

ChessBase Cafe

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Do You See UCI?

I'm taking advantage of my usual brush with the deadline to discuss the world computer championship tournament that just finished in Iceland. Instead of the usual suspects at the top – Junior, Shredder, Fritz – the top two spots went to amateur programs largely unknown outside the computer chess community, which prompted the massive amount of mail I've received in the last 48 hours.

First place went to the American program Zappa, by Anthony Cozzie. It gave up only a single draw, scoring an unprecedented 10½/11, and beat both Shredder and Junior. That's a tiny data sample for computer people, most would want to see a 100-game match before they'd cede anything, but it's still a very impressive result for a program you'd only heard about if you noticed its 3-1 victory over GM Jaan Ehlovest in a four-game match earlier this year.

As could be expected, this quickly filled my inbox with email declaring "the king is dead!" Earlier versions of Zappa have been released free on the web and the second-place winner Fruit, also from the USA, is an open source program, meaning all its code is freely available. Some people asked me why they should spend forty or fifty bucks for a chess program when they can download the top world championship programs free.

It's a good question. Free goes a long way, and the worst that can happen is you waste some time. The short response is: "go ahead!" The longer one is to compare this to the Linux versus Windows debate. The marvelous Linux operating system, at least various versions of it, is free and offers many free and open source programs that cover most of what you do with your Windows machine. But as the saying goes, "Linux is free only if your time is worth nothing." Windows is far easier to use and has countless features we have come to depend on, no matter how much we may resent making Bill Gates' mountain of gold a tiny bit higher.

So it goes with chess software. As mentioned in a previous [column](#), ChessBase has already started moving its flagship engine Fritz in a more human, training-friendly direction. Spending years of human hours plotting how to best bash another program hasn't done much in improving the product for you and me – the people who want the f-word: features. It's good news for everyone that this is what ChessBase is focusing on for Fritz 9.

Who would want to give up Fritz's database features for another dozen theoretical Elo points? Or swap the ability to export html replay pages for three

more wins out of a hundred games against another engine? It's fine for Kramnik and Kasparov to be pushed to the max by the latest programs on PCs with four or more processors. Most humans were being stomped by Sargon on their Commodore 64 twenty years ago.

Of course, ChessBase trumpets victories and rating when they have them on their side, but this is the wrong emphasis in the long run, as they've acknowledged. That they are also smart enough to swoop in and make new programmers offers they can't refuse doesn't hurt either. Junior and Shredder both joined the ChessBase stable after winning the world championship. Popping the latest brilliant engine into a great interface is a win-win-win situation (Programmer-ChessBase-Us).

But if you have even a shred of computer chess geek in you, it's the more engines the merrier. The best news is that you can use the Fritz 8 interface with both Zappa and Fruit, as well as many other free engines. Note that the version of Zappa that is freely available is not the one that just won the championship.

These free engines are UCI compatible, meaning Universal Chess Interface. There are quite a few free engines that use this protocol so you can host your own tournaments with the newcomers, tossing them in with Fritz and friends. You might expect ChessBase to lock out these free guys the way Microsoft does with its competitors, but they've been good about offering strong free engines like Crafty. UCI compatibility is a very handy feature.

Once you have downloaded and unzipped the program's files, you need to tell Fritz about it. Under the Engine menu there is a Create UCI Engine item. Click that and browse to where you put the program's .exe file. After that you can configure the engine with the Parameters button if you really want to geek out. The default settings are optimized by the programmers, so tweak them at your own risk.

After that, the UCI engine will appear with your other engines in the list. You can play against it or use it in tournaments, matches, and analysis. Many free engines have their own custom Fritz-compatible books you can download. Others use their own book format, so you can just use the Fritz book or make one yourself.

There are uses for having a variety of engines beyond having them massacre each other for your viewing pleasure. Playing in tournaments against them provides a nice mix of different styles in the competition, much more like playing in a human tournament. This is especially true if you include a few clearly weaker engines.

This variety is also good if you enjoy one of the [projects](#) we looked at in last year, using engine tournaments and matches to provide sample games based on opening positions you are interested in. We all want to know best play, but it's just as important to know what mistakes to watch for on both sides.

I occasionally review my Playchess blitz games to try and patch a few of the hundreds of holes in my opening repertoire. The problem is that my opponents rarely play the best moves that Fritz has prepared for me. So I have to go through the games manually, looking at each refutation in turn. But if you have some weaker engines or some using handicap settings, you can often find lines that are interesting and dangerous, although objectively weaker.

The E-mailbag

Question I am a CB9 user. My question concerns the look of annotations that include variations. Say I want to create the following: 1.e4 The classical answer is 1....e5, but nowadays 1....c5 is the most popular. (With 1.e4 c5 being the main game.) Either I need to repeat White's move in the annotation variation, or I need to place it behind Black's move. What can I do? **Frank Seyl (Germany)**

Answer Not much if you want the moves to be clickable variations and not just text. Variations always appear after the main line, it would just be too confusing otherwise. You just have to be strict with sentence structure, which should come naturally to a German speaker! That is, 1.e4 c5 is the most popular while 1...e5 is the classical answer. Then everything can be a variation.

Question I've used Fritz 8 as a training tool, but have only recently begun using Friend Mode. The tutorial talks about your handicap in terms of hundredths of pawns, but how do I see what my handicap is? **Stan Ogozelec (USA)**

Answer After you play a few games in Friend Mode (the game board will say "Friend Mode" under the player names), the next time you click Game – Levels – Friend Mode, it will show a handicap score, including the number of games and your percentage score. Note that there is an incorrect statement in the Help file on Friend Mode regarding negative handicaps. If your handicap is *above* 400, you should concentrate on the basics. Negative handicap numbers mean you are a very strong player.

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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