White: IM Formanek (2485)
Black: Hitech (2385)


BONA FIDE?
ICCA Communication
by David Welsh

As a service to our readers, we are glad to republish an extract from the Transactions of the United States Chess Federation Computer Chess Committee, Vol. 5, No. 1, May 10, 1988.
The republication has been prompted by its relevance to the vexed question whether and to what extent computer programs are chess-players under FIDE rules.

"Recent successes by HITECH have raised its performance rating to the 2400 Elo level and would make the program eligible for a FIDE rating, except that FIDE does not recognize chess programs as "players". The following letter from Prof. Lim Kok-Ann of FIDE answered a USCF inquiry:

[address and saluting formulae]

1. [...]. There is no official FIDE policy on rating of computers. The following is my interpretation of what is implied by FIDE regulations.

2. The principles of the FIDE rating system is described in Reg. 3.0, B.01 of the Handbook, "Measurement of Over-the-Board Play." Reference is made there to the performance of "players", a term that implied human players. It is a moot point if machines can "play".

3. According to my understanding, a computer cannot be a player, in fact a game "played by a computer is a game played by a human with the assistance of a machine programmed to do so. The Laws of Chess specifically prohibits in Section 15.1(a), the use of "handwritten, printed or otherwise recorded matter, or to analyze the game on another chess-board." This rules out the use of a computer whether the player himself is at the chessboard or places there a remote-controlled machine.

4. The application of the FIDE rating system to games played in violation of the Laws of Chess is therefore meaningless. Please do not include in your rating reports any results obtained with the assistance of computers.

5. The technical skill involved in programming chess computers is of course of great interest, similar to the interest evoked by the construction of flying machines [iEds]. FIDE has a Commission on Chess
Computers which has recommended that a team, or should we say, a battery, of computers be permitted to take part in the Olympiad."

"On being advised by Hans Berliner of this situation, [David Welsh] wrote:

To Policy Board:

At the present time FIDE declines to rate computer chess programs. I would like to draw your attention to this situation. In the past this has not been a problem worth discussing, because programs were not good enough to compete in International events. Recently, the best U.S. programs have demonstrated playing strength approaching the 2400 level [...] and have shown the ability to play creditably against masters. Whether Hitech or any other program could now compete successfully in International events is debatable, but certainly this capability is not very far in the future. Great strides have been made recently in the development of chess-specific computers.

The rights of USCF Computer Members do not include FIDE competitions, thus USCF is in no way obligated to act. But would it not be a very good thing for chess if computer programs were allowed to play, and gain FIDE ratings, in some (perhaps carefully selected) International tournaments? (At present it is unclear whether a program is actually prohibited from competing in International events, but a refusal to rate it would have the same effect as it would lower the event classification.)

One benefit would be an interest in sponsoring such events on the part of the computer manufacturers. I do not know any professional player who thinks we have enough good tournaments or enough prize money offered. Another benefit would be increased public interest in chess tournaments - awareness of computer chess is very high in some parts of Europe (Sweden and the Netherlands, for example). This factor would, I am certain, create significant additional competitive opportunities for top players.

As the strength of chess programs increases, FIDE must come to grips, like it or not, with the problem of their participation in FIDE events. If FIDE ignores computer chess, I predict that within twenty years, perhaps within ten, there will be an unsanctioned challenge to the (human) World Champion from a computer program, for the absolute World Chess Championship. A likely scenario: a FIDE decision that participation in such a match would cost the champion his title, and a subsequent proclamation by the program’s sponsors that the program was now absolute World Chess Champion by default. The ensuing controversy would only be resolved by a match.

As the U.S. now has the most progressive federation in its attitude toward computer chess, and is also the leader in computer chess research, it seems appropriate for USCF to take the lead here and try to give FIDE some constructive input."

The permission granted by the Chairman of United States Chess Federation Computer Chess Committee, David Welsh, is most gratefully acknowledged.