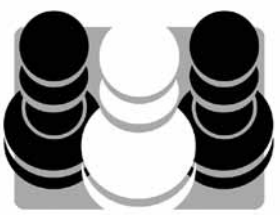
Mayhem in the Morra!

By

Marc Esserman



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Foreword

"It's not business Larry, it's strictly personal." So said International Master Marc Esserman when I asked him why he planned to write a book on the Morra Gambit. His massive treasury of Morra files will be unlocked and the secrets and ideas he has accumulated over the years will be revealed in this book.

Marc adopted the Morra Gambit in his youth and soon weaponized the quaint, tame house pet into a snarling, vicious pitbull of an opening. Esserman has convinced hardcore skeptics. He has refuted many a "refutation". He has forced many opponents to spend countless hours preparing for the dreaded thing. Many formerly proud acceptors have become meek, sniveling decliners when faced with Esserman's dreaded 3.c3. Essermania has spawned Esserphobia. Answering 1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 with the "beta" replies 3...♘f6 and 3...g6 is a significant psychological victory for White by move 3.

In 2011, when preparing for the US Championship, I decided to employ the Morra Gambit as a surprise weapon if given the chance. Marc supplied me with a vast amount of analysis and novelties for that tournament and I became convinced that the gambit was not only dangerous, but perfectly sound. There is no greater authority in the world on this line than Marc Esserman and he lays it all out there in this book.

"It's not business, it's strictly personal."

Grandmaster Larry Christiansen
Three-time US Champion

Foreword

The first time I met Marc was at the Foxwoods Open in 2009. Friends had warned me about him. After the game, which I won, it became clear to me that Marc is a passionate lover of chess who likely dedicates more time to analyzing the game than many top GMs.

Our rematch took place at the 2011 US Open in Orlando. Marc played the Morra Gambit! What !#%?@?$!%! I had just recently visited Boston, where Marc resides. There I played some blitz games in Harvard Square versus his friend, Jorge Sammour-Hasbun, who also used this "weapon". When Marc ventured 1.e4 c5 2.d4, I thought, "Is he serious? Are we going to play coffeehouse today?" Now I know the answer, and the answer is *yes*! I got crushed in an impressive way, leaving me both groggy and completely mad, forcing me to consider the Morra seriously for the first time in my life. After the tournament, Marc and I had a thematic blitz match to test our ideas.

I must admit, life still isn't easy against the Morra. I am sure that in this book, Marc will provide you with many interesting ideas and analysis. I am also convinced that you will have some enjoyable attacking games, at the cost of *only* one pawn!

Grandmaster Loek van Wely
Winner of countless tournaments and former top 10 player

Preface

By the author

At 16, I found myself in the bookstore innocently browsing before the 2000 US Masters, my first ever invitational event. Suddenly, a title struck my eye. Leafing through, some words popped out of the pages and became etched in my memory forever:

> "Why did you elect to take up the Smith-Morra Gambit in the first place? The gambit is a good weapon for blitz chess, useful in teaching tactics to a young player, and fun to play. But if you expect to get a good result with it at the higher levels of serious tournament competition, and think the logical outcome of a game after using it is only a draw for Black with perfect play, we express our condolences. It is difficult to have a serious discourse with someone who insists the earth is flat."[1]

As a teenager all I knew were the games of Paul Morphy, the leader of the Romantic generation. Pawns were sacrificed as the pieces came to the fore with stunning speed, sweeping away all in their path until the king himself succumbed to their power. Whereas now the Berlin and Petroff steal the show, then the Evans and King's gambits governed the landscape. Occasionally the gambiteer would flounder as the defender grabbed all material in sight and lived to tell the tale. But far more inspiring were those cases when two plus two did not equal four,[2] and our royal game revealed far greater depth than mere greed and number-crunching extra pawns to bland victory. Perhaps the author meant simply to attack only the Morra Gambit, but in my young mind he was desecrating the great Morphy and the entire Romantic chess era. I would not let such dogma stand; it could not stand.

A few hours later the Morra appeared on my board, but my opponent was not in the least perturbed. He blitzed out the opening with an aura of confidence bordering on arrogance that I had never encountered, until we reached the very starting position of the book I had just been reading, "Smith-Morra Gambit, Finegold Defense". Quite odd, I mused, but plowed forward nonetheless, thinking for over an hour on move 11. Eventually my opponent too slowed down, I drummed up a decisive attack, tragically missed a mate in two, and lost.

