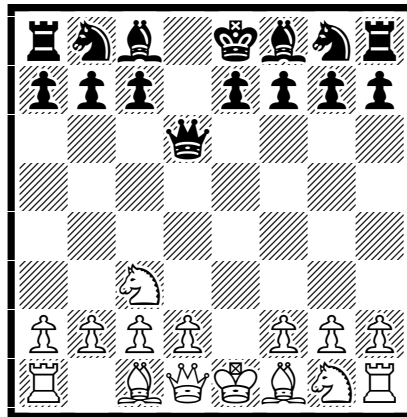


Mini-Lessons From Short Games Of 21st Century

By IM Nikolay Minev

Center Counter: The Retreat 3...Qd6 is Barely Alive



The attempt to revive the Center Counter Defense with the retreat 3...Qd6 seems to not fulfill expectations. The position which arises after 1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 is a relatively new continuation that is popular, but statistics show the results are no better – and probably even worse – for Black than the classical retreats 3...Qa5 or 3...Qd8. The games from recent practice below show that with 3...Qd6 Black has the same strategic problems as the other two continuations: an exposed Queen and the loss of tempi that follow.

B01 Richard Biolek – Vlastimil Nedela

Chehia (Team ch) 2005

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.Nf3 c6

This gives Black an opportunity to further retreat the Queen to c7. This defensive plan is also used in the classical variation 3...Qa5. See also the next two games.

5.Bc4 Nf6 6.O-O b5?!

An unnecessary weakness!

7.Bb3 Bg4

Consistent is 7...b4 and if 8.Ne2 Bg4 9.Ng3 h5!? 10.h3 h4, with unclear complications.

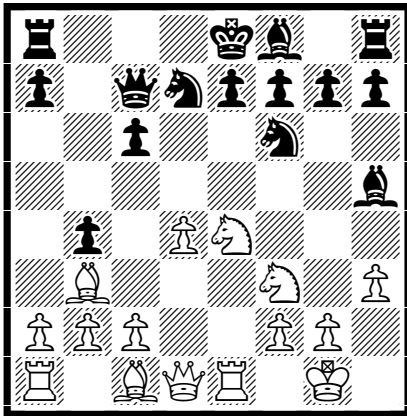
8.h3 Bh5 9.d4 Nbd7?!

Perhaps 9...e6 10.Re1 Be7 is better.

10.Re1 b4

Another loss of tempo, but 10...e6 is no better because of 11.d5!

11.Ne4 Qc7



12.d5!

If the opponent is behind in development and his King is still in the center, the basic strategic rule is: open the center!

12...cxd5

Black's last chance was 12...O-O-O.

13.Nxf6+ Nxf6 14.Ba4+!Kd8

There is no defense. If 14...Nd7 15.Qxd5 Bxf3 16.Qxf3 Rd8 17.Bf4 Qa5 18.b3 e6 19.Rad1 and White wins.

15.g4 Bg6 16.g5 e6 17.gxf6 gxf6 18.Qxd5+! 1-0

B01 B. Lengyel – B. Bednay
Budapest 2007

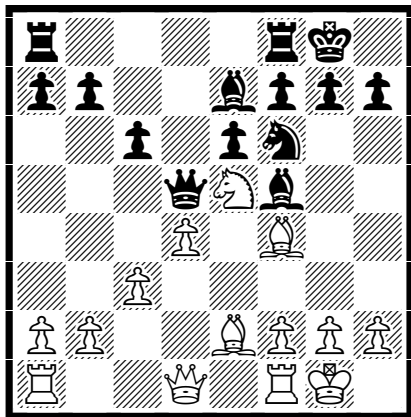
1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 Nf6 5.Nf3 c6 6.Ne5

An original plan to create immediate danger against Black's Queen.

6...Nbd7 7.Bf4 Nd5

If 7...Qb4 8.a3! and Black cannot play 8...Qxb2?? Because of 9.Na4, when the Queen is lost.

8.Nxd5 Qxd5 9.Nf3 Nf6 10.Be2 Bf5 11.c3 e6 12.O-O Be7 13.Ne5 O-O



A typical pattern for all variations of Center Counter – White has more space and stands slightly better.

14.Re1 Rfd8?!

This weakens the f7-square. Better was 14...Rad8.

15.Bc4 Qa5 16.Qf3 Bg6 17.h4 Bc2? 18.a4 Qb6? 19.a5 1-0

Because of 19...Qxb2 20.Ra2 or 19...Qc7 20.Nxf7.

