imagine, but I'm sure most chess-players would single out the greatest and most prevalent problem with *Perfectionism* to be that old chestnut, time-trouble. My aim now is to consider why we are so inclined to fall short of time. I will treat the issue from a slightly unusual perspective and so the interested reader may like to consult further reading on this matter, for which I recommend Krogius, *Psychology in Chess* (Chapters 5 and 6) and Nunn, *Secrets of Practical Chess* (pages 59-61).

The Causes of Time-Trouble (and a few remedies)

The clock is just as much a part of the game as the board and pieces, and losing because of time-trouble is no different to losing because of weak play – it's still a zero on the score-sheet.
GM JOHN NUNN

It may seem that the following list doesn't describe issues related to *Perfectionism* but in fact most of them do, if we look at *Perfectionism* broadly as the desire to follow a certain model towards which you aspire. After considering this list, I draw some more general conclusions about time-trouble, and what to do about it. My bottom line, however, is that it is not always 'sinful' to run into time-trouble and we shouldn't always blame ourselves for doing so. What is important is that you realize just how important a part of the game the clock is, and if you liked what I said in Chapter 4, it may be helpful to see it as one of four dimensions of the game, to be treated with as much attention as the other three.

1) Complexity of the game

Some games are full of difficult, time-consuming decisions that require both players to use a lot of time to find the right moves. The more complex the position, the more you will need to use intuition to make decisions. A confident player will just trust his gut feeling and accept that further thinking won't make the decision any easier. However, there are undoubtedly some games where time-trouble (less than a minute per move is the standard, but not limiting, definition) is almost unavoidable. When you are up against a player who poses original problems, you will need some time to solve them. Kasparov, for example, frequently ran short of time when playing Karpov, and now does so against Kramnik, although in general he is fairly resistant to running short of time. Michael Adams has stated that one of his main strengths is avoiding time-trouble, but even he gets short of time when up against the very best players.

2) Deliberately running short of time

This normally occurs when a player has a bad position and wants to 'blitz' the opponent or just begin some sort of psychological warfare by playing quickly (and often noisily). In my experience the players who do this tend to be quite 'macho' and love the drama and adrenaline rush of hand-to-hand combat under pressure. I would say "don't do this!", but I don't see how that's going to help, especially because many players enjoy being in time-trouble. The 'hit' you get from those ten to twenty minute periods where big decisions are made very quickly is, for many players, a big attraction of the game.

3) Poor theoretical preparation

This can lead to a doubtful mindset. If you begin the game slowly and cautiously, this can undermine your confidence for the rest of the game. Opening preparation has as much to do with general confidence as getting a good position out of the opening and, although it's asking a lot, I would simply suggest that you get your openings sorted out! Indeed if you don't know your openings well, don't have time to prepare something, or aren't suited to playing offbeat lines then it's very difficult to avoid giving your opponent the psychological advantage early in the game. Moreover, I firmly believe that the seeds of slow play later in the game are sown in the opening. I don't think it's wise to play the opening super-quickly because then it will be hard to adjust when you have to think for yourself, but in general you shouldn't spend more than half an hour for your first ten moves. If you are doing this you either need to study your openings, or prepare yourself for the game psychologically so that you are more confident on arrival.

4) Lack of practice
When you are 'rusty' you just don't see things as quickly as you do when you are well practised. Moreover, your awareness that you are below par is liable to lower your self-confidence. The only thing that might help here is to solve some combinational exercises or have a few blitz games against a computer before playing. However, a little twist was pointed out to me by English IM Jonathan Parker, who has no problems playing at over 2500 level despite long periods of inactivity. The irony is that you get short of time because you are rusty, but then the rustiness doesn't show itself as much in time-trouble because you can just play on your judgement and experience. Indeed Jonathan even said that getting into time-trouble is the best cure for rustiness! Interesting stuff, but don't try this at home.