Only afterwards did I receive the shock that my adversary, National Master Bob Ciaffone, co-authored the "Finegold Defense". In the post-mortem, the masters surmised that I fought valiantly and showed some imagination, but ultimately the Morra Gambit remained unsound and I should just learn a new opening. But every time a move flashed on the board which defied their conclusion, I thought I could detect a creeping doubt that maybe, just maybe, the world was flatter than my opponent imagined. I was defeated, but invigorated, having successfully challenged a published author in a debate where we were polar opposites. I went on to use the Smith-Morra Gambit successfully twice more in the 2000 US Masters: once against the young

Hikaru Nakamura, and in the last round vs. FM Chow, who, in a perfect storybook ending, adopted the Finegold Defense himself! After an early bishop sacrifice, my knight raided the Black camp from its e6-outpost, and I won in short order. The coup prompted my objective opponent to pay the ultimate compliment – he remained unconvinced that the Finegold Defense refuted the Smith-Morra Gambit. Chow urged me to keep exploring the possibilities hidden in the gambit, and projected that in my hands the Morra may morph into a formidable weapon after all.

History has not been kind to the Smith-Morra. While the King's and Evans gambits had their time under the sun during the 19th century, the Morra has always remained in the shadows. Although the Sicilian's purest gambit did in fact debut in 1846 in Kieseritzky's practice during the height of the Romantic movement,[3] it remained eclipsed by its more accomplished brothers. Perhaps had it fallen into Morphy's hands, the world would have taken notice.[4] But alas, the gambit stayed buried in the rubble for another 100 years, only to surface again in an era where it was not welcome. Just a glance at Bronstein's famed tournament book of Zurich 1953 would tell a time traveler that the glorious games of the Romantic era had become museum artifacts.[5] The closed openings (much reviled by Morphy) ruled the day. While the masters lauded their improved defensive technique as the demise of the reckless swashbuckling play of yore, occasionally there remained a rebellion scattered across the chess kaleidoscope. The flair of the Romantic school flowed through both Bronstein and Spassky, and their reverence for the forgotten art form took center stage in their classic King's Gambit encounter. And we cannot forget Fischer's demolition of Fine in 1963, when he paid tribute to Morphy's beloved Evans Gambit. But the Romantics were fighting a losing battle, and after Spassky's King's Gambit coup over Fischer, the American genius vowed to refute the relic gambit once and for all. As the global chess level advanced through time and the game became further subjected to brutal, concrete analysis, surely the colorful, emotional play of the 19th century could not survive.

Within this hostile environment, the Smith-Morra Gambit re-emerged. While the dangerous Yugoslav attacking grandmasters, in particular Matulovic, achieved some resounding victories in the Morra, the current of history could simply sweep aside these uprisings as isolated rebellions. Despite his success, Matulovic eventually abandoned the opening, and the young gambit, without the medals of honor from the 19th century, desperately longed for a shining knight.

Sadly, no world class player would lead the charge. While Spassky still felt comfortable dabbling in the established King's Gambit, he would never dare to test the fledging Morra Gambit. In 1960, Fischer would take up the mantle, unleashing the gambit to surprise Korchnoi. Yet despite being on the dominant end of a tense draw, Fischer would not try again. He seemed content for the gambit to remain a surprise, and nothing more.[6]

Alas, history would choose Ken Smith as the gambit's champion and name bearer.[7] The inherent risk in the gambit naturally appealed to Smith's gambling nature, who aside from being a FIDE Master and avid chess enthusiast, donned the hat of a world class poker player.[8] Smith would author a myriad of books and articles promoting the Morra, and in the San Antonio international tournament of 1972, the time came for him to showcase the virtues of the gambit to the world. However, it was not to be. Smith lost all three Morra Gambit scuffles badly vs. world class players (IM Donald Byrne, GM Larry Evans, and GM Henrique Mecking), and the harsh chess public swiftly passed its verdict on the young gambit. The popular sentiments of the day

