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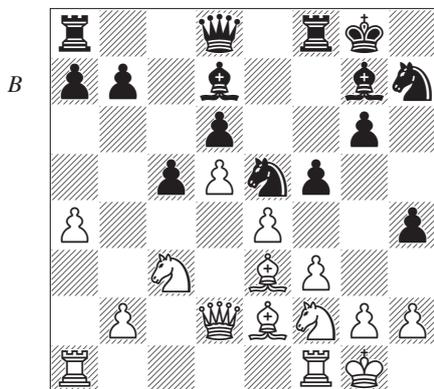
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The Curse of Passivity

Much middlegame play is based on activity. This refers not only to the activity of individual pieces, but also to the activity of the position as a whole and its potential to undertake positive action. If a position is passive and offers no constructive plan, then the opponent will be free to manoeuvre as he likes, and sooner or later he will find a way to make progress.



Tomashevsky – Khairullin
European Ch, Rijeka 2010

In this position from the King's Indian, Black's strategy is based on piece activity while White puts his faith in his extra central pawn and solid position. The main risk for Black is that if his activity leads to nothing, he will fall into a passive and strategically inferior position.

16...♖f6

16...a6 17 ♖h1 ♜e8 18 ♜g1!, with the idea of g4, favours White.

17 exf5 gxf5 18 ♗h3

A key move, preventing ...f4.

18...♗g6?

After this, Black falls into a passive position. 18...♜ae8 is the most flexible plan, keeping the knight on the more active square e5. In this case White has only a slight advantage.

19 f4!

Black was threatening ...f4, so this is the most natural move in any case, but it also severely limits Black's minor pieces. His knights and d7-bishop are now blocked in and it doesn't take long to see that he lacks any positive plan. Note that if Black had left his knight on e5 then

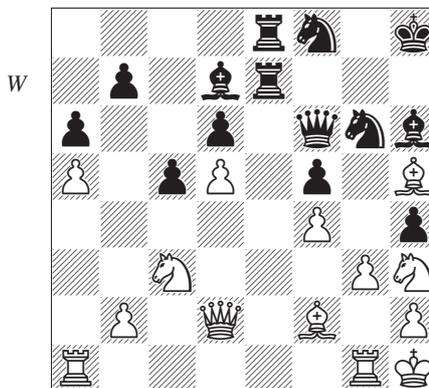
White could not have played f4 due to the reply ...♗g4.

19...a6 20 ♜f2 ♜ae8 21 ♖h1!

When the opponent has been reduced to passivity, there's almost always some way to make progress. Here White intends an eventual ♜g1 and g3, with a direct attack along the g-file.

21...♜f7 22 a5 ♜fe7 23 ♜h5 ♗hf8 24 ♜g1! ♜h6 25 g3 ♖h8?!

Now White has total command of the g-file, but even the best defence, 25...hxg3 26 ♜xg3 ♜g7, leaves Black under tremendous pressure after 27 ♜ag1 ♜ee7 28 ♗g5 ♜e8 29 h4 (note that 29...♗xh4? loses to 30 ♜xe8 ♜xe8 31 ♜h3).



26 gxh4 ♗xh4 27 ♜xe8?

A serious error allowing Black a single chance to escape. 27 b4! is the killing move, opening a second front on the queenside. After 27...♜g7 28 bxc5 ♜xc3 29 ♜xc3 ♜xc3 30 ♜xh4 ♜xa1 31 ♜xa1 Black's position collapses.

27...♜xe8?

27...♗f3! is the saving move since after 28 ♜d3 ♗xg1 29 ♜xd7 ♗xh3 30 ♜xh3 ♜xd7 31 ♜h4 ♜g6 32 ♜g1 ♜h7 White has at most a slight edge.

28 ♗g5

Now White is back on track and wins convincingly enough.

