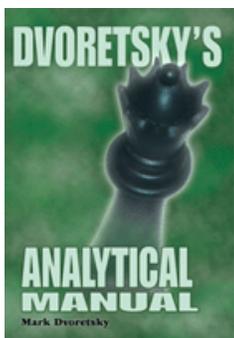




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The Superfluous Piece

One of the most intriguing modern ideas that has actually been codified is the brainchild of the Russian super-trainer IM Mark Dvoretsky – so writes the American author, John Watson, in his popular book, *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy – Advances Since Nimzowitsch*. He’s talking about my article “The ‘Superfluous’ Piece,” published in 1981 in the magazine “64 – Shakhmatnoye Obozreniye,” and later included in the book, *Secrets of Chess Training* – the first volume of the series written by myself and Yusupov, “School of Future Champions.” The article examines the situation in which two or three pieces (generally knights) are all aiming for the same point. In such cases, the opponent should usually avoiding exchanges on that square – since only one piece at a time can occupy it, the other pieces become “superfluous.”

The article did not pass unnoticed – many respected authors have made reference to it. Here, for example, is what grandmaster Mihai Suba wrote, in his weighty tome, *Dynamic Chess Strategy*:

In a Soviet magazine I once saw an interesting article entitled Lishnaya Figura (roughly = “The Superfluous Piece”). It stressed the inactivity of the superfluous piece, which may cause trouble for its owner. Here is an example.



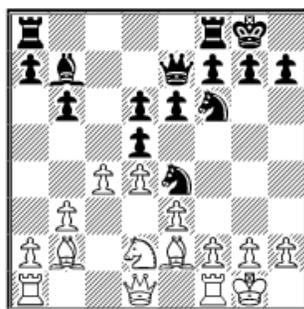
White to move should play 1.Nxc7 Qxc7 2.Nd5 with a clear advantage of a dominant knight against a bad bishop and automatic play on the queenside by b4, bxc5 etc. Black to move should avoid the exchange and make the knight on c3 superfluous, e.g. 1...Ne6!, keeping the game alive with good counterchances on the kingside.

That’s a good text, reflecting the basic idea of my article laconically and accurately.

I present one more instructive example – from a classic game that Artur Yusupov demonstrated at the first session of our school for gifted young players (cf. the same book, *Secrets of Chess Training*).

Zukertort – Blackburne

London 1883

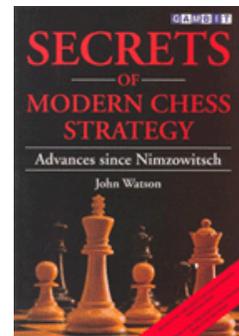


White to move

Recently I was discussing this game with Dvoretsky and he drew attention to the move 13.Nb1!. A hundred years ago, of course, they didn’t play that sort of chess. This positional procedure – non-standard avoidance of an exchange – appeared much later. Mark Israilevich easily found the strongest move, because he had already studied such situations, even written an article on this topic “The ‘Superfluous’ Piece.”

In avoiding the exchange, White intends by 14.f3 to drive the knight away from e4, and then play Nc3, preparing e3-e4. In this case he retains more pieces on the board, which is advantageous to the side with a spatial

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advantage.

A similar situation sometimes occurs in the English Opening or in the Stonewall Variation of the Dutch Defence.

There is an additional nuance – in some cases Ba3 becomes possible, which is important, say, in the variation 13.Nb1 e5 14.f3 Ng5 15.de de 16. Ba3, winning the exchange.

In the game White played more simply, allowing the exchange of knights and thereby lessening his positional advantage.

Dorfman doesn't like this concept. He writes, *It is possible that the topic "Superfluous Pieces" is no worse than others. But the constant mixing of static and dynamic elements is not favourable to the development of a correct understanding of chess.*

If you juggle words, it's not difficult to put together such assertions: on the surface, they may appear deeply thought out, but in fact, there's nothing to them. What sort of constancy are we talking about here – since, after all, this specific situation doesn't occur very often? What are these dynamic and static elements in reference to? – I'm only dealing with the usefulness of a trade. And by the way, the evaluation of position in contemporary chess practically always consists of dynamic and static elements, combined in varying proportions. And finally, how can learning a useful chess technique possibly have a negative influence on one's understanding of chess? Now, Dorfman's commentaries really do disorient the reader, and prevent him from getting at the truth of a position – you could compare, for example, Dorfman's comments with Botvinnik's on the game Botvinnik – Donner.