can no better be summarized than by Grandmaster and World Championship Candidate Bent Larsen. While annotating one of Smith's other games during the tournament, Larsen quipped about the opponent's choice to play the French Defense: "1...e6?, stronger is 1...c5 which wins a pawn."[9] Smith had threatened the established thinking of the day, and the grandmasters were quick to shoot his beloved gambit down. While still considered second-rate, the esteemed King's and Evans gambits were never chided in such a fashion. When Kasparov crushed both Anand and Piket in the Evans Gambit in 1994, the public praised his brilliant, if risky, play. But did Kasparov win because he played the Evans Gambit, or because he is Kasparov? Likewise, did Ken Smith lose in San Antonio 1972 because of the Morra's faulty DNA, or because he was simply outgunned by grandmasters?

The ripples of Smith's losses in San Antonio 1972 are still felt in modern times. As a teenager surveying the book store, I could not understand why such an inspiring opening faced such hostility from the chess public. Now with age and the study of history, I do. The young gambit, with virtually only 60 years of practice today, has never received its proper evaluation. Far worse, it has never even been given a chance; its life cut short, tragically pronounced dead in its second decade of testing.

This book will finally give the Morra Gambit its chance to shine. I have ventured the King's, Evans, and Smith-Morra gambits in tournament and rapid play against strong grandmasters. My results in the Morra are by far the best in these contests. In the last 8 years, I have lost only twice with the Morra Gambit in tournament play, both defeats not a result of the opening. I have faced two players over 2700 FIDE in the Morra Accepted in tournament play. In both cases, they lost in under 30 moves. Luck? Perhaps. During a phase of my career when I would lose game after game with the Evans, I would win on command in the Morra Gambit. Can this statistic simply be ignored as a result of my superior knowledge of the Morra Gambit compared to the Evans? Perhaps. But at the highest level, there is no luck in chess – all can be explained by the art of scientific analysis.

Nothing will be hidden in this book. There are no gimmicks here, no attempts to conceal novelties for later use on an unsuspecting opponent. The reader can expect the truth – nothing less. The Sicilian's only true gambit must take its rightful place in history.[10]

If gambits were viewed with skepticism in the 1950's, then in modern days, the sentiments have turned to downright scorn. The Evans Gambit has all but disappeared at the top level. Meanwhile, the King's Gambit just became the butt of a worldwide April Fool's Day joke when a 3000 core machine proclaimed it refuted at last. Naturally, many got duped![11] And 1.e4 c5 2.d4(?). Well, it just loses a pawn! The general public simply does not believe that the Romantic gambits can survive the rugged world of objective, precise, unforgiving computer analysis.

But tell that to all the grandmasters who now decline the Morra Gambit or simply don't even brave playing the Sicilian against me. Perhaps there is a crack in the armor of the materialists' mantra two plus two equals four. Perhaps there is a growing rebellion against conventional thinking. Perhaps the earth is flat after all.

As I'd do with any serious opening, I will not stop the analysis in each critical variation until I have demonstrated that White is fighting for the advantage. Yes, that is not a misprint – that **White** is fighting for an advantage in the Morra Gambit. If after studying the Morra Gambit for 15 years I did not believe I could make this claim, I would not be writing this book.

For the practical player not so much concerned about the tides of history as about maximizing chess results, I will now speak to you. In the pages ahead you will find a stockpile of heavy artillery to combat the Sicilian successfully, against players of all levels, from amateur to grandmaster. Your opponents, meanwhile, will be placed under considerable psychological strain, not only because of your imposing style of play, but because the Morra Gambit does not constitute part of their standard main line Sicilian preparations. Do not be mistaken, however – this is not simply a "how to" opening book. Rather, it expounds a philosophy of dynamic, attacking chess in general and the Morra Gambit is merely my featured guest. Thus, sprinkled across the pages you will find games which at first glance seem to have no relation to the Morra Gambit. Yet once you scale the Morra's vast, overarching theme base, the sparkling similarities will be as clear as day. Ultimately, even when you are faced with mainstream chess positions, you will be able to more successfully apply the principles of the Romantic school to your chess praxis.

