

Bullet Chess

One Minute to Mate

by

**Hikaru Nakamura
&
Bruce Harper**

Foreword by Yasser Seirawan



2009

Russell Enterprises, Inc.
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by
Hikaru Nakamura & Bruce Harper

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Table of Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	7
Chapter 1: What is Bullet Chess?	8
Chapter 2: Why Bullet Is Fun	10
Chapter 3: Time	33
Chapter 4: Pre-moving and Other Creatures	49
Chapter 5: Pre-moving Blunders	56
Chapter 6: Choosing Your Openings	69
Chapter 7: Winning in the Opening	73
Chapter 8: Bullet Openings	81
Chapter 9: The Initiative	122
Chapter 10: Strategic Focus	137
Chapter 11: Tactics	150
Chapter 12: Simplification	160
Chapter 13: Bullet Endings	164
Chapter 14: Common Mistakes	180
Chapter 15: Mental Errors	197
Chapter 16: Psych Outs	215
Chapter 17: Falling Apart	230
Chapter 18: Knowing When to Stop	236
Chapter 19: Lessons from Bullet	239
Chapter 20: Bullet Principles	245

Bullet Chess

Foreword

My introduction to chess likely mirrored that of most American chess players: after learning the movements of the pieces and basic rules of the game I wanted to *play* as soon and as quickly as possible. No learning how to mate with the two bishops versus lone king, king triangulations or back-rank mates for me. No sir, I wanted to play! After being routinely clobbered by my chess teacher I soon graduated to club play or, in my case, to “coffee-house chess.” After all, my “club” was indeed a coffee-shop in the university district of Seattle Washington called *The Last Exit*. *The Exit* was a magnet for Seattle’s best players and it was there that I developed a close circle of friends. We would play “five-minute” or “blitz” chess and while away the afternoon and evening hours. Some in my circle were more adventurous and we would accelerate our tempo of play to “three-minute chess” and even “one-minute” or “bullet” games.

Bullet was a great deal of fun, and as I was fast but not good, it was an attractive way to spend the day. I fancied myself at such speeds, as I had excellent hand and eye coordination and could get fifty and even sixty moves “in” before the flag on my clock would fall. There were several obvious drawbacks to physical bullet games: even among the very best players, time scrambles at the very end of the games would inevitably lead to pieces being literally “dropped” onto wrong squares, pieces sliding beyond the intended square, hands colliding in mid-air leading to even more dropped pieces, pieces either falling – or flying – off the table, and scrambles to recover or replace the missing-in-battle would be interchanged with the inevitable illegal move...

Because our bullet games were played with a friendly banter, such issues didn’t really bother us and we simply continued, even if we felt cheated with an undeserved loss or two.

Because bullet games were so difficult to control physically, before too long we reverted back to regular speeds of three- and five-minute games. Still, the lure of bullet remained great because these games were so much *fun* and I often played to exhaustion!

While many lengthy musings were given to the idea of being able to “control” bullet games, such as not allowing the clock to be pressed until the piece was righted on a square; or requiring that illegal moves be pointed out immediately or else were allowed to stand, no one ever really came up with a completely satisfactory solution for controlling piece and hand movements. Nonetheless, for my whole chess career, I’ve enjoyed bullet games.

Then along came the internet and chess servers and bullet chess was changed forever. At last, a way of controlling the input of moves had been devised. No more pieces landing on the wrong square, hand collisions or illegal moves. Now it was about good play and of course mouse-inputting speeds! The fun of bullet chess could be enjoyed around the world at any time of the day.

Bullet chess has mostly lurked on the periphery of mainstream tournament play. While attending major open events, it is common to see players blitzing and playing bullet in the hallways and corridors waiting for the rounds to start. For the quick of eye and hand, as well as the tactically gifted, bullet is an endless source of fun.

To my knowledge there has never been a book devoted to serious bullet play (if I may use an oxymoron), which is why I eagerly undertook the assignment to write this foreword to this work by FIDE Master Bruce Harper and grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura. Hikaru (or “H-Bomb” as he is known) is a bullet legend on internet chess servers around the world. His bullet skills are simply extraordinary, and watching him play is a marvelous, and at times jaw-dropping, experience. He is that good.

