

6th World Micro-Computer Computer-Chess Championship Report

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The most recent micro-chess championship took place in the stunning Dallas Infomart. The occasion was the re-joining of two major computer societies (ACM and IEEE) in their renowned Fall Joint Computer Conference series. Despite the excellent facilities, Dallas is not known as a chess centre, and it is hard not to draw a comparison with the 5th Championship (World Trade Centre, Amsterdam) which is now recognized as the model of a well organized event of this type. As a spectator sport the 6th championship rated poorly, not only because the venue was moved from a readily accessible (though small) space off the main lobby to an area that was out of sight and out of the minds of the conference attendees, but also because it lacked vendors' exhibits (like those in Cologne) or a Grand Master simultaneous (like Sozonko's in Amsterdam). Of course there are good reasons why more was not possible, and not the least was that half the participants were also actively involved in the 17th NACCC which was taking place in the nearby Anatole Hotel. Seemingly only a short (1 Km) walk away, but a major headache for equipment-toting-tourists.

Despite last minute clarifications on the entry requirements, which undermined the organizer's plans, and despite the paranoia of some participants and the energetic way they filed such complaints as: Is Rebel Computers really a subsidiary of Hegener & Glaser? Was Fidelity secretly using a multiprocessor? Were the ReCom and Mephisto teams conspiring to fix the outcome of the event (in a foreign tongue, yet), and so on. Such nervousness is not uncommon in micro events, but the complaints were dealt with in a serious and conscientious way, even if some issues were not fully resolved.

Regarding the event itself. In a sense the games speak, and the results reflect both the intrinsic speed of the processor employed and the manufacturer's experience with that unit. Manufacturers were allowed up to three entrants each (nominally all identical) on the understanding they would not play each other. Thus although there were 14 entrants, only 6 were unique. Hegener & Glaser encapsulated their MC68020 prototype of last year into their normal Mephisto tournament board. Fidelity Electronics also used the same kind of processor in their systems, after their 6502-based multiprocessor was transferred to the NACCC event. Fidelity, who manufactured the first commercial computer chess machine more than a decade ago, have been a main-stay of these events by competing at almost every opportunity. Another popular entry was Intelligent Software's Cyrus program (newly implemented on a MC68020 too). For years their software has found its way into the widely sold entry-level machines, and now they are having success with Shogi (Chinese Chess). The event was rounded out with three 6502 based systems from ReCom, whose first product (Rebel) did so well in the recent World Championship, and single entries from Jacques Middlecoff (whose Intel 80386 system was called Chess Monster for this Halloween event) and Kempelen a new MC68000 system (developed in Hungary) but sponsored by Sierra Software.

With competitors coming from Germany, Hungary, The Netherlands and the U.K., plus the American contingent it is not surprising that the first round got off to a late (9.30pm) start on Halloween night. Quickly the top contenders, Fidelity and Mephisto, demonstrated their superiority by winning all three of their games. In the following days the rounds came and went with frightening regularity, with some teams playing three rounds on Sunday! After five rounds Mephisto 3 had won all its games, and Fidelity A and C held a narrow lead over the remaining programs. The pattern for the event was set. The later rounds were a bit of an anticlimax, with only the serious sounding disputes to enliven them. By the time of the final round Mephisto 3 could not be overtaken, yet ReCom 3 was able to act as spoiler by denying Mephisto a repeat of the clean sweep that it had in Amsterdam. When the last game was played and the dust had settled Hegener & Glaser programs finished 1st and 3rd and Fidelity's 2nd and 4th. Not everyone can win, but none of these events occur without some heartbreaks. Here the Kempelen Programmer, with his Atari system, made no real progress against the professionals, although it had some close games. The graphics were superb, giving the appearance that the pieces floated around the board, but 10 weeks is not long enough to rewrite a chess program. Similarly the Cyrus program, though it fared quite well, employed a newly designed data structure which simplified the installation of new knowledge, but whose training schedule peaked sometime after the end of the event. It is to the designers' credit that their system is so flexible, but perhaps they should rely more on the input from hundreds of games played by professional chess-players, as do some of their competitors. Clearly there is no substitute for months and months of working experience with these chess programs, if one is to bring them to their peak performance in time for everyone of these events.

Program	Contact	Address
Mephisto	Richard Lang	c/o Hegener+Glaser GmbH, Arnulfstr. 2, D-8000 MUNICH 2, West Germany
Fidelity	The Spracklen's	c/o Fidelity Electronics, 13900 N.W. 58th Court, MIAMI, FL, 33014
Cyrus	David Levy	c/o Intelligent Software, 11 Loudon Rd, LONDON NW8 OPL, UK
ReCom	Ed Schroeder	Merel 10, 7423 EH DEVENTER, The Netherlands
Monster	J. Middlecoff	c/o Cypress Software, 1450 Koll Circle, Ste. 108, SAN JOSE, CA 95112
Kempelen	Horvath Gyula	Baranyai ul. 10, 1117 BUDAPEST, Hungary