

# **Don't Study Chess Openings without this Book**

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# **Don't Study Chess Openings without this Book**

## **How to Improve and Prepare Your Openings for Real Games**

**DANIEL MUÑOZ**

**Thinkers Publishing 2026**



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# **PART 1:**

## **FUNDAMENTALS.**

### **DECODING THE BOARD'S GENOME: THE STRATEGIC DNA OF OPENINGS**

**SPOILER:**

**IN THIS BOOK, YOU WILL FIND TOOLS FOR ALL LEVELS OF CHESS.  
DON'T BE FOOLED BY THE FACT THAT, AT FIRST, I DON'T WANT TO TAKE  
CERTAIN CONCEPTS FOR GRANTED FOR PLAYERS WHO HAVE ONLY BEEN  
PLAYING FOR A SHORT TIME...**

## INTRODUCTION:

### WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT OPENINGS?

With a few honourable exceptions, opening books are the best-selling chess books. The fascination with openings, with the magic remedy and the immediate solution, has loomed over us for the last few decades. Furthermore, with the rise of the internet and material shared on social media, basic strategies for the first phase of a chess game have spread like wildfire across smartphones. In fact, in my experience as editor of the blog [www.thezugzwangblog.com](http://www.thezugzwangblog.com) and director of the International Chess School [www.thezugzwangmembers.com](http://www.thezugzwangmembers.com), few courses or articles have been as well received as those related to openings.

As a brief aside, aimed at those players who have somewhat less experience in chess, I would like to explain that chess openings are like the script of a film: they set the scene and determine the tone of the game. They are the initial phase of the game, where both players develop their pieces, fight for control of the centre and prepare their strategy for the next phase: the middlegame.

If you are reading this book, it is because you have already played chess, probably on many occasions, and you have surely noticed that it is not the same to start with a random move as it is with a structured approach. You will also have noticed the psychological importance of finding yourself in familiar territory as opposed to an unexplored jungle. Openings are sequences of moves studied for centuries by grandmasters and amateurs, designed to give you a good position from the start. A good position and also security. And security moves the world.

There are many openings, each with its own character. Some are aggressive, such as the King's Gambit, where a pawn is sacrificed to attack from the outset. Others are solid and strategic, such as the Spanish Opening (Ruy Lopez), which prioritises the harmonious development of the pieces. There are also flexible options, such as the English Opening, where you can adapt according to your opponent's response. And, apart from all this, there are a huge number of transpositions that make openings even more complex.

Transpositions in chess allow us to choose different paths to reach the same destination. Imagine you want to go to a city and you can choose between several routes. In chess, this happens when a game starts with one opening and, after a few moves, you reach a position typical of a different opening. This simply happens because the order of moves in chess is not always unique. Sometimes, players can change the order and end up with the same structure, the same pattern of play, but having avoided some annoying responses from their opponent or taken them into less familiar territory.

Transpositions are very useful strategic tools. Great players use them to bring the game to positions they like or that their opponent does not know well. There have been great players who are experts in transpositions, such as Vladimir Kramnik. But be careful: if you do not understand the opening you are transposing well, you could end up in unfamiliar territory. And in chess, being lost in the opening is not a good idea.

In any case, my goal with this introduction is not to give you a lesson on transpositions; it is to explain the reason behind this book and also to tell you what you will find in it and what you can expect from it. So, I will start directly with the first point.

There are more books written about chess than the sum of books written about all other sports. If we know that the number of possible moves in chess is 10 to the power of 120, we realise that there are more possible moves in chess than there are atoms in the universe — yes, in the universe, not in your town or city, but in everything that has matter. However, among these books, of all those written about chess, there are a huge number of books on openings: repertoires, Play the openings like Magnus Carlsen (or another player), hundreds of books aimed at learning a variation, a defence or a complete opening; some very educational and others that are collections of unmemorable and incomprehensible variations.

What I have found curious after so many years of dedicating myself to chess is that there are hardly any chess books aimed at improving our openings from a global perspective, without necessarily focusing on learning this or that opening. That is, effective techniques, methodology and study plans that can allow you to achieve a specific goal in terms of opening preparation. Something like physical education for a specific sport.

Learning openings does not mean memorising meaningless moves, but rather understanding their ideas and plans. As in life, it is not just about how you start, but what you do next. And in chess, a good start can make all the difference. If you think about it, it is a contradiction. There are opening books for every taste and need: from the most rigid theory manual to those that promise to turn you into a grandmaster with a ready-made repertoire. But what about the method? Where are the books that teach us how to train openings efficiently, how to build a solid repertoire without falling into the chaos of memorising lines as if they were advanced chemistry formulas?