Drawing from his games and the games of others, his experiences and how he thinks about bullet, the reader is welcomed into a fascinating parallel universe of the chess world. It is not to everyone’s liking, and indeed former world champion Mikhail Botvinnik would turn over in his grave to see such a young talent as Hikaru championing bullet. But it doesn’t seem to have hurt Hikaru’s “real” chess results, to put it mildly, and bullet is fun and addictive. And yes, bullet *can* help you in your tournament games, as ideas are reinforced, helping with your calculation during tournament play.

A few summers ago, when American grandmaster Larry Christiansen and his wife Natasha came to spend a couple weeks at our home in Amsterdam, one of the first stories Larry told me by way of our catching up was with what happened to his laptop. To paraphrase, *“I was playing bullet and played a really sweet game building up a nice mating attack, suddenly I had to rush my move and ^*x%#@ed it up and lost on time before I could mate. I was so mad! I meant to smash my fist onto the table in disgust but somehow caught the top end of my laptop and smashed it down. The top met bottom with a crash. Uh-oh... I broke my screen, wrecking my \$2,000 state of the art little friend...”* We both fell into a good laugh. Every bullet player knows the story only too well. (Hopefully not all of us have destroyed our computers. I’ve managed to avoid that trap. So far.) Enjoying Larry’s works such as *Storming the Ramparts*, Larry cites a number of his bullet games, explaining how a typical bullet mating pattern helped him pull off a coup.

Bullet Chess

Bullet players should really understand this above all else: play bullet for fun! It behooves us if we are serious about our bullet skills to give a bit more thought to bullet and how to improve our play. Time management is crucial: in bullet a bad move is indeed better than no move at all! The initiative is far more important than material. King safety is of paramount importance as it allows you to play quickly, free of concerns about mating attacks.

What bullet really teaches us is pattern recognition. Specifically, mating and tactical patterns that win material. All these themes are chapters in this work and critical components of playing bullet successfully. This book was written with an emphasis on enjoyment and fun. I suspect that you, dear reader, will be treated to more blunders in one book than you'll find in a hundred others combined. A record not meant to be broken.

Certainly this book will *not* teach you to be as good as Hikaru, but it will teach you to be a sharper tactician and a much stronger bullet player.

Enjoy!

Yasser Seirawan
Amsterdam
August 2009

Introduction

The idea of a book about one-minute (“bullet”) chess was first conceived in the spring of 2008, when American grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura visited Vancouver, British Columbia.

At the time, few members of the Internet Chess Club were unaware of the exploits of “Smallville,” the principal handle used by grandmaster Nakamura. His domination of the other ICC bullet players was astounding – several hundred rating points separated him from his “rivals.” if such a term can be used in this context. As all chess players know, someone always has to win in the end, but the Smallville phenomenon defied common sense.

In contrast, the other author of this book, FM Bruce Harper, was a late-comer to bullet chess. An entire game of chess in two minutes or less? What’s that all about? How could it even be possible?

This book is the result of the fortuitous meeting of a formidable grandmaster who is arguably the strongest bullet player in the world and a novice bullet player who just happened to be idle after completing his first chess book (*Chess on the Edge*, the three-volume chess biography of Canadian grandmaster Duncan Suttles). Hopefully it makes sense of a form of chess that, at first blush, seems impossibly nonsensical.

While all the mistakes in this book are those of the authors, it goes without saying that this book could not have been written without help and encouragement from others. We thank *ChessCafe*’s Hanon Russell for his enthusiasm and support for a novel venture, while former Canadian Junior Champion Tyler Johnson contributed many of the games (both good and bad!) found in the following pages.

Finally, no book can fully realize its potential, whatever that might be, without a skilled and ruthless copy editor. We thank Robin Perelle for taking time from her professional editing duties to squeeze the errors, verbosity and superfluous commas out of this book – her mastery of language is exceeded only by her ignorance of chess. And we thank Robin Harper for providing that extra set of non-chess eyes which found the errors we had all missed.