B01 A. Olsson – B. Jaderberg
Sweden (Team ch) 2005

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 Nf6 5.Bc4 c6 6.Nge2!?

Maybe stronger than 6.Nf3, when Black uses the defensive plan with c7-c6.

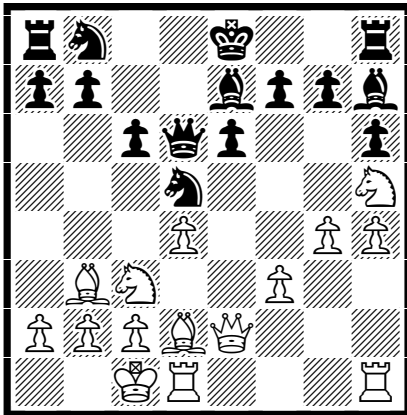
6...Bg4

In case of 6...e5 7.dxe5 Qxe5 8.Bf4 or 8.O-O Black is too far behind in development. Even though an immediate disaster is not visible, Black's chances are clearly worse.

7.f3 Bf5 8.Bf4 Qb4 9.Bb3 e6 10.g4 Bg6 11.h4 h6 12.Bd2 Qd6 13.Nf4 Bh7 14.Qe2 Be7 15.O-O-O Nd5

Black is already in big trouble. If 15...Nbd7 16.g5! followed eventually by g5-g6.

16.Nh5!

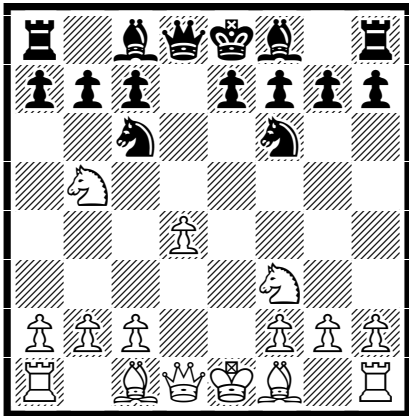


16...Nxc3 17.Bxc3 Bf6 18.f4 Bg6 19.Nxf6+ gxf6 20.f5 1-0

The next game shows what can happen to Black if the important square b5 is not protected.

B01 D. Bojkov – V.Panbukchian
Bulgaria (ch) Pleven 2005

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 Nf6 5.Nf3 Nc6? 6.Nb5 Qd8



7.d5! Nb4

If 7...Nxd5?? 8.Qxd5! Qxd5 9.Nxc7+.

8.c4 c6

This leads to disaster. However, it seems that already Black has no satisfactory continuation.

9.dxc6 Qa5 10.Bd2 Ne4 11.Bxb4 Qxb4+ 12.Nd2 Rb8 13.Nc7+ Kd8 14.Nd5 1-0

The defensive line used by Black most often in practice includes the protection of the b5-square with a7-a6. With this approach, Black has a relatively better result, which keeps the whole 3...Qd6 variation alive. But first, let's see the examples where the idea of a7-a6 finishes in disaster.

B01 D. Werner – R. Schildt
Berlin 2005

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 Nf6 5.Bc4 a6 6.Bb3

Also possible is 6.Nge2 and if 6...Qc6? 7.Bb3 Qxg2 8.Rg1 Qf3 9.Bf4 as in M. Perunovic – T. Gruskovnjak, Portoroz 2005. White has more than enough compensation for the pawn and won quickly.

6...Nc6 7.Nge2 Bg4 8.f3 Bf5 9.Bf4 Qd7 10.g4 Bg6 11.g5

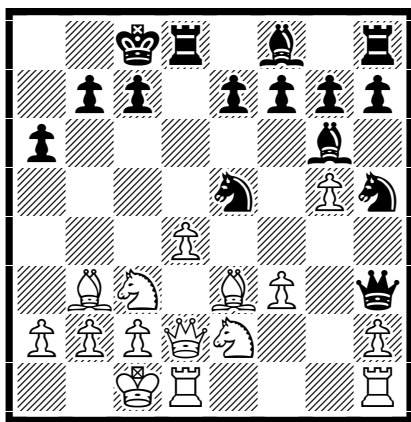
Stronger is 11.h4! – compare with Olsson – Jaderberg above.

11...Nh5 12.Be3 Qh3?!

12...e6!? intending Bb4 and O-O.

13.Qd2! O-O-O 14.O-O-O Ne5?

Threatening 15...Nxf3. This tempting action is a decisive mistake, because Black is several tempi behind in development. Necessary was 14...e6



15.Nd5! Nxf3 16.Qc3 Qd7??