5) Doubts concerning analysis
This leads to the constant checking and re-checking of variations because you don't trust yourself to get it right the first time. Normally this stems from a lack of confidence and excessive fear of making a mistake. It also tends to afflict players who don't like to calculate much and so when they have to do it, they don't do it very well. My simple advice would be to face up to the fact that mistakes are inevitable. Just allow yourself to make mistakes – it's no crime! The biggest mistake is constantly to be afraid of making a mistake. It's much better that you just trust yourself; even if you do make a few little mistakes, because then at least you'll stop making this big one.

6) Fear of opponent/seeing ghosts
If you are informed that your opponent is a brilliant tactician you may be inclined to spend time looking for non-existent tactics or if you are up against a stronger player you may doubt your judgement. The key is to be confident of your own abilities, and know your strengths and limitations. It's also worth remembering that your opponent is not infallible, and whatever their abilities, he can't change the rules of the game. As Julian Hodgson once put it when consoling someone about to play a stronger player: "Don't worry! For every move he gets, you get one back".

7) Crucial game; extra tension
Last rounds, grudge matches and crunch team games all lead to games where the result increases in importance and errors seem twice as significant. Unless you are very confident of playing well under this pressure, you will take extra time and care to be accurate. The best way to garner this confidence is pre-game preparation where you think carefully about the psychological aspects of the battle at hand, including the tension, before you arrive at the board. Visualization is a useful technique here, but anything that you think will make you feel more 'at home' during such games should be considered.

8) Time-wasting thoughts
Examples include looking back at what might have been if you had played a different move, thinking of variations in the game next to you, thinking of rating points you'll gain when you eventually win, etc. You are less likely to do this if you are confident that thinking of your own position will yield helpful insights. Also, as we'll see in the next chapter, there are many different ways to look at a position, and this can help solve the boredom caused by seeing the same thing again and again.

9) Fear of the unknown
If you lack experience in certain types of position, you may be wary of entering them, and pause looking for alternatives that either aren't as good, or just aren't there. This may involve a 1 d4 player being scared of Sicilian structures, a general fear of sacrificing material, or maybe even a fear of the endgame in general. Here you just have to believe in your own creative ingenuity and general understanding. Just because you haven't been exposed to that type of position before, doesn't mean that you can't play it well. All I can recommend in such situations is to find the courage to go ahead, because only by embracing new territory do we learn new things.

10) Attraction to complex positions
Some players seek out positions that require a lot of thinking time, hoping to probe their opponent's understanding and nerves. This is not a problem in itself, but if it leads to games being

lost in random time-scrambles, something needs to be done. The solution may be to navigate your way through the complexity with your intuition and be confident, trust your feelings and know that this is as reliable an approach as 'thinking' your way to a solution. However, as we saw above, time-trouble is not always avoidable.

11) General indecision

You can't make up your mind. The 'which rook?' question is a classic example. If you dither for twenty minutes over ♖fd1 or ♖ad1 then you are letting yourself down. Just get on with it! At such moments it is worth asking yourself if you will need this time more later than you do now, and more often than not, the answer is yes! In such situations you are paralysed by your choices and lack the confidence to make an educated guess. In this respect I am great believer in John Nunn's advice: "Chess is all about making decisions. Postponing a decision doesn't necessarily improve it. Try to get into the habit of asking yourself: is further thought actually going to be beneficial." Another question to ask is: "is this problem solvable, and if so how long will it take me?" Often the answer will be no, in which case you just have to make a good guess; and if the answer is yes, but it will take a long time, you have to gauge whether you can afford the time to work it out, because it might just be more practical to guess.

12) Excessive attention to detail

Spending many minutes on the possible significance of very minor matters that, deep down, you know to be fairly irrelevant. Just face up to the fact that chess results are rarely decided by such small matters. Most games include a plethora of errors on both sides, and the biggest ones, the ones that really matter, often occur when you're short of time.

13) Excuse provision

Many players simply can't handle losing on the board and fail to take responsibility for their moves in time-trouble or the fact that they got short of time. I have absolutely no sympathy for this. Time-trouble may be an explanation for a certain decision, but it is never a good excuse. This is what Sartre would call '*mauvaise foi*' (bad faith) in that you don't face up to your freedom in relation to your circumstances. Lack of confidence to compete over the board leads to the 'poor me, I got short of time' mindset, which is, I think, pathetic.