28...♗hg6 29 ♜ae1 ♜xe1 30 ♜xe1 ♜f7 31 ♗xf7+ ♜xf7 32 ♜g3 ♜g7 33 ♜e3 ♜d4 34 ♜f3 ♜g8 35 ♜e2 ♜h7 36 ♗a4 ♜d7 37 ♗b6 ♜b5 38 h4 ♜xa5 39 ♗c4 ♜d8 40 h5 ♗h8 41 ♜g2 ♖f7 42 ♜d3 1-0

Players often think passively when their opponent has sacrificed something. The logic is that with extra material in hand, it's only necessary to defend grimly and the material will win out in the end. But many positions are not like this. Responding passively to a sacrifice often only allows the opponent to improve his position and increase his compensation. This applies especially to positional sacrifices. In many cases the way to disrupt the enemy build-up is to play aggressively yourself, even if this involves a counter-sacrifice. Thinking actively is just as important when material up as in any other situation.

Berndt – P.H. Nielsen

Bundesliga 2005/6

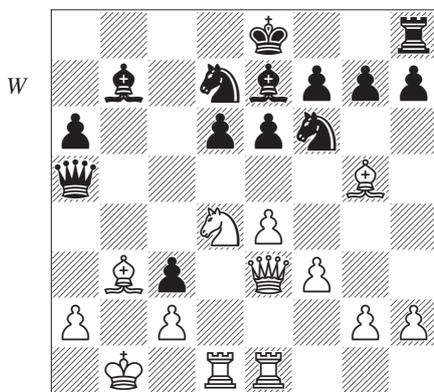
1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♙c4 e6 7 ♙b3 ♘bd7 8 ♚e2 b5 9 ♙g5 ♙b7 10 0-0-0 ♚c8 11 ♚he1 ♚xc3!? 12 bxc3 ♚a5 13 f3 b4?!

A natural move, exploiting the undefended bishop on g5 to win the c3-pawn. However, 13...d5! is better since after 14 exd5 ♙a3+ 15 ♙b1 ♘xd5 16 ♘xb5! axb5 17 ♙xd5 ♚xc3 18 ♙c1 ♙xc1 19 ♙xc1 ♚a1+ 20 ♙d2 ♚d4+ 21 ♙c1 the complications peter out to a draw.

14 ♚e3 bxc3 15 ♙b1

For the moment Black's attack is not dangerous, since ...♚a3 can be met by ♚xc3, but if Black is allowed to complete his development by ...♙e7, ...0-0 and ...♚b8 then he will have excellent compensation for the exchange. It is essential for White to prevent this.

15...♙e7



16 ♘f5!

The key move. By sacrificing a piece, White takes over the initiative and avoids falling into a passive position.

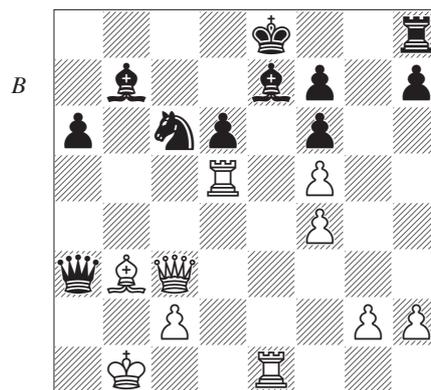
16...exf5 17 exf5 ♘e5 18 f4 ♘c6

The best defence. 18...0-0? loses to 19 fxe5 ♘g4 20 ♚d4! ♙xg5 21 ♚xd6 followed by e6.

19 ♙xf6 gxf6 20 ♚d5 ♚b4?

This allows White to increase his initiative. 20...♚c7 21 ♚xc3 ♙d7 is a better defence, although after 22 ♚dd1 ♚b6 23 ♙a1 White retains some advantage thanks to his active pieces and Black's awkward king position. Note how even after Black's best defence, White's sacrifice has transformed the position. Instead of defending against Black's queenside threats, White has seized the initiative and it is Black who is under pressure.

21 a3! ♚xa3 22 ♚xc3



Black is in trouble because his queen is now sidelined.

22...♙f8?

22...♚b4 was the last chance, but after 23 ♚xb4 ♘xb4 24 ♚xd6 ♙xg2 (24...♘c6 25 ♚xf6 0-0 26 ♚xc6 ♙xc6 27 ♚xe7 ♙xg2 28 f6 wins for White) 25 c3 ♘c6 26 ♙a4 0-0 27 ♚d2 ♙h3 28 ♙xc6 White should win in the long run.

23 ♚e4!

With the decisive threat of ♚a4, which forces Black to surrender material.