Chess is a game of patterns, ideas and structures, and yet most opening books throw us into the sea without teaching us how to swim. Learning to play the Najdorf or the Catalan is useful, yes, but what about learning to study openings intelligently?

Imagine you want to improve your physical condition to play football. You don't just learn set plays; you also run, do agility exercises, and strengthen key muscles.

In chess, the same should apply: it is not enough to absorb lines by heart, but you need to develop skills such as understanding structures, using analysis engines effectively and managing study time. A book on this approach would be a beacon in the fog of theory, a tool to avoid falling into the classic trap of spending months learning an opening only to abandon it when a new development leaves you out of the game, or when you've forgotten what you studied the week before because you simply memorised it.

All this reflection led me to tell myself that perhaps it was time for someone to write that book.

And secondly — or my second point — the problem of how to study openings is no small matter. Many players rush to learn them as if trying to remember a list of telephone numbers without understanding who they belong to or why they are in that order. But chess is not a series of secret codes to be memorised without further ado. Openings are dynamic structures, strategic paths that lead to positions with defined characteristics. If study is limited to mechanical repetition, without an overview, the player becomes an actor reciting a script without understanding the drama. The key is to develop a method that allows openings to be assimilated comprehensively, understanding the underlying principles rather than simply accumulating moves as if they were Panini stickers.

An efficient approach to improving openings should focus on the logic behind each move, the interconnection between moves, and the flexibility to adapt to different schemes without getting caught up in a theoretical straitjacket. There is no point in knowing twenty moves by heart if, once you leave theory behind, you don't know what to do next. True progress lies in training strategic patterns, familiarising yourself with typical structures, and understanding the nature of the middlegame that the studied openings lead to. This involves studying model games, analysing transitions to the middlegame, and developing training habits that prioritise understanding over the accumulation of variations. Only then will you be able to build a solid repertoire that does not depend on the fragile thread of memory, but on the solidity of real chess knowledge.

With any luck, perhaps everything I have just explained in the last few paragraphs sounds familiar to you, but I want to go a little further... When we want to improve our openings, at what point have we concerned ourselves with the sustainability of progress, the transfer of knowledge between the different phases of study, the practical integration of work with computers, or simply realising that our learning is human, no matter how many hundreds of modules or analysis engines continue to be developed?

## Gambits in modern chess

In contemporary practice, gambits remain a double-edged sword. At the amateur level, almost any gambit gives us the chance to play to win, although some are more precise than others. However, at the professional level, with the development of computer chess, many great gambits have been refuted: if your opponent knows the correct defences, the game becomes even or even tilts against you.

For example, in the Albin Countergambit (1.d4 d5 2.c4 e5), if White knows solid resources — such as playing a3 to avoid ...Bb4, or opting for quiet development with g3, Bg2 and castling — they should have no problem, despite it being a very tactical gambit.

Similarly, famous gambits that you have probably seen on social media, such as the Latvian Gambit or the Englund, are considered at this level to be simply extravagant options, usable only in blitz or bullet games, but which in reality encourage bad habits: if your opponent simply ignores them, they are left with a better position.

On the other hand, there are other classic gambits that retain their real tactical power, such as the Evans Gambit or the Danish Gambit, which are very aggressive options with solid strategic support. I would even dare to say that they are very destructive gambits at the beginner level.

Broadly speaking, we can classify gambits into two groups based on their degree of speculation:

- 1) **Solid or safe gambits:** these are those that offer real compensation and do not depend exclusively on an opponent's mistake. Clear examples are the Belgrade Gambit (1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. d4 exd4 5. Nd5) or the classic Queen's Gambit (1.d4 d5 2.c4). Although very different from each other, both can pose serious problems for Black if they do not know the precise lines, while providing a balanced game with solid defensive options. The Urusov Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d4) can also be included in this category: White sacrifices the central pawn on d4 with the idea of quickly opening up lines against the black king. If Black accepts, the game can transpose to very tactical positions similar to the Scotch Gambit, the Max Lange Attack or even Petrov's Defence (with transpositions).
- 2) **Tricky or speculative gambits:** as you can imagine, this category includes those in which your advantage will depend on your opponent playing poorly or badly, falling for a trick or failing to avoid a specific combination. Typical examples are the Englund Gambit (1.d4 e5) or the Halloween Gambit (1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. Nxe5). In short, these are the types of gambits you should not play in a competition, unless you do not care about the result at all and simply want to have fun and try new things.