14) Going 'walkabout'

Some tournaments have the toilets miles away from the playing hall, and the cafeteria is understaffed. In these cases you can spend a long time away from the board while your clock is ticking. You can also end up talking to friends, or being engrossed by someone else's position, or just generally wandering around. I do all these things myself and know that they are one cause of time-trouble. However, I am not sure I could counsel against doing this sort of thing, basically because it tends to be fun! In so far as there is a remedy, learn to gauge when you think your opponent will use a lot of thinking time, and limit your 'walkabouts' to two or three a game. Curiously, Jonathan Parker, perhaps the strongest IM in the world (now a GM), considers 'walkabout' to be the main cause of his time-trouble problems.

Furthermore, Michael Adams told me that his results improved considerably when he conquered his 'walkabout' problem, and that lots of players let themselves down by wandering around. I suggested that stretching legs, going to the toilet or getting refreshments were essential for some players, to which he replied that he used to think that too, but one day he realized that he was deceiving himself and his main motivation for leaving the board was actually to alleviate boredom! If you take chess at all seriously, it's hard to accept this as a good reason. Indeed Mickey now leaves the board very rarely and usually only when he feels he has seen all that's worth seeing for the time being. The advice here is to try harder at the board. Mickey's advice boiled down to "just stay at the board and don't miss things". Indeed, if you have to miss something, it's better to miss it through lack of ability than lack of effort. Conquering the boredom factor will be touched upon in the next chapter.

15) Deep thinks

This can be problem if you habitually take more than twenty minutes for a move more than

twice a game. In my experience, it is very rare for a think of more than twenty minutes to lead to a good move. Normally if you think for this long, or longer, you just end up confusing yourself, and forget which line is which.

There may be a psychological/neurological basis for this. For starters, Krogius writes: "It is possible to detect in players who experience a limited range of attention, a relative backwardness in their understanding of the dynamics of play over the entire board, which is revealed in their tendency to make a painstaking and productive analysis of only one particular idea or variation. Probably such players are affected by an effort to be excessively conscientious; they are striving for the best way in which to penetrate an appealing idea as deeply as possible." In this regard, psychologists speak of 'the unitary nature of attention' which is described by Edward de Bono like this: "It is in the nature of a self-organizing patterning system to have a single area of stabilization. If there are two competing areas at a time, the large one will expand and the lesser one will disappear even if the difference is very slight. This arises directly from the wiring of the system and is not an imposed condition. It leads to one area of attention at a time."

Having these deep thinks may be mistaken, on this view, because you may not be thinking about as much as you imagine. It's more likely that you'll be going round in circles on the same line and there is some reason to think that this arises because of the nature of your brain. Moreover, if you use the same neural pathway over and over, there is a chance that this pathway will become 'drenched', as neurologists put it, which means that more is by no means always better when it comes to thinking.

That said, GM Emil Sutovsky once commended me for having a half-hour think during a critical moment in our game which led to a correct decision in a complicated position. He explained that Russian GM Bareev had told him all about 'The Linares guys' and how they use their time, which made a big impression on him. Apparently, if you watch the world's best playing live, you see a sequence of moves played fairly quickly followed by a substantial pause. They know all about the dangers of *Blinking* and so use their time in these critical moments, but don't worry so much about small details at other moments and trust their fantastic judgement.

This suggests that deep thinks may not be such a crime, but that you should be careful how you *begin* your long think and be sure to make room for variety instead of starting on a difficult line and getting 'stuck' there for several minutes. So if you do feel that a long think is required, make a mental note of what you aim to achieve and a mini strategy for how you will go about it.

16) Turning up late for the game

This is a bit like walkabout in that there is little point in saying 'don't do it', when it's often a big part of your personality. What I find interesting is that many of the players who turn up late are time-trouble addicts! This makes me think of one of the psychological explanations for late-coming in general, which is that it is a form of self-punishment. Such unconscious motivations are at once plausible, subtle and speculative so there is little value in dwelling on them here, but time-trouble generally and especially time-trouble addicts who make things worse by turning up late do make me think of the following quote by Kierkegaard: "There is nothing man is so afraid of as knowing how enormously much he is capable of doing and becoming." Perhaps some players are just more comfortable perpetually being 'under-performers' than feeling the pressure of being the best they can be.

