

ChessBase Cafe

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So Many Questions

The questions dam is about to burst, so before it changes to hate mail it's time for another Q&A marathon. I'm going to start with one of the great unasked questions of our era: why do I need chess software? (And its corollary: If we are in the computer chess era, why do I still buy so many books?)

When commercial chess software came on the scene – around three hours after home computers – this would have been an easy question to answer. Pretty much the only thing most early programs did was play chess against you. Analysis and training features were rare and poor.

Nowadays any chess program you can find will wipe you out with a few billion transistors tied behind its back. Arguments about which engine is stronger are for connoisseurs and players with ratings over 2800. Most casual users still use their chess software for an opponent, albeit on the handicap levels, but extra features are where it's at.

And that's just the playing programs, which have ballooned to include database features, automated analysis, music, chit-chatting kibitzers, video, and soon they will probably have a pizza maker too. One area where things have really improved in the past year or two is that of training software. In the past these were either exercise marathons with puzzle after puzzle or were basically e-books.

Most of these CDs and DVDs, as with print chess books, are about openings. Chessplayers are addicted to openings and the material is relatively easy to produce. You could make your own opening study material in a few hours with a big database. Add some pithy notes, pinch the evals from Informant and MCO, extend the lines of a few other analysts and you're ready to be published! The amount of useful original analysis in most new opening books could usually fit on one or two pages.

That's not to say that a well-organized and entertaining practical guide to an opening isn't a handy thing to have. Few of the 99%-amateur readers are looking for a stunning piece of new analysis to surprise their friends at the club. Software makes it easier to include more material because you don't have any space limitations. But this makes organizing the material critically important.

The titles that do this best organize things in a way that also teaches you something. Few books bother to explain (assuming they could) why one chapter

is before another and why variation X comes before variation Y. Does one line get more space because it's better, or because it's more popular with GMs, or because it used to be popular and there's a lot of old analysis about it available?

The latest ChessBase offerings are doing a fair job in that department, although ease-of-use has never been a strong point. Most people end up clicking around from section to game to section without much coherency, the same way people surf the web. This non-linear study method doesn't hurt most of the time, although I doubt the authors are aware of it or would approve.

I recommend taking the plunge and purchasing a training title if you haven't already. Having a board in front of you all the time doesn't do wonders for your visualization, but you retain a lot more information and can go through things much quicker. The key, even with video, is to not be a passive learner. Make notes, come up with your own variations, write down questions and doubts, and figure out the answers.

If you don't want to be an openings zombie, I can recommend the interesting *Right Decisions* CD by Aagaard and Lund. (When does Jacob Aagaard sleep? He's everywhere! Maybe he could trade in a few of those vowels for a nap.) It's an extended version of a book by the same name and contains around 4000 positions to solve. I'm not terribly enamored of the ChessBase "training notation" system, but it works well for this sort of puzzle marathon.

The E-mailbag

Several people have asked why ChessBase 9 is slow to launch, slower than CB 8 and only slightly quicker than the *Return of the King* extended edition. This is mostly because of the greater quantity of information CB 9 loads at start-up. Instead of just displaying the database icons, you also have the "database preview" that shows the game list of the database in focus. If you have the view set to Details it also has to load the stats for each of the databases. You can speed up the launch by removing unneeded icons from the My Databases pane and by turning off the database preview under the Window menu. It's still slower to launch than CB 8, but there aren't many examples of software getting smaller and faster when it adds features.

Another important item is the trouble many people have had with Chess Media System videos crashing Fritz and ChessBase. The bug is an incompatibility with the new Windows Media Player 10. The crashes stopped when I uninstalled 10 and installed WMP 9. Windows Update will automatically install the latest version, so you need to download and install 9 manually. You can do that [here](#). For some reason this doesn't affect every user of WMP 10. ChessBase is working on a fix for the next update.

Tim Bogan writes in to point out that the Fritz "never resign" setting is on the Game tab under Options, not the Clocks+Notation tab as I said last month in an apparent hallucination.

Question I noticed on ChessBase 9 that when I use the default blue and white

chessboard (tools-design-default design) there are annoying thin black lines between the squares!? How do I get rid of them? I spent two hours trying every single command under board design and could only make them go away by turning off the scaling function, but then the pieces don't look nearly as good as when it's on. There are ways to make the sides of the board fatter or thinner, and make the pieces larger or smaller, but no way to make the black lines go away!? Say it's not so!

Michael Jeffreys (Los Angeles)

Answer It's not so! Step away from the ledge! I was annoyed by this too. It makes the board darker at small sizes and does terrible things to diagrams. They hid this under the main Options menu, not the board design menu. Go to Tools – Options – Design and uncheck “Gradients.” (Well hidden, eh?) That turns off the color gradients on the board and also removes those lines.

Question I just purchased the ChessBase 9 Mega package and I love it. One annoying feature though, is the arrows and colored squares that some programs put in their training software, for example Renko's *Tactics 2*. I want to look at the problems and if I can't figure them out, *then* turn on the arrows/colors, etc. I figured out that right-clicking on the notation-delete-delete all commentary (shift-ctrl-y) will do it, but not globally.

