Understanding the QGA
A Black Repertoire with 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4

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  - 10 Days (www.Chessmix.com)
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Is the King’s Indian better than the Nimzo? And what about the Benko?! My mailbox is full with such questions and I always try to explain that the choice of opening repertoire should depend on the player’s tastes and needs. For instance, I think that 1.Nf3 would be a bad move for a beginner. Open games with empty or mobile pawn centres put the accent on piece play. They demand detailed calculation and help refining endgame technique.

The QGA is in the same category. It is an excellent opening if you want to learn to play chess better. The overwhelming majority of games is decided in deep middlegame or endgame. The complexity of theory is not even close to mammoth openings as the KID or the Grünfeld where one need several volumes – and the corresponding memory!

At the same time, modern QGA is positionally sound and reliable opening, played by world champions Kasparov, Karpov, Anand, Topalov. Its only drawback is that White could choose ultra solid drawing lines.

I solved this problem by inviting GM Delchev to share his personal repertoire which includes the sharp and challenging Alekhine Variation based on ...Bg4. That allowed us to present a multifaceted approach with a wide choice for Black ranging from the blunt drawish line 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.Nf3 a6!? 4.e3 b5 to the pawn sacrifice 3...Qf6 4.e3 g4 – without ...a6!

It so happens that I have been studying the QGA all my life. That made our collaboration with Delchev an easy task and resulted in our third mutual work after The Most Flexible Sicilian and The Safest Sicilian.

*Semko Semko*

*August 2015*
In 2009 during a teamwork with GM Artur Kogan, he briefly showed me the line 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.Nf3 f6 4.e3 g4, together with his analysed games. I found it promising and attempted to build up a complete repertoire. It turned out, however, that I faced a serious problem as early as on move 6. After 5.Bxc4 e6 6.c3!,

White was threatening to capture our bishop with h3, g4, e5. Artur claimed that best was 6...Nd7, but then 7.0-0! Bd6 8.h3 Bh5 9.e4 e5 10.g4! was well known and definitely unpleasant. I tried to improve with 9...Bxf3 against Swiercz, but got an extremely murky position. It became clear that it was a dead end. 6...a6 7.h3 h5 8.g4 g6 9.e5 was not appealing either.

Thus by the natural method of exclusion I reached to the idea of 6...Nc6. I found in the database a game of Spassky of 1961 where he met the critical 7.b5 by the weak 7...b4?!.

Only a quarter of century later did Black come with an improvement:

Kinsman-Brynell, 1988, saw 7.b5 d6 8.e4 d7 9.e3 0-0 10.0-0 b6 11.e2 f5 and Gausel-Brynell, 1999, introduced the pawn sacrifice 7.h3 h5 8.b5 d6 9.a4 xf3 10.gxf3 0-0. On the ground of these games, I developed the main directions and managed to build a detailed repertoire. My pupils were satisfied with the new weapon and soon I also had a chance to test it against GM Edouard (an ardent QGA protagonist himself!) – see the annotated game 34 Edouard-Delchev, Linares 2013.

My compensation for the pawn is obvious and it grew up in a rout: 18...xf4 19.c3 h3+ 20.g2 c4 21.f4 g5 22.d1 xb2+ 23.xb2 exe2+ 24.xh3 xc3 25.g4 xe3+ 26.g3 xf4 27.xe3 xh2+
28. \texttt{Qg4} h5+ 29. \texttt{Qf3} \texttt{Kh3}+ 0-1
The variation got its first taste of gunpowder and the ball was in White’s court (it is still there!).

The Classical System with 4...e6 has never really attracted me due to White’s possibility to play with a draw in the pocket in the Exchange Variation 7.dxc5. Here is what happened a couple of days ago in Kavala Open, August 9th 2015:

Rychagov 2552-Delchev 2604
1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.\texttt{f3} \texttt{f6} 4.e3 e6 5.\texttt{xc4} c5 6.0-0 a6 7.dxc5 \texttt{xc5} 8.\texttt{Qxd8}+ \texttt{Kxd8} 9.\texttt{Be2} draw.

When playing opens against 100-150 Elo points lower rated opponents, such a line should be out of question. On the other hand, a solid endgame without risk could be a fair choice against a decent player.

