

## STRIP OR MESSAGE? TWO WAYS OF CREATING STUDIES FROM GAMES

By Steffen Slumstrup Nielsen

When Carlsen, Firouzja and the rest of the speed brains get together at super tournaments, I like following the live streams to be entertained and inspired. I am often struck by a beautiful move, a series of moves or an unusual tactical device from top games and indeed from games at all levels. Over-the-board games are one of four inspirations for me as a study composer. The others are: 1) previous studies/problems; 2) lines suggested by my computer; and 3) toying around with the pieces until something interesting occurs.

Surprisingly often I watch sequences of moves in games that do not remind me of anything from my previous chess memory. When this happens I hurry to the board – well, to the computer – hoping to put the idea from the game into a good form that is suitable for an (endgame) study.

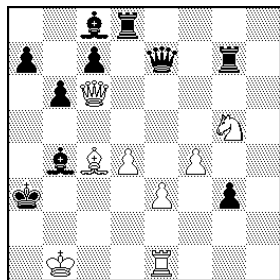
### Strip – the well proven method

The traditional way to deal with a promising game fragment is to strip it. By this I mean removing all the units that are not necessary for showing the idea. It is important, of course, to do this and to show the idea as economically as possible. Over-the-board players are not limited by such refined worries in their games, and it is often possible to remove a large number of pawns and even pieces from the game position without destroying the idea. Experienced study composers can do this fairly quickly, improving both the economy and weeding out possible side solutions. In the process the position might be shifted or even rotated, but the main aim is to lower the number of pieces involved. I don't consider this process to be particularly creative, but rather somewhat mechanical.

When you use the strip method, most of your creative powers are used in the second part of creating the study. Once you have stripped the board of unnecessary units, you still need to create an introduction leading up to the idea borrowed from the game. Creating a good introduction is not a top quality of mine. Apart from the creative aspect of working backwards from a given position and creating play with pieces that are not on the board anymore, generating introductions is also exceptionally hard work. Duals are everywhere and often can only be dealt with by adding extra material, captures and even piece exchanges. Keeping the introduction clean and interesting is a real craft. The masters manage to add extra ideas to the introduction, but more often than not, composers are happy to make a workable introduction at all, and even that is hard work.

### 1) Daniil Dubov - Rasmus Svane

Batumi 2019



Position after 35...c3 8+10

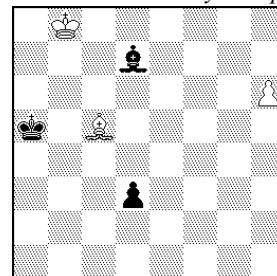
Here is a boiled-down illustration of such a composing process involving stripping away pieces.

After a highly eventful game, Dubov finished off his opponent by 36. ♖b3!! with a threat of mate on a4. At the same time, the bishop opens the line from c6-c2, preparing for 36... ♗b3 37. ♖c2+ ♕a3 38. ♖a2#. Therefore, Svane resigned.

In my view, the move played by Dubov is perfectly suitable for stripping. In fact, it can be shown with only six pieces, removing no less than 12 pieces from the game position. The following is the final product by Martin Minski and me.

### 2) Steffen Nielsen & Martin Minski

7<sup>th</sup> Pr Chess Artistry Competition 2021



Position after 7...b1

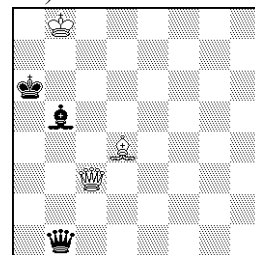
The starting position looks almost like a joke. Surely nothing exciting can happen?

1.h7 d2 2.h8 ♖ d1 ♖ 3. ♖c3+ ♕a6 4. ♖b2! ♗b5 5. ♖f6+ ♕a5 6. ♖c3+ ♕a6. As a result of 4. ♖b2!, the bishop has been lured to b5, where it is beautifully placed from White's point of view

7. ♗d4! threatens 8. ♖c5

7... ♖b1.

### 2.a) S. Nielsen & M. Minski



Position after 7...b1

Here we have the Dubov position, perfectly stripped.