In professional chess, grandmasters rarely (if ever) rely on dubious gambits in important classical games. However, in informal contexts or in rapid chess, these ideas are re-used relatively frequently. Above all, they are selected for specific situations and aligned with one's own style.

## Gambits for surprising and aggressive players

One of the important factors when deciding whether or not to opt for gambits is your style. If you are someone who enjoys playing aggressively, seeking dynamic and open positions, gambits are a natural fit for you. If not, you may have a hard time playing gambits. However, it is important not to confuse the intelligent use of the gambit with always playing it in every situation. In general, when playing serious classical chess, it is advisable to be more cautious. This is not about prohibiting anything — on the contrary, play whatever makes you happy and what you think adds excitement to your life — but normally in serious tournament games you should rely on a more solid repertoire. A logical strategy for a club player is to use gambits with confidence when there is practical scope (e.g. in blitz or against unprepared opponents) and to alternate them with safer lines in more critical situations or against stronger players. In other words, the gambit is neither a panacea nor a sin: it is just another tool that you need to know when to use.

But the success of a gambit depends not only on your style allowing you to dare to play it, but also on preparation. You need to know the theory, the plans, and the typical tricks and traps. What does this mean in practice? Here are some ideas:

- **Analyse model games:** we will discuss this in the second part of the book, but I can tell you now that these types of games will help you understand the natural development of the gambit.
- **Memorise critical responses:** certain gambits can be played very well from a defensive point of view, but if you don't know what to do against critical responses, your potential attack will die before it even begins.
- **Work on tactical patterns:** not all gambits have the same tactical component. For example, the Queen's Gambit is not an overly complex gambit from this point of view, but the King's Gambit is. Many gambits gain strength when you master typical tactical resources: temporary sacrifices, diversions, etc.
- **Combine them with a solid repertoire:** it's not about living off gambits. The smart thing to do is to have a couple of them in your arsenal (Evans against 1.e4 e5, for example) but also have solid alternatives.

## Gambits in rapid and online chess

If there is a natural ecosystem for gambits, it is fast online chess. Why? Because with little time on the clock, the element of surprise is multiplied, and it is not as easy to remember the best defences. In bullet and blitz chess, many players repeat the same patterns. This is the case with those players who, even if they are being killed, do not change their opening or scheme, and in these cases in particular, gambits are a good poison, although they cannot always be considered.

Of course, in chess there is no opening, defence, gambit or whatever you want that will guarantee you certain success. If your opponent does not enter a certain line and plays solidly, you also need to have an alternative plan. In any case, let me tell you some of the virtues of gambits when we play with little time:

- Time pressure favours the attacker. With initiative and little time on the clock, the defender is more likely to panic.
- There is more room for error: it is more difficult to find the precise defence, and it often goes unnoticed.
- They are more fun games and reinforce your confidence in an active style.
- Any player's Elo rating is built on both what they do well and what they do poorly: successes add up and mistakes subtract. This means that even if your overall Elo rating is 1800, you do not necessarily defend and attack at an equivalent level. It is very likely that your 'offensive Elo' is around 1850 and your 'defensive Elo' is closer to 1750. This imbalance between attack and defence — bearing in mind that defending is usually more difficult than attacking in chess — is even more pronounced in fast-paced games.

## Risks and lessons for club players

There is something you need to be clear about, although you probably already know it: all gambits, absolutely all of them, involve risk. If you sacrifice without compensation, you can go down the drain when your opponent defends with common sense. So let me give you some practical advice:

- **Do not rely solely on the element of surprise:** just because a gambit is working for you in your games in bed before you fall asleep while playing Lichess does not mean it will work in a serious tournament. Learn the underlying ideas. And above all, pay special attention to those games in which your opponents have managed to neutralise your ideas.

- **Study the basic refutations:** many gambits have known antidotes. Before incorporating them into your repertoire, make sure there is no simple response that nullifies them. And if there is, be prepared. You must also be ready for natural moves that, while not incisive, seek to avoid the lines you have studied for the gambit. For example, in the Volga (Benko) Gambit, after the moves 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5, the most common response by a margin—that is, statistically played much more than all other options combined—is for White to capture the b-pawn. However, the move 4. Nd2, declining the gambit, is a frequent recourse among those who play 1.d4 and do not want to study the Volga. You must also be prepared against these types of natural and ‘unincisive’ moves.
- **Choose gambits that are appropriate for your level:** if you are a player below 1600, adding a little tactical firepower can be a good idea. But as you move up in level, your opponents know more about chess and their knowledge of prophylactic play is more precise. Therefore, in those cases, rely on proven gambits if you want to play aggressively (such as the Morra Gambit against the Sicilian, for example). Avoid those that are pure tricks and crude traps, because your opponents will not fall for them.

