IN THIS CHAPTER

- Determining what endings are and what they are not
- Understanding the importance of theoretical examples and techniques
- Getting familiar with chess notation

Chapter 1

Understanding What the Endgame Is

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What is an endgame? How do you determine if you are in the endgame? It is determined by the pieces that remain on the board. In the book *Endgame Preparation* (Batsford, 1981), Jonathan Speelman defines the endgame by material count, suggesting that endgames are positions in which each player has 13 or fewer points in material. For his definition, he has used the standard point count, which excludes kings and pawns:

Queen = 9 points

Rook = 5

Bishop/knight = 3

I have always felt that this definition is unnecessarily tight and eliminates too many positions from endgame studies and practical examples that everybody would otherwise agree are endgames.

My personal interpretation is that when each side has four or fewer pieces, excluding kings and pawns, we have arrived in the endgame, even if, in some cases, it feels like an endgame with more pieces on the board.

Exchanging Queens — Is It an Endgame Now?

A common misunderstanding is that when the queens depart the board, the game magically becomes an endgame.

For instance, the following position (Figure 1-1) is from the so-called Berlin Wall variation of the Ruy López. (If you don't know what any of this means, then I encourage you to check out *Chess Openings For Dummies, 2nd Edition* (Wiley, 2025) by Jim Eade and me.)

The queens have been exchanged, but it is not an endgame. This type of position has an endgame feel because of the missing queens, but it is a queenless middlegame.

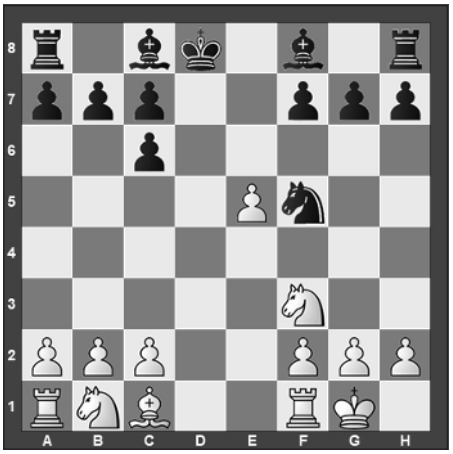


FIGURE 1-1:
No queens, so this is an endgame. Right?

The Importance of Technique

The endgame consists of many examples of technique and practical play. This book will provide plenty of examples of both, but it places heavy emphasis on technique. Why shouldn't we focus on examples from actual games? It is because technique is the foundation for all the decisions you make in actual games. If you don't possess any technique, you will not know why you should exchange certain pieces and pawns, and why you should leave others on the board. Also, you will not know what wins and what doesn't. Technique is important, and understanding and repetition are essential to becoming a better endgame player.

Theoretical versus Practical Endgames

Many composed positions are theoretical because, in their simplicity, they illustrate the points of the position as clearly as possible. Practical play tends to make things more complicated and muddier, making them harder to evaluate accurately. Having relatively "clean" composed positions to learn from makes it easier to understand what should happen next and thus evaluate more accurately.

That, of course, doesn't mean that we will not use practical examples; there will be plenty of those, but if you want a quick reference to how many mistakes real-life games between the best players in the world can contain, quickly skip to Chapter 8, where the practical examples are littered with mistakes and blunders. Endgames can be hard, and certain types can be particularly tricky.

Getting Comfortable with Endgames

The reason you are reading this book is undoubtedly that you don't feel particularly comfortable with endgames or you are brand new to this phase of the game. This book is here to help you remedy that. With improved technique, understanding, and awareness of practical tools, you will be better prepared to play endgames. The next step is to play more endgames and put your newfound knowledge to good use. That means playing some endgames and analyzing the games afterward to see if you made the right decisions along the way. It may take a while before you get truly comfortable with endgames, but start by not being afraid of them; you can always find greater comfort later.

When to Enter the Endgame

Should or shouldn't you enter the endgame? When is the right time? There is only one right answer to this question: When the position dictates it. I know that sounds a little too clever, but it is exactly right. Many games, especially among lower-rated players, end up in the endgame because of pointless exchanges that shouldn't have happened:

» If you have an advantage or the initiative, exchanging pieces often means that you are making unnecessary compromises, and your advantage or initiative could vanish or be reduced in the process.

- If you are the weaker player, it is tempting to think that by exchanging pieces and pawns you get closer to a draw. Sometimes that is the case, but often it is not.
- If you are on the defensive side of a position, reducing the material can be an effective strategy and should be evaluated, but don't be blind to the possibility that your opponent has only allowed the exchanges to happen because it is to their advantage.