8. ♗b6!! (Dubov's move)

8... ♕b6 [or 8... ♖a2 9. ♖c8+ ♕b6 10. ♖c7+ ♕a6 11. ♖a7# or 8... ♖h7 9. ♖a5#]

9. ♖c7+ ♕a6 10. ♖a7#

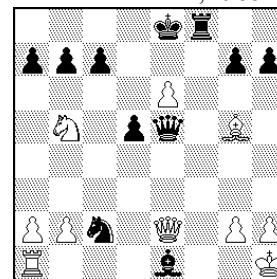
Dubov's idea from the game is perfectly kept and thanks to Martin's skills we managed to create an introduction without a single capture and with the extra point of 4. ♖b2!

### Message – altering the idea

I suggest that the alternative to the established strip method should be called message. It is best explained with an example.

### 3) Mikhail Tal - Jack Miller

Anaheim Simul, 1988



Position after 20...e5 10+11

In a simul game the unknown Miller played the creative 20... ♖d6-e5!, hoping for a mate on f1. But he was up against Mikhail Tal.

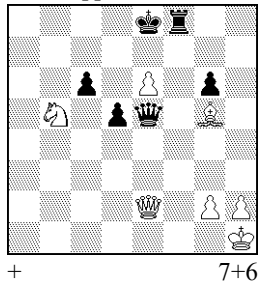
21.h4!!

covering ♗g5, and showing that Black has a mate to worry about himself on c7. White is totally winning. The game continued:

21... ♖g3 22. ♖d1 ♖f2 23. ♖f2 ♗f2 24. ♖d5 ♖h4+ 25. ♗h4 25... ♗h4 26. ♗c7+ ♕f8 27. ♖f5+ ♗f6 28. ♖d5 a5 29. ♖d7 ♗b4 30. ♖f7+ ♕g8 31. ♖f6 ♗c6 32. ♖f7 g6 33.e7 1-0

A wonderful game and combination, showing that even average players can strive for immortality.

3a) Tal – Miller  
Stripped version



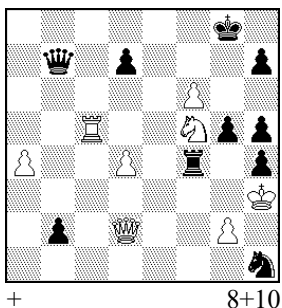
This is what Tal’s 21.h4! might look like after stripping. Here **1.h4!** is the only winning move.

The diagram is the result of 10 minutes of work on my part. To make h2-h4 the only winning move, I still need 13 pieces! Of course, I could now go about creating an introduction, which inevitably would involve even more pieces. And when that was done, would h4! really be a sufficiently striking finale to merit 13 pieces on the board? The mate after 1...♚:e2 2.♜c7# would be nowhere near ideal (in either meaning of the word).

Instead of stripping, there is another route to travel, namely to stand back and try to decipher what Tal’s 21.h4 is really all about, looking at the position abstractly rather than concretely. My interpretation is that the move is fundamentally about “leaving pieces en prise and playing elsewhere”. This is no profound idea in itself, but imagine that Miller had the chance to react in a similar way, doubling the idea. Imagine he had some way to cover h2 so that the back rank would still be weak and the queen on e5 would still be immune. And imagine that Tal had a counter-counter, still leaving the queens to stare at each other in a perfect act of suspense.

I am far too unstructured to be able to retrace the steps that followed as I tried to create a study from Tal’s beautiful move. But basically I tried to turn the game brilliancy into a situation where both kings were potentially under threat of mate. Weak back ranks are perfectly suitable for creating and maintaining this kind of tension (and better suited than the threat on c7 in the game). After some months of work – where I probably ate and slept as well – I had the following study on my screen.

4) Steffen Nielsen  
Schach 2001



1.♜h6+ ♚f8 2.♚:b2  
Black’s back rank is weak. 2...♞c8? ♚:c8 3.♚b4+ d6+ (check!) would be unfortunate.