As you can see, gambits are a good resource if you use them wisely. You can try them out and experiment first in friendly blitz games, study the critical lines and combine them with solid openings. This combination will allow you to enjoy yourself and improve.

## Gambit catalogue according to your level of play

Remember: you are not obliged to play gambits, but if you decide to do so, there are several recommendations I can give you to prevent you from getting into trouble prematurely. In this section, I want to share my point of view on which gambits may be suitable for you based on their complexity and your level of play. I will also mention some that I do not recommend so much but that you have probably seen in the 'info-intoxication' of the internet. Let's get started...

Gambits to have fun with that you should play very rarely in your life (they are so bad that it doesn't matter what your level of play is):

- The **Schilling-Kostić Gambit**.

This gambit occurs in the Italian opening after the moves 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nd4!?



Black's idea is very simple: to tempt White to capture on e5, which allows the tactical trap ...Qg5 with threats to enter g2 and recover the pawn, and even to checkmate if White stubbornly captures on f7 with the knight (followed by ...Qxg2 and ...Qxe4 then mate with ...Nf3). The trick sometimes works on beginners. The problem is that if White does not fall into the trap, Black is left in a very bad position. A quiet move such as 0-0, c3, or simply capturing on d4 leaves Black with poor development and a weak centre. In fact, in many cases Black is lost after a couple of moves if the opponent knows what to do. Use it only sporadically against weak opponents.

### - The **Elephant Gambit**.

It arises after the moves: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d5!?



Black gives up a central pawn in search of quick counterplay. The problem is that, objectively, it is a bad opening. After 3.exd5!? (also 3.Ne5!) e4, almost any solid response by White leaves Black in trouble. For example, 4.Qe2! is strong, because it threatens both the pawn and the pin, and after natural moves such as d3 & Nbd2, Black can be lost in a few moves. You are very likely to be punished if you play it.

Recommended gambits, but be careful, adapt them to your level:

Level below 1600.

### - The **Blackmar-Diemer Gambit**.

This arises after the moves 1.d4 d5 2.e4. White immediately sacrifices their central pawn with the idea of a quick Nf3, Nc3, Bc4, Qd2 and, often, long castling, launching a direct attack on the black king. It is a very attractive gambit because it can appear in various move sequences (even leading to defences such as the French Defence or the Caro-Kann Defence). At beginner level, it is extremely dangerous: White's quick initiative is often fatal against unprepared opponents. Although there are solid defences at master level, below 1600 Elo it is one of the most effective systems you can play. It arises easily, the attacking ideas are clear, and Black often makes mistakes very quickly.



- The **Danish Gambit**.

It appears after the moves 1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.c3.



White offers up to two pawns to accelerate their development with Bc4, Qb3, 0-0-0 and a brutal attack on the kingside. This gambit is ideal for beginner players because it fulfils two perfect requirements: it is easy to achieve (almost always against 1... e5) and the compensation in development and attack is enormous if Black does not know the precise theory. Although there are modern defences such as ...Be7 to try to neutralise it, even those lines leave Black in very uncomfortable positions if he does not know exactly what to do. It has been played at a high level by players such as Firouzja and Nakamura with excellent results. Ideal for players below 1600.

Level 1600-1900.

- The **Smith-Morra Gambit**.

It appears against the Sicilian Defence, after the moves 1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3.



In exchange for a simple pawn, you get immediate development and open files for attack. It is a great choice for blitz and rapid games, or to avoid the enormous Sicilian theory. Important: if Black knows solid plans (develop calmly; block the bishop on c4;

return material in time), your initiative may be diluted. The presence of tactics is high and requires calculation and good coordination of pieces.

#### -The **Urusov Gambit**.

It appears after 1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d4



This leads to very tactical Italian and Scotch Opening positions. Typical ideas: pressure on f7, Ng5 and fast play in the centre. Very effective in club-level play if your opponent does not master the critical defences. It also involves a high level of tactics.

