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Other Open Games

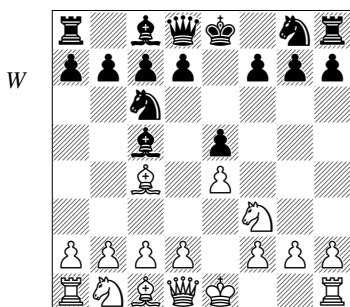
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8 Giuoco Pianissimo

In this chapter, we continue our investigation of quiet 3 ♘c4 lines, but now with the black bishop not on e7 but on the more active c5-square. Again, you will notice that there is little, if any, need for rote learning. Rather than concrete variations, you should primarily be looking for patterns, manoeuvres and ideas.

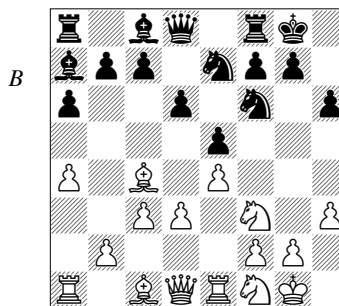
1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♘c4 ♘c5 (D)



Chess nomenclature isn't very consistent. In some languages 3 ♘c4 is said to introduce the 'Italian Game' (and we shall follow this convention) but sometimes the opening is considered to be nameless until Black's reply (with 3... ♘c5 the Giuoco Piano and 3... ♗f6 the Two Knights Defence).

By putting the bishop on c5, Black sensibly prevents any immediate ♗g5 lines while preparing kingside castling. However, the bishop development threatens nothing and the bishop is somewhat exposed. There are also lines involving ♘g5 and threats of ♗d5 that need to be accurately met (quite often with a preventive ...h6).

In this chapter, we shall deal with White's quieter lines where he plays d3 rather than d4, corresponding to the quiet Two Knights lines in the preceding chapter. The more direct lines with d4 are the subject of Chapter 9. Compared to the lines in Chapter 7, White has some extra freedom and may choose between 4 c3, 4 d3 and 4 0-0 while heading for a flexible set-up with possibilities to play in the centre and on either wing. Mostly the players will end up with a position like this:



However, just as interesting as this exact position, is the number of possible 'adjustments' for both sides; e.g.:

- Each of the a-pawns may or may not advance.
- Each of the h-pawns may or may not advance.
- Both players may delay castling (or not).
- Both the active bishops may retreat early or stay at c4/c5 for some time.
- Both players may at various points offer an exchange of bishops with ♘e3/... ♘e6.
- The rooks may go to the e-file immediately or stay on the f-file for some time.
- There are various quiet knight manoeuvres available for both sides.

In short, there are hundreds of permutations of this type of position that are just as playable for both sides but still subtly different. This makes the position relatively resistant to computer analysis, which most players consider an advantage. But even more importantly, it makes pure memorization of computer analysis almost impossible, which is a huge advantage if you are trying to win against a highly skilled opponent.

Memorable Game 8

Jolly – Mazé

French Ch, Agen 2017

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♘c4 ♗f6

This move-order has the advantage of attacking e4 and thus limiting White's options.

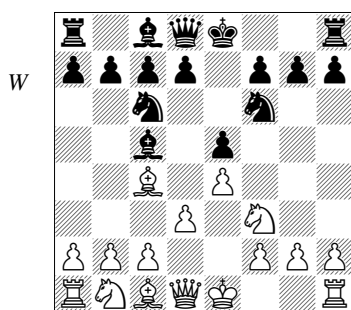
Most importantly, Black can now avoid Bird's line 3...♗c5 4 c3 ♘f6 5 b4, which is discussed in 8C. The relatively few remaining independent options that 3...♗c5 offers White are dealt with in 8A.

4 d3

This quiet move characterizes this chapter and the previous one. We have already dealt with all the alternatives (including the controversial 4 ♘g5) in Chapters 1-6.

4...♗c5 (D)

During 2017 this bishop development was clearly more popular than 4...♗e7 in top elite games. This may be just fashion, but the attraction of the more active bishop development is so obvious that it's really the alternatives that need justification.



5 0-0

After 5 c3, Black should probably play 5...a6 (rather than 5...d6), in order to meet 6 b4 with 6...♗a7. See Line 8D for games where White delays or even omits kingside castling.