Lastly, even if you have no interest in playing the Morra Gambit or doubt that it could ever be sound, your overall chess imagination and vision will improve as a result of studying this book. I dare you to push forward, and you will be exposed to possibilities you never thought existed on the chessboard. And if you finish the task, you will add a new dimension to your chess understanding, no matter what positions you choose to play. This is why Spassky's legendary coach Tolush urged him to play gambits, and why my first professional coach, IM Calvin Blocker, taught me the Smith-Morra Gambit as a youngster.

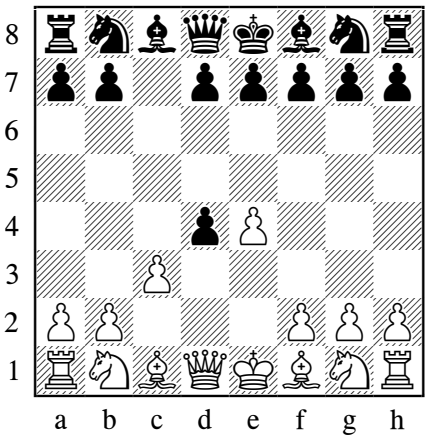
I hope this book inspires a whole younger generation to take up the forgotten art of gambit play which so enriches the possibilities in our game and chess players in general. I hope that as a result of this book, aspiring professional players have the courage to test the gambit at the highest level, pushing this fascinating opening into mainstream modern chess. And lastly, I ironically hope that after this book, the Morra Gambit Declined (which I also copiously cover) becomes the main line after 1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3. After all, every player who declines the gambit tacitly admits that there is indeed much to fear! May the Smith-Morra Gambit finally have a home, a firm foothold in the 21st century, 200 years after its predecessors.

IM Marc Esserman
Cambridge, Massachusetts
June 2012

Introduction

The Much Maligned Morra

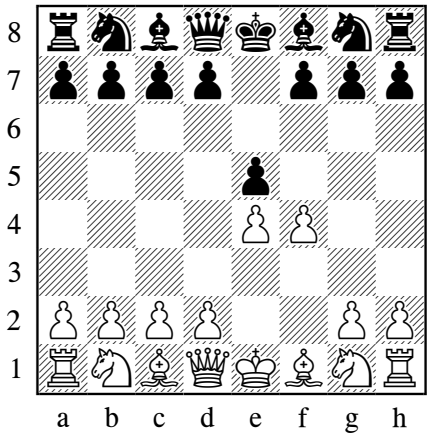
After 1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3,



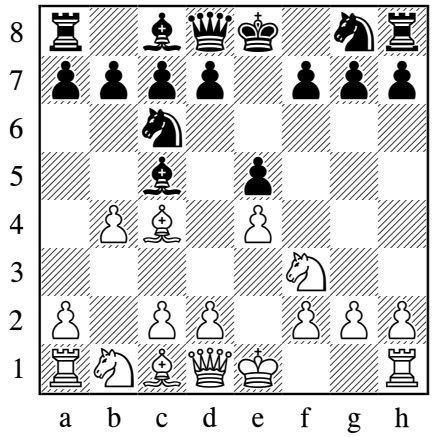
we reach the starting position of the much maligned Morra Gambit. I must confess that this is often the moment in my chess praxis when my heart thumps most – will my opponent accept the sacrifice in the spirit of the Romantics, or will he shun the most honorable path and meekly decline? Sometimes I wait for the critical decision for many minutes as my grandmaster foe flashes me an incredulous, bordering on insulted, look. Other times, I receive the answer almost instantaneously. Yet every time I am greeted with 3...dxc3, I could not be happier. My knight freely flows to c3, the Morra accepted appears, and we travel back in time to the 19th century. Already ahead a full tempo in development, I smile, knowing that all of my pieces will soon flood the center. My bishops will zoom to the central diagonals, and my nimble queen will influence any sector of the board she desires. Meanwhile, Black remains cramped. His queen and bishops lie sleeping, and while his queen's knight can reach c6 unharmed, the king's knight must constantly fret about the dangerous e4-e5 thrust.