#### - The **Vienna Gambit**.

This arises after 1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.f4!?.



Technically, it is not a pure 'gambit', because if Black accepts the pawn and tries to keep it, they usually end up worse off. In fact, many theorists consider it a 'false gambit', but that does not detract from its practical effectiveness. The strength of the Vienna lies in the fact that:

- It is easy to learn: the attacking ideas are clear, with Bc4, Qf3, 0-0 and pressure on f7.
- It works very well against unprepared opponents: even the strongest players can suffer if they are unfamiliar with its nuances.

- It gives you an immediate initiative: Black often fails to equalise and faces a difficult defence.
- It is ideal for those who do not want to delve into the vast theory of the Spanish or the Italian Opening, and are looking for an aggressive direct alternative. At an Elo level of 1600-1800, you can win many games quickly if your opponent 'overplays' and accepts the pawn without knowing the critical lines. Even at master level, there are examples of good games with the Vienna Defence. Of course, against very solid opponents, the practical advantage diminishes, but it remains an excellent weapon for rapid and blitz games. It has been played at a high level by many current elite players such as Sevan, Nakamura, Shirov and, occasionally, Carlsen himself.

- The **Wing Gambit**.

This is played against the Sicilian Defence: 1.e4 c5 2.b4!?



On the second move, White offers the b4-pawn to open up lines on the queen's flank. It is a risky idea, and I suppose that objectively it is not correct; I have only played it in one official game and it went well for me, but you shouldn't rely on that. The logic behind it is that if Black accepts the pawn, you can activate your pieces with a3, Nc3, Rb1 and attack along the open files.

The advantages are obvious; if your opponent is not prepared, and they usually aren't because almost no one plays this way, they may be psychologically affected early on and suffer some discomfort when developing. But the problem is that if Black knows the antidote (...cxb4...d5, followed by simply developing moves), you may end up objectively worse. In 1985, International Master Jack Peters beat International Master Kamran Shirazi in just five moves with this antidote. Although it is also true that the gambiteer had to contribute with a blunder.

My recommendation is that you only use it in rapid or blitz games, but in serious games it will require a lot of study and, even then, you will not always get compensation.

Level above 1900.

- The **Volga-Benko Gambit**.

This appears after the moves 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5!?



Black offers a pawn on the queen's flank with the idea of obtaining long-term compensation by pressing on the a- and b-files, as well as achieving very active development of the pieces. It is a very interesting gambit strategically, but the problem is that at lower levels the probability of actually getting into the gambit is low. Often your opponent will avoid the sacrifice with quiet lines such as 4.Qc2 or 4.Nf3, and then you will be playing a kind of Benoni Defence (which you would also have to know how to play) without the typical compensation of the Benko. Furthermore, even if you manage to sacrifice the pawn, understanding and applying the strategic plans (rooks on open files, long-term pressure, knight manoeuvres, sacrifices on e4, understanding which endgames are favourable) requires a lot of practice and positional knowledge. Suitable for experienced players, I do not recommend it if you are a player below 1900 or 2000.

- The **Blumenfeld Countergambit**.

Although it was created in the 1920s by Benjamin Blumenfeld, it rose to prominence with Alekhine's games. You can find it after different transpositions, depending on how White plays.



The Blumenfeld Countergambit is a very powerful weapon to play with Black against d4, Nf3 and c4, and to avoid the solid and dry play that White sometimes seeks. The idea is to give up a pawn in the centre or on the queenside to gain quick central control, active diagonals for the bishops and a central invasion. It is a gambit loaded with strategic ideas and with a certain amount of risk: if you do not know the middle-game plans well, you can end up with a horrible pawn structure. Another added problem is that you will have to memorise some critical lines that, moreover, do not work by patterns, so you should rely on your pure memory. Recommended for experienced players.

#### - The **King's Gambit**.

When it comes to openings with history, the King's Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.f4) takes the cake.



It emerged in the heyday of romantic chess, when players sought to attack with everything they had from the outset and win games in spectacular fashion.

The idea is very simple at first, although not so much when you get into the middle-game: you give up the f-pawn to open lines and go all-out against your opponent. Anderssen, Morphy and many others made it a symbol of creativity.

On platforms such as *Chess.com* and *Lichess*, we can find it relatively often; it is one of the most popular openings among intermediate and advanced players looking for dynamic games with chances of victory.

In my database, it is the fourth most popular choice for White; however, it is the opening that offers them the best results, with a 57.7% score according to my records. Incredible, right?