A blunder in an already lost position.

17.Nb6+ 1-0

B01 T. Thorhallsson – V. Koskinen
Helsingor 2007

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 Nf6 5.Nf3 a6 6.Be2

A rarely used continuation in comparison with 6.Bc4.

6...Bg4?!

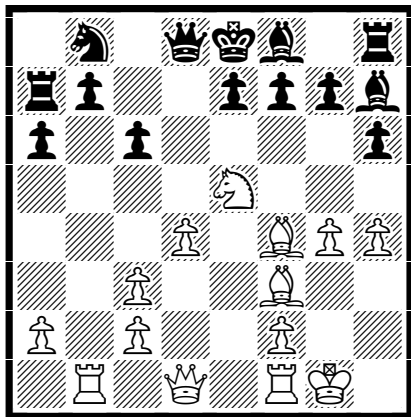
6...Bf5!? or 6...g6!?

7.h3 Bh5 8.g4 Bg6 9.Ne5 Nd5

If 9...Nbd7 10.Bf4!

10.Bf3 c6 11.h4! Nxc3 12.bxc3 h6 13.Rb1 Ra7 14.Bf4 Bh7 15.O-O Qd8

White is fully developed and has total domination. It is time for decisive action.



16.d5!

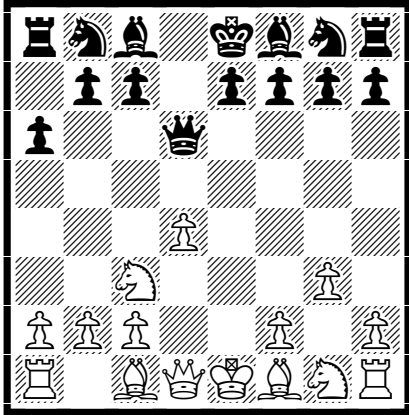
Another instantly winning continuation here is 16.Nxc6!!

16...f6 17.Nxc6! Nxc6 18.dxc6 Qxd1 19.Rfxd1 1-0

For if 19...bxc6 20.Bxc6+ Kf7 21.Bb8 or 19...b5 20.c7.

B01 R. Hungaski – A. Aberbach
Villa Ballester 2005

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 a6 5.g3



This is a positional continuation, and is the most popular against Black's a7-a6 but, as we shall see later, it is probably not more successful than the variations with Bc4.

6...Nf6 6.Bg2 e5?!

6...g6!? or 6...Nc6!?

7.dxe5 Qxe5+ 8.Nge2 Bb4

8...Bc5!?

9.O-O Nc6 10.Bf4 Qe7 11.Bg5!

The threat is 12.Nd5. White stands clearly better.

11...Bg4

No better is 11...Bxc3 12.Nxc3 Be6 13.Ne4.

12.Bxf6 Qxf6 13.Nd5 Qd6 14.Nxb4 Qxb4

After 14...Qxd1 15.Bxc6+! White wins a piece.

15.Bxc6+ bxc6 16.Qd4 Rb8?

After the correct reply 16...Qxd4 17.Nxd4 Bd7 18.Rfe1+ White has a practically winning position.

17.Qxg7 1-0

B01 Michele Godena – Meng-Kong Wong

Turin (ol) 2006

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 Nf6 5.Nf3 a6 6.g3 b5 7.Bg2 Bb7 8.O-O e6 9.Ne5 Bxg2 10.Kxg2 c6 11.Qf3! Qxd4

Almost forced. If 11...Be7 12.Bf4!

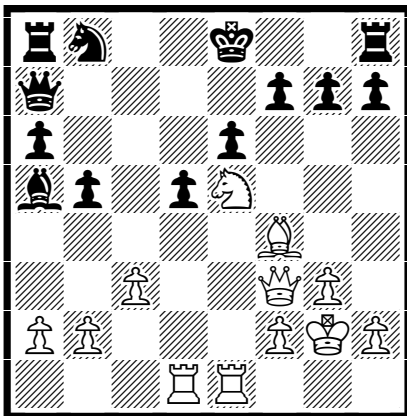
12.Bf4!

Against 12.Nxc6 Black has a good defense in 12...Qg4!

12...Nd5 13.Rad1 Qa7

If 13...Qb6 14.Nxf7!

14.Nxd5 cxd5 15.Rfe1 Bb4 16.c3 Ba5



17.Nxf7! Qxf7

Or 17...O-O 18.Ng5.