Dorfman criticizes two endgames from my article. Let's evaluate his critiques.

Karpov – Dolmatov

Amsterdam 1980



Black to move

Of course, White stands better; but the outcome of the game has yet to be determined – even these kinds of positions may offer stubborn defenses. First, let's see what happened in the game.

34...Ne7?! (a dubious decision – Black is actually trading off the "superfluous" knight on b4) 35.Ra6! Qd7

If the knight returns to c8, then 36.Nc3! is unpleasant, with its threat of 37. Ne4.

36.Qe4 Nxd5 37.Nxd5 Be7 38.Rfa1 Bf8

White's advantage has increased. All his pieces are much more active, with the knight's superiority over the poor bishop at f8 being particularly acute.

39.Qe2 Rc6 40.R6a3! Rc5 41.Rf3!

An excellent maneuver. Anatoly Karpov trades off the rook which defends the king, and then puts together a killing attack.

41...Rxf3 42.Qxf3 Qf7

42...Rxc4 43.Qf6+ Kg8 44.Nb6+–.

43.Qg4 h5 44.Qe4 Rc8

44...Kh7 45.Ra3 Bg7 46.Rf3 Qe6 47.g4!+– offers no joy either.

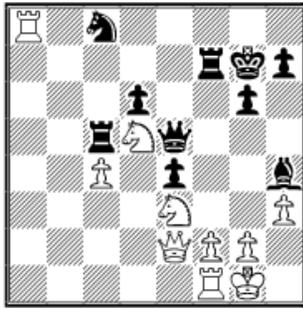
45.Ra3 Qf5 46.Ra7+ Kh6 47.Qe3+ g5 48.Qe2 Rb8 49.g4! hg 50.hg Qb1 + 51.Kg2 Rb7 52.Rxb7 Qxb7 53.Qf3 Qc8 54.Qf6+ Kh7 55.Qf7+ 1-0

How could the defense be improved? Instead of the illogical exchange of knights, I suggested 34...e4, putting at least one pawn on a light square –

the opposite color of his own bishop – and allowing Black to activate his pieces, if only a little, by Qe5-d4, if White allows it.

Now I shall present the main thrust of Dorfman's argument, editing out his usual rhetoric about dynamics and statics.

In accordance with all the rules of strategy, White converts his advantage by playing 35.Ne3 Qe5 36.Nbd5.



Black to move

36...Ne7 37.Ng4 Qd4 38.Rd1 Qxc4 39.Qb2+.

Let's look at the diagrammed position (by the way, Dorfman places his diagram only at the very end of his variation, when it's time for Black to resign).

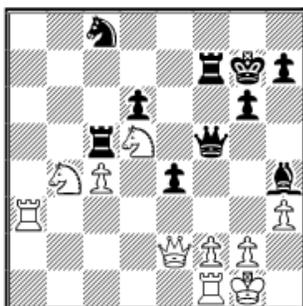
The threat of 37.Ng4, to seize control of the a1-h8 diagonal, is indeed dangerous, but it's also easily parried by 37...h5!. And then what should we recommend for White? If, for example, he plays sharply by 37.f4, then 37...e4 38.Rxf3 Rxf3 39.Qxf3 Bg5 40.Rb8 Ne7!? (40...Bxe3+ 41.Nxe3 Rc7 wouldn't be bad, either) 41.Rb7 (41.Qf8+ Kh7) 41...Ra5, with approximately equal chances.

White doesn't have to force matters, but there are no clear ways to increase the pressure. This situation would be much more pleasant for Black than what happened in the game. As you can see, Dorfman's concrete conclusions are not defensible, which in turn erodes the basis for the arguments he has constructed.