It does seem to me that many players deliberately make it difficult for themselves to realize their full potential by sabotaging themselves with time-shortage, a state in which they feel 'diminished responsibility' for their actions and some relief in the knowledge that their best is yet to come.

All I would say is that although being on time, preferably a little early, suits most players who like to soak up the atmosphere, the most important thing is that you are psychologically prepared and feel ready for the game before it starts. It is possible to prepare yourself either on the way to the tournament hall or at the board. Personally, I find it easier at the board, as I tend to be more prone to distractions elsewhere.

17) Failure to make adequate use of opponent's thinking time

This is a very common shortcoming and I think it's related to boredom. To tackle this problem we need to learn how to concentrate better, which I discuss at the end of the next chapter.

18) Attention seeking

The most ridiculous cause of time-trouble is the shocking desire of some players to attract attention by being short of time. This is somewhat absurd, and the only remedy I might suggest is to use other ways to grab people's attention, like wearing a funny hat, though preferably choose one that won't unduly disturb the opponent.

Pragmatism

Do or do not. There is no try.
YODA

Telling a hardened perfectionist to be 'pragmatic' is a bit like telling a dog to be cat – it's asking a bit much, even in these days of genetic engineering. Yet this is the type of advice that the time-troubled perfectionist tends to hear. "You just need to be more practical", "don't forget about your clock", "don't leave less than ten minutes for your last ten moves", "never use more than 20 minutes for a move", "turn up on time", "stay at the board", "play the opening quickly" and so on *ad infinitum*. Even though such advice is perfectly sound and well intended, it rarely helps. Pragmatism simply comes more easily to some people than others. Those who are not troubled by the desire to play the uniquely correct move as part of a perfect game are in some ways rather blessed, but it's wrong to assume that perfectionists can shake such habits (dreams?) at the drop of a hat.

The perfectionist may lose many games through lack of time but they will also win some spectacular games by digging deeply into a position that the pragmatist may only have understood superficially. Moreover, I think it's limited to assume that the only aim of a chess game is to win. While it may be true that the pragmatist gets better results in general, we shouldn't assume that this is the model for everyone to follow. Indeed, some players prefer to win one beautiful game and lose two normal games than to win three normal games, but create nothing particularly memorable.

However, for those of you who would like to be a bit more pragmatic, and feel this to be attainable, I hope the following game will give a good example of pragmatic thinking.

Rowson – Gardner
Edmonton 2000

1 e4 c5 2 ♘c3 d6

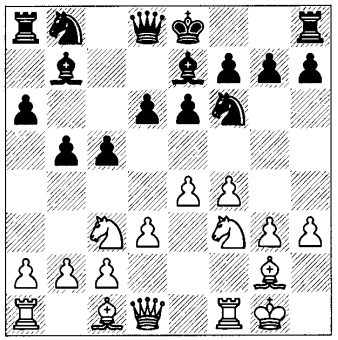
After a four-minute think. This made me feel good about my opening choice. Now my opponent took at least two minutes for each of the following three moves.

3 f4 a6 4 ♘f3 b5 5 d3 ♗b7

Not so bad in itself but there are other developing moves which are more flexible, and which should perhaps have been played first. The bishop is not well placed to aid queenside play with ...b4 or for the central push ...e6 and ...d5, which will almost certainly be met by the closing of the centre with e5 followed by d4, when the bishop will be passively placed.

6 g3 e6 7 ♗g2 ♘f6 8 0-0 ♗e7 9 h3 *(D)*

B



9...d5

Black spent about ten minutes over moves 6-9, which suggests that he was in a very doubtful state of mind, because they were all fairly obvious. However, this last move seems to be slightly inaccurate for the same reason that 5...♗b7 was; ...d5 may or may not be a good idea, but ...♘c6 is certainly a part of Black's plan and so should have been played first. After 9...♘c6 10 ♗e3 (what else?) 10...d5 11 e5 ♘d7