And with that, we invite the reader to enter the exhilarating, irrational and thoroughly fun world of bullet chess.

Hikaru Nakamura
Bruce Harper
Vancouver, British Columbia
August 2009

Bullet Chess

13. $\mathbb{Q}d2 \mathbb{Q}f8$ 14. $e \times f5 g \times f5$ 15. 0-0-0 $\mathbb{Q}e7$

Black offers a pawn to open lines to White's king. White accepts the gift, but Black gets counterplay.

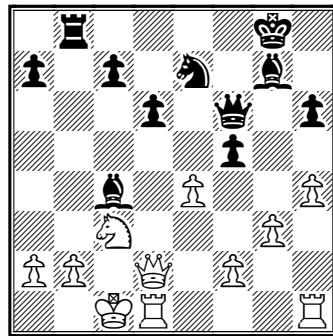
16. $\mathbb{Q} \times b7?$ $e4!?$ 17. $d \times e4? \mathbb{Q}b8$ 18. $\mathbb{Q}d5$

White took 11 seconds for this move, which fails to defend. This is common in bullet: if a player doesn't find the right continuation immediately, panic may set in and a blunder often results.

18... $\mathbb{Q} \times d5$ 19. $\mathbb{Q}c3?$

This fatalistic move loses. White should recapture on d5 and live with the consequences.

19... $\mathbb{Q} \times c4$



Now Black has a material and temporal advantage, as well as the initiative. The finish of the game is not for the faint-hearted.

20. $\mathbb{Q}he1 \mathbb{Q}c6$ 21. $f4 \mathbb{Q}b4$ 22. $e5 \mathbb{d} \times e5$ 23. $f \times e5 \mathbb{Q}a6$ 24. $\mathbb{Q}e3 \mathbb{Q} \times e5$ 25. $\mathbb{Q}d7 \mathbb{Q} \times a2+$ 26. $\mathbb{Q} \times a2 \mathbb{Q} \times a2$ 27. $\mathbb{Q}d2 \mathbb{Q} \times b2+$ 28. $\mathbb{Q}e1 \mathbb{Q}c3+$ 29. $\mathbb{Q} \times c3 \mathbb{Q}e2$ mate 0-1

Fighting for the initiative

In the preceding games, one player pretty much had things his own way. Even at the cost of material, one side made threats and the other side defended against them (or failed to defend against them, in some cases).

Such games are fine for illustrative purposes, but usually things are not so clear, especially in bullet. With both players making mistakes, the initiative can be fickle, changing hands quickly. One moment a player can be attacking, and the next minute he can be defending.

Steinitz taught us that the failure to exploit an advantage can result not only in the loss of that advantage, but also in the opponent gaining an equal or greater advantage. In bullet, this principle applies in spades, as the following example shows.

White (2126) – Black (2033)
[A04]

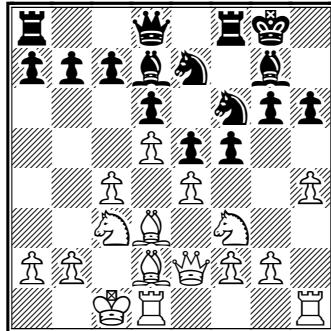
1. $\mathbb{Q}f3 g6$ 2. $e4 \mathbb{Q}g7$ 3. $d4 d6$ 4. $\mathbb{Q}d3 \mathbb{Q}c6$ 5. $c3 e5$ 6. $d5 \mathbb{Q}ce7$ 7. $h4 h6$ 8. $\mathbb{Q}d2 f5$ 9. $\mathbb{Q}e2 \mathbb{Q}f6$ 10. $c4 0-0$ 11. $\mathbb{Q}c3 \mathbb{Q}d7$ 12. 0-0-0 (D)

Now that White has committed his king, Black has a target and the play gets sharper. Each player has used about ten seconds.