Dorfman's books were first published in French. Early in 2000, the grandmaster published material in "64 – Shakhmatnoye Obozreniye" laying out the basis of his theory. Unfortunately, both his logic and the commentaries he gave to concrete examples have not stood up to criticism, which induced me to place an analytical dissection of Dorfman's article in that same magazine. Among other things, I examined the Karpov – Dolmatov endgame.

Once they learn of their analytical errors, honest authors either correct them or remove the refuted examples from future publications. Dorfman has never done so. He has seen my article; evidently, he has been unable to disprove the conclusions it contains. Nevertheless, in subsequent English- and Russian-language editions of his book, he reproduces the very same "cooperative" variation, and the gibberish assertions that came with it.

Now, when I prepared the above-mentioned Volume 1 of the "School of Future Champions" series for later re-publication, I made some changes to my own text – certainly not in response to Dorfman's notes. The point here was that grandmaster Yuri Yakovich had shown me something that cast serious doubt on my recommendation of 34...e4, that being the move 35.Ra3!



This threatens 36.Re3, winning the pawn at e4. If Black replies 36...Bg5, then 37.f4! is very strong (but not 37.f3? Qe5): 37...Bf6 (taking *en passant* is out) 38.g4 (38.Rd1!?) 38...Qe6 39.Kh1, with an overwhelming advantage for White.

Which in turn means Black must play more accurately; for example, 34...Bg5!?, taking control of the e3-square, and preparing to play e5-e4 again. The maneuver 35.Nc3?! is poor here, because of the reply 35...Nb6, attacking the c4-pawn. After 35.Rfa1?! e4 (35...Bh4!?), attacking the e4-

pawn would no longer be effective: 36.Re1 Rxc4! (Black also has 36... Bh4 37.Qb2+ Qe5) 37.Qxc4 Qxf2+ 38.Kh2 Qxe1 39.Rxc8 Rf3! =.

White keeps his advantage the same way: 35.Ra3!, to which 35...Rb7 is one possible reply. Even if Black chooses 35...Ne7, the strong Karpovian move 36.Ra6 will be played, even at the cost of a tempo.

One more thing: after 34...Ne7?! 35.Ra6! (the game continuation), Dolmatov was wrong to put himself into deep defense by 35...Qd7?!. He would have done much better to play 35...Nxd5 36.Nxd5 e4! (this active continuation at least answers the needs of the position!). Taking the pawn would leave Black with decent drawing chances after 37.Rxd6 Qe5 38.Ra6 Qd4 39.Ne3 Bg5 40.Rd1 Qc3 41.Ng4 e3!? 42.Nxe3 Bxe3.

This new analysis does not refute the logic connected with the “superfluous” piece idea – although I must admit that it renders its application to the present example considerably less convincing. As I look at it today, the Karpov – Dolmatov endgame is a better illustration of the search for defensive resources in a strategically difficult position.

In my article published in 2002, entitled “[Lawless Pawns](#),” I analyzed situations where pawns should be placed (or left) on squares that are the same color as one’s bishop, thereby breaking a well-known strategic principle. One of those situations was described as follows:

If your opponent is confined to passive defense on account of his “bad” bishop, but a pawn of his is “properly” placed (on the opposite-colored square), then it is this pawn that will sometimes become a weakness, and the chief target of your attack.

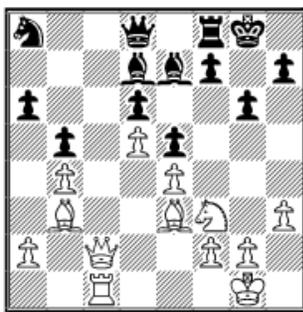
The refutation of the move 34...e4?! pointed out by Yakovich is a clear illustration of this thesis: the opponent immediately falls upon the only pawn brave enough to go onto a light square.

But in the variations 34...Bg5!? 35.Rfa1?!, or 34...Ne7 35.Ra6! Nxd5 36.Nxd5, the continuation e5-e4 would be positionally justified: moving the pawn off the same color square as the bishop allows Black to create active counterplay, and thus to increase his chances of not losing.

As you can see, even diametrically opposite conclusion may sometimes prove correct – all that’s necessary is for some of the concrete circumstances to change. Chess is like that: it cannot endure dogmatic schemes!

