

# Breaking the Chess Game Addiction

Or...

## Why Chess Openings Wizard Sucks

*By Mike Leahy, bookup.com July 9, 2016*

I promise you two things. If you read this manifesto and you take it to heart, you will become much better at playing the opening phase of chess and you will become a happier chess player. **You will not need to purchase anything to do this.** This is about breaking an addiction that is stealing the joy from your chess.

Bookup is about to release Chess Openings Wizard 2016 after four years of development. It's going to have record sales on the Macintosh and on Windows. Then the iPad later this year.

But that's not why I wrote this. Really it's not.

I was in touch with a potential marketing partner, the Internet Chess Club. They made some great suggestions for the new COW that have been folded into the program but it was during our discussions about how to market stuff to chess players (videos, software) that made me light up with this thought...

(Read the next paragraph with an eye toward whether this could be you.)

The "average Joe" chess player (like any of the hundreds of thousands who have accounts on the ICC) is upset about one thing. Joe learns an opening and he plays it perfectly but then his opponent - who doesn't know the opening as well as Joe does - plays a garbage move. Joe doesn't know how to punish this garbage move so he soon turns a good position into a bad position. Then he loses.

For Joe it hurts to spend all that time studying openings and then lose anyway so Joe starts backing off on his opening preparation.

Do you know anyone who thinks like this? Do you know anyone like this... *intimately?*

You see, it'd be easy to create marketing based on this, marketing that would stick a knife in your back and twist the blade in hopes of moving you to buy Chess Openings Wizard. It would go something like this:

**You do your best to study openings but you still lose to inferior players right out of the opening - even when you play the opening phase correctly. And now you're tired of losing.**

**We have the cure for that. Chess Openings Wizard 2016 will take your understanding of openings to the next level.**

Now mind you, that is all true but it omits something so very critical that it may as well be a big fat marketing lie.

I've talked with hundreds of tournament players over the past 20 years and if I asked Joe how his openings are going he is not going to tell me about the games he's lost.

Instead Joe will almost always tell me about the game database he just got or the software he just upgraded. It has a million more recent games. It's rated 50 points higher. It has more annotated games than he'll be able to study in a lifetime of lunch breaks. It has new search features that bring him more information on his favorite openings.

And I can see from the smile on his face that he is... addicted to his game database.

Joe will tell me that he wants to get better. Obviously, he wants to get better. Why else would he sink so much money in his chess software (and videos and even books)?

But if I were honest I'd tell Joe what I know to be true. A year from now he will have about the same rating, maybe even a little worse.

I make my living selling what I think is the best chess study environment available so I can hardly afford to be that honest with Joe.

At this point you're probably choking on the inconsistency - Chess Openings Wizard is the best tool out there AND Chess Openings Wizard sucks.

Stay with me and you'll see why both these things are true and not a marketing gimmick.

It goes two ways for almost every chess player who buys Chess Openings Wizard. Both ways both suck.

The first way is this: Joe buys COW and installs it. He sets an intention to finally buckle down and master the opening. He jumps into the software. Like anything new, it is bright and shiny when he starts but very soon the luster fades and he does less work with COW. The software becomes "shelfware."

At the risk of dating myself, software used to come with manuals which came in binders. Most of it wasn't very good software so at some point we just left the binder on the shelf. We poke fun because we bought the dang thing but now it just sits on the shelf. Shelfware.

You have probably purchased some shelfware. We all have. Studies have shown that people who buy videos (like those great chess videos) seldom make it past the first three videos. It's human nature.

Let me save you \$197, the price of COW Professional. If you think you are going to turn it into shelfware, consider not buying it. Why would I say that? Because it's bad for business in the long run. I want COW owners to rave about how good their chosen tool is AND about how they are out-playing stronger opponents in the opening and beyond. I'm happy to report that many COW users have been using it for decades and they are getting stronger.

The second way is very much like the first way: Joe buys COW and installs it. He sets aside some time to enter what he knows about the opening into a COW ebook. Joe thinks he knows a fair number of positions by heart. He is no newcomer to studying openings.

Let me stop here and ask you this: how many opening positions do you know by heart? By that I mean how many positions do you know the right and wrong moves for you and your opponent?

Don't go on to the next paragraph until you've picked a number. Trust me. Pick a number.

The average Joe thinks he knows around 500 to 2,000 positions. I remember having this thought myself. I thought I knew a few hundred positions. After all, I'd read a dozen books on my pet lines. I'd gone over hundreds of master games in my opening.

But Joe is wrong and so was I.

