? 16.♟d4+-) 16.♟e1 ♟h5 17.♟g5 ♟×g5 18.♟×g5 g6 19.♟×f7!+- ♟f4 (19...♟×f7 20.♟e8+ ♟g7 21.♟×f7 ♟×f7 22.♟e7+-) 20.♟×d6+ 1-0

Ligoure (2240) – Milesi (2030)
Cannes 1990

1.e4 c5 2.d4 c×d4 3.c3 d×c3 4.♟×c3 ♟c6 5.♟c4 e6 6.♟f3 ♟c7 7.0-0 ♟f6 8.♟e1?! (The critical theoretical line is 8.♟b5 ♟b8 9.e5!) 8...d6 9.♟f4 ♟e5?! (9...a6 was preferable.) 10.♟b5+ ♟fd7?! (♟ 10...♟d7) 11.♟c1 ♟b8 12.♟d5!



12...e×d5 13.♟×e5 (Even more powerful was 13.♟×e5! d×e5 14.♟×c8+! ♟×c8 15.♟×e5+-) 13...d×e5 14.♟×e5! ♟×e5 15.e×d5 ♟d8 16.♟×e5 ♟×e5 17.f4 ♟g4 18.♟e1 ♟d7 19.h3 a6 20.♟×d7 ♟×d7 21.♟a5+- ♟e7 22.♟e1+ ♟f6 23.♟b6+ ♟f5 24.♟e5+ 1-0

(3) The Piece Sacrifice on b5

This radical attacking method is frequently seen in the Chicago Variation and in the $\dots\text{c}7$ -system. In these systems, the black king often stays in the center for a long time, and White in-

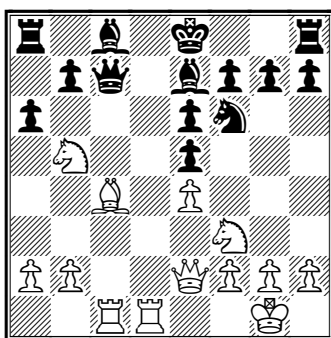
Introduction

tends to open the a4-e8 diagonal, thereby clearing the way to the black king.

Starck (2040) – Timme

Nordhausen 1986

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♟xc3
e6 5.♞f3 ♞c6 6.♞c4 d6 7.0-0 a6
8.♞e2 ♞f6 9.♞d1 ♞c7 10.♞f4
♞e5?! 11.♞xe5! dxe5 12.♞ac1
♞e7? 13.♞b5!+-



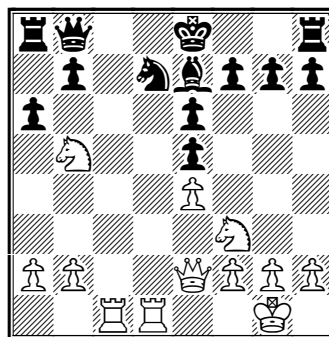
In this case the sacrifice decides immediately, since white achieves meaningful material gains. 13...♞b8 (13...axb5 14.♞xb5+-) 14.♞c7+ 1-0

Mes – Elmi

corr 1994

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♟xc3
♞c6 5.♞f3 e6 6.♞c4 d6 7.0-0 ♞f6
8.♞e2 ♞d7 9.♞d1 ♞b8 10.♞f4
♞e5 11.♞xe5 (11.♞b5!?) 11...dxe5
12.♞b5a6 13.♞xd7+ ♞xd7 14.♞ac1
♞e7? (♠14...b5) 15.♞b5! (D)

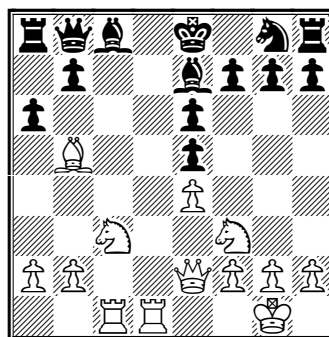
White is raising a terrible storm.
15...axb5 16.♞xd7! ♞xd7?
17.♞xb5+ ♞d8 18.♞xe5+- ♞xe5
19.♞xe5 ♞f6 20.♞c7+ ♞e8
21.♞xb7 ♞d8 22.♞c8 1-0



Hess – Neumeier

Bonn 1999

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♟xc3
♞c6 5.♞f3 d6 6.♞c4 e6 7.0-0 a6
8.♞e2 ♞e7 9.♞d1 ♞c7 10.♞f4
♞e5?! 11.♞xe5! dxe5 12.♞ac1 ♞b8
13.♞b5+!