I cannot resist one more clear illustration of this theme.

Anand – Carlsen
Linares 2007



White to move

Commented (outstandingly, as far as I’m concerned) by Viswanathan Anand.

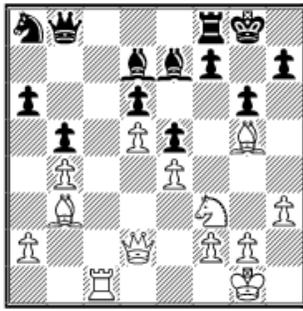
23.Qd2

I considered 23.Ne1, with the idea of simply playing Nd3 and Nc5, and after Black takes on c5, I will have two connected passed pawns and a lot of play (and once I play d6, you can see that the knight on a8 is trapped forever). But I didn’t like 23...Bg5, and here Black gets some relief even if White keeps a nice edge after 24.Qd2 (24.Bxg5 Qxg5, and here White has to deal with both Rc8 and Bxh3) 24...Bxe3 25.Qxe3 Qb8 (25...f5 26.Nf3 fe 27.Ng5 is clearly better for White) 26.f4.

23...Qb8

After 23...f6, White goes 24.Ne1, with the idea of Nd3 and Nc5!

24.Bg5!



It seems illogical. You first avoid the bishop exchange and then you force it yourself. There is no grand reason I can give, it's purely a tactical thing. It seems less effective to exchange the bishops with the knight on e1. But here Black wants to play ...Rc8, and once Black manages to swap the rooks or to defend himself, the advantage is gone and you can offer a draw. So it's very important to act quickly. 24.Bg5 relies on two things. One is that 24...f6 is impossible because of 25.Nxe5, and wins. The second is that after swapping there are some very direct lines, as you will see, involving Qh6.

24...Bxg5

The best was 24...Qd8!, when I felt that maybe 25.Qe3 (25.Bxe7 only improves the black queen's position, 25...Qxe7, and after 26.Qe3 he has 26...Rc8!) 25...Bxg5 26.Nxg5 Qe7 27.f4 gives White an edge anyway.

If 24...Bd8 I play 25.Bxd8 Qxd8 (if he takes with the rook, 26.Qg5 is unpleasant, threatening Qe7 or Qf6) 26.Qh6, and this is unpleasant too, as these lines testify:



A) 26...Qf6 27.Ng5 Qg7 28.Qh4 Rc8 (28...Re8 29.Ne6!; 28...Kh8 29.Nxh7! Qxh7 30.Qe7 [after 30...Qh6 31.Rc3 Bc8 32.Qxd6, Black's position is difficult]) 29.Rxc8+ Bxc8 30.Nxh7!;

B) 26...f6 27.Rc6! Bc8 28.h4! Rf7 29.h5 Rg7 (if 29...g5 30.Nxg5 fg 31.Rxd6, with a winning advantage) 30.hg hg 31.Nh4 g5 32.Nf5 (the line 32.Ng6?! Rh7 33.Qf8+ Qxf8 34.Nxf8 Rc7! 35.Ne6 Rxc6 36.dc Bxe6 37.Bxe6+ Kf8 leads to a minor-piece endgame in which White's king will probably be unable to break into the enemy position) 32...Bxf5 33.ef, and now White's rook can never be dislodged from c6.

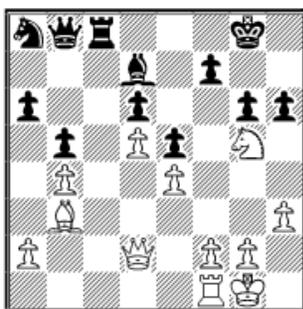
25.Nxg5

Again purely tactical. It's very important that White takes back with the knight. Now 25.Qxg5 f6 is not the right plan.

25...Rc8

Here I spent a fair amount of time, as 26.Rxc8+, followed by 27.f4, was also tempting. And I still was not sure how strong 27.Ne6 was. But in the end I decided that it was important to keep rooks, since this improves White's attacking chances.

26.Rf1 h6



White to move

26.Ne6!