Nowadays, it is not very common in classic elite games, because Black can equalise by using a precise defence, but it continues to appear quite successfully in rapid and online games. Carlsen, Nepomniachtchi, and Nakamura have used it to surprise their opponents, and modern statistics give it a very decent score when played well.

Should you play it? It depends a lot on your level and style. For beginners, it is not an option I can recommend: the theory is extensive and a couple of inaccuracies are enough to leave you lost. There are no immediate 'magic tricks'; you need at least ten correct moves to reach the typical attacking positions.

For intermediate or advanced players who enjoy tactics and risk, the King's Gambit is another story. Studying variations such as the Muzio Gambit or plans with long castling can give you memorable games and a huge surprise factor. Its great virtue is that it creates clear imbalances: initiative in exchange for material. Its weakness is that it requires precision and courage.

As I mentioned at the beginning, there are a huge number of gambits in chess. The above selection is only intended to be a small classification to give you some quick ideas about why you should or should not play certain gambits. You don't have to play gambits, nor do you have to play the ones I recommend. In the classification, I have omitted very correct gambits in which it is very easy to equalise, such as the Queen's Gambit or the Portuguese Gambit of the Scandinavian Defence

## **G. SECONDARY OPENINGS: THE SIDE PATHS**

"If you hear a voice within you saying 'you cannot paint',  
then paint no matter what,  
and the voice will be silenced."

*Vincent van Gogh*

Secondary openings are those that are not common among professional chess players, but which can be perfectly valid at certain levels and in certain contexts. These openings are often less explored in terms of theory, which can lead to strategic surprises and surprises of all kinds. They are characterised by deviating from the main lines early on, avoiding the most well-trodden paths.

Unlike the more popular openings, secondary openings are often selected by players who seek to take the game to less well-known positions in order to escape dense theory and prepare lines in which their opponent is presumably less prepared. In chess, we always consider, although this is not always true, that players are better prepared against the main lines than against the secondary ones. A player who has a thorough knowledge of a secondary opening can find opportunities against a player who feels uncomfortable outside the most familiar patterns.

Some classic examples of secondary openings are the Queen's Gambit, the Bird's Opening and the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit, and, as always, the list is not exhaustive, as there are hundreds of secondary lines. Although these openings are not regularly seen in high-level tournaments, creative professional players and, of course, club players can find fertile ground in them to express their personal style and try to cause problems for their opponent.

In modern chess, secondary openings are especially useful for players looking to stray from the beaten path. One of the biggest advantages is that your opponent may not be familiar with the details or subtleties of that opening, giving you a psychological edge. In an era where theoretical preparation is becoming increasingly scientific, deviating from the script with an unexpected opening can be an effective strategy. This is especially true at the elite level.

For example, players such as Bent Larsen and Michael Adams became known for employing secondary openings with great success, surprising their opponents and obtaining dynamic positions from the outset. Larsen, in particular, was a staunch advocate of the Bird Opening (1.f4), which is rare among the elite but capable of generating interesting and asymmetrical positions. In the more than fifty games in which he used it, it yielded excellent results.

Another interesting example is the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit (1.d4 d5 2.e4). This gambit is rarely used in high-level tournaments, but it has many followers among club players, thanks to its aggressive approach and its ability to generate complex positions where initiative and tricks are key. In fact, if you play 1.e4, you can use it by transposition against the Scandinavian Defence: 1.e4 d5 2.d4!

Here is a nice example of dynamic play in the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit between two legends of international chess.