I would not like to impose my tastes so I provide the following alternative repertoires:

The first part of the book is devoted on White’s most challenging option against the QGA – \textbf{3.e4}. You should learn either:

1. Chapter 1, which deals with 3... \texttt{c6} 4.\texttt{f3} \texttt{g4}, or
2. Chapter 2, which is my recommendation. It covers 3...\texttt{c6} 4.\texttt{f3} \texttt{f6}!? and offers extremely interesting play \textit{à la} Chigorin Defence.

I also analyse 3...b5?! mostly to show Black’s problems in that topical line.

If White plays \textbf{3.e3}, we have the following choice:

1. 3...\texttt{f6} followed up by the Classical System.
2. 3...e5?! – my recommendation – see Chapter 15.

After \textbf{3.\texttt{f3}}, we can choose:

1. 3...\texttt{f6} – the Classical System.
2. 3...a6 – with a draw in mind – see Chapter 17.
3. 3...\texttt{f6} 4.e3 \texttt{g4}!? which is my weapon of choice in most games.

If you stop your attention on options 2 or 3, you can safely skip the whole part about the Classical System.

Chapter 18 offers advice against Queen’s Pawn Openings.

I have written this book in first person, but it is a collaborative work. Every line has been checked and discussed by both authors.

\textit{Alexander Delchev}

\textit{August 2015}
Part 1

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4**

This is the most challenging system against the QGA and the first thing you should learn. Its importance made me offer several alternatives for Black. I recommend 3...Nc6 4.Nf3 Nf6!? – see Chapter 2. This move order transposes to a very interesting line from the Chigorin Defence. It is strategically unbalanced, but easy to play with Black as he does not have any weaknesses while White’s pawn structure is compromised and often overextended. I do not see any theoretical problems so you can use it even against well-prepared opponents. Another plus is that the variations are not forced and you will not be risking to face a groundbreaking novelty.

The more conventional 3...c6 4.Nf3 Bg4 is the subject of Chapter 1. I offer reliable defences against everything White has tried so far. However, I also discuss new approaches for White which might give him a pleasant position without much counterplay for Black. Also note that in one line White has a forced draw. On the positive side, we might trick the opponent with the move order, and in the most popular line for White, based on the game Karpov-Milov, we can even get a self-playing attack. So, if you hope to capitalise on your better home preparation, Chapter 1 will give you plenty of advice.

Finally, I pay a tribute to fashion and devote Chapter 3 on the super-topical 3.e4 b5, but mostly in order to discourage you from playing it at a higher level. Black has had his day or two of glory, but I expect murky days for him in future. There are two many lines where his limit is a forced draw. Or a struggle for the draw.
Chapter 1. 3.e4 Ʌc6

Main Ideas

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4 Ʌc6!?  

This development is alien to the spirit of the QGA, but it does lead to very complex and strategically unbalanced positions with considerable winning chances... for both sides, to be sure. Instead of unloading the centre, Black hopes to prove that it is overextended. His first goal is to double the f-pawns with ...c8-g4xf3 or provoke d4-d5. Then ...e7-e5 would block the centre while ...e7-e6 would try to undermine it.

Theoretical status

It strikes me that all the authors who write on this system seem clearly uncomfortable in White’s shoes. Let’s consider their recommendations.

- Lars Schandorff gives in his White repertoire book Playing 1.d4 – The Queen’s Gambit 4.Łf3 Łg4 5.Łxc4 e6

6.Łe3  
He offers as a backup line 6.d5 exd5 7.Łxd5 Łf6 8.Łc3 when 8...Łge7 9.Łxc6+ Łxc6 evens the game.

6...Łxf3 7.gxf3 Łf6 (Black can also transpose to the Chigorin with 7...Łf6!? 8.Łc3 Łb4 – see Chapter 2). White is in danger, but Schandorff points out that he can still make a draw with 8.Łc3! 0-0-0 9.Ła4 (9.d5 Łb4) 9...Łxf3 10.Łg1 Łb4 11.d5 exd5 12.exd5 Łe8 13.Łxc6 Łxe3+ 14.Łf1 Łc5 15.Łg3 (15.Łg2∞) 15...Łh1+ 16.Łg1.