On the one hand this is the kind of move that gets you diagrams and so on and I must say it's a move you play with a lot of pleasure. In fact, it

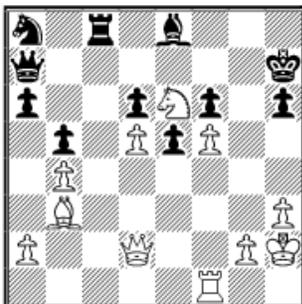
cheered me up for the rest of the tournament. But objectively speaking there is no other way. White's whole plan has led him to this point, and you have to follow through.

Analysis showed that Anand's combination was absolutely correct. The conclusion of the game is given with short notes.

27...Kh7!?

White's attack also reaches its goal after 27...fe 28.de Be8 29.Qxh6! Nb6 30.e7+ Nc4 31.Qf8+ Kh7 32.f4!?, or 32.Bd1!?

28.f4 Qa7+ 29.Kh2 Be8!? (White also gains no joy from 29...fe 30.de Be8 31.f5) **30.f5! gf 31.ef f6**



32.Re1! Nc7 33.Rc1!

It's just amazing how flexible and unprejudiced the gifted Indian grandmaster is in making his decisions. When he moved the rook to e1, he intended to bring it to the king's wing via the e4-square, and would undoubtedly have played this, had Black replied 32...Nb6. The other route – 32.Rf3 Bf7 33.Rg3 – was less attractive to him (although I think that was also pretty strong – after all, it threatens 34.Rg7+, and if 33...Rg8, he can respond with 34.Rxg8 Bxg8 35.Qc3 Qb7 [otherwise, the queen invades via the c-file] 36.Qg3, when Black's in a bad way, since 36...Qf7 is met decisively by 37.Bd1!, intending 38.Bh5).

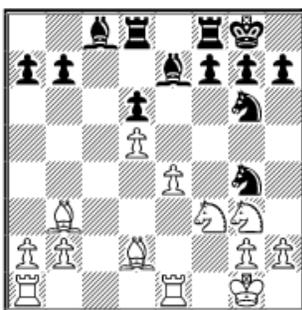
But after the knight went to c7, Anand saw that pinning it on the c-file would force Black to take pieces away from the king's defense, so without hesitating, he altered his plan.

33...Bd7 34.Rc3 e4 (34...Ne8 35.Rg3 Bxe6 36.Rg6!) **35.Rg3 Nxe6 36.de Be8 37.e7! Bh5** (37...Qxe7 38.Bg8+) **38.Qxd6 1-0**

Now that we've enjoyed Anand's brilliant play and his lively, entertaining commentary, we return once again to the theme we were discussing earlier.

Dolmatov – Romanishin

USSR Championship, Minsk 1979



The basic idea of this position was explained in an old article of mine, which I still consider completely correct:

White has a spatial advantage, but Black has at his disposal the strong point e5, for which both his knights and the dark-square bishop are contending. White cannot and should not fight for the e5-square – one of the opponent's pieces will occupy it, but the other two will prove "superfluous."

In the game, Sergei Dolmatov chose an unfortunate continuation.

27.Bc3 N4e5 28.Bd4 b6 29.a4? (better was 29.Bc3, and if 29...Bf6, then 30.Nd4) **29...Bf6**

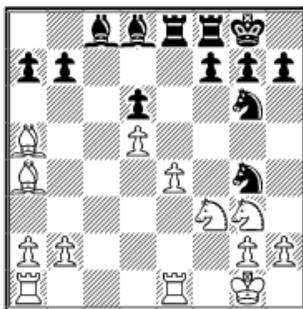
The bishop "hangs" at d4. Dolmatov could find nothing better than **30.Nxe5 Bxe5 31.Bxe5 Nxe5 32.a5 g6**.

Look at what has happened: Black still controls e5, but his two "superfluous," unnecessary pieces have now left the board: the dark-square bishop and the knight from g6. Meanwhile, White is left with two "slackers" – both the knight at g3 and the bishop stand poorly. Black's

chances are now indisputably better and, exploiting his opponent's later inaccuracies, he went on to win.