5...d6

5...a6, intending 6 c3 0-0 7 a4 d5!?, is an independent idea which you may add to your repertoire in due time. In this chapter I'll focus on ...d6 set-ups.

6 a4

This has recently been played by So and Kariakin. More common is 6 c3, which usually transposes after 6...a6 7 a4.

6...a6

If there is any problem with White's early a4, it could be 6...a5!?, which has recently been played by Harikrishna and others. For an explanation, see the comment to Black's next move.

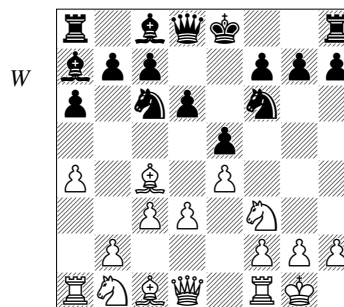
7 c3

For analysis of the entertaining lines that can arise after 7 ♗g5 h6 8 ♗h4 g5, see Line 8B.

7...♗a7

This is clearly the most popular move and is my recommendation. Black will probably have to retreat his bishop quite soon anyway and it's nice to be free how to react to d3-d4. Anyway, the theory of this opening is in a state of flux, and currently the main move seems to be 7...h6!?, when after 8 ♖e1 0-0 9 h3 both Svidler and Grishchuk have played 9...a5!? in important games, reaching a position that has occurred several times with Black to move. I cannot fully explain the strength of this paradoxical tempo-loss, but 9...a5 is at the top of Stockfish's ranking at 30 ply search depth.

We now return to 7...♗a7 (D):



8 h3?!

When I was quite young I learned that in the Giuoco Pianissimo the move h3 or ...h6 was an invitation to attack if your opponent had castled and you hadn't, as you then could throw your g-pawn forward and use the h-pawn to open lines on the kingside. Of course, there are complicating factors. Even in the quiet Giuoco Piano lines, it's often possible to meet a wing attack with central counterplay. What we shall see in this game is a complicated struggle where it's not at all clear that Black's kingside attack is the most important factor. Nevertheless, I believe that 8 ♖e1 h6 9 ♘a3 (or 9 ♘bd2) is a better try for White to get a small plus from the opening.

8...h6!

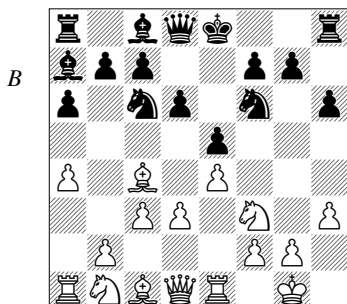
This is generally useful and doesn't oblige Black to go all-in for the kill.

9 ♖e1

This is a standard move in the Pianissimo lines, among other things making room on f1 for a knight. Also after 9 ♘bd2, Black has promising play after 9...g5 (although 9...0-0 is

safer). White can try to slow the attack with 10 ♖h2 but 10 d4 is also possible. See Line 8G (note 'c2' to White's 8th move) for details. As a matter of fact, only 9 b4! seems active enough to make 9...g5 unattractive (and 9...0-0 the sensible reaction).

We now return to 9 ♖e1 (D):



The position may seem calm but Black has an opportunity to seize the initiative.

9...g5!?

This is my recommendation even if it's far from clear that Black gets an advantage. It should be noted that Kariakin-Mamedyarov, Paris rapid 2017 went 9...0-0 and after 10 ♖bd2 ♖e8 11 b4 ♖e6 12 ♖xe6 ♖xe6 13 ♖c2 ♖d7 14 ♖f1 ♖e7 15 ♖g3 ♖g6 16 c4 White had a small plus.

10 ♖h2

It seems natural to slow down ...g4 a little. 10 ♖e3 ♖xe3 11 fxe3 g4 12 hxg4 ♖xg4 13 ♖bd2 ♖g8 wasn't quite clear in Da Matta-Proudian, Praia do Morro 2017 but the position seems easier to handle for Black and after 14 ♖f1 ♖e7 15 ♖e1 ♖e6 16 ♖h4 ♖g4 17 ♖f5 ♖g5 Black indeed had the better prospects.