The Morra Gambit vs. the King's and Evans gambits

But this only scratches at the surface of the gambit's depth. In order to fully appreciate why the Morra can endure the 21st century's rigorous analytical microscope, we must first compare the gambit to its two elder brothers which have virtually disappeared from top level chess, the King's and Evans gambits. In the King's Gambit,



White sacrifices his king's bishop pawn for central dominance. However, his aggression comes at a hefty price – not only does he lose a pawn, but all of the squares around his king are critically weakened forever. So often it is not White's minus pawn in the King's Gambit, but a compromised king, which ultimately leads to his demise. Likewise, in the swashbuckling Evans,



the gambiteer sacrifices his queen's knight pawn to gain tempi on the black bishop via c2-c3 and d2-d4, erecting a central pawn mass in the process. But again, the price is steep, as the lunging b2-b4 undermines the solidity of White's queenside, chiefly the c3- and c4-squares. In both of these illustrious openings, if the gambiteer does not swiftly sweep Black off the board, his game will likely become positionally bankrupt. To cast further doubt upon the ancient gambits, after 1.e4 e5, Black's king's bishop already can move, thus bringing him one step closer to castling out of danger. In contrast, in the Morra Gambit, the bishop starts buried on f8. As a result, Black's king often never escapes the pelting central crossfire.

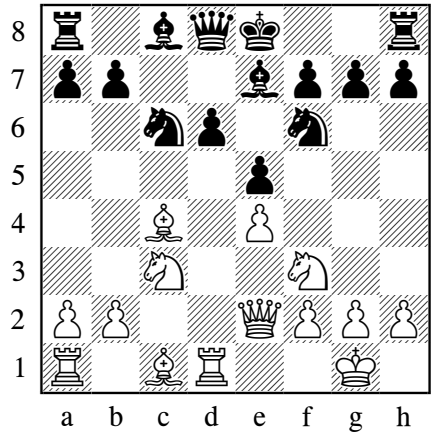
Yet it's not all so cut and dry. To the credit of Morra bashers, Black does possess a full extra central pawn for his woes (while in the King's and Evans gambits, White sacrifices only a flank pawn.) But to take the conversation into the concrete, Black can blunt the Morra gambiteer's assault on the sensitive f7-square with ...e6, a defense not available in the classical e4/e5 gambits. The extra central d-pawn then may make an immediate impact, sliding up to d6 and plugging any holes while restraining White's e4-e5 advances. No wonder then that the solid ...e6 and ...d6 pawn duo, establishing a Scheveningen Sicilian-like fortress, is one of the most trusted ways to subdue Morra mayhem.

Yet in the final analysis, the secret to the Morra Gambit's longevity lies not solely in the tactical arena (all gambits pose immediate tactical dangers to the defender). Rather, the Morra is also firmly *positionally* grounded. For starters, a Morra gambiteer may safely castle and tuck away his king on g1 behind a healthy blanket of pawn cover. The same luxury is not available in the King's Gambit (so aptly named for throwing the white king's safety to the wind). On the other end of the board, White's rooks may rush to c1 and d1, where they will chew up central squares on the wide open c- and d-files. Take a close look at the Morra accepted starting position again – White simply has no obvious weaknesses! This fact alone can breed a doomsday psychology from the defender as

he struggles to deal with reality. He knows he is up a pawn, he knows he should win easily – after all, the chess authorities said so. As all of these thoughts cloud his thinking, the freewheeling gambiteer slowly increases the pressure, his pieces ready to ravage. Even in the worst case scenario, when White's potent e4-pawn and Black's passive d6-pawn swap off and the gambiteer obtains only nebulous compensation in return, the menacing Morra rooks and imposing centralization of White's forces can still strain the defender's delicate psyche.

The d4-square – White's only true weakness

Only a keen eye can spot the one true defect in White's starting position: the d4-square. As a result of pushing 1 e4 and then shedding the c pawn, the gambiteer lacks proper pawn protection against an enemy incursion on d4. Particularly, a black knight plopping on d4, especially when supported by the e5-pawn, can virtually paralyze White. However, to access the d4 soft spot, the defender must make some serious concessions.



Black has just played ...e6-e5, securing a foothold on d4. In return, he surrenders the d5-square for White's pieces. But hastily probing the d5-square further with 10.♗g5(?) meets strict punishment. After 10...♗g4! Black becomes master of the center, as the highly unpleasant threat of ...♘d4 looms large. A Morra virtuoso would never allow such a beast into the heart of his camp, and instead would overprotect d4 with ♗e3! immediately. Only after the sensitive d4-square is under lock and key would White then continue his plans to conquer d5 and the rest of the board.