Jim

Answer You can strip all the annotations from an entire database by selecting it and going to Tools – Unannotated DB. It will ask you if you want to keep the last annotation. This is done because in some cases there is an important note at the end of a gamescore, such as “time” or “and White died of exhaustion on move 258.”

Question I've really appreciated your column for sorting out the complexity of Fritz 8. I am a beginning player so I don't need some of the more sophisticated stuff in Fritz (yet!). My problem is: I never am sure I have all the variables set up correctly for Fritz; I would like to get the best simulation of a 1200 level player. I've toyed around with a variety of settings (thinking time, setting ELO to 1200, etc.) but I'm never sure I either have him making too many dumb errors or if I'm on the right track. My question is: Do you have any suggestions on what to set and the values for the most realistic 1200 level player?

Jim Munro

Answer Just like there is no one 1200 human player there is no one 1200 computer player. Some 1200 humans know their openings quite well but can't find a mate in two without divine intervention. Others are quite good at tactics but know nothing about endgames.

The main thing to worry about with tweaking Fritz is how often you lose. You want it set to where you win maybe a third of the games. Lose as many as your ego can take, and don't crank it up so high that you never get to attack or develop your own plans. The Elo setting isn't particularly useful. The most important setting is for blunders. 1200-players don't randomly give up pieces for pawns the way Fritz will on its weakest personalities.

Put the playing strength at 1200 or even 1500, it doesn't seem to make a huge difference as long as you keep the blunder range relatively low. By that I mean under 2.0, definitely under 3.0. (Unless it keeps killing you!) Keep the opening book on so it plays logically for a while. On its weaker settings it can start throwing away pieces on move three.

Question In the last game that I ran through Full Analysis, I played Bxf7+ winning a pawn and if Black took the bishop, a following knight move would create a royal fork Black indeed did play Kxf7 and I won a queen for the knight and bishop. In the annotation, Fritz gave Bxf7+ an exclamation mark (!) and made a training question out of it, saying, "Demolition of pawn structure." After showing off my brilliancy to other players, someone commented that in the position Bxf7+ is not the best move.

Returning to Fritz 7, I loaded the game to the move before Bxf7+ and let the Infinite Analysis run. It immediately found a stronger move and after 35 minutes the stronger move was still number one with a score of +- 7.41 while Bxf7+ was fourth with a score of +- 5.66. Huh? What happened? Why did Fritz not give the better move as a variation? Do I need to run all my games back through Fritz Full Analysis without Training annotations selected? Please help.
Sean Roffe (Washington)

Answer The short and unhelpful answer is that chess engines work in mysterious ways and the Full Analysis (and Blunder check) features are even more mysterious, even to the developers! There are always going to be some inconsistencies, although I find Fritz 8 more reliable with this sort of thing. The amount of time allotted to each move and each line during automated analysis is unpredictable. Fritz possibly didn't get far beyond the main line in the time given.

When there is a particularly forcing and winning line, Fritz sometimes won't give alternatives even if something stronger is there. (One exception is a forced mate, which will always be given even if the move played is +30.00.) Fritz is also designed to pay special attention to material sacrifices in its commentary. i.e., it won't give a ! or !! for a pretty quiet move, for example, or ingenious prophylaxis. Let's just say that Fritz was so entertained by your bishop sacrifice that it didn't have the heart to suggest anything else! You can be sure that if there was a big difference in evaluation it would have given an alternative.

Question I have a laptop as well as a desktop and would like to know if there is any way I can synchronize the information on both machines. In other words, is there a way to transfer work I've done on my desktop base to my laptop and vice-versa?

Mr. Light Buggiani

Answer ChessBase doesn't have much in the way of file-handling capabilities, but your question is as appropriate for word processing documents as for chess databases. Moving files between computers is fairly easy these days, although you used the word "synchronize" and that is a whole other kettle of kielbasa.

To make game databases portable you should create an archive file with ctrl+z. This stuffs the many separate ChessBase database files into one compressed file with the extension cbv. When you open a cbv it will automatically uncompress in its location.

Moving files around became a whole lot easier with the appearance of the USB key. These little life-savers are about the size of your pinky and plug into the USB port of your computer. They appear as a drive letter under Windows Explorer, just like your hard drive and CD drive. You can drag and drop (or copy-paste) files to them, take them out and plug them into your other computer and reverse the process. They are fast and reliable, especially when compared to floppy disks or burning things to a CD. Most don't require any installation at all. Just type "USB key" into Amazon.com and you'll find plenty of them cheap. You could also set up a network connection between your computers, but that's a whole other adventure.

Synchronization is another matter. That usually implies an intelligent program that will automatically keep the newest version of the same file on two different machines. This is easy enough to do manually; just check the dates on the files in Windows Explorer or ChessBase's "Details" view. But if you do some analysis in a file on your desktop and then some on your laptop before copying, something is going to be lost if one copies over the other. You can avoid that by copying the edited games from one database to the other, making sure that the bases have different names or are in different folders.