Common Mistakes in Endgames

We will cover many common endgame mistakes throughout this book, but I will start by sharing some of the typical mistakes that are exploited by stronger players when they are facing weaker opponents:

- **Exchanging pieces and pawns without careful consideration of the consequences:** All exchanges have consequences; some favor you, others don't.
- **Playing too passively:** Timid or passive play is the trademark of someone who doesn't know what they are doing; we will see plenty of examples of this in this book.
- **Assuming an equal endgame means it is a draw:** There are so many examples of this throughout chess history; even the strongest players in the world have made this assumption and then paid for it by losing the game. Former World Champion Magnus Carlsen has capitalized on this particular mistake in numerous games.
- **Assuming it is so simple that it doesn't matter what you play:** Nonchalant or careless play should be punished, and it is frequently. We all make this mistake from time to time, and we hate ourselves afterward.

Reviewing Chess Shorthand

Throughout this book, I use game scores from composed studies or notable games to explain how to play in a particular position. These game scores use standard chess notation, known as algebraic notation. Unless you're a chess novice, you're probably familiar with chess shorthand, but we include the main points in the following sections just in case you need a quick refresher.

Describing the board and pieces

Chess players use an alphanumeric system to record chess moves. Each file (column) is given a letter from a to h. Each rank (row) is given a number from 1 to 8 (see Figure 1-2). So, the lower-left-hand square is a1, the upper-right-hand square is h8, and so on.

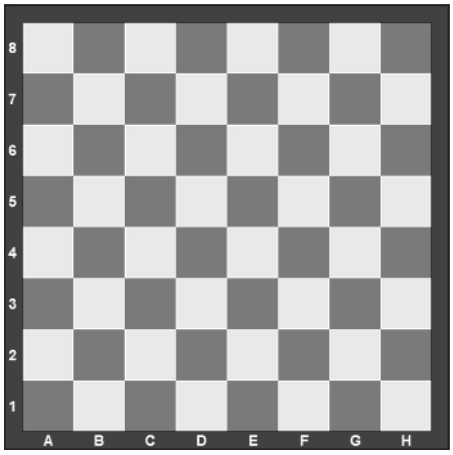


FIGURE 1-2:
Where it all begins.

The pieces are described as follows (note that capital letters are used to distinguish these abbreviations from the letters that describe the files):

Piece	Abbreviation
King	K
Queen	Q
Rook	R
Bishop	B
Knight	N

A move is written in the following fashion: move number, piece, and the square it moves to.

Thus, for example, in the starting position (see Figure 1-3), **1.Nf3** means White is playing the knight on g1 to f3 on their first move.



REMEMBER

Pawn moves are described by just giving the square the pawn is moving to.

1.d4 Nf6 2.Bg5 means White opens the game by pushing the queen pawn two squares forward, and Black replies by developing the kingside knight to f6. White then responds by developing the queenside bishop to g5.

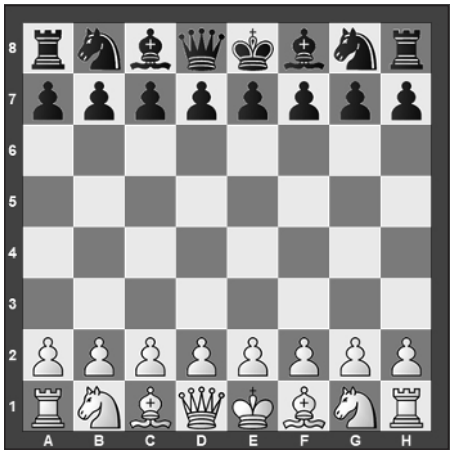


FIGURE 1-3:
The pieces on their home squares.

One other convention you will see throughout this book is moves that look like this: **55. . . . Qxf3.** This means it is a move for Black. The three extra dots indicate either that White's move 55 was already given earlier in the text or that from a diagrammed position it is Black's turn to move.

Describing the action

So much happens during a chess game: checks, captures, castling, tactics, threats, blunders, and good moves. It is an action-packed game. If you've played enough games or read some annotations, either online or in a book, you will see comments on whether a move is good, bad, or fatal. The following chess symbols are shorthand for conveying these ideas:

Symbol	Definition
?	A bad move
??	An extremely bad move
?!	A dubious move
!?	An interesting move
!	A good or only move
!!	A brilliant or winning move
0–0	Kingside castling
0–0–0	Queenside castling
x	A capture has taken place
+	Check
#	Checkmate
1–0	White wins the game
0–1	Black wins the game
½–½	The game is drawn
e.p.	A pawn capture via en passant

Now, let's look at a longer sequence of moves, as shown in Figure 1-4:

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 a6 7.Be2 Bg7 8.Qd2 Nbd7 9.0–0–0 0–0.

Do you have the same position on your board? If not, go through the sequence of moves and determine where you went wrong. Was it on move 8, where two knights could move to d7, and it was the one from b8 (. . .Nbd7) that was used?



FIGURE 1-4:
A reality check: Does this position match yours?



TIP

If you see a move listed like 8 . . . Nbd7 or 42. R1d1, that means two pieces have the option of moving to the listed square. The additional information (in these two cases the "b" and the "1") is given so you know precisely which piece to move.