2...♞f2+ 3.♞h2 ♞g4+ 4.♞g1  
[4.♜:g4? ♚:b2]

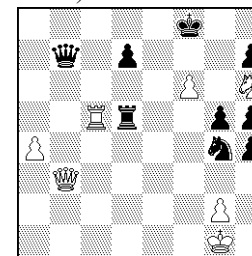
4...♞:d4  
White’s back rank is weak as well.

5.♚b3!  
On an abstract level this is equivalent to Tal’s 21.h4. White covers the back rank mate while at the same time prolonging the uncertainty. Black is not one to back down, either. He calmly covers f7 and g8 by interfering on White’s queen line from b3.

5...♞d5!

Now three pairs of pieces stare at each other. In the diagram 4.a after 6.a5! Black is in zugzwang (White has no threat, as 7.a6? will be met by 7...♚b6!). Now Black has two apparently good waiting moves.

4.a) S. Nielsen



Position after 5...♞d5

MAIN A:

6...♚e8

The weakness of this move is that it allows 8.♚e3+ with check.

7.a6!

[7.♚c2? ♚a7 8.♚e4+ ♞e5 9.♞h1 ♞f2+ 10.♞h2 ♞g4+ 11.♚:g4 11...♞:c5 12.♚e4+ ♚d8 13.♚e7+ ♚c7 =]

7...♚b6 8.♚e3+! ♞:e3 9.♞c8+ ♚d8 10.f7+ ♚e7 11.♞:d8 1-0

MAIN B:

6...d6

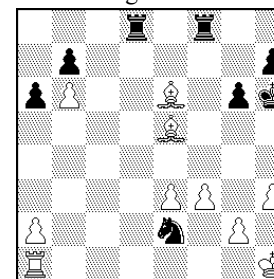
The weakness of this move is blocking the b8-h2 diagonal.

7.♞c1! ♞d1+ 8.♚:d1 ♚a7+ 9.♞h1 ♞f2+ 10.♞h2 ♞:d1 (10...♚b8+ is not possible) 11.♞c8#

Notice that the final position still involves 14 pieces, which is roughly the same as after the attempt at strip shown above. The economy suffers.

My study came about by massaging the original game fragment. Massaging involves a more comprehensive change to the original position. One may argue that it is a change to the content/idea whereas stripping is a mere change of the form. The change when massaging can take many shapes: doubling the idea, adding black counterplay, diagonal/orthogonal change etc. In the present case, the idea of leaving the queen en prise was expanded by a number of moves. In the process an extra idea of leaving other (in fact all) pieces en prise was added as well. It is not uncommon that massaging an idea from a game ends up in an entirely different idea that has almost no connection to the original game fragment.

5) “ShinkarovAtem” – Steffen Nielsen  
Blitz game 2020



Position after W26 10+8

The next game example is not by Tal or anyone of his class. It is rather a Lichess blitz game of mine against a player with the handle ShinkarovAtem.

With Black I played 26...♞de8, optimistically convinced that I was winning a piece. But my opponent showed a highly amusing idea based on several counterthreats.

27.♞d6 ♞f6 28.♞d7 ♞d8 29.♞e7

And in fact, I had lost the exchange.

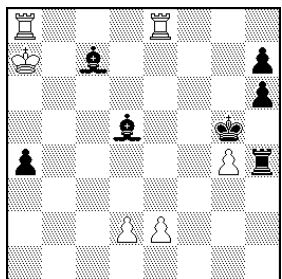
The escape of the bishops was very appealing and I felt it was suitable for a study. Again, stripping was possible, but I felt that what I really wanted was to prolong the escape of the bishops to more than the three moves shown by my opponent in the game.

Some massaging went on and relatively early in the process I stumbled on an ambitious idea. What if the bishops would be able to eternally escape? Or alternatively: what if a rook was able to eternally harass the bishops?

The idea that such a mechanism could even exist was probably very optimistic. In fact, this is often the worst part of composing with the massage method. Some abstract idea is conceived, but there is no guarantee that it is achievable.

This time, I was lucky. An extra rook was required and in fact also the active involvement of the king. Within a day I managed to compose a workable study

### 6) Steffen Nielsen ARVES 2022



= 6+7

White, well down on material, draws by constant harassment of the bishops.