As we see, there is nothing to worry about so far.
Many commentators rely on Karpov’s erudition and claim a small advantage for White on the ground of his widely cited game against Milov. It continued 4.\textit{f}3 \textit{g}4 5.\textit{d}5 \textit{e}5 6.\textit{f}4 \textit{g}6 7.\textit{e}3 \textit{e}5 8.\textit{x}c4 \textit{a}6 9.\textit{c}3 \textit{f}6 10.0-0 \textit{d}6 11.\textit{e}2 0-0 12.\textit{d}2 \textit{d}7 (Keep this bishop! We need it for an attack – see \textbf{game 1} Anand-Vallejo Pons, Bilbao 2014.) 13.\textit{c}1 \textit{w}7 14.a3 \textit{b}5 15.\textit{b}3 \textit{f}4 16.\textit{f}3, when instead of 16...\textit{h}8? which allowed 17.\textit{a}2! (heading for c6), Black should have immediately launched the g-pawn: 16...g5 17.\textit{a}5 \textit{h}8! 18.b4 \textit{g}8

White has the better centre. His pawn on d5 makes the difference on the queenside. The d2-knight can follow the route \textit{c}4-a5 or \textit{b}3-c5(a5). The c3-knight could go to a2-b4 or d1-e3. Both bishops on e2 and e3 support the knights’ stabs. In short, White’s game is playing itself. Black’s only counterplay is...
Chapter 1

Based on ...\(\text{f4}\) followed up by ...g5. If White overcame the spell of Kar-pov’s name and thought logically, he could find the very unpleasant move 13.g3!. It effectively dissipates our hopes for an attack and brings us down to prose. Although this line is practically unexplored, I believe that 13...\(\text{e7}\) 14.\(\text{c1}\) b5 15.a3! (a new move, which aims to block the queenside and take control of c5) retains some initiative.

Now 8.\(\text{c3}\) e6 introduces a totally different approach to the centre. Instead of blocking it, Black destroys it. Critical here is 9.\(\text{a4+}\) \(\text{d7}\) 10.\(\text{xd7+}\) \(\text{xd7}\)! 11.\(\text{g5}\)! (Karpov again!) 11...\(\text{exd5}\) 12.\(\text{xf7}\) \(\text{g8}\) 13.\(\text{f3}\) \(\text{e6}\) 14.\(\text{g5}\) \(\text{b4}\)!

Of course, Black can enter a symmetrical position with 15...c5 16.dxc6 \(\text{x6}\) 17.b4! \(\text{e8}\) and gradually exchange most pieces to draw, but I do not like such static positions.

I use another approach to avoid the abovementioned line:
4.\(\text{f3}\) \(\text{g4}\) 5.d5 \(\text{e5}\) 6.\(\text{f4}\) \(\text{g6}\) 7.e3 \(\text{f6}\)!?

Game 3 Sakaev-Yakovich, Moscow 2009 saw further 15.0-0-0 \(\text{xc3}\) 16.bxc3 b5 with a tangled and very interesting position. A sterner test of Yakovich’s idea, according to my analysis, might be the line 15.\(\text{xe6}\) \(\text{xe6}\) 16.exd5+ \(\text{d6}\) 17.\(\text{xc4}\) \(\text{ae8}\) 18.\(\text{d2}\) with a sharp nontrivial endgame.

The move order with 7...\(\text{f6}\) is also effective against 8.\(\text{bd2}\) when 8...e6! is strong.

However, Tomashevsky pinpointed against me in 2013 a downside of Black’s seventh move. He sacrificed a pawn by 8.\(\text{xc4}\)?! when 8...\(\text{xe4}\) is practically the only decent answer since 8...a6?! 9.\(\text{bd2}\)?! e5? 10.dxe6 would be horrible. After 9.h3 \(\text{d7}\) 10.0-0, I should have probably forced play with 10...e5! 11.dxe6 \(\text{xe6}\) 12.\(\text{c2}\)?! \(\text{xc4}\) 13.\(\text{xe4}\) \(\text{e6}\). This position also needs practical testing.
For completeness sake, I will also mention the retreat to g3:
4.Nf3 g4 5.d5 e5 6.f4 g6 7.g3. Then 7...e5 is the only move but this version of the static structure should not be a problem for us since White’s bishop is badly missing from the g1-a7 diagonal. We can exploit that by advancing pawns on the queenside. Here is an example:

15...c6!=.

In conclusion, 4.f3 g4 is playable, but the Chigorin with 4...f6 offers much sharper play. I examine it in Chapter 2.
Chapter 1

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Part 1. 3.e4 \( \Box_c6 \)

Step by Step

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4 \( \Box_c6 \)!