When I first sat down with the original Bookup program in 1984, I decided to start by keying in (yes keying, there were no mice back then on DOS computers) all the moves I knew. It totalled around 50 positions. Just 50.

I did say that almost all players had one of these two experiences. A notable exception was Dr. Bruce Burdick, a math professor at Ohio State University near the Bookup home office. Bruce got the original Macintosh version of Bookup and he decided to enter in everything he knew about this pet opening, the Sicilian Najdorf. The poisoned pawn variation is so thick with variations that entire books have been published on it. Bruce studied these books voraciously.

Bruce was no average Joe. He ended up pulling an all nighter entering all the moves he knew by heart. This was aided of course by the fact that his Macintosh was one of the first computers that came with a mouse.

Don't play into the Najdorf against Bruce Burdick. You will have your hat handed to you.

Which leads me to why Chess Openings Wizard sucks.

For the average Joe, when he finds out that he knows only a few dozen positions by heart... that hurts.

Unless Joe is extraordinarily resilient, he will be crushed enough to give up on studying openings.

Joe will retreat to his game database where he can fiddle to his heart's content with all the engines, new collections, search functions (all games that include a sacrifice on f7).

Like all addictions, this will make Joe feel better while still leaving him to spin his wheels.

It sure beats the brutal revelation by COW that Joe doesn't know squat about the opening. He has been playing the same set of positions without improvement for some time and the exercise of putting in everything he knows into COW has turned to heartache.

A game database won't tell you that your knowledge is limited. COW will show you exactly how much or how little you know if you do that exercise. COW sucks.

Unless you one of the Bruce Burdicks of the world.

There is a test to see if your next few years of chess will be rewarding or frustrating. Want to take the test? It's a simple test and it's fun. Ready? Read these next few paragraphs carefully and I'll get back to you. Go.

COW requires discipline to get any benefit from it.

Like every grandmaster before the advent of computers, it's totally doable to become better without buying any software (just in case you might still be thinking this a marketing plug for COW). You will want some good game software and some good playing software and some good internet chess interface software. They will make the job easier but it's still a task that requires discipline.

Which reminds me of the joke that I credit to international master Malcolm Pein. Malcolm's job was to sell ChessBase to other strong players in the UK. Strong players are natural skeptics and Malcolm's straight up and honest sales pitch was this:

Malcolm: "Just buy ChessBase. It will do half your work for you."

Customer: "In that case I'll take *two* copies."

I think Malcolm was right by the way. ChessBase will take care of half the work that any strong player is already doing. (Yes, that is my strong endorsement of ChessBase.)

I also think that COW is the place for doing the *other* half of the work.

Notice that I did not say that COW would do the other half of the work for you. That half requires discipline. You need to do the work. COW is just the ideal *place* to do that work. You need to face down exactly what you do know (after you take the time to put your repertoire into COW) and you need to have the discipline to keep measuring what you know while you expand what you know.

Okay. That ends the reading portion of the test. Here's how to tell if you are going to get stronger at chess and thus enjoy it more and more over the next few years. If, when you read the word discipline, you felt good then you are on the track to better chess and more happiness. If instead you had a negative feeling when you read the word discipline, you should look forward to the same chess strength and a certain level of frustration that accompanies lack of improvement.

And you thought I was selling you chess software.

Lastly, let me let you off the hook if you are using COW primarily to research chess (solve an opening, say) or improve the opening book of your playing engine. I know you're out there and you know this wasn't directed at you. You have filled my email inbox with deep thinking which I appreciate. Keep doing what you're doing.

Now my friend you have some decisions to make. I am not going to judge you. I myself spend my break times most days with a game or two of speed chess on the ICC. I don't pretend to tell you that you should do what I'm doing in chess and expect to get better because I'm not doing it.

My specialty is creating the most useful tools for tournament players *and then getting them to use those tools*. That second part is the hardest part of my job but I bring discipline to both parts of the game. I seek out any way I can (new software wizards, new videos, this manifesto) to accomplish what I'm up to.

My hope is that I've opened up a crack in that addiction and shined enough light on it that you can't help but do something about it. You're welcome.

If I can persuade you to stick it out through the part that sucks, you'll be thanking me again.

Mike Leahy  
The Database Man

[www.bookup.com](http://www.bookup.com)

P.S. If you have thoughts that I should hear, drop me an email or craft a comment at <https://www.facebook.com/chessopeningswizard> or catch me on the ICC playing three minute chess as **database**man.

P.P.S. Conversations with folks at the ICC sparked this manifesto but if for some reason you didn't like it, all the thoughts here are my own.