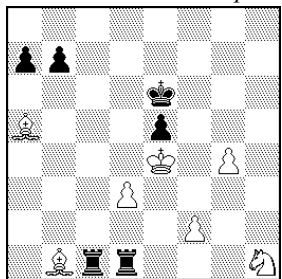
1. ♖ac8 ♕d6 2. ♜ed8 ♕e6 3. ♜c6 ♕e7 4. ♜e8 ♕d7 5. ♜g8+ 5... ♖f4 6. ♜c7 ♕e6 7. ♜e8 ♕d6 8. ♜c6 ♕d7 9. ♜c4+ ♖g5 10. ♜d8 ♕e6 11. ♜c6 ♕e7 12. ♜e8 ♕d7 13. ♜g8+ and draws, as we are back to the position after White's 5<sup>th</sup> move.

In this first version, two rooks manage to draw by eternally threatening to win a piece. It has a clear weakness, however, as the rook on h4 is basically only on the board for soundness. Besides, I felt that ideally the bishops should succeed as this was the case in the game. Additionally, eternal escape is a more pleasing scenario than eternal harassment.

The next version is more pleasing.

### 7) Steffen Nielsen

1<sup>st</sup> H.M. FIDE World Cup 2021



= 7+6

1. ♕a2+ ♖d7 2. ♘g3

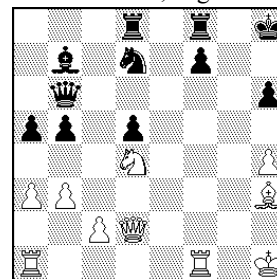
Material has been saved, at first, but the rooks begin their (fruitless) work:

2... ♜a1 3. ♕b3 ♜db1 4. ♕c3 ♜a3 5. ♕c2 ♜c1 6. ♕b2 ♜e1+ 7. ♖d5 ♜a2 8. ♕c3 ♜c1 9. ♕b3 ♜a3 10. ♕b2 ♜a5+ 11. ♖e4 ♜b1 12. ♕c3 ♜a3 13. ♕c2 and we have the same position as after 5. ♕c2. The bishops will keep escaping for eternity.

All pieces move and the position resembles a game. The White knight on g3 provides just the right balance to make the study sound. If a bishop is lost, Black wins. If the bishops remain unharmed White has sufficient material for a draw.

The final game example is quite extraordinary, because I believe a fundamentally new idea was found at the board. It is an idea that is perfectly suitable for studies, but which apparently had never been done before Valentina Gunina sat down to her first-round game in the Grand Swiss Tournament in Riga in 2021.

### 8) Valentina Gunina – Thanh Trang Hoang Grand Swiss, Riga 2021



Position after 25... ♜cd8 10+11

In the diagram, White has several winning moves, but Gunina found the best and most beautiful move.

26. ♕e6! ♖h7

Clearly forced as the king cannot move to the g-file.

27. ♕f5+

The sacrificed bishop moves away from e6.

27... ♖h8 28. ♘e6

Another piece is offered on e6, not fearing the discovered check.

28...d4+ 29. ♖h2 ♜d6+ 30. ♖h3

And here we have the explanation for 26. ♕e6! If White had sacrificed the knight first with 26. ♘e6?, Black would have drawn by 26...d4+ 27. ♖h2 ♜d6+ and the bishop would block the white king's access to h3. Therefore the bishop first had to be transferred to f5.

30... ♕g2+ 31. ♜:g2 f:e6 32. ♜g6

and Black resigned.

Gunina's idea is easily defined:

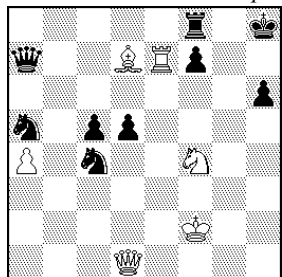
1. Piece A and piece B can both be sacrificed on square X.
2. Piece A is sacrificed on square X. The sacrifice is declined.
3. Piece A moves away.
4. Piece B is sacrificed on square X.
5. The sacrifice by piece A in some way logically prepares for the second sacrifice.