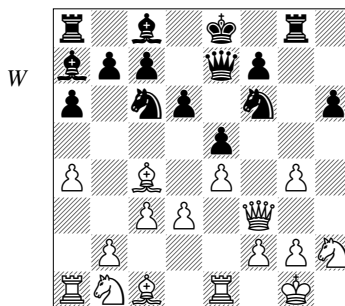
10...g4

Another idea is 10...♖g8 11 ♖e3 g4 and after 12 ♖xa7 ♖xa7 13 d4 g4 14 g3 ♖c6 15 ♖d2, in Kosteniuk-E.Pähtz, Erfurt blitz 2017 Black could have ensured a promising attack with 15...h5 (or with ...h5 on one of the next few moves).

11 hxg4 ♖g8 12 ♖f3

This seems better than 12 g5 hxg5 13 ♖e3, as in J.Hernandez Sanchez-Ossa, Bogota 2016, where Black's most precise continuation probably was 13...♖xe3 14 ♖xe3 g4 15 d4 ♖h5 16 ♖d2 ♖f4 with a very dangerous attack.

12...♖e7 (D)



With f7 protected, Black will win back his pawn with promising kingside play.

13 ♖e3 ♖xg4

Black should probably have exchanged on e3. The position is sharp, but not really of a forcing nature and over the next ten moves or so there are probably quite a few inaccuracies by both players but my general impression is that Black's position is easier to play as his attack is the more direct.

14 ♖xa7 ♖xa7 15 ♖d2 ♖xh2

15...h5 may be better.

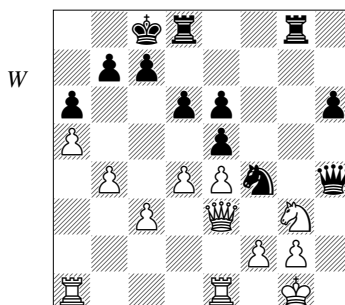
16 ♖xh2 ♖g4 17 ♖e3 ♖h4+ 18 ♖g1 ♖c6 19 ♖f1 ♖e6 20 b4 ♖e7 21 ♖xe6 fxe6 22 d4 ♖g6 23 ♖g3? 0-0-0?

This is premature. The immediate 23...♖f4, planning ...♖g5, is winning.

24 a5?

24 b5 a5 25 b6! is more challenging but 25...c6! 26 ♖ad1 h5! seems to eliminate any hopes White may have for a perpetual.

24...♖f4 (D)

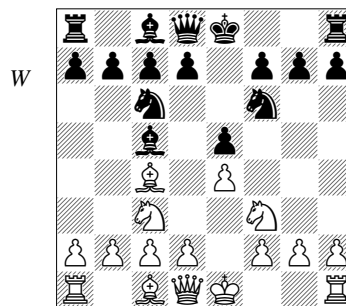


Black is winning.

25 dxe5 ♖g5 26 exd6 ♖dg8

Or 26...cxd6 27 ♖ad1 ♖dg8 28 ♖d3 (28 ♖a7 ♖h5 29 ♖a8+ ♖c7 30 ♖xg8 ♖h2+ 31 ♖f1 ♖xg2#) 28...♖h5 29 ♖xf4 ♖xf4 30 ♖xh5 ♖h4 31 ♖g3 ♖g4 32 ♖xd6 h5 →.

27 d7+ ♔d8 28 ♖a2
 28 ♕f1 ♜h5 29 ♞xf4 ♞xf4 30 ♜xh5 ♞f7
 –+.
 28...e5
 28...♜h5 29 ♞xf4 ♞xf4 –+.
 29 ♞f3 ♜xg3! 30 fxg3 ♜xg3 31 ♞d1 ♜h3+
 32 ♜h2
 32 ♕f1 ♞f4+ 33 ♕e2 ♞f2#.
 32...♜f2+ 0-1
 33 ♕g1 ♞h1+ 34 ♕xf2 ♞xg2#.