12... $c6$ 13. $\mathbb{Q}b1 c \times d5$ 14. $c \times d5 \mathbb{Q}c8$ 15. $\mathbb{Q}c1?$ $\mathbb{Q}b6?$

Missing 15... $\mathbb{Q} \times c3!$ 16. $b \times c3 f \times e4$, and if White recaptures with 17. $\mathbb{Q} \times e4 \mathbb{Q} \times e4$? 18. $\mathbb{Q} \times e4?$, he loses his queen to 18... $\mathbb{Q}f5$.

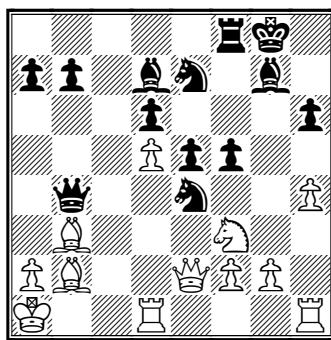
The Initiative



16.♕a1 ♕b4 17.e×f5 g×f5 18.♗c2 ♘×c3!?

By now Black is starting to fall behind on time, so he sacrifices the exchange in an effort to make things happen. If nothing else, this might create enough confusion that Black gains some time.

**19.b×c3 ♕×c3+ 20.♗b2 ♕b4
21.♗b3 ♖e4**



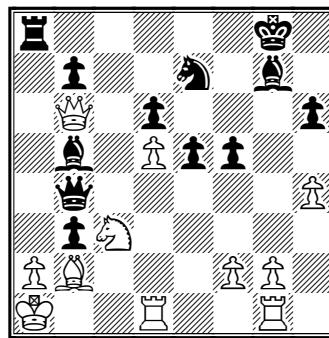
22.♖hg1!?

White must have known this move was too passive when he played it, and it turns out there was indeed something better: 22.♘×e5! blows open the position and gives White the initiative (22...d×e5 23.d6+).

22...a5 23.♘d2 ♗b5

23...♘c3 was better, but there's no point in quibbling. Black wants the initiative and he's not going to let details stand in his way. Under the barrage of threats, White falls behind in time and his defenses crumble

24.♕e3 a4 25.♘×e4 a×b3 26.♘c3 ♕a8 27.♕b6



27...e4!

Defending has worn down White's resistance, and now he was down to only ten seconds.

**28.♕×b5 ♕×a2+! 29.♘×a2 ♕×b5
30.♘c3 ♕a5+ 31.♕b1 ♘×c3
32.♘×c3 ♕×c3 0-1**

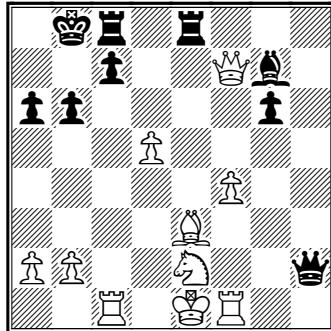
White lost on time.

In the next example, White also misses a chance for a decisive blow, and Steinitz's principle is again confirmed. (D)

White (1946) – Black (1937)
[A40]

Black has sacrificed a piece, but White's king appears to be somewhat insecure. Time is about equal: White

Bullet Chess



has 16 seconds remaining, and Black 19 seconds.

How should White continue?

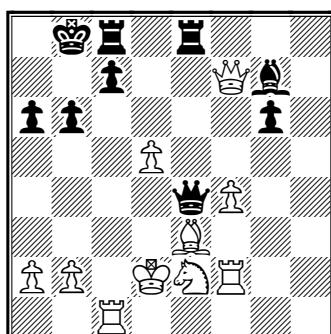
28. $\mathbb{Q}f2?$

White took five seconds to play this defensive move, missing 28. $\mathbb{Q}xc7!$, which breaks down Black's defenses. After 28... $\mathbb{Q}xc7$ 29. $\mathbb{Q}xe8+$, Black's threats vanish and White has a decisive advantage.

28... $\mathbb{Q}h1+$ 29. $\mathbb{Q}d2$

White now has ten seconds left.

29... $\mathbb{Q}e4$



Things are no longer clear, and Black's time advantage gives him the better chances.