### **Velimirovic, Dragoljub (2540) - Bellón López, Juan Manuel (2370)**

*Metz Open, 1988*

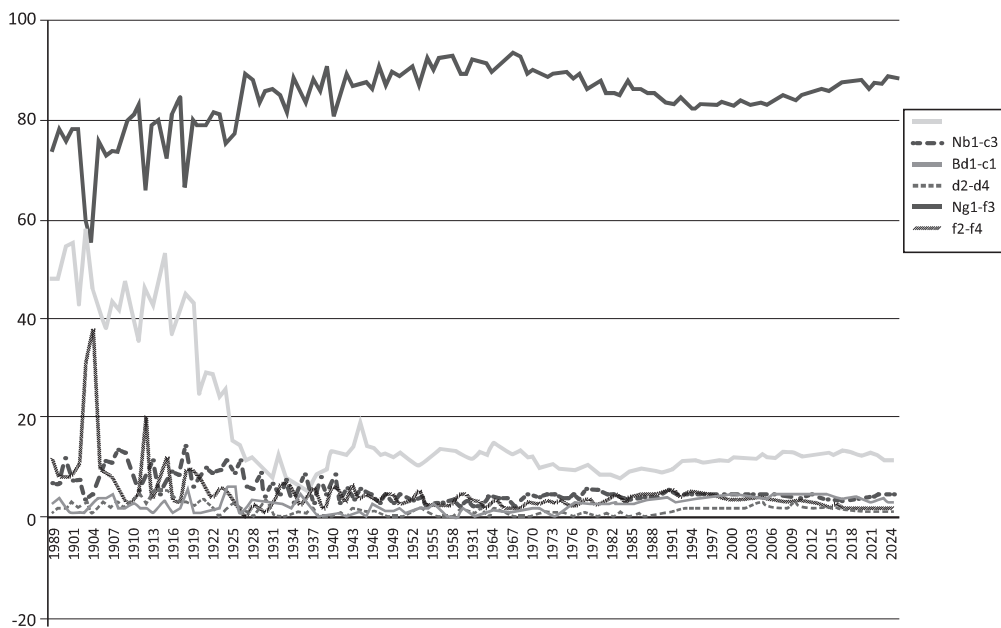
**1.e4 d5 2.d4 dxe4 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.f3 exf3 5.Nxf3 Bg4 6.h3 Bxf3 7.Qxf3 c6 8.Bf4 e6 9.0–0 Bb4 10.Bd2 Nbd7 11.Bd3 Nb6 12.Qg3 Qe7 13.Rf1 Rg8 14.Rxf6!** After this move, White gains a strong initiative.

**14...Bxc3 15.Bxc3 Qxf6 16.d5 Qe7?** 16...Qh6 was necessary.

**17.d6 Qd7 18.Bxh7 0–0–0 19.Bxg8 Rxg8 20.Bd4 Kb8 21.h4 Nd5 22.h5 g5 23.Kb1 f6 24.c4 Qh7+ 25.Kc1 Nf4 26.Qe3 b6 27.Bxf6+– Qf5 28.Be7 e5 29.d7 Ne6 30.Qf3 Qxf3 31.gxf3 Kc7 32.d8Q+ Nxd8 33.Bxd8+ 1–0**

Historically, secondary openings have reflected the chess and cultural context of their time. During the 19th century, when players favoured romantic openings with early and aggressive sacrifices, many of the openings that we now consider secondary were actually very popular. We could say that there are secondary lines in the 21st century that were main lines in the 19th century. For example, the King's Gambit and other openings involving aggressive gambits dominated the cafés of Paris, London, and Vienna. However, with the arrival of positional masters such as Wilhelm Steinitz and Siegbert Tarrasch, solid and more structured openings – such as the Caro-Kann Defence or the Reti System – began to gain ground, relegating more aggressive or less orthodox openings to the background.

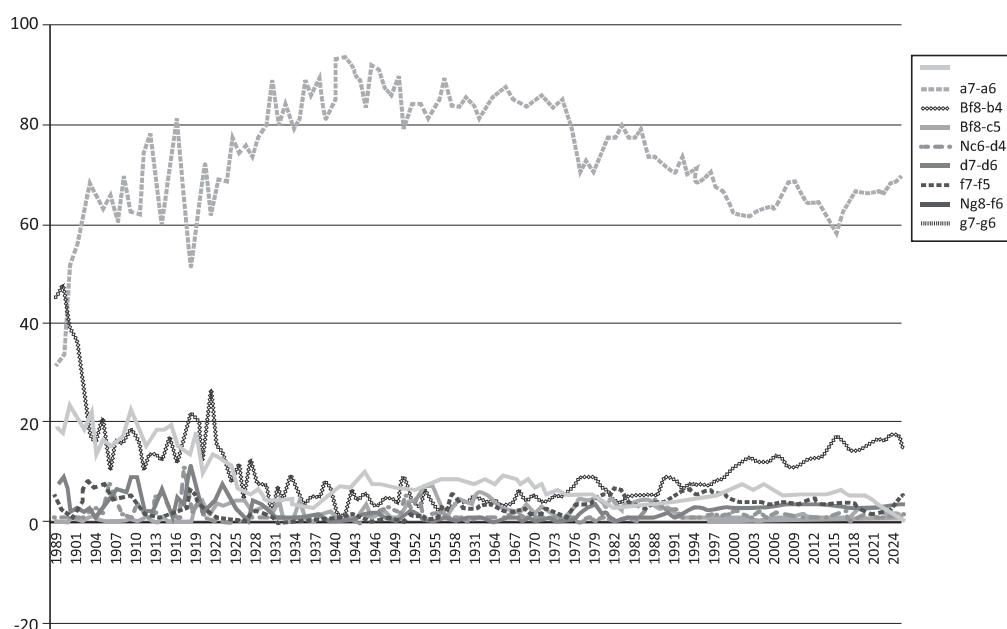
In the 20th century, with the rise of positional chess and the great importance of opening theory, players began to gravitate towards lines that offered more security and, after years of analysis and reference games, were considered more reliable. This, however, did not mean the disappearance of secondary openings, but rather their specialisation in certain contexts or for players seeking surprises. Take a look at the following graph:



