Interview with Wolff Morrow

This is an interview ICCF member Ray Kappel did with Wolff King Morrow about his correspondence play. Wolff is a U.S. champion and one of the leading figures on how to use your computer.

Q:What is your background?

A:I'm 42 years old and live in Denton, TX. I'm a graphic artist and computer technician. I've designed the artwork for over 100 of Gambit Publications chess books, and a selection of my covers can be view on my web site over at www.firebrandx.com.

Q:When did you get started playing correspondence chess?

A:My first real interest in chess came about in 1996 when a new friend I had made (Sean) turned out to be a casual chess player, and I remembered my father being an avid chess fan during the Fischer boom of the early 1970s. I had learned the basic rules as a child, but never played more than a few games in that time. I wanted to see if I could play the game intelligently this time around and give my friend Sean some competition. It didn't take long before I was trading wins with Sean, and we'd play marathon games for several hours. After a while, I felt like there had to be more to the game, and that I needed to take the next step and actually study the theory so I could get an edge in my games against Sean. So I went to the local recycled books store and found an old tome called "Chess Openings: Theory and Practice" by I.A. Horowitz. This book was like a doorway that made me realize I had no clue just how deeply developed human strategy had become in the centuries leading up to my interest in the game. I spent two weeks reading the book and studying the opening lines contained therein. It was so potent a step up for me that I immediately started winning every game against Sean. So much so that after a year, I was able to give Sean rook odds and still won the game, and Sean stopped playing me after that.

Q:Why do you like correspondence chess?

A:What got me involved in tournament chess and eventually correspondence chess was the rematch of Deep Blue vs Garry Kasparov. I was absolutely fascinated by the struggle of man versus machine, from both sides of the board. As I got more and more experience and proficient at chess, I started to notice top correspondence players on various web sites and servers were very clearly using engine analysis to augment their games, even though the rules of those sites strictly forbid use of computer chess engines. So my early years in correspondence chess were spent crusading against and exposing the top-ranked correspondence players as being nothing more than cheaters. I remember one site in particular had an Italian player by the name of "Rodog" that had been absolutely dominating the #1 spot for a long time, and appeared to be even dominating other cheaters in the top ranks. So I created an account and managed to entice him into playing me. I opened with 1.e4 and he opted for the Scandinavian defense. Over the next 3 months, I did extensive research in the opening and filled 3 paper notebooks with my analysis combined with what the engines would predict his engine move would be (which he in fact never deviated from). Having knowledge beforehand that he was just copying engine moves gave me that extra edge to play a very strong line against his opening, and eventually weave a winning position. When he finally resigned, I was I believe the first player to actually defeat him at the time. I posted my detailed analysis of the game, and was subsequently banned for accusing their top player of being a cheater.

After the Rodog incident, I realized that I was wasting my talent for playing strong "centaur" chess as it's called, so I began looking for organizations that supported engine use openly and freely. I wanted to find out if I could still play

well in an arena where "anything goes" as far as coming up with your chess moves is concerned. That's when I came across a chess web site that held regularly schedule "so and so versus the world" correspondence chess matches, and they were holding a exhibition match against one of the legendary best correspondence players at the time known as Gert Jan Timmerman. I joined the team, and we were allowed to make extensive use of engine analysis combined with human ideas. Each and every move became a project in and of itself, and a good dozen of us were top contributors of the analysis trees. Once it came close to time to tally votes for our move, we'd all agree on the best possible move we could make. It worked so well that Gert eventually cracked in the endgame, having missed a drawing line that was both deep and obscure. It was a fantastic victory for our team, and I was so thrilled with the process that I joined the ICCF that Gert was playing for and began my climb from a lowly 1800 provisional rating.

Q:When did you become U.S. Correspondence champion?

A:I became 19th USA correspondence champion on June 30th of 2013. My new rating due to be released this month will be 2531. It took me 8 years climbing from 1800 to reach that mark, something VERY few players on ICCF have been able to do. Most got started at much higher provisional rankings, so their climb was a less arduous task.

Q:What are your ambitions as a player?

A:My ambitions as a player on ICCF are to make world champion. I recently took a large step forward in that direction by winning a semi-final tournament for the right to advance to the world candidates tournament. If I can win that, I will then be playing for the world title in the finals.

This answer is from Wolff's article on chess.com about his method

A:*I keep a running diary of every game I play. This includes notes about the opening, the general impression I get from the current position (whether or not I agree with the computer's evaluation), and my overall prospects and goals for the game. This for me is important because I typically have 30 to 40 games running at the same time, and it helps me to refresh my memory on my intentions instead of just blindly plugging the game into an engine.*

The opening, impressions, and goals I set come from experience on ICCF, and those concepts can only be honed from ICCF play. This is why a 1500-rated player can still have the potential to win against a 2600 GM when they play on ICCF, because that 1500 might just have several years of experience on ICCF versus the GM trying it out for the first time. I myself have defeated FIDE masters on ICCF using this same "apples to oranges" concept of experience and skill. Often times a FIDE master will want to play their pet opening from over-the-board play, not realizing it may contain deadly traps that are 20 moves deep and sacrifice two pawns for the initiative. This is stuff the engines cannot see coming, and thus, the FIDE master doesn't see it either. However, more and more FIDE masters are taking interest in the ICCF, and some of them are very quick to adopt to the arena and realize that it's never a good idea to base your opening preparation on what you did over-the-board. You have to variate and be creative, or your opponent might just have a nasty surprise waiting for you in the middlegame.

2. Subtractive analysis. This means using the engine to explore either your own ideas or alternative ideas the engine normally might skip over due to its selective search pruning function. What you do is forcefully remove the engine's top choice and have it evaluate from the remaining set of legal moves. As long as time permits, you can keep doing this and take notes of the evaluations until you start reaching moves that are clearly weak. This gives a set of candidate moves to really start your analysis from. Remember that an engine doesn't do this on its own, so it's still up to you to create the list of potential moves to consider playing.

3. Backsliding analysis. This allows you to go well above and beyond the engine's horizon and really find out if the position is going anywhere meaningful. What you do is move forward several moves in the given line an engine predicts as best, and then work your way backwards up the line and check for alternative

moves the engine may have missed as being an improvement. You really have to get in there and move pieces around. Ask yourself "why doesn't this work?" or "what about this move?". Believe it or not, you can sometimes come up with a brilliant line that the engine had no clue was even a viable option. This is an essential technique to beating opponents that simply let the engine play the top choice move. It also can save your skin in a game that you are being slowly crushed in. I had a recent game where my opponent was very creative in the opening, and I found myself in that horrible situation of getting squeezed off the board. The computer engine couldn't figure out what move to play that would save the situation, so I employed my backsliding technique on several candidate moves, and uncovered a brilliant game-saving draw that sacrificed a pawn twenty moves deep (40 ply). I input the entire line as a conditional string, and my opponent followed it all the way out to the draw because his engine couldn't resist the material evaluation making it look advantageous for him. These kinds of draws are almost as satisfying as a win for me. It demonstrates technique the computer engine could not find on its own, but the human-engine combination did.

Q:How do you improve at correspondence chess?

A:Improvement comes from experience, just as it does in over-the-board live chess. You get a keen sense for what openings give the best chances for a win, and you also develop a more solid repertoire as black by learning from your losses. The most important thing however, is to stay informed and updated on game databases. New ideas or dominating lines can still be discovered to this day, and you want to be on the informed side of that information for every new game you start. I will point out that buying expensive computer hardware is NOT required if you're a competent centaur chess player. I'm still using the same desktop computer I started with back in 2008!