18.Qxd5 O-O 19.Qxa8 Bb6 20.Qf3 1-0

B01 F. Kwiatkowski – J. Snowden

Hastings (Masters) 2006/7

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 Nf6 5.Nf3 a6 6.g3 Bg4 7.h3 Bxf3 8.Qxf3 Nc6
9.Be3 e6 10.O-O-O O-O-O 11.Bg2 Qb4 12.Rd3!

White is preparing a direct attack on the Queenside, and Black does not have any adequate defense against the plan.

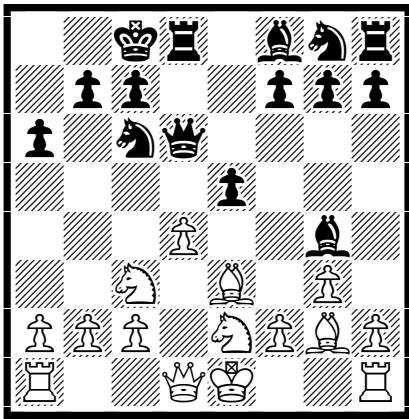
12...Qa5 13.a3 Rd7 14.Re1 Ne8? 15.Bd2 Qb6 16.d5 Nd4 17.Qf4 c5 18.dxc6 Nxc6
19.Rxd7 Kxd7 20.Qxf7+ 1-0

Naturally, there exist some sporadic successes for Black that keep the variation alive. It is hoped that new ideas can be found for Black in these rare examples. Below are presented two such games, which attracted my attention.

B01 Darren McCabe - Mikko Kivisto

Kemer 2007

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 a6 5.g3 Nc6 6.Nge2 Bg4 7.Bg2 O-O-O 8.Be3
e5!?



Notice that Black uses this idea for counter play without to losing a tempo by Nf6.
Compare with Hungaski – Aberbach above!

9.dxe5

9.d5!?

9...Qxe5 10.Qc1 Bb4 11.O-O Nf6

It seems that Black has solved all his opening problems.

12.a3 Bxc3 13.Nxc3 Rhe8 14.Bf4?

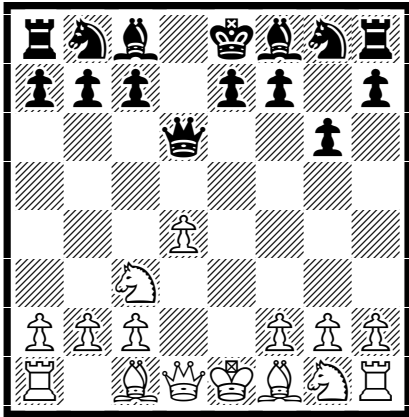
14.h3!?

14...Qh5 15.Be3 Ne5 16.f4 Nf3+ 17.Bxf3 Bxf3 18.h4 Bc6 19.a4 Qg4 20.Kh2 Bd7 0-1

B01 A. Avdic – B. Kurajica

Bosnia and Herzegovina (Team ch) 2005

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qd6 4.d4 g6!?



Rare, but probably the most interesting idea for Black.

5.Nf3 Bg7 6.g3 Bf5 7.Bg2 Qa6!?

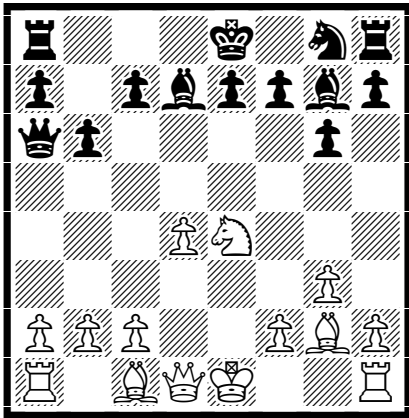
7...Nd7!?

8.Ne5

8.Bf4!?

8...Nd7 9.Nxd7 Bxd7 10.Ne4 b6!?

A controversial decision. Instead 10...Bc6 is not only playable, but looks even better for Black. For example, 11.Nc5 Qb6 12.O-O O-O-O 13.c3 e5 etc.



11.e3

Critical is 11.Nc5 (11.Nf6+? Nxf6 12.Bxa8 c6 or 11.Nd6+?! cxd6 12.Bxa8 d5!) bxc5 12.Bxa8 cxd4 13.Bg2 e5. Black has compensation for the exchange, but the position is unclear.

11...Rc8 12.a4 Nf6 13.Nxf6+ Bxf6 14.Bh6 c5 15.d5 Qc4 16.Qe2??

A decisive blunder in a slightly better position for Black.

16...Bxc3+ 0-1