The graph shows the historical evolution of the popularity of various opening moves from the late 19th century to the present day, starting with 1.e4 e5. In other words, it statistically interprets what is the second most common move for White in that position. As you can see, it is clear that 1.Nf3 (top line, with fluctuations until

approximately 1930) has dominated the scene for more than a century, remaining stable at over 70% of games. In contrast, the move 2.f4 — characteristic of the King's Gambit (represented by the line that reached almost 40% around 1904) — was somewhat relevant in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but has since suffered a steady decline.

From the 1920s onwards, the King's Gambit began to be seen as a riskier and less solid option against precise defences, causing its use to decline dramatically. While at the end of the 19th century it was a common choice among romantic and offensive players, in the modern era it has been relegated to a secondary opening role, used mainly as a surprise weapon or in rapid and blitz games, where exhaustive theoretical preparation matters less than immediate initiative, as we will see later. The graph thus reflects the change in mentality in competitive chess: from a romantic and direct approach to a more positional and solid one. But above all, what I find really relevant is that you understand that how secondary or primary a line is, is completely relative. I'll explain this with a new graph.



In this graph, you can see (look for the line at the bottom right that rises above the others) how the move 3...Nf6 (Berlin Defence) went from being a marginal choice for much of the 20th century to experiencing remarkable growth since 2000. Historically, the option 3...a6 (Morpho Defence in the Spanish Opening) had clearly dominated the preference of elite players, reaching figures close to or above 80% for many

decades. This preference was also evident among amateur players. Meanwhile, the Berlin Defence remained at low levels, used sporadically by specialists or as an occasional surprise, with a popularity close to that of very marginal lines today such as the Schliemann Variation (3...f5).

The turning point came after the 2000 World Championship, when Vladimir Kramnik used this weapon against Garry Kasparov with enormous success. Since then, the popularity of 3...Nf6 has risen steadily, becoming the second most popular choice against 3.Bb5, although without unseating the solid and traditional 3...a6. This example shows us how an opening considered 'secondary' for a whole century can rise to the elite thanks to concrete results at the highest level and the support of in-depth analysis with engines.

Yes, you read that right, engines. We are going to talk about the relationship between secondary openings and analysis engines such as *AlphaZero* and *Stockfish*.

## Analysis engines and secondary openings

In the world of analysis engines, trends work differently because there is no sports psychology in artificial intelligence. Or, at least, not yet.

Modern chess engines, such as *AlphaZero* (I will focus on AlphaZero), learn openings in a purely mathematical way, without the psychological distractions that affect us humans. During its training, AlphaZero started by playing randomly, but very soon identified the most solid opening moves. After just a few tens of thousands of self-learning games, it discovered that 1.e4 and 1.d4 offered an advantage and adopted them almost exclusively in a short period of time. Similarly, it understood that after 1.e4 e5, the move 2.Nf3 is superior to 2.d4, quickly discarding the latter.

In just 1% of its training process, *AlphaZero* had already restricted its choices to the most classic options, focusing its attention on a small group of main moves and abandoning the rest. This behaviour shows us that, contrary to what many players believe, the strength of an opening does not depend on its surprise value, but on its objective solidity. However, this is in a very specific context: chess without serious mistakes and with virtually no inaccuracies.

Unlike humans, engines do not play with their opponent or the clock in mind. They evaluate each position dispassionately and do not stop to consider whether, in the 21st century, they will surprise their opponent by playing the King's Gambit or any other more or less bizarre alternative. Human chess is, to a large extent, a psychological battlefield: we try to deceive, surprise, or lead our opponent into uncomfortable territory. Engines, on the other hand, do not feel this need.