The improvement on White's play was pointed out in the note to move twenty-nine. In order to avoid losing time on the back-and-forth bishop maneuver, I suggested another improvement: 27.Ba5! This appears to force the move 27...b6, weakening the c6-square and granting White a target for opening another line by a2-a4-a5. After 28.Bc3 N4e5 29.Nd4!, he retains excellent prospects.

I acknowledge thinking the reply 27...Rde8 impossible, in light of 28.Ba4, overlooking the strong reply 28...Bd8!, pointed out by Dorfman. But from this single oversight, the latter immediately spun several far-reaching conclusions about the insupportableness of the whole "superfluous piece" concept!



White to move

In an article in "64 – Shakhmatnoye Obozreniye," I replied that, in the first place, the point of my ideas did not consist of one concrete recommendation for White (who could have played something different), but in how he should **not** have played: he had to avoid the exchanges on e5. And in the second place...

Fine, let's play these generally unnecessary moves, and after 28...Bd8!, let's continue this variation: 29.Bc3! Bb6+ 30.Nd4 Re7 (30...Rd8!?) 31.h3 N4e5 (or 31...Nf6) 32.Kh2. My problems with the "poor static position of the king" have ended, but now Black's difficulties are just beginning, with the unpleasant threat of 33.Ng5. This is precisely where White's space advantage – which Dorfman underestimates – and the unfortunate position of the "superfluous" knight on g6, preventing the move g7-g6, come into play. White is at least not worse. You can see that even this plan, hampered as it is by a tactical oversight, is still stronger than what happened in the game.

And now, I give the comments from Dorfman's book, published seven years later.

Let us employ the method.

The static balance gives an advantage to Black due to the difference in the kings' positions and the backward e4 pawn (and, as a consequence, the weakness of the e5 square). The short variation 27.Ba5 Rde8 28.Ba4 Bd8 29.Bb4 (with the exchange of bishops 29.Bxd8 Rxd8 White would, at the least, not have improved his position) 29...Bb6+ emphasises all the defects in White's position.

Note that in the French edition of his book and in the article in the magazine "64 – Shakhmatnoye Obozreniye," Dorfman ended his variation with 28...Bd8. After my response was published, he added one move in the English and the Russian editions – not the move that I suggested, but a different, completely pointless move that immediately puts White in a difficult position. This is not a mistake in analysis – it's a card-trick! Naturally, if you use this sort of thing, it's easy to prove anything you want.

I have not delved into the heart of Dorfman's theories – a critical analysis of those could be the theme of a separate article. We have spoken only of his means of argument, of their very weak link to the actual chess content of the examples he gives, and finally, of their low analytical level. Still, in conclusion, I would like to give a short version of my opinion on the basic postulates of the Dorfman "method."

1. **Critical positions.** The criteria that Dorfman offers to determine "criticality" are in fact applicable to almost any chess position, and thus are of no use in a practical game. This is discussed in greater detail in my July-September 2008 articles "Critical Moments," published at Chesscafe.com.
2. **"Regressive Scale for the Static Evaluation of a Position."** This attempt to suggest some formal procedure for evaluating a position was been tried earlier, but it never met with success – no one uses such procedures. Without getting into the strengths and weaknesses of Dorfman's scheme, I note that it too will eventually be forgotten. It almost never offers any real help in the decision-

making process at the board, nor could it, in view of the colossal variety of the situations that can arise over the board.

3. **Strategy In Statically Inferior and Superior Positions.**

According to Dorfman, in the overwhelming majority of positions, one can determine a static advantage for one of the two sides. His main idea is as follows: that *if for one of the players the static balance is negative, he must without hesitation employ dynamic means, and be ready to go in for extreme measures.* On the other hand, his opponent should play conservatively. And in order to determine who should “twist,” and who should “fortify,” Dorfman proposes all the preceding analysis.

This scheme does in fact describe situations that frequently arise in the course of battle. They are useful for study – but in the first place, they certainly cannot be considered universal; and in the second place, one should select convincing and clear examples in which such an approach would be productive. Dorfman does not meet these conditions, and thus his analysis can only serve to disorient the student, and to distract him from a realistic attempt to deduce the secrets of a position, with a stillborn scholasticism.

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