A good rule of thumb – Chase the black queen!

Too often the novice gambiteer believes that there is only one formulaic setup for White, namely 5.♘f3, 6.♗c4, 7.0–0, 8.♕e2, 9.♖fd1, and then hope for the best. While this sequence is normally the correct method against the d6-e6 Scheveningen defenses, thinking in these simple terms will often get you into deep trouble. In fact, the savvy defender lies awake at night wishing that you have such a misunderstanding. Achieving Morra mastery requires great mental flexibility, but if you must abide by a Morra formula, the most powerful one would be: *when in doubt, chase the black queen.*

In the Open Sicilian, White's c2-pawn obstructs his rook from participating in the fight for the c-file. As a result, Black often makes the c-file his permanent base of operations, with a rook on c8 patrolling the half-open line and the black queen comfortably perched on c7. However, in the Morra Gambit, the fully open c-file morphs into White's greatest asset. The gambiteer's lead in development ensures that his queen's rook will reach c1 first, thus serving fair warning to the black queen that c7 is no longer safe territory. The queen can be hounded on her original d8-square as well, as White's other rook can easily target her from d1. If she heads to e7, she may obstruct the

harmonious development of the king's bishop and the entire kingside in turn. If she pokes her head out to b6 or a5, she comes under fire from a pawn advance b2-b4 or a sleek ♗d2 or ♗e3. If she obstinately tries to beat the queen's rook to the punch with a premature ...♕c7, White's queen's knight can harass her with ♘b5 (or even the sacrificial ♘d5) and White's queen's bishop can also get into the act with ♗f4. And if she ever plays it too cool on b8, the entombed rook on a8 will pay dearly for her cowardice. As you can see, finding a harmonious square for the queen is Black's main headache in the Morra Gambit, and if he can solve this problem, he often solves the Morra riddle. Let us now witness some queen hunting in action.

Chase #1

The following example, which made a great impression upon me as a young Morraphile, can be found in Graham Burgess's groundbreaking 1994 Smith-Morra Gambit book. Burgess featured the sequence to explain why Black cannot make simple developmental moves in the Morra Gambit and survive. We will be viewing it from a different lens, with an eye for rabidly chasing the black queen to and fro.

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♘xc3 ♘c6 5.♘f3

In every example in this book, White's king's knight will develop to its natural f3-square.

5...d6 6.♗c4

Likewise, White's king's bishop takes aim on the aggressive "Italian" diagonal in almost all cases.[12]

6...e6

Black adopts the solid Scheveningen structure alluded to earlier, and so the gambiteer readies for the standard 0–0, ♕e2, ♖d1 plan.

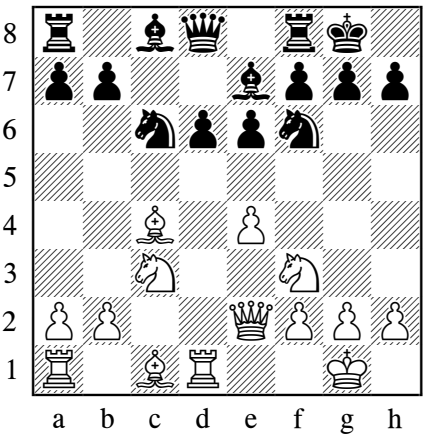
7.0–0 ♘f6 8.♕e2 ♗e7 9.♖d1

The chase begins. If the queen flees to c7, White's cavalry keeps stalking her via b5.

Here the old main line of the Morra Gambit, 9...e5, prevents White's e4-e5 thrust but consequently weakens the d5-square forever.

The passive 9...♗d7 also blocks the d-file pin but interferes with the queen's guard of d6. There are just no easy answers against the Morra's flowing compensation.

9...0–0?



10.e5!

Black is scolded for his carelessness, and must retreat to a fallback position.

10...♘e8 11.exd6 ♗xd6

11...♘xd6 12.♗f4+– and the crushing pin decides. 12...e5 (12...a6 13.♗xd6 ♗xd6 14.♘e4+–) 13.♘xe5 only prolongs the inevitable.

12.♘b5! ♕e7

The hapless queen runs, but she cannot hide.

12...a6 13.♘xd6 ♘xd6 14.♗f4±

13.♗g5!