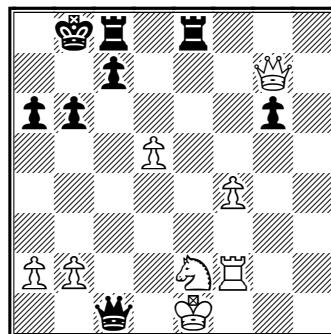
30. $\mathbb{Q}xg7?$

White took another five seconds for this move, which is a mistake. 30. $\mathbb{Q}xb6$ was right.

30... $\mathbb{Q}xe3+$ 31. $\mathbb{Q}e1$

With four seconds left, White instinctively protects his f2-rook, overlooking that his other rook is undefended.

31... $\mathbb{Q}xc1$ mate 0-1



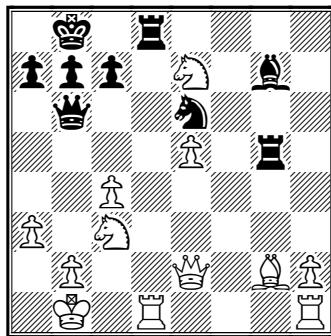
It's mate. Once White missed 28. $\mathbb{Q}xc7!$ and lost the initiative, his position disintegrated, both on the board and on the clock.

Naturally in bullet examples of missed opportunities that forfeit the initiative can be extreme, and lend credence to the axiom "never resign!"

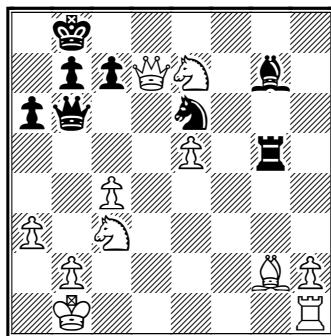
White (1921) – Black (2010)
[A10] (D)

The Initiative

White has completely outplayed his opponent and, with 12 seconds left to Black's nine seconds, he now begins what should have been the decisive attack.



28. $\mathbb{B} \times d8+$ $\mathfrak{Q} \times d8$ 29. $\mathbb{W} d2!$ $\mathfrak{Q} e6$
30. $\mathbb{W} d7!$ $a6$



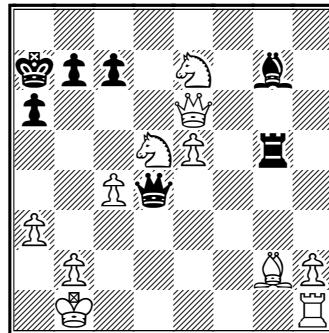
31. $\mathbb{W} c8+?$

White mates after 31. $\mathbb{W} e8+$ $\mathfrak{Q} a7$ 32. $\mathfrak{Q} c8+$, but with Black down to five seconds, against White's eight seconds, one would think that anything wins. Famous last words...

- 31... $\mathfrak{Q} a7$ 32. $\mathfrak{Q} cd5$ $\mathbb{W} d4$

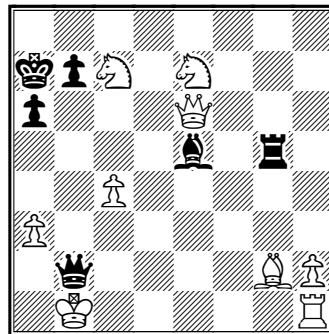
Since White is having trouble finding the mate, Black finds a glimmer of counterplay – a battery directed towards White's b2-pawn.

33. $\mathbb{W} \times e6?$



Another mistake by White, with seven seconds left. Now 33... $\mathbb{B} \times e5$ is actually better for Black, but he had no time for such refinements.

- 33... $\mathfrak{Q} \times e5?$ 34. $\mathfrak{Q} \times c7?$ $\mathbb{W} \times b2$ mate
0-1



Black had one second left when he delivered checkmate. White certainly can't complain that he didn't have his own chances to win.

The initiative as technique

One similarity between bullet and normal chess is that winning a “won” position is not always so easy, especially when time is a factor. Trading whatever material or positional advantage you might have for an attack