Having identified this concept, it would be a shame to use the strip method to find a study letzform of Gunina's combination. In other words, the scheme used by Gunina (Black's queen on b6 protecting square h6, but being interfered with on e6) is only one possible rendering of the theme and therefore massage is a more suitable method.

As it happened, the scheme from the game proved to be so excellent that it worked for an expansion even without the usual shifting around and remolding that is so typical of massage. In fact, the game may have been sent from heaven.

## 9) Steffen Nielsen

Chess Problems and Compositions 2021



In the diagram Black may be three pawns up, but his king is remarkably naked. But (of course) there is only one route to conquer it. And that is a detour to the queen-side.

**1. ♖a1+!**

White needs to close the diagonal from b2 to g7, before attacking on the king-side.

**1...d4 2. ♖h1 ♜b6**

Now, White must choose from three possible sacrifices on e6.

**3. ♖e6!**

The rook is sacrificed on e6. 3. ♗e6 ♜b2+ ruins everything and the knight sacrifice meets with a rather obvious refutation, that I will let the reader unravel for him or herself.

**3... ♜b2+ 4. ♖e2**

The rook moves away. The queen cannot go to d4 or further up the diagonal because of White's prophylactic first move.

**4... ♜b6 5. ♗e6!**

The bishop is sacrificed on e6. Black must cover h6.

**5... ♗h7 6. ♗f5+**

The bishop moves away.

**6... ♗h8 7. ♗e6!**

Finally, the knight is sacrificed on e6. As a result of the two preparatory sacrifices on e6, Black's next move will not happen with check.

**7...f:e6 8. ♜:h6+ 1-0**

The obvious follow-up question is whether the Gunina-theme can be shown in another manner? Can there, for instance, be four sacrifices on the same square each preparing the following? Or might the piece from the first sacrifice return to the key square on the third sacrifice? I have no answers for such questions yet, but I know that only the message method will be able to provide them.

Below I attempt to sum up the different characteristics of the strip and message methods. Of course, there is no clear dividing line between the two methods and the composer may end up using a mixture of both.

### Characteristics of strip:

- Structured, mechanical process
- Goal-oriented
- Perfecting the form
- High emphasis on economy, searching for a "letzform"

- Limited change in material used
- Emphasis on building a fitting introduction
- Few pieces on the board
- The study features tactics and manoeuvres typical of the endgame
- Pointed finish (climax)
- Guaranteed end product once you have the idea.

### Characteristics of message:

- Chaotic, organic process
- Process-oriented (curiosity driven)
- Perfecting/Expanding the idea
- Low(er) emphasis on economy
- Large change in material used
- Emphasis on building both introduction, main play and afterplay (*nachspiel*)
- Many pieces on the board
- The study features tactics and sequences typical of the middlegame
- Often the high point (climax) of the study comes early and the finish may be unsatisfactory.
- No end product guaranteed.

Without a doubt there is still plenty of fascinating novelty to be found in miniatures and other studies with relevance to endgame theory. The endgame remains the main scene of studies. Nevertheless, the middlegame study is definitely here to stay. In the recent *Timman 70 JT* the average piece count of the six prize-winning studies was 13!

Not surprisingly, the middlegame study finds a perfect inspiration in games. In my view, composers who seek their inspiration from games will be best served by using the message method. The process is much more fun (though at times frustrating) and I am convinced the method is ultimately better suited for expanding the horizons of chess and producing better, more ambitious studies.

*This article is a version of a short lecture originally given at the 2021 WCCC in Rhodes. (Steffen S. Nielsen)*

Thanks to our new contributor Steffen S. Nielsen for his excellent and thought-provoking article (Steffen is one of the leading study composers in the world, an International Master of the FIDE for Chess Compositions with 58.23 points in the last two (!) FIDE Albums, of which 46.56 in the FIDE Album 2016-2018!). Let's hope that the article will inspire endgame study composers and even over-the-board players to compose endgame studies based on real games and to send their original studies for the informal tourney of *The Macedonian Problemist* for 2022 (please send entries to the editor [zoran.gavrilovski@gmail.com](mailto:zoran.gavrilovski@gmail.com) until 1.12.2022), which will be judged by Steffen himself. (Editor)