Chapter Guide

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♙c4 ♙c5 (4 c3 ♘f6 5 d3 a6 6 0-0 d6 7 a4)
 8A: (4 ♘c3) 83
 8B: 4 d3 ♘f6 5 0-0 d6 (6 a4) 85
 8C: (5 b4) 89
 8D: (5 d3 a6 6 ♙b3 d6 7 ♘bd2) 91
 8E: (7 b4) 92
 8F: 7 ♙b3 93
 8G: 7 a4 96

8A: 4 ♘c3 and Rare 4th Moves

(1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♙c4 ♙c5)
 4 ♘c3

This move is active and more pointed than in similar lines with Black's bishop on e7. It's sometimes called the Canal Variation but that name should probably be reserved for lines where White combines the knight development with ♙g5 (which we shall not allow). Alternatives are rare and not particularly scary:

a) 4 ♞e2 ♘f6 5 ♙xf7+?! has been known to be bad for White due to 5...♙xf7 6 ♞c4+ d5 7 ♞xc5 ♘xe4 at least since Albin-Schlechter, Vienna 1914.

b) 4 ♙b3 ♘f6 5 ♘xe5 ♞e7 6 ♘xc6 ♞xe4+ 7 ♞e2 ♞xe2+ 8 ♙xe2 dxc6 9 d3 0-0 = Firman-Laznička, Bundesliga 2007/8.

c) 4 d4 may be an invitation to the Max Lange Attack after 4...exd4 5 0-0 ♘f6 (probably 5...d6 is better) 6 e5, but my recommendation is 4...♙xd4, offering a transposition to Line 9B via 5 0-0 ♘f6. Instead 5 ♘xd4 ♘xd4 6 f4?! (6 0-0 ♘f6 is again Line 9B) 6...d5 7 exd5 ♞h4+! 8 g3 ♞h3 9 ♙f1 ♞f5 10 ♙d3 e4 11 ♙e2 ♘xe2 12 ♞xe2 ♘f6 ♞ was Fahrni-Spielmann, Baden 1914.

4...♘f6 (D)

White has reached a symmetrical position he shouldn't head for via the Four Knights (see Line 13A for the details on that move-order).

5 d3

Now Black must decide how to handle the ♙g5 option. Alternatively, White can try:

a) For 5 h3 d6 6 0-0 h6 7 d3 a6, see Line 8A2.

b) 5 a3 a6 6 d3 h6 transposes to note 'a' to White's 6th move.

c) 5 ♞e2 is harmless. One path to equality is 5...♘d4 6 ♘xd4 ♙xd4 7 0-0 d6 =.

d) 5 ♘d5 doesn't have much point, except perhaps that 5...♘xe4 6 ♞e2 ♘xf2?! may prove too naïve after 7 d4. A simpler solution is 5...d6 and normal development.

5...h6

Although this is mainly a useful defensive move, we shall see that it may also be part of some quite aggressive plans.

6 0-0

Or:

a) 6 a3 is relatively common but will usually transpose quickly after 6...a6. After 7 ♙e3 (for 7 0-0 d6, see note 'b' to White's 7th move below) 7...d6 8 ♙xc5 dxc5 9 h3 ♞d6!? 10 0-0 0-0 11 ♘e2 ♙e6 12 ♘d2 ♘h5!? 13 ♜b1 ♘f4 14 ♙xe6 fxe6 15 ♘c4 ♞e7 chances were equal in an interesting position in D.Ebeling-Halkias, Tromsø Olympiad 2014.

b) 6 ♙e3 ♙b6 7 ♘d5 d6 8 c3 0-0 9 b4 ♘xd5 10 ♙xd5 ♞f6 (10...♙e6 11 ♙xe6 fxe6 12 a4 ♙xe3 13 fxe3 ♘b8 14 0-0 ♘d7 15 a5 a6 16 ♞b3 ♞e7 17 d4 ± Ehlvest-Short, Novgorod 1995) 11 h3 ♘e7 12 ♙b3 ♙xe3 13 fxe3 ♞g6 14 ♞e2 a5 ♞.

c) 6 ♘d5 d6 7 c3 ♘xd5 8 ♙xd5 0-0 9 h3 ♙e6 10 ♙xe6 fxe6 is quite comfortable for Black. After 11 0-0 ♙b6 12 ♙e3 d5 13 exd5 exd5 14 d4 exd4 15 ♘xd4 ♘xd4 16 ♙xd4,