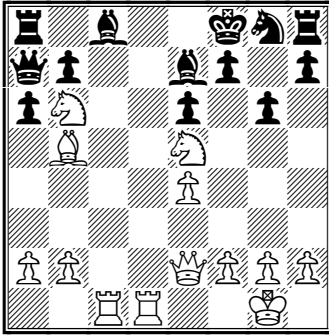
13...♞f8 (13...axb5 14.♞xb5 is also bad for Black as shown in chapter 1.)
14.♞a4! After this nice move, White's attack breaks through. 14...b6 (14...axb5 15.♞b6+-) 15.♞xc8+ ♞xc8 16.♞xb6 ♞b7 17.♞d7+ ♞e8 18.♞a4+- ♞b4 19.b3 f6 20.♞fxe5 fxe5 21.♞h5+ 1-0

Lochte (2227) – Wu Shaobin (2496)

Shenyang 1999

The Modern Morra Gambit

This game saw the same variation as the previous one, when Black tried **14...♖a7**, keeping an eye on b6. However, it didn't change the outcome: **15.♘×e5 g6** (For 15...a×b5 see the theoretical section.) **16.♘b6!**



White wins by force now. **16...a×b5** (16...♖×b6 17.♖×c8+ ♖×c8 18.♘d7+-) **17.♘×c8 ♖×a2 18.♖f3 f5 19.♘d7+ ♖f7 20.♖c3 ♖×c8 21.♖×h8 1-0**

Lastly, here are five exercises to serve as a preview to this fascinating and unique opening. They are divided into two categories:

* Simple.

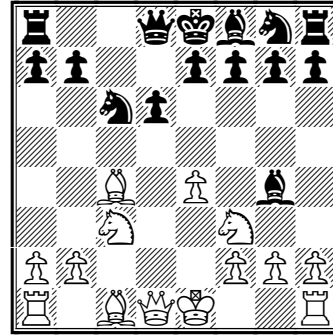
** Slightly harder.

(1) Kucharski – Kasperek *

POL 2009

1.e4 c5 2.d4 c×d4 3.c3 d×c3 4.♘×c3 ♘c6 5.♘f3 d6 6.♙c4 Now Black played the active **6...♙g4**, pinning White's knight. (D)

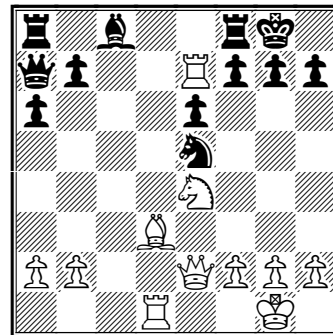
What is the best way for White to meet this variation?



(2) Holthuis – Holldorf **

corr 1993

1.e4 c5 2.d4 c×d4 3.c3 d×c3 4.♘×c3 ♘c6 5.♘f3 e6 6.♙c4 d6 7.0-0 ♘f6 8.♖e2 a6 9.♖d1 ♖c7 10.♙f4 ♙e7 11.♖ac1 ♖b8 12.♙d3 0-0 13.e5 d×e5 14.♘×e5 ♘×e5 15.♙×e5 ♖a7 16.♘e4 ♘d7 17.♖c7 ♘×e5 18.♖×e7



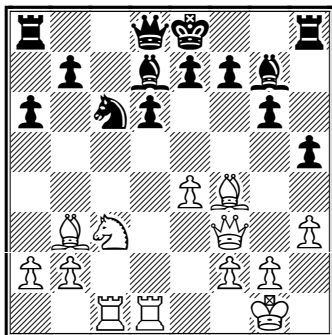
Black played **18...♘c6**, questioning the future of White's rook. Was this a good idea?

(3) Winkle – Rottbrand **

Griesheim 1997

1.e4 c5 2.d4 c×d4 3.c3 d×c3 4.♘×c3 a6 5.♙c4 ♘c6 6.♘f3 d6 7.0-0 ♙d7 8.♖e2 g6 9.♙e3 ♙g7 10.♖ac1 ♘f6 11.♖fd1 ♘g4 12.♙f4 h5 13.h3 ♘ge5 14.♙b3 ♘×f3+ 15.♖×f3

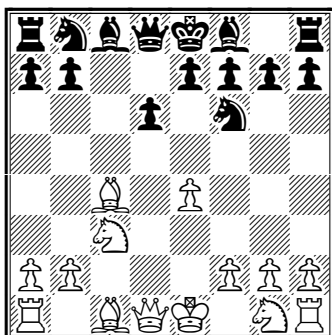
Introduction



Black continued with **15...♘d4**, intending to halve the opponent's bishop-pair. How do you assess the position?

(4) Gueroui (2101) – Abdalla *
Cairo 2009

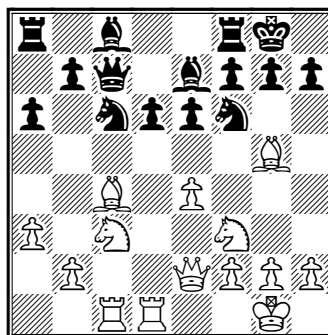
1.e4 c5 2.d4 c×d4 3.c3 d×c3 4.♗×c3
d6 5.♕c4 ♗f6



White continued with **6.e5**, but could he really prove sufficient compensation for two pawns after **6...d×e5**?

(5) Compagnone – Hall **
corr 2001

1.e4 c5 2.d4 c×d4 3.c3 d×c3 4.♗×c3
♗c6 5.♗f3 d6 6.♕c4 a6 7.0-0 ♗f6
8.♕g5 e6 9.♖e2 ♕e7 10.♞fd1 ♖c7
11.♞ac1 0-0 12.a3



Which is the better choice: the developing move **12...♕d7** or the active **12...b5** intending to gain space before developing the bishop (possibly to b7)?

I wish you much fun and enjoyment studying and winning with the Morra Gambit!

Hannes Langrock
Leipzig
June 2011