

(This is a redacted version of a presentation I gave Nov. 19 at the Second Koltanlowski Conference on Chess and Education, in Dallas.)

My talk is titled “The Magnificent Seven”. More broadly, it is about the power of narrative.

We use narratives when we teach about our civic institutions or our holidays such as Thanksgiving, to clean up the messy details for junior consumption, A narrative can be used, on the negative side, to stampede a nation into war, or to scapegoat a minority population. On the positive end, a narrative can be used to bring life, to give flesh and blood, to a dry, abstract subject such as chess.

The Russians, with their love of fairy tales, do this all the time. Nimzovich said the isolated pawn is a “criminal, who must be kept under lock and key. Ordinary surveillance measures will not do,” only blockade.

As Alexey Root said yesterday, we can talk about the importance of developing our pieces until we’re blue in the face, and some kids will still play all their pawns forward one square, or even advance the king to the center. I teach chess in grades 1-6 as part of the enrichment curriculum at a private school, so with such a broad audience I find a good narrative especially useful.

I had the insight earlier this year that *The Magnificent Seven* provides a perfect analogy for piece development. This 1961 movie, perhaps the greatest color Western ever made, made Steve McQueen an international star. A farming village is threatened by bandits, and the town elder says to seek out professional gunfighters. They don’t have much money to spare, so they must seek out gunfighters who are down on their luck and will take a cut in pay to defend the village.

So in chess you have all these farmers – pawn comes from the Old English word *peon* for peasant, like the Spanish *peon* or the German *bauer*, which also mean pawn. And you have these seven strong fighting pieces on the back row: the magnificent seven. And there is the village elder, the king, who you probably want to keep in the basement, behind the door with a heavy frying pan.

In the opening then, you don’t want to send all the poor farmers into the fray; you want to get your best fighters into battle. Open the gates (I advance a center pawn) and let them ride out into the center (I develop a bishop).

*The Magnificent Seven* was based on a 1954 Japanese movie, *Seven Samurai*, set in the 16th century during the period of the warring kingdoms. I was tempted to find a parallel to the chess analogy in the game of go – which came about in the same

historical time -- but unfortunately that game has a 9 x 9 grid and eight important fighting pieces.

I use a narrative when I explain the *en passant* pawn capture, which is surely one of the strangest rules and the most difficult to explain to the beginner. I go back to when the rules of chess were modified in the late 1400s to allow an unmoved pawn to go one or two squares. (Board setup in Forsythe notation: 8 / 7p / 6p1 / 6P1 / 8 / 8 / p1K5 / k7) Black to move has painted himself into a corner on the queenside, and would be stalemated except that he can push the h-pawn. Under the old rules, he had to go one square, when White would take gxh6 and then checkmate in two moves when he makes a queen, or even a bishop. Then someone had the bright idea to speed up the game and let a pawn that has never moved go two squares. Now this pawn can zip right by the adjacent enemy pawn (I thumb my nose): "Nyah, nyah, can't get me!" And suddenly Black is not losing, but winning.

Well, this seemed entirely unfair. It as a case of unintended consequences, and it was changing the game way too much. So to make it fair, they said "Let's make it so White's pawn can capture as if the old rules were in effect, and Black had advanced just one square."

The origin of chess is enshrined in some version of a familiar narrative. In India it is attributed to Lord Krishna, and in Persia (Iran) it is attributed to the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra). An ancient king was fond of making war, but it was bleeding his kingdom dry, both in treasure and the blood of young men. A wise man invents the game so the king can have the pleasure of making war without the vast expense. Thereupon the king is so grateful that he offers anything the sage desires. You know the story. "My wish is but a simple one. Put one grain of rice on the first square, two on the second, then four, doubling each time until you have gone through all 64 squares." The astronomer Carl Sagan determined that this would be an amount of rice that would cover the earth up to everyone's knees!

It was around the same time the pawn was speeded up that the queen became a strong piece. This was shortly after Joan of Arc had led troops into battle, which seems to be more than a coincidence to me. The queen was sometimes called the "mad queen", which is fitting when you consider that Joan's English accusers thought she was possessed or mad, which amounted to the same thing. (Dr. Tim Redman spoke to this subject, citing the book *The Birth of the Chess Queen* in which Eleanor of Aquitaine is considered to be inspiration for the strong role of the queen in chess. He added to this the factor that chess was in competition with cards in those times, when "games of dalliance" offered occasions for nobles of opposite sex to linger for hours in sitting rooms.)