23...♘e5 24 fxe5 dxe5

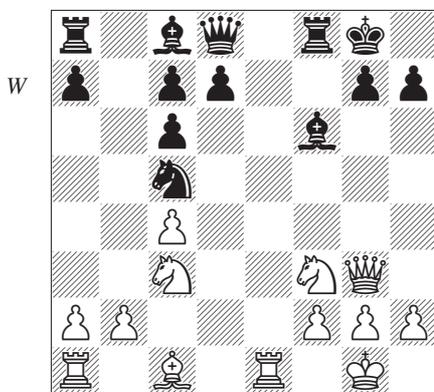
24...♙xd5 loses to 25 ♚c8+ ♙g7 26 ♚g4+ ♙h6 27 ♚c3 with a quick mate.

25 ♚c7 ♙xd5 26 ♚c8+ ♙g7 27 ♚g4+ ♙h6 28 ♚c3! 1-0

24

The Initiative

In chess, ‘having the initiative’ means possessing the ability to create threats that keep the opponent off-balance. The ability to generate threats at will is very uncomfortable for the opponent, since every move he has to calculate the consequences of executing those threats. By piling one threat on top of another, the player with the initiative can improve the position of his pieces with gain of time. In the following game, Adams used this technique to launch a deadly attack on the king.



Adams – D. Howell
London 2010

14 ♖g5

Developing a piece and preparing to exchange off the active bishop on f6.

14...♟d3?

14...d6 is sounder.

15 ♜e3!

The key moment. By sacrificing the b-pawn, White is able to seize the initiative and keep it for the rest of the game. By contrast, 15 ♜e2?! ♖xg5 16 ♟xg5 ♟f4 17 ♜e3 d5 gives Black a satisfactory position.

15...♟xb2

15...♖xg5 16 ♟xg5 ♟f4 is no longer effective because after 17 ♜f3 ♜f6 18 ♜e1 Black has to respond to the threat of ♜e4.

16 ♜ae1

The only defect of Black’s position is the undeveloped c8-bishop. By continually making threats, White denies Black the chance to develop this bishop effectively. Black faces

the immediate problem of countering White’s threats of 17 ♜e7! ♖xe7 18 ♜xe7, with a deadly attack against g7, or simply 17 ♟e4.

16...♖xg5

16...♖a6 is bad because after 17 ♜e7 ♖xc3 18 ♜1e3 ♟d1 19 ♟e5 ♜xe7 20 ♖xe7 ♟xe3 21 ♖xf8 ♖xe5 22 ♜xe5 ♜xf8 23 ♜xe3 ♖xc4 24 ♜xa7 the passed a-pawn will be decisive.

17 ♟xg5

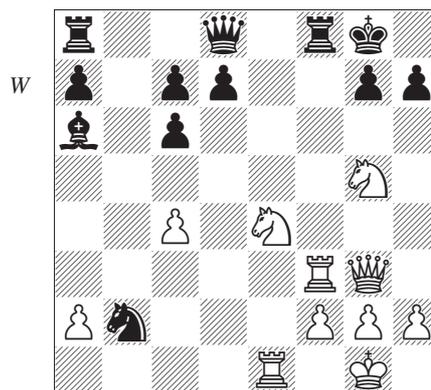
Again threatening ♜e7.

17...♜f6 18 ♜f3 ♜d8

The queen has to backtrack since 18...♜d6 loses to 19 ♜h4 h6 20 ♟f7! ♜xf7 21 ♜e8+.

19 ♟ce4

Black now has to meet the possibility of 20 ♟f6+ ♜xf6 21 ♜xf6, amongst other threats.

19...♖a6

Now the a8-rook can defend e8, but the bishop still displays no real activity.

20 ♟xh7!

White has gained so much time that he can launch a sacrificial assault on Black’s king.

20...♜xf3

After 20...♖xh7 21 ♟g5+ ♖g8 22 ♜xf8+ ♜xf8 23 ♜h3 White mates quickly.

21 gxf3 ♖xh7 22 ♟g5+ ♖g8 23 ♜h4 ♖xc4

At last the bishop enters the game, but it’s too late since White’s attack is already decisive.