This development is alien to the spirit of the QGA, but it does lead to very complex and strategically unbalanced positions with considerable winning chances... for both sides, to be sure. Instead of unloading the centre, Black hopes to prove that it is overextended. The first goal is to double the f-pawns with \( \ldots \Box_c8-g4xf3 \) or provoke d4-d5. Then \( \ldots e7-e6xd5 \) would devalue White’s pawn centre and would give us an easy and natural development.

4.\( \Box_f3 \)

Of course, White may refrain from 4.\( \Box_f3 \), but 4.\( \Box_e3 \) and 4.d5 (an attempt to sidestep the Chigorin which arises after 4.\( \Box_f3 \) \( \Box_f6 \)) do not pose substantial problems. Let’s see:

a) After 4.d5 \( \Box_e5 \), we can get a good version of the main plan with \( \ldots e6 \). The key point is that we have not played \( \ldots g4 \) so we are not to fear \( \Box h4+ \) which is the most challenging retort to \( \ldots e6 \) in line A. For instance:

5.\( \Box_f4 \)

Minor alternatives are:

5.\( \Box_f3 \) \( \Box_g4 \);
5.f4?! \( \Box_d3+ \) (5...e6 6.fxe5 \( \Box h4+ \) 7.\( \Box_d2 \) \( \Box_f4+ \) is only a repetition)
6.\( \Box xd3 \) cxd3 7.\( \Box xd3 \) c6;
5.\( \Box c3 \) e6!;
5.\( \Box d4 \) \( \Box g6! \) (do not develop the enemy by 5...\( \Box d3+ \). He gets an initiative after 6.\( \Box xd3 \) cxd3 7.\( \Box c3 \) c6 8.\( \Box f4 \) \( \Box f6 \) 9.0-0-0) 6.\( \Box f3 \) e5 7.\( \Box xc4 \) (7.\( \Box xe5? \) drops a piece to 7...\( \Box b4+ \) 8.\( \Box c3 \) c5. I encountered once 7.dxe6? \( \Box xe6 \) 8.\( \Box c3 \) \( \Box f6 \) 9.\( \Box g5 \) when simplest was 9...c6!.)

White counts on seizing space on the kingside with h2-h4-h5
which could be embarrassing after 7...Ng6. It is better to prepare a retreat on e7 with 7...d6. Black took over the initiative in the game Goldin-Morozevich, St Petersburg 1993, following 8.Nc3 f6 9.h4 h6 10.h5 e7 11.e3 0-0 12.e2 a6 13.d2 c6.

5...Ng6 6.Bg3 6.e5 Bg4 6.Nf3 Nd5 gives Black comfortable development.

5...e6! opens the e-file in Black’s favour: 8.xc4 exd5 9.exd5 d6 10.h3 0-0 11.f3 a6 (11...e7 12.0-0 e5—Petkov-Godena, Warsaw 2013) 12.0-0 b5 13.a3 e8

6...h5? It is good to gain space on the kingside before switching to the thematic plan with ...e6.

6...e5 leads to the pawn structure of line A (see below): 7.xc4 a6! 8.Nc3 d6 9.f3 f6.

7.h3 h4 8.h2 and now 8...e6 9.xc4 f6 10.c3 exd5 11.xd5!? d6=.

b) 4.e3 f6 5.c3 5.e5 g4 6.f3 d5 gives Black comfortable development.

5.f3 does not look inspiring as besides 5...e5 6.d5 d4 7.xd4 exd4 8.xd4 c6 which offers sufficient compensation for the pawn, Black also has 6...a5!? 7.a4+ c6 when 8.d2 b6 or 8.xc6 xc6 9.xc4 d7 are clearly harmless so White should take the piece and struggle after 8.b4 b5 9.xa5 xa5 10.bxa5 cxd5 11.c3 d4 12.xb5 dxe3 13.c7+ d7 14.xa8 b4+ 15.xd1 a6 16.xc1 c8 17.b6+ axb6 18.axb6 d2.

5...e5 6.d5 a5

7.a4+ The insertion of 7.f3 d6 enables the nice piece sac 8.a4+ d7!? 9.xa5 a6!! 10.a4 e7! with great compensation, for instance: 11.a3 xe4 12.xc4 0-0.

7...c6 7...d7 is also possible, but not so strong as in the previous example.

8.xc6 xc6 9.xc4 b4 10.f3 0-0=.

Let’s now return to the most topical line 4.f3:

We have three possible approaches here. The most popular one (line A) is to force d4-d5 and block the centre with ...e5. More testing is the plan with ...e7-exd5. I consider it
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