Question What is the relationship between "Friendly Game Handicap" and "Game Rating" in Fritz 8?

Mike Cuff

Answer I'm not sure I know what you mean by "game rating." Perhaps the playing strength setting in the handicap and fun mode? The Friendly Game feature is an excellent one and I think it's a better test than handicap settings. It starts out reasonably weak and then changes the level of play based on your results against it. Only games played with the Friendly mode active are counted in this evaluation. It tries to keep a level at which you are competitive, getting stronger when you win and weaker when you lose. You can see your cumulative score and current handicap in the Friend setting screen. It doesn't really tell you what it thinks your rating is, but since such evaluations are wildly inaccurate as stated above, that's not so important.

Question I have ChessBase 9 starter package and Fritz 8, and am just now getting into using the openings book for the BIG 2004 database to study my favorite openings. I am curious if the Fritz Powerbook 2005 (on DVD) is intended for use by those who have not purchased CB 9 and F8, or is it something that would significantly enhance what I already have. Basically, I am wondering what I would gain if I purchase the Powerbook DVD.

Chuck Young (Ohio)

Answer The Powerbook, like the Rolls-Royce and Lombardy's pizza, is for

those who demand the very best. It's a gargantuan book that has deeper and more current variations than the books that come with the playing programs. You'll find Fritz staying in book much longer than when it uses its own book. You probably wouldn't notice it so much playing against the program (although it might pay off if you like to watch your Fritz battle other machines online).

As with any opening ChessBase book/tree it's a very handy study tool on its own. You can browse through it in Fritz or ChessBase to study an opening very quickly. All of the games that went into creating the Powerbook are included on the DVD, so if you want to see how the games ended up you can just bring up the position in the Powerbook, open the database and conduct a position search. (Click "copy board" in the position search mask.) You could make a giant opening book tree from the Big database, but then you get the bad along with the good. The Powerbook might not be perfect, but it has been closely checked to include only the good stuff. The bad stuff that is included is clearly marked so Fritz (and you!) won't play it.

Question When annotating my games with CB9 I would occasionally like to use different colored text to make certain notes stand out. I know it is possible to change the color of variations, but how do you change text color?

Benoni

Answer You can change the color of all the text, but not part of the text. Under Tools – Options – Notation you can set the text color. Yes, it would be nice to be able to make it bold or something like that. Being able to add some sort of marker or bookmark at different points in a game is also a common request.

Question I've been running Fritz or Hiarcs overnight on various chess problems. With the Hiarcs program these have included building all the five-piece endgames. My problem is that my AMD-processor computer crashes after a few minutes or a few hours. Someone has hinted that the processor may be overheating. Do you know if this is a common problem?

John Dodgson (United Kingdom)

Answer It's quite possible the processor is overheating. The older generation of AMD Athlon chips ran very hot and required serious case and chip cooling. Chess software maxes out your CPU and if your computer doesn't have a good cooling system the processor can get too hot, at which point it shuts itself down to avoid melting through your floor.

You can download a utility that will tell you the temp of your CPU, at least if your system BIOS is capable. (SpeedFan is a good one; SiSoft Sandra is a more complete diagnostic suite. Go to www.download.com for either one.) You can probably look up the recommended temp range for your processor online or in your system manual. If this is the problem, this is something to hassle your computer manufacturer about. If you want to crunch numbers for three straight months you should be able to do so. Overheating means poor design.

If you're on your own you may need a better (bigger and/or faster) heatsink, chip fan, or case fan. Make sure the case vents and fans are clean and not

clogged with cat hair (ahem). Vacuuming out the case isn't a bad idea either. Turning it on with the case open to make sure all the fans are working is also worthwhile.

Question In Fritz8 the search is case sensitive and it appears to automatically capitalize the first letter. I have gotten around this by using an asterisk before the players name. Is there a way to turn the case off? I play and want to find online games, and the capitalization is very bizarre.

Richard

Answer I could do an entire column on the agonies of the case sensitive search mask and an entire Q&A on questions about it. Yes, it automatically, and inexplicably, capitalizes the first letter. And CB 9 has the same treacherous feature. Here is what the CB 9 help file has to say about it: "You can use wildcards in the search, e.g. "H*bner" to retrieve both Hübner and Huebner, or "?ussup" if you are uncertain whether it is Yussupov, Jussupov or Jussupow."

Fine for normal names, and that should solve most problems, but it can still be excruciating, especially with, as you point out, online names where you have to search for "TheMetsFan," "slamin," or "TMAtack." As you discovered, you can find "slamin" by searching for "*slamin." But this doesn't work for capital letters – god forbid if it's "slaMin." The only way to find "TMAtack" is if you capitalize the three first letters. Wildcards don't help much (although "*tack" would work, sort of).

They definitely need a "match case" checkbox on the mask so you can turn this crazy thing off.

All the ChessBase software described by Mig in this column, as well as many more ChessBase programs, are available in the [ChessCafe Online Catalog](#).

Mig wants your questions!! Send it along and perhaps it will be answered in an upcoming column. Please include your name and country of residence. [Yes, I have a question for Mig!](#)



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