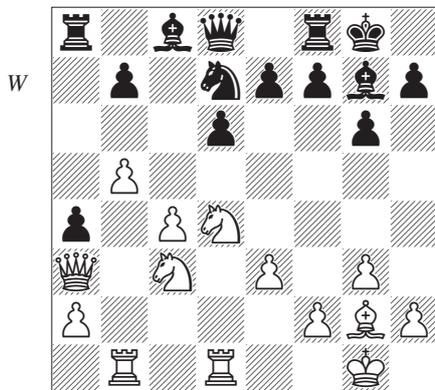
24 ♜h7+ ♖f8 25 ♜e5

Threatening 26 ♜f5+.

25...♖e6 26 ♜h8+ ♖e7 27 ♜xg7+ ♖d6

Or 27...♖e8 28 ♜f7#.

28 ♟e4# (1-0)



McShane – Carlsen
London 2010

It's important to note that the initiative can be exploited in ways other than an attack on the king. For example, the continual pressure may eventually lead to a gain of material. In this position, White has a lead in development and actively-placed pieces, while Black has the two bishops and a possible strong square for his knight on e5. In order to keep Black from consolidating and completing his development, White must operate with immediate threats.

17 ♖e4

Preventing ...♗c5 and threatening to open the position up by 18 c5.

17... ♗b6

17...♗a5 is safer. While the text-move is not bad if followed up correctly, it's risky to place the queen opposite the b1-rook.

18 ♗c6! ♗e8?!

Too passive; 18...bxc6 19 bxc6 ♗a5 20 cxd7 ♗xd7 21 c5 ♗g4 22 ♗dc1 dxc5 23 ♗xc5 ♗a6 is better. White has an edge due to his active rooks but Black's bishops give him counterchances.

19 ♗b4

Threatening ♗d5 followed by c5, so Black takes action to expel the knight from e4 even though he weakens his position in the process.

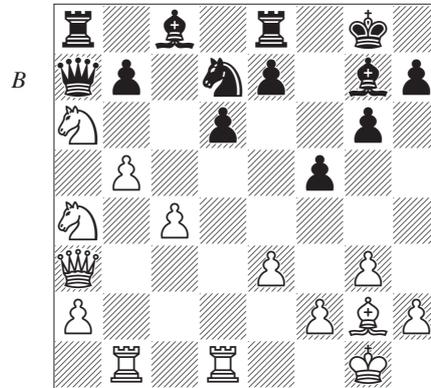
19...f5 20 ♗c3 ♗c5?!

This allows White to expand his initiative and results in serious problems for Black. 20...e6 21 ♗d3 ♗c5 is a better chance, although White retains considerable pressure.

21 ♗xa4!

A well-judged move, triggering some tactics which keep Black occupied for several moves.

21... ♗a7 **22** ♗a6



This is forced to avoid losing a piece, but also puts pressure on Black due to the threat of 23 ♗c7.

22... bxa6 **23** b6 ♗xb6

After 23...♗b8 24 ♗b3 ♗h8 25 ♗xa8 ♗xa8 26 b7 White wins material, so Black must return the piece at once.

24 ♗xb6 ♗b8 **25** c5

Typical initiative play: White introduces a new threat of 26 ♗b3+ and so forces Black's reply.

25... ♗e6 **26** ♗db1

Now the threats are 27 ♗b7 and 27 cxd6.

26... dxc5 **27** ♗b7 ♗xb7 **28** ♗xb7 ♗a8 **29** ♗xc5 ♗c8

29...♗f7 loses two pawns after 30 ♗xe7, so this is forced.

30 ♗xa6

White has won a pawn but, importantly, his initiative persists and this greatly simplifies what would otherwise have been a tough technical task.

30... ♗f7 **31** ♗c6 ♗d8 **32** ♗d7

White's pieces are a picture of activity. The main threat is 33 ♗b6 followed by ♗c7, trapping the queen. Black's bishops are shut away on the kingside and cannot influence the play in the top-left corner.

32... ♗xd7

Acquiescing to further material loss, but the position was hopeless in any case.

33 ♗xd7 ♗c1+ **34** ♗f1 ♗xf1+ **35** ♗xf1 ♗c4+ **36** ♗g1 ♗xa2 **37** ♗a4 e5 **38** f3 ♗h6 **39** ♗b3+ **1-0**